



Anke Otto-Wolf, Founder / Creator – Ph: 928-254-1879 - Sedona, AZ

## “... and then they became my kids...”

### The Creation of TOLEY RANZ

By Anke Otto-Wolf

This is not my story.

It is the story of the children at a city “project” school in Norfolk, Virginia, who inspired the creation of *Toley Ranz* and its School Project. Moreover, it is the story about children who allowed me to reach their Soul. And together we reached for the stars.

It began with my belief in their abilities. I felt a deep respect for them. Yes, I showered these kids with endless beauty of any kind and gentleness. It opened a new world filled with hope for tomorrow in the lives of the boys and girls before me.

It is the story of being tossed into unknown territory and where I discovered my life’s passion: teaching in the truest sense of the word; conveying my knowledge and experiences, bringing beauty and laughter into a math class; believing that they CAN, and that they deserve the best.

**Then one day, I asked for assignments** at the poorest schools in the most crime-ridden areas of the city. Administrators looked at me as if I were out of my mind, because no one in his or her right mind volunteered for the “project” schools! I, the idealist, did. Or was I just too naïve and did not know what might await me? In any case, I wanted to teach where I thought kids needed me most and where my passion for reaching a child’s soul could make a difference. So I volunteered.

Children who on a daily basis dealt with crime, violence, drugs, murders, rapes and poverty, were the ones who needed me. I had this deep desire to give them some beauty, gentleness and affection along their way to adulthood, convinced that they would reach it.

My teaching assignment began with one job: I needed to convince them of my belief in their abilities. I wanted to tell the world how great they were. It seemed that the kids not only had to survive horrific, daily problems at home, they also were caught in a system which, in many cases, had given up on them. They were the ‘throw-aways’ of society.

In the classroom, I experienced reversed discrimination, listened to insults and dealt with physical threats. In the hierarchy of school administration, I dealt with ignorance and open envy for my blossoming success with the kids. At times, the ambiance was even hostile, as if even the adults had given up; given up on the kids. I did accomplish things in my classrooms principals and teachers had tried in vain to accomplish for years.

The pay was lousy. Yet, how rich I became!

After an initial period of distance, indifference and anger, combined with the dislike of having to deal with a teacher who came from the ‘outside’ world, the kids inhaled my way of teaching and copied my social behavior. I lived

it; I did not lecture or even preach. Like little dry sponges, the kids soaked up everything.

As exhausting as it was, it was deeply satisfying to see the changes in 'my kids' right before my eyes. For instance, "my arrogant boy" discovering his own artistic talent, was a great reward. He became an A-student. Or the treasured note reading "thanks for teaching me how to smile", from the little girl who found the inner strength to face her abuser. It was the music teacher in our school.

And when I much later realized that the 'finger nail' girl broke the tragic family cycle and made it into high school without getting pregnant, I knew that's what teaching was all about!

And they were only twelve years of age.

At that point, I knew that I had to find a solution for "my kids". I had to find a platform, an opportunity for the children to be able to openly deal with their emotions and to find their own identity. Thus, I created an *After School Program* based on the healing power of the performing arts. Being a participant meant to be proud to have found identity with a positive life style and with socially acceptable behavior skills. Being a member meant to live by the ten-point Honor Code and learn as well as implement social skills, positive attitudes and respect for one another. By strengthening their self-esteem and their awareness of "self", my kids became "bully proof"!

As if tragedy in my own family, and the daily larger-than-life problems of "my kids" were not enough, a so-called partner within my non-profit organization, "Our Children – Our Future", embezzled quite a large amount of donation money. It left my program fading. Yet, teaching the kids filled my life and kept me focused to go forward.

Although Norfolk Public School Administration praised the program, it did not have any funds for financial support. However, the attitude changed dramatically when politicians, like then Virginia Senator Stanley Walker, became involved. He supported our on-profit organization with a substantial state grant. Private Foundations, local businesses, the medical and psychology field, law enforcement and many private individuals of the Hampton Roads Community jumped on the band-wagon.

It became 'fashionable' to support the *Tolerance Awareness Program*, therefore, the 'my' children.

The culmination of acknowledgement came in 1996 under the nationwide "President's Service Award", when I was nominated and President Bill Clinton honored my work with a personal letter for the "difference I made in the community and for my social engagement".

Years later, the girl who learned how to smile again, shared her joy of entering college with me. She also informed me of others who finished high school. My 'arrogant boy' was using his artistic talents in an on-the-job training at an advertisement company.

Just as any proud parent, I think back and I know that volunteering to teach at those crime-ridden schools was one of the most beneficial decisions I ever made.

One day, I brought a small radio, placed it on my desk and tuned into WHRO the classic station; Mozart, Wagner, Beethoven, Dvorak, Opera, and ... well, you know what I mean. Even though the volume was very low, the kids 'rebelled' when I turned it off completely after seven days. My heart jumped with joy, I had reached their Soul!!!

That's how they became aware of classical music, learned details about culture and traditions of the composers' countries. My Kids could even point

out those countries and cities on the global map. Mozart was the most impressive one to the kids because he was still a child himself when composing so many known great pieces of music.

One day, I received tickets to the local Opera Company's dress rehearsal of Puccini's *La Boheme*. Believe me, there were no problems with the kids, they were thrilled to be able to experience something so foreign to them, and enjoyed it tremendously. The adults were the ones who doubted that I could take "those" kids to a place like the Opera House. 'My Kids' did not disappoint me or my friend, the director of the Virginia Opera. Most of all, it was a huge accomplishment in itself for the youngster boosting their self-esteem and their 'can do' attitude.

The *Toley Ranz After School Program* had developed into a sought-after School Project for K – 6<sup>th</sup> grades and was implemented in several Norfolk Elementary Schools. At one of the schools, the maintenance man told me that he "could detect a Toley Ranz kid" anytime in the hallways they just 'behaved differently like respectful', he shared with me. That remark was more than any paycheck could have given me!

My experience with my students and Toley Ranz in the classroom has provided proof to my hopes that Toley Ranz, the confidant and go-between, has greatly increased my time for teaching using much less time on behavioral corrections. One of the most impressive results were the corrections among the kids themselves reminding each other "Psst-psst Toley Ranz says..."

And to 'my kids'- I say thank you for being in my life still - - via facebook, and in memory.

**Over the years, TOLEY RANZ has developed into a powerful “go-between” and trusted confidant for students, teachers and parents alike.** I very much want children everywhere to get to know TOLEY RANZ for this little character instills self-belief, self-esteem and assists kids to welcome a bright future.

Oh just try it, Parents and Teachers, start with the 10-Point Honor Code and you'll see how easy it is to create an atmosphere of joyful learning, critical thinking, inspired discussions, and embracing of basic social skills. And that happens because Toley Ranz is the spirited coach, and not you or I! You see, Toley Ranz is the *third person* kids can talk to and share confidential things, which they wouldn't share with teachers or parents. *Toley Ranz is their confidant.*

Remember YOU ARE influencing the philanthropists, teachers, great parents, doctors, scientists and performers of tomorrow!

Thank you for reading this. I am here for you.

Love and light,

Anke

Call me: **928-254-1879**

Skype me: **ankeow**

Mail me: **anke@sedonasoulbalance.com**