

Education Podcast with John Merrow #65 – Spelling Iraq



Spelling Iraq

Almost all of Nancy Welsh's kindergarten students have a parent in Iraq or Afghanistan.

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NANCY WELSH

It's very hard for the children to accept that they're not going to see their dad, or mom, for an entire year. And they'll say, daddy will not be here for my birthday. He won't be back until I'm seven years old. Or he won't be back until we have Christmas, and then we have this, and we have that. So it's hard for them to ... to really accept that it's going to be an entire year.

JOHN MERROW

I'M JOHN MERROW NANCY WELSH HAS TAUGHT AT MCNAIR ELEMENTARY ON FORT BRAGG, NORTH CAROLINA FOR 29 YEARS. ALL OF HER STUDENTS HAVE A PARENT IN THE ARMY, AND OVER THE LAST FEW MONTHS HER CLASS HAS EXPERIENCED A NUMBER OF DEPLOYMENTS. EVEN DURING THIS DIFFICULT TIME, HER CLASSROOM IS A HAPPY PLACE, FILLED WITH THE CHILDREN'S ART AND STUFFED TOY RACCOONS, THE CLASS MASCOT. SHE'S MASTERED THE BALANCE BETWEEN EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND ACADEMICS, OFTEN TACKLING BOTH NEEDS AT THE SAME TIME.

NAT SOUND "This one's Iran, Here's Iraq, and do you remember what this one is? Afghanistan.

JOHN MERROW Of your 17 kids, how many have a parent deployed in Iraq, Afghanistan, or perhaps even Korea?

MRS. WELSH Uh, 14 ... 14 ...

JOHN MERROW Fourteen of 17.

MRS. WELSH Yes, mm-hm. And we will have two more in May; another father is going in June; another father's going. So, almost everyone. I try to do for every single child what they need and they don't always need the same thing either. One might need to talk about it a lot, another doesn't want to talk about it at all, one needs humor and they want to write things and draw funny things and another child needs extra hugs. So I have to try to know what each child needs each day which may be different from morning to afternoon also.

JOHN MERROW THE DAY BEFORE SHE LEFT FOR IRAQ, MCNAIR PARENT DIANE REITZAMMER VISITED NANCY'S CLASSROOM.

JOHN MERROW What's your sense of the teacher, Mrs. Welsh?

DIANE REITZAMMER Oh she's really good (laughs). I uh we actually moved and we were supposed to switch schools but I didn't want to because I wanted her to finish the year here with Ms. Welsh, especially because I'm leaving on the deployment so."

JOHN MERROW It sounds like you are comfortable, knowing that you are leaving your daughter with Mrs. Welsh.

DIANE REITZAMMER Yes, she's done really well. I've watched what she's done with other children, you know how they've

been able to adapt. She helps with that sadness in school.

- NAT SOUND Daddy in US Army song (better?)
- JOHN MERROW NANCY WELSH USES MUSIC IN ALMOST ALL OF HER LESSONS.
- MRS. WELSH I've been writing a lot of songs about love. They've been upbeat songs, we don't sing about missing dad, we sing about loving dad or loving mom and mom and dad loving us, but I've been writing a lot of songs to try to help them through this.
- NAT SOUND Camera song
- MRS. WELSH Music helps adults and children when you ... you're in a bad mood or a sad mood. Songs about mothers and fathers - not about mothers and fathers being away. We don't sing sad songs like that. So, I've written lots of songs that help them feel better about helping their parents when their parents are missing them. And, just songs that make them feel that they're loved, and they still have that connection with their parent. Um ...
- JOHN MERROW So, a kid comes to you sad ...
- MRS. WELSH Yes ...
- JOHN MERROW You sing glad songs? You don't let them be sad?!
- MRS. WELSH No, no. Um, I let them be sad, and I even say, 'It's okay to be sad. I would be sad too if ... if my daddy was far away,' or ... or 'I'm sad that your mommy's not here. Um, so it's okay to be sad.' But ... I'll say, 'but let's try to feel better now.
- JOHN MERROW SOME CHILDREN IN MRS. WELSH'S CLASS HAVE TROUBLE SLEEPING.

