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QUDWA 2017

Plenary

Sunday October 8th, 2017

Speaker

Ron Clark, Founder, The Ron Clark Academy, USA

Summary Paragraph/Key Points

Charismatic, eccentric and a mesmerizing speaker, Ron Clark is called ‘America’s teacher’ for his game-changing Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia. He began his address quickly by jumping into his favourite topic—a ‘revolution’ that is needed in education, making students love going to school and aspire to be teachers when they grow up.

The Ron Clark Academy has an electric blue slide that kids can go down instead of stairs. It is a quirky touch that befits its founder, and, yes, it can save you time if you are late for class. But more than anything else, it is a symbol. The first time you whoosh down it, for example, you get a sticker that says “Slide Certified.” This is not a “normal” school.

Ron Clark went from being the first person in his family in North Carolina to attend university to being “America’s Educator,” a teacher celebrated by Bill Clinton and Oprah Winfrey, an author of three best-selling books and inspiration for a TV movie starring Matthew Perry. He might seem like an unassuming guy, but what he hopes to achieve is nothing short of a revolution in education.

“Global education is taking the stairs,” Clark said. “It is nothing new. That is what the slide is. I do not want to be 85 and say I took the stairs and that my profession did not change at all. Think different. Be innovative. Find out a way to take the slide.”

The first job position that came up after Ron Clark graduated from East Carolina University was for a fifth grade teacher for kids with learning disabilities and problems in North Carolina. When he visited the school, he saw a kid standing in a garbage pail as punishment. Kids were throwing paper in the classrooms. He was going to turn the position down, but “my Mama said she would not support me if I did not take it.” Being a North Carolinian through and through, he had to listen to his Mama.

Clark’s classroom had an anything-goes attitude. He made up a rap song about the presidents of the United States, dressed in costumes, played music during class, and allowed students to pop a





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balloon if they solved the math problem on the balloon. The kids who did not solve the problem still wanted to pop the balloon, and Clark — did NOT allow them. He might be bursting with positive energy, but he also thinks part of the education revolution will require educators to raise expectations of their students. “The kids complained. ‘I didn’t get to pop my balloon!’ ” He said. “In America, kids are wussified. You gotta play nice and everyone gets a trophy. But we dumb everything down and do not challenge kids. I found the harder I made things, the more kids would do.”

Over the five years Clark worked in North Carolina, his innovative methods worked; his class’s test scores were the highest in the school. Yet he was called down to the principal’s office and told that other teachers were complaining. He was told to shut his door. “I wanted to open my own school and keep the door open and say: ‘See what a good educator is.’ ”

Before he achieved his dream with the Ron Clark Academy, he took a detour to New York City. After watching a TV segment on inner-city schools in Harlem, Clark packed up his car and moved to Harlem. “I had a feeling in my heart.” On his first visit to the school, one student started swinging at him. He was carted off to the principal’s office; Clark followed. “The kid was breathing heavy, so I just looked at him until he felt better. I do this with all kids, staff members and peers. I learned it from Bill Clinton. People who are successful stop the world and make others feel important. At the end, the kid said to me: ‘You are different. If you were my teacher I would like coming to school.’ ”

Just like in North Carolina, the students in Harlem were rude and disrespectful. So Ron Clark went to each of their homes and visited with their parents. He brought the same off-kilter teaching methods into his classroom. The kids liked Double Dutch, so he brought jump ropes in. They loved chocolate milk, so he brought a crate into the classroom. “This grammar lesson is going to be boring, but if you pay attention for three minutes at a time you will get to see me throw up,” he told one class. “They said: ‘What?!’ ” Seventeen cartons of chocolate milk later, and the teacher was bent over a garbage can. The students helped their teacher, patting him on the back. “You care so much that you will throw up.” The janitor who had witnessed the spectacle wanted to clean the garbage can. Clark said: “No, it is my mess.” But the janitor persisted, saying it would be an honour. Parents started helping out at the school, and soon the “difficult” students were outscoring the “gifted” ones. “I’m not saying people need to start throwing up,” Clark said. “We just need to do something to reach those kids. How can an educator not take every moment to teach these kids?”

His success in Harlem led him to an appearance on ‘Oprah.’ When Oprah Winfrey encouraged him to write a book, then sent it to the New York Times Bestseller List by including it in her book club,





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With the money from his book sales, Ron Clark finally got to buy the building for his dream school. It turned out to be an abandoned warehouse in a crime-infested area of Atlanta. There were drug problems in the neighbourhood and the warehouse was broken into 19 times. When confronted with dysfunction and neglect, Clark did what he always does. Over four months, he visited every house and told them about his school. He went up to one house where men were on the porch drinking beer. He was intimidated, but he took a deep breath and went up to the porch. After hearing about Clark's ideas for a revolutionary new school, the men volunteered to help clean and paint. "One of the guys said if that school were here when he was school age, he could have done something with his life." Mr. Clark urged: "We have to take the slide. We have to take a different path, and take a different way to do it. Think differently. Be innovative, and in your own way."

