



# View from the Trenches

High school defines teens' lives. Each day, teacher Veronica Daley steps inside their world.

**By Janelle Brown**

**'Our kids  
are more  
sophisticated  
today. They have  
more access to  
information.  
But I think they  
are also more  
frustrated.'**

**A** bell rings inside Veronica Daley's classroom at Timberline High School. Students plop into chairs, open notebooks, banter with friends or close their eyes and push the world away. They wear jeans and T-shirts, clingy skirts and matching tops, designer labels and no-name bargains, black fingernail polish and open-toed footwear that bears no discernible relation to the freezing temperatures outside. Some already look like grown-ups, others barely older than children. Together, they exude more energy than these four walls can possibly hold.

"Good afternoon, class!" Daley says and flashes a warm smile. A few students respond, and Daley launches into today's lesson: reading the last chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, answering questions, then heading to the school library for an introduction to conducting research. It's a lot to accomplish in 51 minutes, and Daley moves at an energetic pace. You'd never guess that she's got a cold, that she stayed at school until 9:30 last night for a club meeting and arrived at 7 today,

that she'll see 156 students in five periods of junior English by day's end, or that she has a pile of student progress reports to churn out before she goes home.

Daley, who earned a master's in English at Boise State in '94 and a bachelor's in English/secondary education at the university in '87, is passionate about her work. "These kids are so smart. They have a great deal to offer the world. I'm lucky to get to spend time with them," she says.

Thirteen years of teaching has given Daley some hard-won insights into the often secretive lives of teens — the issues they face, what motivates them, what they love and fear. At a time when national attention is focused on teen violence and adolescent angst, those insights from the front lines of our high schools are particularly compelling.

Spend some time in her classroom, and the complexity of her job, and these kids' lives, becomes clear.

## Relationships

The girl holds a vase of red roses. "They won't fit in my locker. Can I leave them on your desk?" she asks. Daley says of course, and the girl explains that the roses are her invitation to the Christmas dance. "Pretty classy guy," Daley chimes. The girl beams and floats out of the room.

It's a small exchange, but the subject matter — teen relationships — is huge. When you're 16 or 17, the opposite sex can engender more stress than an algebra exam. It's not surprising to Daley that kids explore the topic in assignments, as well as during class breaks.

A student project sits on a shelf in Daley's room, titled "All I Need to Know I Learned From Ex-boyfriends." Pithy one-liners are pasted inside: Share nothing you wish to keep in good condition. Friendships are always more than they seem. Horoscopes about love are never true. A comedy is always better than a love story. And this one: Smile now, cry later.

## Pressures

Announcements blare over the loudspeaker: club meetings, auditions, volunteer drives, basketball contests, driver's ed sign-ups, a request that seniors bring baby pictures for display.

Students in Daley's advanced placement English class listen; a few even take notes. Many are involved in multiple extracurricular activities, which they cram in on top of school work.

It's a challenge to keep up, students say, and sometimes sleep, family and grades suffer. One girl approaches Daley about turning a paper in late, explaining she simply hasn't had time to do her best work. Daley is sympathetic. There are times she's extended deadlines, but in this case she

tells the student to turn in what she has and that she'll have a chance later to make revisions.

"It's tough. Sometimes they do have too much," Daley says. She scrawled a note on her board before a holiday vacation, urging students to get their work done before the break so they could relax. "Everybody needs down time," she says.

## Independence

"Today I will wear the clothes I like, not what everyone wants me to wear. When I arrive at school I see a forest of Abercrombie & Fitch, Gap, Banana Republic, Old Navy. It seems like half the student body is operating on one mind."

The statement is from a student's personal Declaration of Independence, a paper Daley assigned after the class read the original version. Some students wrote declarations of appreciation. Others pushed the limits.

"I believe you should be able to smoke at age 16," one boy wrote about tobacco and marijuana. "I declare independence from my mother's vindictive heart," wrote a girl about family custody issues. Another declared independence from school conditions: "Break times are nowhere near adequate. The temperatures are intolerable and have already begun to give me a cold."

"Athletics are supported over anything else in school, and participants are 'superior' to everyone else," wrote one student. "But what about snowboarding, skateboarding or rollerblading? These sports are just as hard as football or basketball, but their participants are outcasts."

"I have a mother who does everything in her power for me. I have had the privilege of growing up with one parent, something I'll cherish forever," wrote one boy.

Daley pens questions and comments in the margins, but withholds judgment. "If you do that, you become the authority to rebel against. I'd rather be an instrument of education. If it's true, they'll see it."

## Connections

Daley flips through her copy of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Her students are discussing the small steps that lead the characters toward either peril or power during the witchcraft trials in 17th century Salem.

