



# The Plague of the Broken Crayons and the Heads That Haunted Us

Sara Cole

I have always placed a lot of stock in artifacts. When I walk into an afterschool program, one of the clearest and quickest things I use to assess the situation is how the room looks. What activities and supplies are available? What is on the walls? What is on the desk in the corner?

When I climb on my soapbox about quality programming—a box that is never far from where I stand—I often refer to the box of sad, broken crayons. Anyone who works in the field laughs. We have all seen that collection of crayons, typically accompanied by its partners in crime, the coloring pages or, even worse, the *photocopied* coloring pages. Those stubby old crayons have become my symbol of the constant struggle to provide appropriate resources for afterschool programs. If the crayons don't work for you as an image, feel free to substitute the board games in the torn boxes with the missing pieces, the naked dolls, or the books with pages that are missing or barely attached.

How can programs be exciting, innovative, and engaging when providers and youth do not have what they

need? How can youth feel valued and respected when they are surrounded by worn-out and broken materials?

Why are we *still* fighting this battle?

About a year after I came to the Rochester YMCA to take a senior-level position overseeing youth development, I also became the interim director of one of our struggling child development centers. The center's director and the branch's executive director had both left to take other positions; it felt as though the only certainty was that nothing was working as it should be.

That year, I woke up at 4:00 in the morning, Monday through Friday, so I could be in the center when it opened at 6:00. I often stayed until 8:00 or 9:00 in the

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evening to fix, clean, train, fire, strategize, reorganize, plan, and budget. Some Saturdays, I would wake up in the middle of the night and then feel relieved that the center was closed. I never could truly relax during the 12 hours the center operated each weekday.

During my time as interim center director, I reorganized all 13 classrooms. In one of them, I found three heads of the kind hairdressers practice on; their faces were grimy and their hair was matted. Children had been playing with them. I was horrified. Carrying all three heads upstairs with me, I proceeded to give impassioned speeches to anyone who could not get away fast enough about how important it was for quality programs to have high-quality toys. At some point in the speech, I would grab the head and wave it close to the frightened listener to make my point.

I put the heads in my office so I could not help but see them each day and remember how hard we needed to continue to work. They became an effective (if ridiculous) metaphor for what I wanted our programs to be—and of what I definitely did not want them to be. Soon after, our chief financial officer asked for one of the heads to place in her office so she, too, could be constantly reminded of what we were working toward (and against).

That winter seemed to last all year. I replaced most of the staff. I learned the names of the parents and their children. I sometimes cried, out of frustration and exhaustion, in my car on the way home. I remembered what it was like to work with youth and with parents and with staff every day.

Eventually we hired a really great director and a wonderful assistant director. Eventually there were days that I did not have to walk through that center and weekends that I forgot to wake up in the middle of the night and feel relieved. Eventually the remaining two heads found their way out of my office. When I went to find them to take a photo, they had disappeared.

Those heads may be missing, but the sad crayons (and their ilk) probably still crop up now and again. I don't want to forget that the struggle for quality is continuous. I don't want to forget that the greatest joy lies in the hardest work. I don't want to forget what it is to touch the programs every

day—to be so moved, so tired, so in love with an idea of what something could be that I lie awake in the middle of the night just trying to figure it all out.

### **Author's Note**

This essay is dedicated to Sue Reschke, fierce advocate and partner in the struggle.

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