

I would like to thank the alderpersons and people of New Haven for allowing my colleagues to present my story to you tonight about why I stopped teaching at Hillhouse High School. My family moved to New Haven in 1976 and I am one of seven siblings who have all attended New Haven public schools. Our youngest brother, Lewie, will graduate from Wilbur Cross this year. I was voted “most likely to succeed” by my classmates when I graduated from Cross myself in 1992. When I was hired at Hillhouse in 1999, I felt I had found the success I was aiming for. Even though I grew up in Westville -- a neighborhood attached to Hillhouse -- most white students in my day transferred over to Cross. However, as a teacher, I was eager to work at Hillhouse with all the accompanying challenges I expected to find there. I worked through grade-changing scandals and fight club contests in the bathrooms. One student took a swing at me in my classroom during a psychotic episode after his close friend was shot down over the weekend. He was back in school two weeks later, apologized and shook my hand. Graduated a few months later. No one has the right to accuse me of not being tough enough.

Throughout my sixteen years at Hillhouse I worked with and trained educators from Yale, UCONN, Southern, UNH, Eastern, Amistad, and high schools across Connecticut through Project Opening Doors. I earned certification as an adjunct professor of English at UCONN. I'd like to think I have learned quite a bit about the do's and don't's involved in urban education. And I felt fiercely loyal to the Hillhouse legacy I hoped to offer my small contribution towards -- until the day I retired to write a great novel. I wanted to be the next Dr. Burt Saxon, for those of you who might know of the highly estimable career of this Hillhouse educator. But by early fall of the 2014 school year, it became very clear to me that this would no longer be my fate. When summer finally arrived I transferred to Coop. Following the same path as more than a few other talented teachers who have left Hillhouse in the last few years. And likely there will be more to come if things are not turned around quickly there.

I hesitate to use the phrase “turn-around” because that is how they labeled the three restructuring efforts at Hillhouse that were forced upon us as a staff within a five year period. The phrase has been poisoned for me because of the deception and injustice

that were associated with it, each time causing more damage to the students and staff at Hillhouse. I stood up at a staff meeting in January of 2015 before a director of instruction and our union president, proclaiming that I no longer had faith in the third turn-around they were planning to roll out the next fall. It was an act of defiance that those who know me well would certainly call uncharacteristic. The director in the Hillhouse library that afternoon responded to me by chuckling and saying that “faith was only for Sundays.” I was appalled. This was our district leader! Cracking a joke in front of a weary staff by implying that we were not expected to have faith in her or the plans she had for Hillhouse.

But, to be honest, I had come to expect such a response by then. For I had already stood up earlier in the year at a teachers-only meeting held in my classroom with the school social worker. It was my last ditch attempt to label our school climate crisis as a human resources issue in the hopes of drawing someone’s attention. When we met there were a number of veteran teachers who cried as we talked about the anxiety, stress, depression, and disrespect we felt as professionals working under the current leadership both within Hillhouse and in central offices. We had already been through many rounds of letters to our union leadership, letters to the administration, letters to the superintendent -- all to no avail. We had been abandoned.

And that was the first sign of the ‘beginning of the end’ as far as I’m concerned. When a young freshman of ours, a scholar, an athlete, a friend to so many -- the youngest of five brothers who all attended Hillhouse. When Jacob Craggett was gunned down on the streets of New Haven during the summer of 2014. When we all returned to school in August with heavy hearts. And when I heard our new administrator instruct one of my colleagues to abandon Jacob Craggett. When this teacher was to stand before Jacob’s grieving classmates in the coming weeks, she was not to bring up his name. That Jacob’s death had happened during the summer and was not to be discussed with students entering class in the fall. And when classmates writing for the school newspaper I was the advisor for -- a newspaper published at Hillhouse for 100 years -- when they penned a memorial to Jacob Craggett on the front page of the centennial issue and this principal refused to disseminate the paper to the students in her academy. When she hoarded the three hundred issues in a box in the corner of her office instead of encouraging Jacob’s

peers to read about the inspiring legacy he had left for all of us to cherish and grow from. That's when I knew it was the end. I knew that was the end of House Family. And that's why I stopped teaching at Hillhouse High School.