MRS. WELSH Aja who had trouble sleeping - she was a child who had trouble sleeping - um, she kept telling me she was having bad dreams. So I told her, I said, 'I know it's okay ... I know you're sad, and it's okay to be sad. But at nighttime, when you're laying in bed, try to think about good things that your daddy does.'

NAT SOUND Austin, calls over Mrs. Welsh, "I'm going to draw this picture of my Dad bouncing" and Mrs. Welsh sings, "I can dream about daddy"

MRS. WELSH I suggested to them that they draw pictures of happy dreams, that they would like to have, or they have had. Um, it could be dreams about anything, or anybody. And Austin chose to draw a dream that he would like to have about happy things he could do with his dad. And he drew his dad holding him on his shoulders, bouncing him around. Because that's something he really enjoys. So that's ... he was drawing these good things that he does with his dad. Which is what I've encouraged him to think about when he's ... when he's going to sleep. To think about the fun things, so that he can fall asleep laughing and smiling, and thinking good things about his dad.

JOHN MERROW TIM HOWLE IS PRINCIPAL AT MCNAIR.

TIM HOWLE I know what caring and nurturing can do in education. I see it everyday.

JOHN MERROW Your kindergarten teacher. Ms. Welch.

TIM HOWLE Awesome. Unbelievable. She's just great. You know, she goes above and beyond ... what ... but those kids are ... they're always involved. They're always learning, they're doing things. It's hands on. But yet she just cares. And you can't ... you can't walk in that class without feeling it. I mean,

it's just ... you feel it. And you know it. And ... you want to give a kid a boost up in education? That's the kind of environment they've got to have, especially in those early years. Because that's when you instill the love of learning.

JOHN MERROW PARENT DIANE REITZAMMER IS GRATEFUL FOR THE ENVIRONMENT MRS. WELSH CREATES.

DIANE REITZAMMER They have the touching wall outside and we traced my hand so that every time Elise walks by she can give me a high 5 or she can kiss it and there's a picture of us together so she can wave hello to me. So she can see me, when she's missing me she's got a picture of me in her cubby.

MRS. WELSH To me it's very frustrating when you can't give your love to someone. And I wanted to make sure the children could still have a way of giving love, expressing love.

JOHN MERROW Is it tough for you emotionally? I mean, for example, if Aja goes out to kiss her dad. Or Austin goes out to give his dad a high five. What do you feel?

NANCY WELSH That is tough. Uh, I wish the parent as home. And I wish I could do more for that child. It ... it makes me a little bit sad, but in the same way, usually the child turns around and smiles, after they've kissed mom or dad, or given mom or dad high fives. So, I also feel good because I know, okay, it helped a little bit. But yes, it can be exhausting at times. Um, it's physically exhausting at times, but lately it's been emotionally exhausting. Um, to be there for so many children. And because I invite the parents to come in, and especially before they deploy, I get to the point that I ... I know the parents. And I know the relationship between the

parent and the child, too. So, it's sad, to see such happiness between the children, and then the children and the parent. And then, say good bye to them the last day. And I know I won't see them for a year, or more. And I know that a child won't see them for a year or more. So, it can be very emotionally difficult for me.

JOHN MERROW

It's like 'Super Teacher.'

NANCY WELSH

But ... well, I don't know, I'm not Super Teacher. But I care a lot. And you know, the more you care, the harder it is for you, emotionally.

JOHN MERROW

Is it ... is it good for the kids to be with other kids who are in the same situation? Even as it's more tiring for you?

NANCY WELSH

Most of the time it's good for the children to be with each other. They understand what it means to miss mom, to miss dad. They enjoy sharing the maps, and saying my daddy's in Iraq. My daddy's there, too. Let me show you Afghanistan. But when the deployment first happens, then it's really difficult to have them all in the same class.

JOHN MERROW

Do you worry that one child gets upset, that it will be contagious?

