



# Crash Course: The Life Lessons My Students Taught Me

By Kim Bearden

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*Crash Course* chronicles the life lessons that Kim Bearden has learned during an award-winning career in education. From her challenges as a first-year teacher to her triumphs as the cofounder of the highly acclaimed Ron Clark Academy, Kim shares how children can teach each of us the importance of building relationships, abandoning fear, discovering resilience, embracing one’s unique gifts, and living with passion.

Full of honesty, humor, heartbreak, and humanity, Kim’s experiences show how children can help any one of us find joy and meaning in both our personal and professional lives. *Crash Course* is “humorous and sensitive” (*Kirkus Reviews*), an important resource for every home library.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Humorous and sensitive. ... Thoughtful and entertaining tales of how students influenced and changed one teacher's perspective on life." (*Kirkus*)

"[*Crash Course*] was positive, inspiring, real, open, reflective, uplifting, honest and nothing short of incredible. I cried, I smiled, I laughed, I reminisced, I related." (Adrienne Phillips *PrometheanPlanet.com*)

"She loves these kids so much, she's always going above and beyond for them and they just love her to death. She's like mama bear and I'm papa bear. She's the best person I know, and I know a lot of people." (2010)

"Kim...is clearly the best speaker I have ever heard at any conference I have attended. Her message about the importance of creativity in the classroom and how to make a difference in the lives of all children was both moving and informative. It makes me feel good to know that the education profession would choose Kim as a representative of all teachers. She is a professional who understands the ins and outs of being a teacher, and her message is one that should be heard by all." (2001) (Ron Clark)

"If we are lucky, each of us, during our educational endeavors, hopes to encounter that one teacher who helps us make sense of it all. A teacher with whom we can truly connect and enjoy the educational experience just for learning's sake. And if we are really lucky, this same educator may touch the soul of her students in a way that encourages her students to become a better human being. Kim [Bearden] is this teacher." (Stephanie Hill, parent of one of Kim's students)

"Whether you're in education or business, or want to learn more from someone who has really had a profound impact on our society and the way that children are being taught, and has countless success stories to validate her methods, it's worth listening to what Kim had to say." (*Sheehan Marketing Strategies (blog)*)

"[*Crash Course*] will renew your passion for teaching and the human spirit." (*Mrs. Jump's Class (blog)*)

"Kim is infectious!" (*Primary Graffiti (blog)*)

"Bearden has a love for children unlike anything I have ever witnessed... a must read." (*Second Grade Shenanigans (blog)*)

"If you are up for an inspirational, heart-felt, honest read... then this is your book." (*Kickin' It in Kindergarten (blog)*)

"This book will remind you why you became a teacher in the first place." (*Kindergals (blog)*)

#### About the Author

Kim Bearden is the cofounder, executive director, and language arts teacher at the Ron Clark Academy, an internationally-renowned middle school and educator training facility. She resides in Atlanta with her husband Scotty and daughter Madison.

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# 1

## CHEMISTRY

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course, you will learn the importance of building relationships.

Freddie was a jolly seventh-grade boy who exploded into my classroom every afternoon at 3:02. His hoarse, booming voice would signal his arrival several moments before he appeared with books, papers, and disheveled articles of clothing swirling around him. Whenever I walked by his desk, I could feel the electricity coming from his body—perhaps this was why his unkempt blond hair always stood on end. Full of one-liners that would go above many of his classmates' heads, Freddie was adept at disrupting the classroom environment and seemed to miss social cues from others. He was the kid who would fall out of his chair for no apparent reason; he was the kid who always seemed to need to go to the bathroom, sharpen his pencil, throw something away, or find any other possible excuse to get out of his seat.

Many teachers and students thought Freddie was highly irritating, and he knew it. He was quick to tell me about their distaste for him, and although he would say it with a chuckle, I could read the sadness behind his bravado. I certainly understood the others' frustrations. Freddie was scheduled into my last-period language arts class every day and he was quite a handful. I could tell within the first five seconds of class whether it would be a good Freddie day or a bad one. However, despite his antics, I knew that there was goodness within him. I saw that Freddie could be clever, creative, and incredibly funny. I embraced his exuberant spirit whenever possible, although I was often required to issue him silent lunches and detentions for misbehavior. Somehow, I just had to teach this kid how to temper his bold personality in order to reach his potential.

One Friday afternoon after my classes, I was called to the front office for an important phone call. I was stunned to discover that I was a finalist for a major teaching award. As I was just trying to process the information being relayed to me, the representative from the Georgia Department of Education explained that seven judges would watch me teach at 3 P.M. on Monday.

