



2012 Writing Competition

A Hero in Disguise

by Megan Sturgill

Adult - 3rd place winner

Surgoinsville Elementary School

Hawkins County

Have you ever known true hunger? You know- that gnawing, relentless pain that won't let up? Have you felt true panic when you realize you don't know where your next meal is coming from? Have you experienced that lifeless energy drain that comes after days of not eating enough? Yeah, me neither. But sadly, some of my students have. Too many of my students do. I am the counselor at Surgoinsville Elementary School and while I hear my share of sad tales and hard times, there is another person at my school who often hears much worse.

Betty Sandidge is our cafeteria manager. To see her, she's a short little bit of a thing with spiky hair and a ready smile. Wearing colorful scrubs, she looks like your favorite nurse you always want to see. But there is something hiding in her...something we adults can't quite identify. She works diligently to make sure our cafeteria runs smoothly. Entering early (and I mean *early*) in the morning and working until the day is done, Mrs. Betty never slows down. Her mind is a whirlwind of numbers, serving sizes, class sizes and all the comings and goings of a very busy school cafeteria. But still, she goes beyond that. In a world where food allergies run rampant, Mrs. Betty is present at every 504 and Health plan meeting, listening and learning all she can to keep our students safe. If an alternative is not readily available for a particular meal (last minute menu changes from the "higher ups" sometimes throw a wrench in her plans) Mrs. Betty has and will purchase food for a child out of her own money.

And then there are the students who are hungry. *Truly* hungry. A hunger that I have never and hopefully will never know. Mrs. Betty feeds them. She puts food in their bellies and soothes their souls. Always quick with a kind word, a gentle smile and a bit of mischief, Mrs. Betty helps these precious little ones not feel so scared and panicked. Because they know. They know Mrs. Betty will feed them. She will, for a few minutes, be a stand in momma, grandmother, aunt, sister and friend. She will put warm food in their bellies. She will fulfill for them the most basic of needs. And not because she has to- because she wants to.

And, as always, behind each story is another story. A story that, when you hear it, makes you see that person in a different light...a kinder light. Mrs. Betty is a grandmother through and through. She adopts our students and takes care of and comforts them for as long as they are here. But she has her own grandchildren and they are walking their own difficult path. Her grandson, born with special needs, has required many surgeries, and endured countless tests, treatments and therapies. Her granddaughter, a senior, has dealt with her own struggles this

year. The victim of a senseless crime, she now struggles with even leaving the house. And Mrs. Betty is there for them-always.

Mrs. Betty, while kind, is a true fighter. She fights for what is true and just. She fights for children-her own and the ones she adopts. She fights for fairness and understanding. She fights the inequity of childhood hunger every day. She fights for those hungry bellies, those sad eyes and those scared faces. And again-not because she has to, but because she wants to.

So you see; Mrs. Betty is a hero. Oh, she will say that she's not. She will say she's just doing her job. But we all know better. Heroes come in all shapes and sizes. They hold jobs and have families of their own. But heroes cannot be hidden. Even if they try to hide...we always find them. It's been said that children have innocent hearts and I believe those innocent hearts find the hero in Mrs. Betty.