NANCY WELSH

Yes. Somebody will say I'm missing mommy, I miss my mommy. And then somebody else says I miss daddy, I miss daddy. And it can um, escalate quickly.

JOHN MERROW

What about the tough question? Do you get that?

NANCY WELSH

Yes.

JOHN MERROW

Will my daddy die.

NANCY WELSH

Right after 9/11 um, I was sitting next to a boy at lunch. And he said, my daddy might get killed. Will my daddy get killed. And I actually said a little prayer, before I answered. And then I said, I hope not. I said your daddy isn't there by himself, is he? And he said no. And I said, who is he with? And he said lots of soldiers. And I said did they go to school and learn how to be good soldiers? And he said, yes. And I said, well I think they're all going to protect each other the best they know how. I said your daddy won't be alone. So, I didn't tell him, no, he won't get killed. But I just tried to reassure him that he had good training, he wasn't alone. And he said, okay. And then asked me to open his applesauce. So, we moved on.

JOHN MERROW

So when you get a tough question, is your thought process, how do I not lie? How do I divert? What do you think?

NANCY WELSH

It's usually how to be honest. How do I put this at their level. Or how do I move them someplace else, and try to answer them away from ... the group, depending on who they're with. One of the difficulties is that, as a teacher, you know some children know a lot about the subject of war. And some children are protected. Um, we have some children in this class who will tell me all the details. My dad's going to a very dangerous place. This is what he's going to do. And then we have others who just say, my daddy's going to be gone for a long time. So, you sometimes have to move the ones who know all the details away from the ones who are being sheltered. So it's ... it's a tightrope, walking a tight rope at times.

JOHN MERROW

But you don't lie. You don't say 'your daddy's going to be fine.'

NANCY WELSH No, I don't say 'your daddy's going to be fine.' We had a child here, not in my class, but another kindergarten class last year, whose daddy did not come back. Uh ... so I do not want to tell them your daddy's going to be fine. Or your mommy's going to be fine. Because I don't know that. So.

NAT SOUND "Iraq-write this down- A desert country in the Middle East where America brings freedom."

JOHN MERROW Now ... now, Mr. Wieland's class, he would say things. All right, write this down. Iraq is a country that will have freedom because of what America is doing.

NANCY WELSH Iraq is a place where your daddy is helping. Or your mommy is in Iraq. Or, Iraq is a hot place. Or it's a place far away. Afghanistan is a long word. And then, I've never been to that place, but I've heard it has mountains.

JOHN MERROW But you're not taking a position...

NANCY WELSH No. No.

JOHN MERROW On the war.

NANCY WELSH No, I don't take any. At school, that is not my place to take any position on the war. I'm not a politician, and I'm not someone who expresses opinions about, we should be in Afghanistan, or Iraq, or Korea, or any place else for that matter. My position is to teach the children, to love the children. And I think a lot of people don't realize how hard military life can be on families and children. And I especially feel for the children, because the parent who joins the army makes a decision. They don't get to choose. I want my dad to be in the army, or the marines, or whatever. I want mom to be in the army, or in the marine ...

marines. So, I do think we need to support our troops by supporting the families. And for me, that's supporting the children, especially.

JOHN MERROW Do you have politics?

NANCY WELSH Sure.

JOHN MERROW Do you feel strongly?

NANCY WELSH I definitely do.

JOHN MERROW Going to tell me?

NANCY WELSH I am not.

JOHN MERROW NANCY WELSH'S CLASS HAS CREATED A DVD OF THEIR SONGS TO SEND TO THE DEPLOYED PARENTS. THIS INTERVIEW WITH TEACHER NANCY WELSH IS A PART OF OUR NEWS HOUR REPORT, 'LESSONS OF WAR.' PLEASE GO TO OUR WEBSITE, PBS.ORG/MERROW, M-E-R-R-O-W, FOR THE FULL STORY AND OTHER EXTENDED INTERVIEWS.

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JANE RENAUD PRODUCED THIS PODCAST. I'M
JOHN MERROW. THANKS FOR LISTENING.

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