My mind began to race. Seven judges? Not a problem. Three o'clock? Huge problem. Three o'clock meant Freddie. So, I did what any logical person would do—I tried to figure out how to get him out of my class. I entertained several scenarios in my mind as I meandered down the long hallway. When I entered my classroom, I sat down to take it all in. Maybe it was a coincidence, but as I reflected, I saw that I was sitting at Freddie's desk. Guilt washed over me. I realized that I would be the world's biggest hypocrite if I tried to create a false sense of nirvana in my classroom just to impress a group of judges.

As I continued to process the situation, I considered what my class must be like from Freddie's perspective. And then I thought about what every day must be like in his world. Freddie must have seen impatience, frustration, and irritation when others looked at him. I wondered if he saw that in my eyes as well.

Over the weekend I struggled to create the perfect lesson plan that would amaze all my guests. But I felt hollow, exhausted, and uninspired. It was a stressful time in my personal life—I was dealing with a broken marriage and my impending divorce, and quite honestly, I just didn't think I had it in me. I wanted to curl

into a ball and sleep for a month. Somehow, I found the strength to reevaluate my situation and recommit to my calling to be there for my students. Who cared what a bunch of judges thought?

On Monday morning, I visited the homerooms of my students to tell them that some important people would be in my classroom that afternoon. I told the students that I knew they would do a great job. I winked at Freddie and smiled to show him that I believed in him. He nodded, knowing that I was speaking directly to him.

By the time three o'clock came, I was ready. My classroom had two doors—one for entering and one for exiting. As I was standing at the entrance greeting the students and the judges, I looked over my shoulder to what should have been empty desks. But to my surprise, Freddie had snuck in through the exit and was the first child in class. His hands were tightly folded on his desk, and his knuckles were white. A frozen smile covered his face, and his eyes and cheeks bulged like a blowfish. Have you ever tried to push a basketball underwater? When you let go, it will fly up into the air. That is the best way to describe Freddie at that moment. It was as if there were an invisible horde of angels there on my behalf, holding him in his seat. If those angels let go, I knew he would just hit the ceiling. But the lesson went beautifully. The students were highly engaged and Freddie was abundantly eager. Throughout the period, I could see the students glancing at him and then at me as if to say, "What is up with Freddie?"

At the end of thirty minutes, the judges were to go to a conference room on the other side of the school to complete their evaluations. When we were finished, I asked the class, "Who would like to escort the judges to the conference room?"

Freddie shot his hand up like a missile and waved it back and forth. I scanned the room to look for a more suitable escort, but there was no denying his zeal, and the judges all smiled adoringly at this boy who had been so very charming and perfect throughout the class period. Freddie speedily led them out of the room, causing them to quicken their pace as they left.

To this day, I don't know if he ran with them to that conference room or if he stopped halfway there and pointed them in the right direction, but I do know he came back to my class way too soon. The door shot open and hit the wall, and Freddie burst into the room as only he could do.

"THAT WAS THE LONGEST HOUR OF MY LIFE!" he shouted while holding his head as if his brain would spontaneously combust. It had only been thirty minutes.

We all burst into contagious laughter. Tears streamed down my face, and the whole class couldn't seem to stop giggling. Finally, after composing myself, I looked at Freddie and said, "You were so wonderful today. I couldn't have asked for a more perfect student. Thank you."

His response? "I had to be good today. I just had to. I just love you so much." I was completely undone.

As with every challenging child, Freddie had made me a better teacher. He wanted to be a good student—the one who would sit perfectly, answer perfectly, and behave perfectly. However, it took every fiber of his being to be that child for just thirty minutes on one day. Maybe those angels had really been whispering in Freddie's ear, telling him that I believed in him and saw the goodness in him.

Since that day, I have often found myself alone in my classroom, sitting in the desks of my students and pondering better ways to develop the relationships that are necessary in order to teach them all well. I don't always find it easy to love some students, but it is something that I actively strive to do. I think about those

children who challenge me the most, and I meditate on all that is good within them. I think about their gifts, their talents, their hearts, and I remind myself that they, too, are God's children and that He has a purpose for each of them.

I wish that I had truly understood this before I started teaching. If I had, things might have gone differently with Mitchell.

I taught Mitchell my very first year in the classroom, and when he entered each day, students would quickly scurry off to their desks. I wanted to do the same thing. Mitchell's massive frame towered above me, and his perpetual smirk and disdain for authority caused my heart to race and my palms to sweat as I feebly attempted to convince myself that I was in charge. Mitchell had mastered the art of eye rolling and spreading negativity, and I struggled to remain enthusiastic during lessons when he was present. When he would sigh and slump in his chair, an ominous cloud covered my class, and despite my attempts to keep him in line, I made countless rookie mistakes with him.

"Mitchell, please return to your seat," I'd say.

"I wasn't doing anything! I just needed to throw something away," he'd respond.

"Mitchell, please stop talking while I am talking!" I'd plead.

"I wasn't talking!" he'd reply, despite the fact that I had seen him.

"Mitchell, don't do that," I'd say, as my voice would crack.

