

## A teacher, a student, a letter

By [Steve Giegerich](#)

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

05/25/2007



May 22, 2007: College Summit teacher Brian Kruger of St. Charles Roosevelt High School helped Raymia Williams, 18, a senior conflicted about her future. (Laurie Skrivan /P-D)

He was a West County telecommunications salesman propelled to teaching by a midlife crisis; she a product of the city. His epiphany came when he was 44: "I wanted to experience the reward of helping someone else."

Hers was at the age of 7. It was then, she wrote, "I put it in my head that I was pretty much on my own."

Brian Kruger and Raymia Williams clashed after Roosevelt High School threw them together last August.

A business teacher, Kruger has a certain way of doing things.

Every week he issues his students a "report card" detailing their progress. Kruger continued the practice after he agreed to supplement his classload with a College Summit course — a nationwide college preparation program adapted by the St. Louis Public Schools.

Raymia learned of the program from an English teacher during her junior year and signed on.

A less-than-stellar assessment on Kruger's first weekly report card almost changed her mind.

"What is this?" she demanded of her teacher.

His student, Kruger concluded, had something of an attitude. He liked that. Though he didn't know it at the time, it was kids like Raymia Williams who had drawn Brian Kruger to teaching.

On Jan. 1, 2004, Kruger awoke with everything a man could want — a loving family, a house in the suburbs and a great job "making more money than a small town Nebraska kid ever thought he would earn." All that, and still, something was missing.

Kruger recalled a statistic that determined that working adults generally laugh 17 times a day compared to 300 times a day for children. Kruger wanted to hear laughter.

He quit his sales job with Cisco Systems and enrolled in a teaching certification program.

"My wife," he noted, "has said she would have been quite OK if I'd bought the red sports car."

Ten months later, the St. Louis Public Schools called. "I want to be candid," Kruger told them, "the last place I want to teach is in the city."

But St. Louis offered Kruger the opportunity to complete his re-education and student teaching on a full-time salary. In November, 2004, he met his first class.

### **A NEW BEGINNING**

Fate landed him at Roosevelt High, gritty, gang-infested, dominated by good and decent kids wanting nothing more than a chance to catch lightning in a bottle — and looking for someone to show them how.

Raymia Williams, now 18, knew in eighth grade that she wanted to go to college. Midway through high school she'd pretty much settled on a course of study: Raymia wants to be an orthodontist.

There were times in the pursuit of that objective, Raymia believes, that she had little support. Her childhood was nomadic — she and her sister and the single mother with whom she was often at odds moved often. "My mother called herself a gypsy," she wrote in her college admissions essay. "You know, like the people you see in the movies that don't really have a home and do what they want to do. ..."

Raymia's mother, Rosalind Johnson, is a health care worker. She raised her children to be independent-minded. Johnson is neither surprised nor bothered by the brutal honesty of Raymia's essay.

"They can fuss, they can voice their opinion," Johnson, said of her children. "You know, I'm not the perfect parent. But I know one thing: Education is important to me."

In her essay, Raymia recalled the day she arrived at school without a coat, hungry and sick, "my head spinning out of control and my stomach still rumbling." She was 7.

"Moments like that ... you can remember and look back on for motivation," she wrote.

Raymia enjoys writing. But she is quick to admit "the punctuation thing never works out."

### **PUSHED TO EXCEL**

As Brian Kruger embarked on a teaching career, daughter Amy Kruger was applying to college.

"It was stressful for someone who had all the tools," said Kruger. "As hard as it was for my daughter ... I couldn't imagine what it was like to go through it alone."

The 25 students in his College Summit class saw to it that he didn't have to imagine long.

Kruger and Raymia put aside their inauspicious start. He grew to like the challenge. She says she changed her attitude. Mr. Kruger's class, she found, edged the prospect of going to college from dream to something that could become a reality. Friendship blossomed between teacher and student.

Raymia went along when Kruger pushed her to take the ACT a second time. And basked in his pride when she raised her score by two points to hit 17. Kruger made her take the admissions test a third time and refused to let her wallow when her score didn't budge.

The teacher forced her to write essays, then rewrite them again and again (the punctuation thing). Her eyes steadfastly on the ball, Raymia didn't mind.

"I looked at my life and said, 'Do I want more than this or do I want to keep it the same?' And as I got older, I want better things for myself. I feel like I want to make some accomplishments in my life. And to do that you need to further your education," she said.

Raymia grew to love the College Summit course, just as Kruger loved teaching it.

At Roosevelt, a school enjoying a renaissance under Principal Terry Houston, Kruger also found what he felt was missing on that New Year's morning, 2004.

"Even on the worst days, there is so much laughter," Kruger said.

### **SUCCESS COMES KNOCKING**

Raymia sent out 15 college applications. Her awareness of some of the schools was peripheral at best.

November turned to December with no word from any college. Anxiety took hold. Raymia placed a call to Alabama and spoke with a Tuskegee University admissions officer. What she learned, she kept inside. She'd believe it, Raymia told herself, when confirmation came in writing.

The knock on the door came minutes into Kruger's seventh-period business class. Heads turned. Ignore it, the teacher snapped, muttering under his breath about "hooligans" pounding on the door.

KNOCK-KNOCK-KNOCK. This time incessant. "See who it is," Kruger instructed. A student opened the door, Raymia burst through, fairly screaming: "Mr. Kruger! Mr. Kruger! Mr. Kruger!"

She thrust a sheet of paper at Kruger. It bore the letterhead of Tuskegee University. He only needed to see the first word: "Congratulations."

"My eyes started to water and I wasn't sure what to do. I had a class with 25 kids sitting there, so I turned my back and bit my tongue so they wouldn't see me," said Kruger.

Months later, his voice still grows husky in the retelling. Drawing a deep breath, he continued: "I will take to my grave that moment. It is one of the best memories of my life."

Four more schools invited Raymia to their campus in the weeks that followed.

She searched her soul and added offers of scholarships, grants and financial aid to the equation before deciding, reluctantly, that Alabama was a bit too far from home.

With her mother beaming in the audience, Raymia Williams strolled proudly across a platform on Thursday night at Kiener Plaza to receive her diploma.

The next step of her education will begin on Aug. 27 when she walks into a classroom in St. Joseph, a freshman at Missouri Western State University.

**sgiegerich@post-dispatch.com | 314-340-8172**

