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Padding Upstream

What defines success? Money? Big house? A picture perfect family? The newest gadgets? I know as a child the ultimate definition to success was owning a forest all to myself. Although I would still love to have a forest of my very own, I now wonder if that could make me truly happy. Are there any objects that can ensure lasting happiness? There is no such thing as an item that would give you a never-ending pleasure. So what can bring true satisfaction then? If we think about it, our life is not completely our own to live. There is no way we can go through life without affecting another living creature. Like Isaac Newton's third law states, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." The one thing we decide is whether we have a positive or negative effect on someone or something else's life. Most of us try to do the right thing in our day to day lives, but there are many people that make doing the right thing into their lives. These people give up the luxurious comforts, or just plain comforts, of their lives in order to bring their good-will to others. In Miles Corwin's *And Still We Rise*, there are some great examples of people that have made this decision. Mr. Braxton, Mama Moultrie, Miss Little, and Miesha's brother Raymond are four people who embody the idea of giving your life to help improve the lives of others.

Someone that displays the example of altruism is Scott Braxton. Although Mr. Braxton is the head of the gifted magnet program at Crenshaw High, his original dream was to become an English teacher so that he could help underprivileged students learn the ability of being able to communicate outside of their neighborhood that they grew up in. The combination of being bombarded by work and his unorthodox methods makes him unpopular with many of his

colleagues. The students involved in the AP program do not share that disapproving opinion of Mr. Braxton. Mr. Braxton is someone all the students trust and respect. For Olivia, he is her sole male authority figure. Olivia has had to put a shield of protection just to make it through some of her difficulties, and the fact she feels safe enough with Mr. Braxton to let that shield down speaks volumes for what type of affect he has on the students. When Toya told him that she could not keep up with school unless she had affordable day care for her son, Kaelen, he spent hours of his time searching for a solution to her. Mr. Braxton is always there for the kids, no matter how dire their predicament is. If one of the students were to drop out of school or seem to keep running into bumps in their path, it weighs heavily on his conscience. No matter how much time he has dedicated, if a student fails he feels personally responsible. He even feels bad that he does not get to know the less problematic children better. For Mr. Braxton, it is not about all the students he has already helped, but rather the kids who still need help. In a world of pessimism and realism, he is like a breath of fresh air in how he still holds on to his optimistic and idealistic point of view. After dealing with the overwhelming stress of working at Crenshaw High, Mr. Braxton has moved on to the position of assistant principal at a school in East side. Through the sacrifice of his time and peace of mind, Mr. Braxton has been able to leave his finger prints of kindness on the lives of people like Olivia, Toya, and countless others.

A teacher that gives her life to her students, who she considers to be like her children, is Anita 'Mama' Moultrie. Mama Moultrie is an AP English teacher for 10th grade. Since Mama Moultrie has a strong sense of her ethnic heritage, she infuses her curriculum with African proverbs. She has been ridiculed , mainly by Miss Little, for trailing off from the American Literature she is supposed to be teaching. Because Mama Moultrie is a religious person, she also tries to draw the moral themes and life lessons from the literature. She has experienced racism throughout her life,

so her lessons tend to be slanted to match up to her bitterness towards the past injustices. Rather than moving on, she feels she can fight prejudices with prejudices. Even though I do not agree with some of her views, I love how she establishes the importance of the history of people of colored skin who defeated all the odds. She has the ability to draw parallels from literature to the current struggles of society. Bringing up the stories of other people that excelled pass their grim surroundings will give heroes these kids can relate to, which can be an incentive to strive for a better future. Mama Moultrie on top of taking over Miss Little's classes, has a full plate with her party business, five kids, advising teachers for ten schools, and she also coordinates a school district program. Mama Moultrie feels like it is her duty to help the kids of deprived situations to prove their worth to the world.

Another person who is out to teach to those who crave learning is Mama Moultrie's constant opponent, Toni Little. Miss Little teaches AP English for 10th and 12th grade. About her constant contradicting attitude of teaching being a calling from her convictions and that she teaches simply because she needed a job, Miles Corwin states: "These two contradictory accounts are not mutually exclusive; both stories contain elements of truth. And they reflect much about her cyclonic personality, her alternating moods of idealism and cynicism, graciousness and pettiness. One day she might be inspired in class, passionate about teaching; the next day she might be peevish and uninterested in the literature. One day she might show great concern for a student; the next day she might be so self-absorbed that she ignores a half a dozen troubled students"(227). That is not the only one of Miss Little's conflicting views. She tells her students that they are the creator of their destiny, yet she seems to see herself as a martyr who everyone is plotting against. She likes to compare herself to people or characters that she feel she identifies with. Some are quite absurd, such as how she thinks she has to deal with similar discrimination