"We don't always know the long-term consequences of our actions," Daley observes. "Sometimes that isn't clear till much later."

She doesn't add that this is true in real life as well as in books; her skilled presentation makes that lesson from *The Crucible* obvious. It's important, Daley believes, to help teens connect their worlds.

Recently, Daley looked out at a sea of bright faces and told her kids they'd already moved beyond what she'd accomplished at their age, because at this point in

her junior year she was pregnant. She attended night school to graduate, but with an infant son it wasn't easy. Daley enrolled in Boise State, earned a degree and began teaching. Her son, now 21, attends college in Arizona. But Daley looks back and understands that at 16, she made decisions that narrowed her opportunities.

Girls who get pregnant — and most years, she knows at least a couple — break her heart. "I know how tough it is," Daley says. "But I also tell them they can still reach their dreams."

## A Changed World

One morning, Daley takes a few moments to review emergency procedures. If there's a fire, everyone should evacuate the building. If there's an earthquake or tornado, students should crouch under desks. And in the case of a shooting or hostage situation outside, the classroom doors will be locked.

"In a lockdown, we need to move very quickly away from the door and the window," Daley says, adding that students should stand next to a wall that can't be seen from outside the room.

Then Daley moves on to the day's lesson. There's no discussion. Still, the announcement is a reminder that the world has changed, and that every school is vulnerable.

"I feel very safe here. But it's still important to be prepared," Daley says. The spate of school shootings across the nation in the past year has made educators more aware about the importance of not tolerating petty cruelties between students, she says. It's also triggered discussions in her school district about how to best identify students who may be feeling isolated.

Early each fall, Daley pairs students and has them interview each other. It's basic stuff: favorite foods, hobbies, music, where they live. But Daley says it's a way to make a room of strangers see each other as individuals.

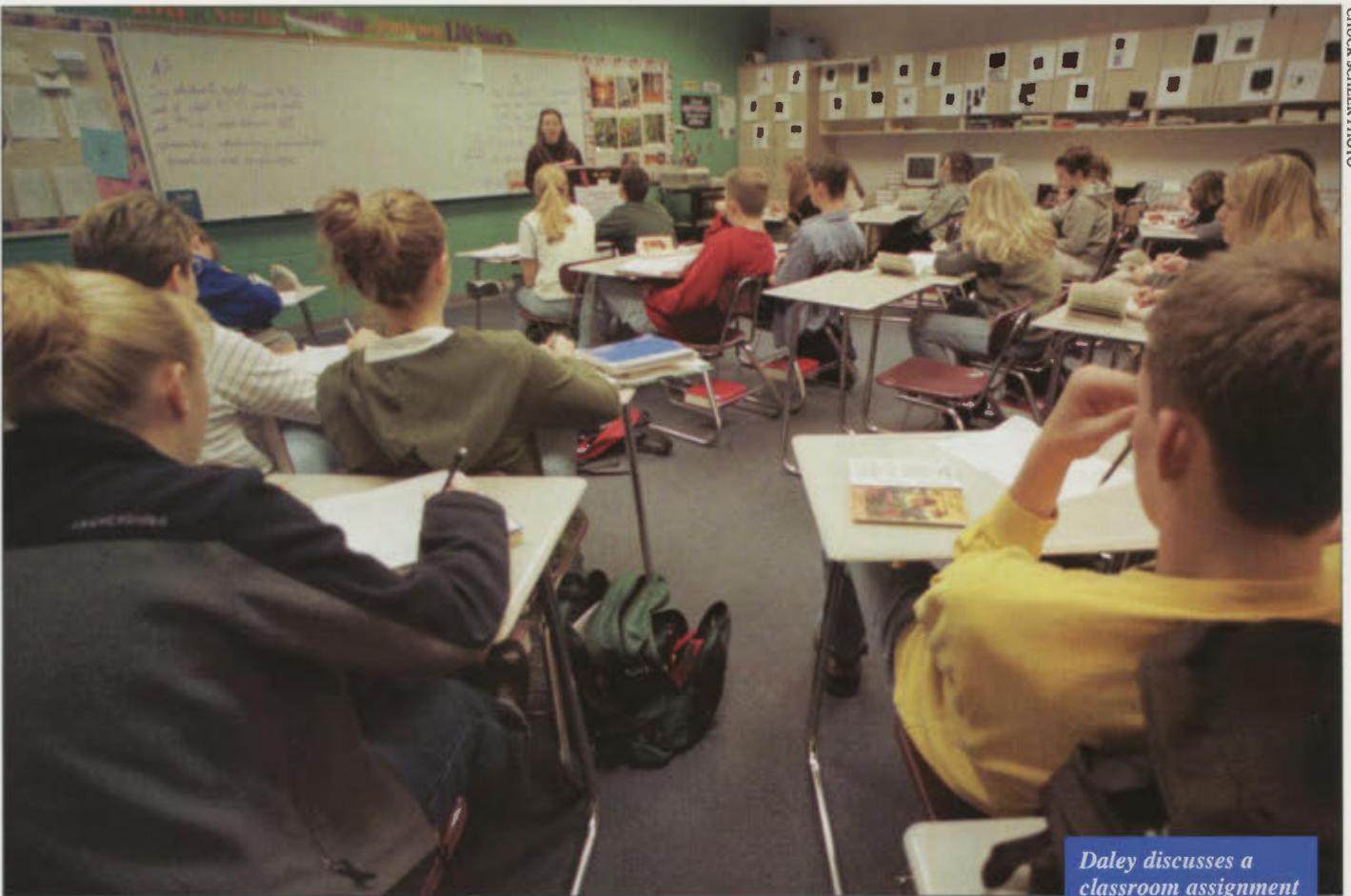
"We assume these kids all know each other — but they don't. In any class, I'll probably have a couple of students who can't name anybody else in the room," she says.

