

LOTS OF BEAUTIFUL MISTAKES

Room #5, Mrs. Martinez

John Lyman School

(November 1993)

Only 24 days into the new school year, a tiny six-year-old is making her first attempt to read the newsletter in front of the whole class. The letter is written on the chalkboard and outlines the day's activities. The child who is running the morning meeting has chosen this girl from among several volunteers – both first and second graders.

The student who has volunteered knows quite well that there will most likely be more than a few words in the newsletter she does not know. Nevertheless, she begins.

She reads the first sentence: "Today is Tuesday, October 4, 1993." So far, so good. She tackles the second sentence. She comes upon a word she doesn't recognize and, after studying it carefully for almost ten seconds, she calls it correctly. All eyes are on the board and the room is so quiet you can hear your own breathing.

By the time she gets to the third and fourth sentences she is still doing remarkably well, but she has run into a few more unfamiliar words. Each time she comes to one she can't figure out, her classmates raise their hands to help her, but only after waiting to see if she gets it on her own, and only if she asks for help.

When she finally gets to the end of the newsletter, the children break into a totally spontaneous round of applause and take turns congratulating her on a job well done. She is literally beaming.

What has really happened here, aside from the obvious fact that she has gained the admiration and respect of her peers? This child has taken an enormous risk. She has exposed herself to the possibility of failure in front of all her classmates. Why did she do it?

Probably for the same reason that many students (and teachers) feel comfortable taking positive risks at John Lyman. When learners, be they children or adults, are given the time to think and can feel certain that they will be supported – not evaluated, criticized or laughed at – for trying new things, they tend to be eager to try new things. It's as simple as that.

Most of the great advances in human history have come about thanks to risk-takers – the people who were willing to make mistakes, learn from them, and then go on to make more mistakes as they tried out more and more exciting ideas. Here at John Lyman I feel safe saying we all make lots of beautiful mistakes. And it's the carefully cultivated atmosphere of respect, encouragement and unfailing support that allows us to stretch ourselves as we do so.