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The Funny Pages | True-Life Tales

The Sub

By TODD BARRY

The phone jarred me awake at the usual time, around 6 or 7 a.m. It was a call to substitute-teach, a job I had been doing for several years. First in Florida, and now in New York City.

"The School for the Deaf needs a sub today," the woman on the line said.

"I don't know sign language," I said.

"It doesn't matter," the woman said.

It doesn't matter if I know sign language? Wow. I'll remember this conversation when I get a call from "60 Minutes."

"Sure, I'll do it."

As it turned out, it didn't really matter. Well, not as much as I thought. There was a student teacher in the classroom who knew sign language, and the kids could read lips. And I did my best to communicate: I made generous amounts of eye contact, did lots of pointing and made some easily understood gestures with my eyebrows.

In a lot of ways, the School for the Deaf was better than my other assignments. The classes were much smaller, and — maybe I shouldn't say this — quieter. I'm not saying all the kids were angels. Sometimes I'd tell a kid to do something he didn't want to do, and he'd respond in a way that let me know I actually did know a little sign language.

The School for the Deaf called me to teach a variety of subjects. One day I was called to teach home economics. The entire class was made up of two taller boys who looked a bit too old for grade school. We spent the class hanging around and burning food. (I believe it was macaroni and cheese.) It was fun. Yes, things were going O.K. at the school. That is, until I made a tragic error in judgment. I made a joke.

I showed up one day and ran into one of the friendlier teachers at the school.

"Oh, you have a rough bunch today," she said, laughing, obviously familiar with the kids I was about to teach. I mean "teach."

"Really," I fired back. "I'll give you \$5 to take them off my hands." I smiled, she laughed and we went on with our days.

A few hours later I ran into this teacher again. She was grinning. She said the dean was going to talk to me later.

"About what?" I said. I really had no idea.

"About offering me \$5 to watch your class." She laughed. But not an ordinary laugh. It was an evil laugh. The kind of laugh that said, "I knew you were joking about the \$5, but I still chose to tell the one person who would take it seriously."

I spent the day in a state of stunned anger, then I ran into the dean in the hallway. She said she wanted to talk to me.

"I understand you offered money to another teacher to watch your class," she said sternly.

"Yes, that was a joke."

At that point she should have said: "Oh, gosh, I'm so embarrassed. You know, I had a feeling you were joking. I mean, how could that not be a joke? If you wanted someone to watch your class, you wouldn't offer such a piddly amount, and you certainly wouldn't phrase it that way — 'I'll give you \$5.' That's not the way bribes are offered, not that directly. You would've said something smoother, like: 'Oh, I have a rough bunch, do I? Well, maybe I should bring out a friend to help me. A friend who lives in my wallet. . . a friend named [Abraham Lincoln](#). . .'"

But she didn't say that. She sort of nodded and accepted my explanation but added, "I assume you want to keep working here."

You assume that I want to keep working here? As a substitute teacher? You assume that I want the worst job in the world? Well, I assume that you still want me to work here because you didn't fire me on the spot. That's what I would do if I were a dean and I thought a teacher offered someone a \$5 bribe so he could ditch his class. I'd fire that teacher on the spot, before he had a chance to reach into his wallet and pull out a more powerful 20. And since you didn't fire me on the spot, I'm going to assume that you knew in your heart that my \$5 remark was a joke but that you can't bring yourself to say that out loud.

"Yes," I said. "I still want to work here." And I did. At the time, I was pursuing a career in comedy, and I needed a job that allowed me to take time off to do out-of-town shows. I could have worked as a waiter, but if you need time off from that, you have to "trade shifts" with someone, which puts you in the awful position of owing someone a favor.

Substitute-teaching is so flexible that you don't even have to officially quit. You just stop accepting assignments. So that's what I did.

Shortly after I left, I found myself sitting on the subway across from a couple of tall young men. They spotted me and started laughing, probably at the memory of burning cheese. They were the guys from the home-ec class. One of them gave me the hugest grin as he enthusiastically shook my hand. They seemed genuinely happy to have a brief reunion with the little sub who couldn't even teach them how to prepare low-level dorm food. I still didn't know sign language, but there on the subway, it really didn't matter.

Todd Barry is a comedian. His Web site is www.toddbarry.com. His last True-Life Tale was about finding a syringe on an airplane.