

From Handcuffs to Harvard

Katy High School graduate and published author Dr. Adam Sáenz shares about the power of Katy ISD teachers

Written by Dr. Adam Sáenz



Dr. Adam Sáenz, in sixth grade, found himself in the back of a police car. Through the influence of several Katy teachers, he now has multiple doctorates and is a published author.

I wasn't dealt the worst hand exactly, but it certainly wasn't the best. By third grade, I was a young Hispanic male living in a single-parent home in the second poorest county in Texas. Early on, I developed a not-so-favorable understanding of myself - a trouble-making kid with no one to turn to. As a sixth-grader, I found myself handcuffed in the backseat of a police car for possession of marijuana and arson. By seventh grade, I was becoming part of the wrong crowd. At the end of that school year, phone calls were made. "It doesn't look good for him. Would you consider? You could send him back down on holidays."

Desperate to salvage my childhood years, my mother signed a permanent transfer of guardianship over to family friends. Just like that, I landed in what was then a tiny rice farming town in what seemed to be the middle of nowhere: Katy, Texas. I had no idea the next five years would so profoundly shape the rest of my life.

Welcome to Katy

My principal at Katy Junior High (KJH), Mr. Roosevelt Alexander, knew about my past when I arrived (my

guardian had given him a brief history about how I landed in Katy). Looking back, I'm guessing that Mr. Alexander knew that a kid like me probably had repeated negative interaction with authority figures, and as a result, probably had issues with people in positions like his. I did.

On the second day of school, I saw him standing on the steps by the school's front door, and I avoided eye contact as I approached, not wanting to have anything to do with him. I looked up, and he was suddenly standing directly in front

of me. "What do you want with me?" I thought. "I haven't been here long enough to offend anyone and my eyes haven't been bloodshot in over four months."

"Welcome to Katy, son," he said, extending his right hand. "My name is Mr. Alexander. I am your principal and I'm glad you're here." He smiled, patted me on the back, and then he walked away. I was dumbfounded. Was this a plot? Was he setting me up? No. For the first time in my life, as I interacted with Mr. Alexander over the course of that year, I came to know what loved-based leadership really looked like.

I Believe in You

My counselor at KJH, Mr. Roger Beck, also knew I was facing a difficult transition. Mr. Beck knew I was a bit different from the other students, and it wasn't just the AC/DC T-shirts I wore. Early on, he purposed to connect with me, regularly checking in with me to make sure I was doing okay. For the first time in my life, I experienced an adult expressing interest in me simply because they wanted to get to know me.

The KJH track coach, Obra Tompkins, knew that I was the kind of kid who, without better options, would probably find trouble after school somewhere off campus. While I was running one afternoon, Coach Tompkins held up his hand to stop me by the field house as I rounded the track.

"I sure love the way you run, young man," he said. "You've got a great, open stride, and you look like you've got a lot of potential as a middle-distance runner. My name is Coach Tompkins. I'd be honored to work with you this coming track season." For the first time, I experienced someone overtly saying, "I believe in you."

Learning to Trust

By the time I transitioned to Katy High School (KHS), I was a much more focused student. My grades had improved, and I qualified for the Junior Olympic national cross-country meet. Much more importantly though, I was a more settled human being. I was no longer operating primarily out of fear and anger as base emotions. I was more willing and able surrendering my need to control and allow the adults on campus to lead me. I was learning to give and receive love. I was learning to give and receive trust.

Mrs. Betty Schmalz, our KHS librarian, always seemed genuinely happy that I chose to enter that quiet, orderly, and predictable sanctuary. "I know I'll find you in the 100s," she would say, referencing my fascination with psychology and philosophy.

In biology, Mr. Ray Wolman taught me that life is an ordered system of interdependent systems, with each system both needing and serving the other. When a system fails or disconnects from the other systems, life fails.