and persecution as Tommie Smith. Some of her comparisons are almost accurate, like how she says: "I'm like Hamlet. I'm obsessed and other people have been harmed. I was self-indulgent, like Hamlet was self-indulgent. I know it's a flaw. I've had to reevaluate some things in my life. But I also have a burden, like Hamlet. I have to right a wrong"(363). So she, like everyone else in the world, has a few demons that she is not always able to recognize and deal with. Miss Little does not always behave properly in her class and is unable to discern the correct time and place to unload all her beliefs. This carries a negative effect on the children in her classes. That having been said, she also has many exceptional qualities. She has a love for literature that she longs to pass on to her students. She tries to make her students think about what the authors are trying to reveal with their writings, and how to apply the message to their lives. Though they have different methods, Mama Moultrie and Miss Little have the same objection. It makes one wonder what makes them resent one another so much. Is it because they are different, or is it because they hate to admit how much they actually have in common? Though she is not as affectionate with her students as Mama Moultrie is, Miss Little truly cares for some of her students. Through her teachings, she has been able to reach out to her students. Reading and discussing *The Great Gatsby* helps Sadi to overcome his hostility towards people with lighter skin. He tells Miss Little, "That's the book that taught me that it's not all about race. It's where I learned that there's a universality to human beings and that everyone has the same dreams"(373). Through her assignment of writing an autobiography, Miss Little was able to aid Latisha confront her painful past of being molested, which eventually resulted in her becoming an alcoholic, and help her move on with her future. But the student she has reached out to the most is Olivia. Miss Little has earned the respect of Olivia and is who Olivia considers as her female authority figure. When Olivia had a business of selling snacks at school, Miss Little was the only teacher that would buy

candy from her. When Olivia went to prison, Miss Little along with Miles Corwin were the only people who kept in contact with her. While Mama Moultrie seems to reach out to the whole class in general, Miss Little seems to have chosen out a few students she really wants to connect with. Two years after *And Still We Rise* was written, Miss Little decided that she has had enough of the constant persecution from the colleagues of Crenshaw High. She has moved on to heading a program, that is funded by the state, to integrate computer technology into the curriculum at Crenshaw High. Although she has physically left Crenshaw High, she still lingers by spirit to help the children from South-Central that want to excel. Even though Miss Little is constantly changing between hot and cold, she really strives to give her students the proper tools necessary to sculpt their future.

And Still We Rise also shows the act of selflessness in people besides the faculty at Crenshaw High. One of these people is Raymond. At the age of fifteen, Raymond took the responsibility of filling the role of a caring parent to Miesha, since their mother had long hours at her job of driving a bus. Instead of him viewing his responsibility as something by which he pops his head in Miesha's bedroom every once in awhile to check to see if she is still living, Raymond decides he would donate much of his time and energy in the hope that he could help Miesha to fulfill her, and his dream, of a better life for herself. He would help her get dressed, brush her hair, and make her breakfast in the morning, and then walk her to school. In the afternoon, he would walk Miesha home from school and prepare a proper dinner for her, and then at night he would help her with her homework. Raymond also attended her parent-teacher conference, dance recitals, and school plays. He would also bake varieties of deserts for Miesha's school bake sale. All of this took its toll on Raymond's life. Though he was a gifted math student, he had little time to study, so he just drifted through high school. He does not want Miesha to repeat the same

mistakes, so he always tries to emphasize the importance of her education. When Miesha was having trouble with her attitude at school, it was the thought of disappointing Raymond that made her change her act. When the discussion of religion broke out in class, Miesha commented: "I believe in God . . .but I am a strong believer in my personal savior, my brother, Raymond"(183). After him being a pillar of strength in which Miesha could always rely on, it is no wonder that she is so grateful for his contribution to her life. It really is touching how elated Raymond was when he found out that Miesha would be attending USC rather than UC Berkley because she would be closer to him. It is amazing that after all he has sacrifice to ensure her a better life, that he still has joy in spending time with her instead of resenting her. To most people, Raymond's life would seem like a bust, but him yielding his time to his sister, created a substantial difference in the way she perceives life. I cannot think of anything that can overshadow the importance of what he has already achieved in his life.

A large amount of people would not consider Mr. Braxton, Mama Moultrie, Miss Little, and Raymond as having a profitable existence. As far as worldly possessions are concerned, these people are not a great success. What Mr. Braxton, Mama Moultrie, Miss Little, and Raymond have accomplished goes far beyond any earthly items. Making such a extensive contribution to this world as they have is the biggest triumph anyone can make. I only hope one day I can look back on my life and say I have had a life as prosperous as they have.