



## A Port in the Storm

By Wendy Lichtman

Even though I knew a student of mine was going through a very rough time, I still came down pretty hard on him for missing Math Lab. I had spent several hours setting up a program that would give him credit for a semester of Algebra, so I was annoyed when he didn't show up for a week.

When he did come back to school, he and I had one of those conversations that I imagine happens frequently between students and teachers. He talked to me about what was going on in his life and I talked to him about trying to make choices that weren't self-destructive. "Let school be your port in the storm," I said, and checked to make sure he understood what I meant — that coming here could be his safe harbor.

He came to Math Lab pretty regularly over the next couple weeks, and one morning while we were working together my phone rang. I don't answer my phone while I'm teaching, but when I saw who it was from I stepped into the hall, closed the door and took the call.

A 40-year-old friend of mine had died the day before, and it was her mother on the phone. I thought I was speaking quietly, but the kids in Math Lab must have heard my voice crack and felt my pain because when I walked back in the room, the three of them were staring at me.

"My friend died," I explained. "I was just asked to speak at her funeral tomorrow." I sat down next to the student who had been absent and said, "It's a hard day."

"See, this is why I hate school," he said.

"Why?" I asked, honestly confused.

He gestured to the worksheet of algebra problems in front of us. "Because this isn't real," he explained. "This isn't what's going on with you."

"Funny," I said, "I feel exactly the opposite — this is why I love school. Because for the hours I've been here, I haven't felt my grief as much. I'm grateful for that."

I reminded him of our port-in-the-storm talk, explained it to the other kids and told them that today, teaching was my safe harbor.

They listened to me, seemed to think about what I said, and then we all went back to work. I know they understood me, but I'm not sure they believed my point of view. But I honestly do. I honestly believe that school can be a port in our storms. Which is not to say that I don't spend a lot of time wishing I could just stop the storms. I do. I wish I could, for example, prevent a wonderful 40-year-old woman with two young children from dying of breast cancer.

But I can't. None of us can. Not any more than we can prevent the traumas in our students' lives. Sometimes, though, we can teach the kids we work with to navigate their storms better; we can nearly always be a port.