

# New York Times

## A Midstream Switch to Teaching

By Peter Wilson, as told to Patricia R. Olson  
February 21, 2010

ALMOST three years ago, I started teaching seventh-grade English. Before that, I was an account manager in public relations in the Boston area.

When people switch from business to teaching, they usually talk about the huge pay cut, then say how rewarding they find their new career. I agree. But it's not as cut-and-dried as that, at least in my case. There are parts of my old job that I miss, and, as with any job, teaching isn't all roses.

I was laid off from my previous job, so it's not as if I had an epiphany and left because I had a burning desire to teach. But I had been in that job for 10 years and no longer found it fulfilling. Losing it forced me to examine what I wanted to do next.

I did some consulting and started job-hunting. But I wanted to talk to someone about my future, and the person who knows me best after my wife, Allyson, is my brother Ray. I called him to help me do some soul-searching.

Everyone who's laid off should find someone they trust and sit down and talk. You can't think things through by yourself, especially when you have a family. You have too much going on mentally. You need someone who cares enough to listen, but is not in the thick of it the way you are.

Over lunch with Ray, I brought up the idea of teaching. It was a possibility I had thought about occasionally, but had dismissed as financially unfeasible. I had a 2-year-old and planned to have another child in the near future. Ray told me to hold on, that we should discuss it. And with his help, in two hours I had a plan.

My wife and I sold our home and moved in with my mother so I could go to school and get certification. I found a program at Simmons College for a Master of Arts in teaching that I could complete in about a year. My wife works at the college.

I had been laid off at the end of January 2006, and by late spring that year I was enrolled in the program. I started student-teaching the next January at Masconomet Regional Middle School in Topsfield, Mass. I took two state teaching exams — a general one and one for prospective English teachers. An

English teacher was retiring that June, and I was hired to take her place in September.

I love teaching, but I was surprised at the amount of planning it takes to keep lessons fresh. I also didn't realize that you're performing in the classroom, giving 45-minute presentations, almost all day. Then you do it again, day after day.

Keeping 12- and 13-year-old kids engaged is challenging. When a lesson works and you connect with them, it's great, but when it doesn't, it's frustrating. Also, at the ages I teach, there can be different maturity levels within each class.

But to have a student return the next year and tell you how much you taught him is unbelievably gratifying. People entering teaching should expect to be fulfilled in ways they haven't been before.

I make about half my former salary, and I don't know exactly how my wife and I are managing. We left my mother's after a year and bought a new house on the opposite side of Boston from where we were. We had done well on the sale of our house and saved money while at my mother's, so we bought a bigger, house that's more family-friendly. I sold my car and bought a smaller one to save gasoline. We don't go out to eat much, and we buy generic brands.

You reach a certain age when money is not the primary driver of your life, especially when you have a child or two. Still, you have to decide what you can live with. If you enjoy what you're doing, it helps compensate for a lower salary. I also lead an after-school activity: a discussion group about the television series "Lost." I wanted the students who signed up to see how much deeper the show is than it might first appear to them. I like to think that it's helping them with critical-thinking skills.

I miss the daily interaction with adults at my old job. I had dreaded business meetings that were held for no reason that I could see, but when meetings to pitch our agency to potential clients went well, that was a different story. When I told vice presidents or C.E.O.'s my ideas and they said they loved them, I felt great. But those moments were not a regular occurrence. It's just the nature of the job.

I INTEND to work at this school the rest of my life if they'll have me. I occasionally think about going into school administration because of my background, but I'm still trying to figure out what it means to be a good teacher. A management job may come later.

One of my former students, an eighth grader who wanted to attend a private high school, stopped by one day and told me he had just finished the application essay. He had to write about someone who inspired him, and he wrote about me. That will keep me going for the next three years.