



UNWAVERING AMBITION

We were happy when our son Alex decided in eighth grade to participate in the high school theater program. After all, the drama teacher had been at the school for more than 20 years and had built one of the most successful programs in the county. Unfortunately, she announced her retirement the summer before Alex started high school.

Even more unfortunate, the helicopter parents swooped in on the new drama teacher. They interfered relentlessly. Pressured by unyielding parental intrusion and frustrated by lack of support from administration, the drama teacher found another job and resigned during the winter break of Alex's junior year. The helicopter parents became B-52s, taking control of the drama program and leaving it in total disarray.

We noticed most of Alex's friends were younger than he was and became worried that he didn't have many friends his own age. At the same time, we noticed many younger boys were getting key roles and were becoming more active in the theater program. We asked Alex if the roles were going to the children of the parents who had commandeered the program, but his answer surprised us.

He told us he and his friends knew the state of the theater program and felt powerless to change it. At the same time, they realized the future of the program depended on the younger students, so he and his best friend consciously sought out freshmen boys who could become the foundation of the program after Alex and his friend graduated. They were willing to take a back seat to make room for the younger students.

In his book "Good to Great," Jim Collins writes that one of the hallmarks of great

leaders, level-five leaders, is an unwavering ambition for the success of the organization, not for their own individual success. Collins writes, "Level 5 leaders want to see the company even more successful in the next generation, comfortable with the idea that most people won't even know the roots of that success trace back to their efforts."

A new drama teacher was hired before Alex's senior year, one who was able to maneuver around the helicopter parents a little more successfully. After a rocky start last year, the program finally turned the corner this year. Despite the parents' objections, he picked plays the students wanted to perform, attracting many students who had never shown an interest in acting. The program became fun and fashionable again. Recently, the drama teacher told me more boys than girls signed up for the drama classes next year, which is very unusual.

The freshman and sophomore boys Alex and his friend recruited are now juniors and seniors and the leaders of the program. This year, the spring musical was nominated for seven Cappies, the most the school had ever received.

We asked Alex if he wished he were still in high school because the program is doing so well the year after he graduated when his own experience was so unpleasant. He looked at us as if he didn't have a clue what we were talking about.

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