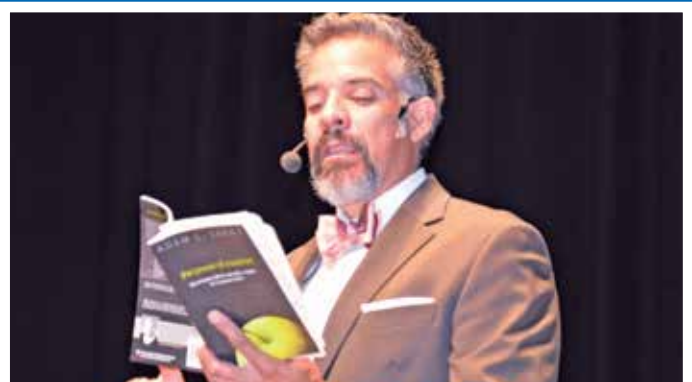
Katy namesakes Jamie and Ray Wolman were both influential educators for Sáenz



Sáenz was honored as the guest speaker at the 2014 Katy VIPs breakfast



Obra Tompkins was Sáenz's track coach at Katy Junior High



Sáenz mentions several Katy ISD teachers in his book, *The Power of a Teacher*, such as Jo Ella Exley and Polly McRoberts

In sociology, his wife, Mrs. Jamie Wolman, taught me that society is a form of collective life, also an ordered system of interdependent systems - an idea that would underpin my understanding of human behavior as a practicing psychologist many years later.

It Takes a Village

As I recount in my book, *The Power of a Teacher*, Mrs. JoElla Exley and Mrs. Polly McRoberts were two English teachers that spoke the profound truth to me - through personally-written letters - that would guide me out of my darkest hours the year after I graduated from KHS.

On May 16, 2014, Katy ISD hosted a banquet to honor their volunteers in public schools participants. I was deeply honored to deliver the keynote address, almost 30 years after having graduated from KHS.

I began my speech with a familiar quote, "Hillary Rodham Clinton once said that it takes a village to raise a child. In the early 1980s, Katy, Texas was the village, and Adam Louis Sáenz was the child."

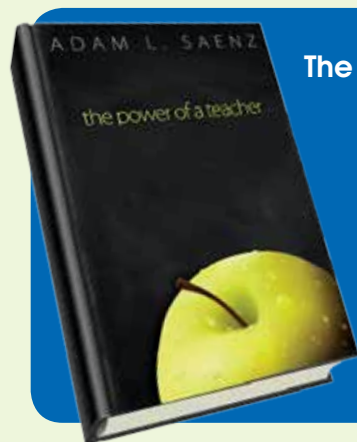
My Safe Place

Katy ISD educators shaped my identity, and I know now that my life is but one measure - four simple beats - in Mr. Alexander's opus and in Coach Tompkins', Mr. Beck's, Mrs.

Schmalz', Mr. Wolman's, Mrs. Wolman's, Mrs. Exley's, and Mrs. McRoberts'.

Along the way, this son of blue collar parents has gained two doctorate degrees, with training at Harvard Medical School and Oxford University. I will be forever grateful for the role educators played in my life. I've ended up with a great hand, and Katy will always be my safe place. **KM**

EDITOR'S NOTE: We would like to thank Dr. Adam Sáenz for sharing his inspirational story of how teachers helped shape his life.



The Power of A Teacher

The book contains actual stories of people whose lives were changed by teachers as well as practical action steps to help teachers perform and live well. Available on amazon.com or visit thepowerofateacher.com.



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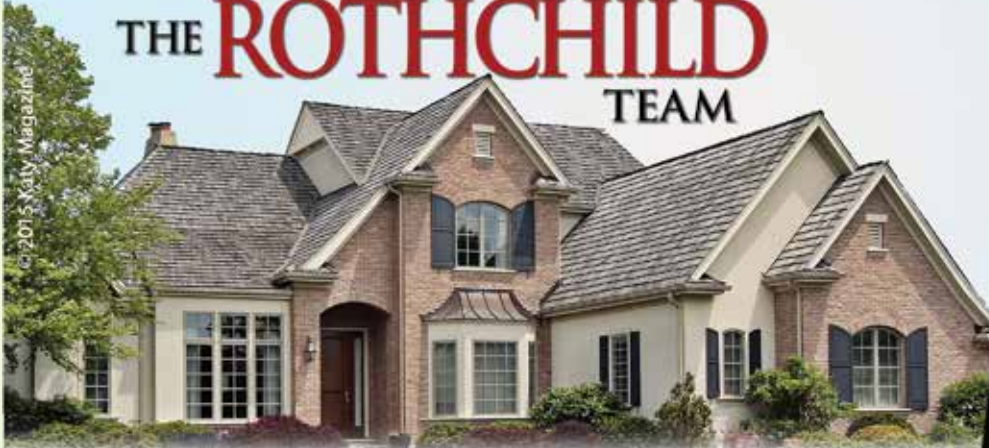
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