"What? I didn't do anything wrong. You are always picking on me!" he'd argue.

You get the picture. He made me want to scream and run out of the room, or at the very least, repeatedly bang my head against the wall. Mitchell always had an excuse, and I was inconsistent when issuing consequences. I'm sure that he also sensed my dislike. If you had asked me about him then, I would have told you that his sole mission on earth was to make every day a living hell for me. As the year progressed, my confidence increased and I learned how to more firmly issue consequences for misbehavior, yet it was always a struggle that left me exhausted. We made it through that year, and at the end, I was relieved to see him go. I thought that I wouldn't have to deal with him again and that he would be out of my life for good.

Eight years later, Mitchell took his own life.

I didn't learn about Mitchell's death until several years after it took place and it still haunts me to this day. I'm sure I was just one of many people in Mitchell's life who had trouble with him, and I can't help but wonder what would have happened if someone had seen him differently. To this day I do not know all the details of what led to his brokenness. When I taught Mitchell, I did not know anything about his home situation. I did not know what he loved, and I did not know what moved him. I never asked him about his hobbies, and I cannot remember if I ever gave him a sincere, meaningful compliment about anything. I never tried to figure out why he was so angry, and I never showed him the love that he was desperate to receive. As a first-year teacher, I focused only on how he made me feel instead of his apparent cries for help. I never once tried to develop a meaningful relationship, and now, twenty-six years later, I can't forgive myself for it.

I failed you, Mitchell, and I am so sorry.

I will not make this mistake again. Relationship building isn't always easy, but I have learned that it is the single most effective way to engage and motivate my students. Though I am clearly the teacher and they are the students, I can still let them know that I care for them and that I'm trying to understand them. This kind of attention has a profound impact on their ability to grow.

Several years after teaching Mitchell, I taught Jeremy, a country boy who had little interest in academics. Quiet and sullen, Jeremy slouched at his desk with his long bangs covering his eyes. When called upon he would answer in his heavy drawl, "I daunt know, ma'am." He took no initiative and all his comments had to be solicited from me. When it came to homework, I was dismayed by his lack of effort, and it pained me to see how low his grades were. I knew that Jeremy was smart. I guess some would simply label him as lazy.

At this point, I had been teaching for a few years and I had a good repertoire of strategies for even the most reluctant learners. In fact, Jeremy happened to be in a class full of students who were highly engaged in my lessons. But I just couldn't figure out how to inspire him. One day when I kept him after class I decided to change my approach.

"Jeremy, what do you love?" I asked.

"Ma'am? What d' ya mean?" he asked.

"What do you love to do? What do you get excited about? I have taught you language arts lessons using football, basketball, food, popular television shows, books, games, music, and more. I have tried to use things that my students love, yet you seem completely unimpressed by them all. I want you to love learning, Jeremy, so I need to know what does get your interest."

He stared at me for a moment, and I just stared back and waited.

"Fishin'," he said. "I love fishin'."

"Okay. Then fishing it is."

That night was a long one for me. Right after school I made a few stops and picked up wooden dowels, string, magnets, and metal washers. After some experimentation I had it all figured out. Late that night I loaded my daughter Madison's baby pool into the car. I arrived early the next morning to reserve the gymnasium and to set it all up.

When Jeremy's class arrived, I was ready.

"Everyone, leave all your things here. We are going to do our lesson in the gym today."

The students scurried with me to the gym and gathered around me as I explained the task.

"Guess what? Today we will be speed fishing!" I revealed.

"Speed fishing? What on earth is that?" Ansley asked.

"Well, you will be placed into relay teams. When it is your turn, you will cast your line into the pool. The magnet on the line will function as a fishhook. In this pool there are over one hundred paper fish, each with a metal washer on the back of it. Each fish also has a different word written on it. After you catch a fish, you

must then run with it to the other side of the gym, where you will find several plates for your team. You must put your fish on the appropriate plate, based upon which part of speech it is. Then the next member of your team will cast. You will receive a point for each correctly placed fish. You must move quickly and accurately. Are you ready?"

"Yes!" they all exclaimed.

"This is so cool!" added Andrew.

Once I heard their enthusiasm I told them, "You all need to thank Jeremy. He gave me this great idea!"

They all high-fived and clapped for Jeremy, and he smiled broadly with reddened cheeks.

"When you hear the music, you may begin. On your mark, get set . . . go!" I yelled while cuing a twangy country music song on the sound system. Cheering and laughing, the kids raced with intensity as they completed the game. When I dismissed the class that day, Jeremy lingered behind. As he walked past me, he looked up, brushed his long bangs aside, and with smiling eyes stuttered, "Um . . . thanks for today. That was . . . uh, pretty fun."

