“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, thought like a child, and reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put aside childish ways.”

This thought best explains my growth experience over the last four years at DeSales University. Entering this University I had what can only be explained as a sheltered view of the world. Growing up in a loving family I never wanted for anything… attention, love, toys, food, or otherwise. As a result, I believed that all children had the same luxuries that I was blessed with throughout my youth. In high school there was no question of “if” I would go on to college, but only where I would choose to attend. It was the logical next step after high school, an idea that I thought was universal. Looking back I can’t imagine I was that naive, thinking that the world was fair; a view that would change over the next four years by a string of experience that can only be classified as eye opening and life changing.

During one of these experiences, my first trip with DeSales to Houston, Texas, I was fully exposed to the impact that poverty and low expectations of students’ potential have on the human condition. It was an experience that not only opened my eyes but broke my heart. At first as I looked at the people that we served on that first day working in the soup kitchen all of the stereotypes that I have heard ran through my head… lazy, druggie, alcoholic, poor, minority, waste of taxpayers money, and unmotivated. But as I looked into the faces of these men, women, and children I saw in each individual the faces of students that I have encountered throughout my experiences in different classrooms during my time as an education major. I could not help but wonder about the path they traveled from having limitless potential to now being in the most vulnerable of positions.
As opportunities presented themselves, I talked with individuals about their life journey and what brought them to the position that they were currently in. I was astounded to find that they were eager to tell their stories, to be heard, and to feel that someone genuinely cared about their existence. As I listened I found that there was a common theme… at one point these individuals had hopes and dreams for their lives. However, somewhere along the line they lost hope and belief in their ability to accomplish these goals. With no one there to provide support and encouragement they started a downward spiral that was difficult to stop. All too often this loss of hope happened at a young age. Some individuals that were homeless were in their early twenties. Listening to their stories made me think that the only difference between us was that in difficult times I had a support system to encourage me to strive to reach my goals while they did not and worse yet, they were continually told that they would not amount to much.

Throughout these conversations I continued to flash back to the faces of students in the classes I have observed and taught, knowing all to well the impact that lack of parent concern and care had on students. When challenged by the teacher, the students who had no drive to learn, to educate themselves, or to dream would respond that their parents did not care about education and that they don’t need to know how to read, write, or do math in order to survive. In these individuals that we were serving I saw the path that many young students may fall into without a reason to set high goals and strive to reach their fullest potential.

A basic need of all individuals is a feeling of belonging. Without this feeling students are at a disadvantage with no reason to strive to better themselves or reach their fullest potential. When students are not able to see people around them striving for their best and to better themselves they are at a loss in how to see and strive for this in themselves. My conversations with the individuals at Bread of Life taught me the importance of being that role model for my
students, playing the role of teacher, cheerleader, mentor, and friend to all students who walk through the door to my classroom.

As a result, every time I enter a classroom I am aware that the praise and positive reinforcement that the students hear from me may be the only words of encouragement that they hear that entire day. Today I take advantage of every opportunity to instill in students a feeling of accomplishment and I am amazed, again and again, to see the growth in their confidence and determination. The more the students are told that they can accomplish something, the more students are willing to take chances and try new things. With an expression of a little faith in them, the students are able to make leaps and bounds intellectually and socially

As I stepped off the plane in Houston several weeks ago I knew that I was once again returning to the place that first instilled in me the desire to develop a support system for students in my class to encourage them to dream. As I sat in church that Sunday morning at St. John’s I knew I was there for a reason… Beyond working with the kitchen staff, on the most recent visit, I had the privilege to work with eleven amazing high school students; ironically they were all labeled “bad kids”, “trouble makers”, “drinkers”, and “druggies”. These students were in the program because they had been kicked out of school for alcohol or drug offenses. Our reason for working with them was to show them that they could get their lives together and wind up where we are, in college with a bright future. Funny thing was by the end of day we realized that we were all closer to one another than we could have realized. A few bad decisions separated us. At first the students put up walls, playing the role of the tough kids who didn’t need anyone. But as time went on the students began to let their guard down and we were able to see that they were individuals with hopes and dreams that they were afraid to reveal. Most of the students had to grow up at a young age and did not have the vital influences to encourage them to make good decisions and work to fulfill their dreams. For some, their only hope of getting off drugs was the
strength they could muster within themselves as they knew they would go home from school to a house full of drug addicts. As I looked at the faces of these young students I couldn’t help but wonder what their greatest potential would be if they had just one person that would support them and help them to stand up when they thought that they couldn’t go any further.

If I could have stayed there with those students and been their personal cheerleader until they were strong enough to believe in their own ability I would have, but in reality that was not possible. Everyday since my return to DeSales I think about them and wonder if they are making it, if they are continuing to fight. This is the same wonder that I carry about students from my observation, practicum, and student teaching experiences. I often think of the impact they have made on me, the way they have helped me to believe in my own ability. I hope and dream maybe I have made a similar impact on them, helping and encouraging them to continue to dream.

As I left Texas that Wednesday I could no longer hold back the tears as my heart filled with sadness and hope. I was torn between hope that these individuals could succeed and the knowledge of the odds that were stacked against them. As I said goodbye to Calvin, the man in charge of our volunteer work, he stared me straight in the eye and said “I know that you don’t want to leave but only by returning home can you teach others what you have learned in your time here.” As that wisdom began to sink in on my flight home I realized that this experience mirrored my experience at DeSales. Over my time here I have been a part of a small, close, supportive community. A community and family that challenged me to dream but was also there to help me when I fell flat on my face. With my classmates and friends I have had times that I have laughed so hard I cried and times that I cried so hard that I couldn’t breath. But at the end of the day, knowing that I had people that believed in me, whether they were right there by my side or on the other side of the country helped me to believe in myself. This same way I know I can and will leave here with a sense of community that I will strive to recreate in my
classroom showing the students no matter their obstacle they can always succeed. Further that they will always have a place they can return when they need a little reminder of their true potential.

Throughout my experience at DeSales I have both given and received encouragement. It is this encouragement that has made this place feel like home, a feeling that is hard to leave. However, it is this same encouragement that has given me the courage to leave everything and everyone I know. Through the support of faculty, staff, and friends I have been equipped with all that I need to go from here into my future as I make my new home in Houston Texas. Only by daring to go there can I teach others what I have learned while I was here at DeSales, to live St. Francis DeSales Teaching, “Be who you are and be that well.”