Daley's students aren't fazed by a discussion of emergency procedures. "Last year after Columbine, we heard a lot about lockdowns," one boy says. "Now it's just part of the routine."

"I don't want to think about it," a girl says. "It's scary."

## Service

Boise Mayor Brent Coles sits next to Principal Betsy Story, Kiwanis Club dignitaries and students. The occasion is the chartering of Timberline's Key Club. Daley is faculty adviser.



*Daley discusses a classroom assignment with her students at Timberline High School.*

Students have joined in Rake-Up Boise, provided Christmas presents for a refugee family and undertaken other projects. Daley likes the fact that any student, regardless of GPA, can join.

"Ms. Daley is awesome. You can tell she really cares about us," says Bryn Field, Key Club president. Field steps to the podium to offer the concluding remarks. The evening has gone beautifully: poinsettias on the tables, plenty of refreshments, an enthusiastic crowd.

Daley breathes her own quiet sigh as things wind down. As adviser, she's taken a back seat. It's the way this club is meant to be run, with the students in charge. "You hope everything goes well, but you also have to tell yourself, if it doesn't, they'll learn from the experience," Daley says.

## Frustrations

She hasn't seen the girl in 10 years, but Daley still thinks about her. "She was blossoming out of the cracks of a not-good situation. She'd be living with her mom, then her stepmom, working part time, going to school. She was so motivated." The girl managed to graduate, then Daley lost track of her. She wonders what kind of life her former student has today.

There are kids who grab Daley's heart and won't let go. A girl who wasted away before Daley's eyes, a victim of anorexia.

Girls who got pregnant. Kids who moved away after custody disputes. A few who died. Others who simply gave up.

Daley's worried about a boy in one of her classes. "I've watched him become more and more depressed. He's absent a lot, he's spiraling downward. He's not turning anything in, so I have no opportunity to modify his work."

School social workers and others have intervened without success. "I feel this sadness and frustration," Daley says. "It's not fair to my other students to just focus on him. I know that at some point I'm going to have to let go."

## Joy

The dismissal bell rings at 2:50 p.m., but Daley's day is hardly over. There are students to help, essays to grade, paperwork to do. At 5, Daley heads to the Downtown YMCA for her nightly workout. She'll grade a few more papers at home, perhaps talk on the phone with her son or meet her fiancé Bernie Zaleha, who she'll marry in June. Bedtime is early; Daley rises each day at 5 to meditate before she heads to school.

There's a bulletin board behind Daley's classroom desk, and some mornings she takes a moment to tack up a new photo. The board features pictures of former students, including a newspaper clipping of a

boy in a wheelchair accepting a

Congressional Medal. The boy is Matt Larson; Daley was his faculty adviser. If there was a mutual admiration society, Daley and Larson could be charter members.

"She's very willing to help students outside her classroom," says Larson. "She also taught me to fence." Daley sat in a chair to teach Larson to thrust and spar. "He works hard at everything he does," she says.

Working with kids is why Daley chose to teach; it's the reason she stays today.

"Our students are more sophisticated today. They have more access to information," Daley says. "But I think they are also more frustrated."

Daley sees glimpses of that frustration when students talk to her about the pressures they face, when they write about their personal lives, and when they choose a role for themselves in the many daily dramas that are part of high school life. But they are only glimpses, because at its core adolescence is impenetrable.

Daley watches closely, but she knows there is much beneath the surface that passes her by.

That secretiveness has always been part of adolescent life — but it's never seemed as unnerving as it does today. "These kids have so much potential," Daley says. "They deserve our attention." □