After that day, things gradually changed with Jeremy. He seemed to realize that I cared about him and that I truly wanted him to love learning. He laughed more, he smiled more, and he participated more with each passing day. It took a little longer for his schoolwork to improve, but he was receptive to my urging and even started to ask for help.

The game I created lasted only twenty minutes, but it changed Jeremy for the entire year. Speed fishing. Who knew?

When we show others that their interests matter to us, we are making meaningful steps toward developing lasting bonds and trust. At the Ron Clark Academy, we make it our business to show the kids that we love many of the things that they love. Every year, our staff works hard to create a joyful welcome to uplift our students on the initial day of school and to celebrate what lies ahead. We plan something special—some sort of surprise. One year we embraced the students' love for roller skating. We borrowed roller skates, and as the students arrived, the twenty staff members rolled up, hugged them, and led them to our makeshift arena where they, too, were able to skate with one another. One year we filled the parking lot with donated inflatable slides and other carnival games, and another year we held a black-light dance party: the students, dressed in all white, were surprised when our darkened library was filled with neon artwork and a pulsating laser light show. But I will never forget what we did for the fall of 2011.

As our students arrived on the first day that year, they were greeted by a one-hundred-piece marching band and college students from the drum lines and step teams at Morehouse, Spelman, Georgia State, and Clark Atlanta University. Our students love stepping, and our school step team, the Essentials, is extraordinary. If you have not seen this sort of dance, it is an art form predominantly practiced by African-American sororities and fraternities; its roots originate in Africa with the Welly "gumboot" dance. When teams step, it is a powerful mixture of clapping, stomping, dancing, and chanting with military-like precision. Step teams also have a long tradition of community service, and so we thought that it would be wonderful for these college students to serve as role models and to celebrate stepping with our kids. But then an even bigger idea started to form in my head. Okay, I admit it . . . as a young woman at the University of Georgia, I was completely mesmerized by the step teams. I thought that it was the most unique type of performance I'd ever seen, and it was even more intriguing because I had never done it. So when we met to plan during the summer, I asked



our faculty and staff, “What if we put on a step show for the kids on the first day of school?”

Although some of the staff feared that they might lack the skills, everyone agreed to give it a try. And so it was. In the two weeks leading up to the first day of school, we regularly met for practices. We stomped, we sweated, we chanted, and we moaned. Mostly, we laughed. Admittedly, our bodies were a little old for the activity—I proudly earned a bruise on my right thigh that looked just like Italy. But we were motivated to keep practicing until we mastered our routine because we knew the kids would love it. Whether I was in the shower, or in the line at the post office, I found myself stomping and clapping to get it just right.

When the big day arrived, we were as geared up as Beyoncé at the Super Bowl. As the students waited patiently in the lobby, each of us slid down the slide (an RCA tradition). As we came out, the students saw that we were dressed in special black T-shirts with our step nicknames on the back. We started a cheer and then I yelled, “Set!” at the top of my lungs. We snapped to attention, and the crowd went wild.

We danced with our arms and feet in sync, heads snapping to attention, chants shouted in unison, formations completed with precision. The show was seven minutes of adrenaline-filled power. We had the time of our lives. When we finished, the students surrounded us, celebrating with high-fives, hugs, cheers, and smiles.

Afterward, when we talked about the experience as a staff, we realized that we felt a bittersweet sadness, knowing that it was all over. The time working on the performance had been a wonderful bonding activity for us because we had helped each other every step of the way. Despite the hard work, we had benefited more than we had ever intended and we will carry the fond memories with us forever. When we stretch to develop relationships with others, we are often uplifted in the most remarkable ways.

The chemistry I create with my students is the primary element that affects my ability to guide them, mold them, and help them find success. And through these relationships, I have learned how to develop better bonds with my loved ones, peers, and colleagues as well. Meaningful relationships do not just “happen.” The most powerful relationships occur when we willingly give of ourselves and seek to understand others wholeheartedly.

## CLASS NOTES

- If you believe in someone, they are more apt to believe in themselves.
- When we build relationships with others, we are better able to motivate them to reach their fullest potential.
- Those who are the most difficult to love often need love the most.
- When we find it hard to like others, we must seek to focus on their gifts, talents, and goodness.
- If you want to know what matters to someone else, take the time to ask.
- When we go above and beyond for others, it shows our commitment to developing a meaningful relationship.

## HOMEWORK

1. Make a list of the people who are in need of a more meaningful relationship with you. Next to each name, list the barriers to that relationship—the things that annoy or frustrate you the most. Then, make a list of the

individual's good qualities. Think of ways to break the barriers, and try to focus on that list of good qualities whenever you are dealing with him or her.

2. Take time to deepen your relationships with your children, spouse, or significant other by learning to love some of the things that they love.

3. Ask your loved ones what things matter to them the most, and use that information to plan a special outing, gift, or moment for them. Don't wait for a birthday or special celebration; make it spontaneous.

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