

**LAUGHABLE
LEGENDS
OF
MIDDLE SCHOOL 99**

VOL. 1

DAVID PARIS

Illustrations by

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ISBN-13: 978-0692931752 (Middle School Life)

ISBN-10: 0692931759

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my best friend, Zoë Klein, for believing in me and supporting me. This book would never have happened without your feedback, technical assistance, and enthusiasm. I want to thank all of my students, who are the inspiration for these stories. Big thanks to my brother Ben, who has been an advocate of all my artistic pursuits throughout my life. Thank you to my roommate Josie for listening to all the stories, sharing with me what worked, and giving me suggestions for what did not work. Thank you to the teachers of M.S. 88 for your contributions, especially Mr. Rosensweig, Ms. Wolfe, and Mr. Walling. Thank you to Andrea and Joe for such incredible illustrations, bringing another dimension to the stories. Thank you, Athena, for reminding me about the power and importance of story. And thank you to my ancestral spirit for your guidance and protection as I try to fulfill that promise to make the world a better place.

ABOUT THE BOOK

I am a middle school literacy teacher in the heart of my hometown in Brooklyn, New York. For most of my students, reading was a chore and held no value in their lives. For twenty years, I have battled video games, hormones, and gossip in and out of the classroom. In order to build a connection to literacy, I often told “true” stories about school legends that were obviously *not* true. This was the only time I had the full attention of the class. These stories explained what seemed to be the hot topics on the minds of every middle school student: conflict, acceptance, visibility, and power. Through outrageous depictions of absurdity, these stories aimed to address these important issues and inspire dialogue. Bullying was portrayed in one story “Why Do Bullies Get Pimples on Their Noses?” The problems of peer pressure were brought to life by the story “The Boy Who Cared and the Boy Who Didn’t.” And the destructive issue of gossip was addressed in “The Worst Kind of Ghost.” The stories were fast, fun, and often fantastical. Students laughed together, shared common experiences, and built a connection that helped create a positive classroom community.

Laughable Legends at Middle School 99 is my attempt to build on those magical moments and create more conversations about middle school life. The stories are edgy and based on real-life situations in order to spark authentic participation and bypass pretense. There can be immense healing when kids learn that they are not alone about what they think and feel, especially in middle

school. When students talk about their experiences, they feel safer, more expressive, and more comfortable showing themselves. I have included discussion questions in the appendix to help in this process. It is my hope that the book is one vehicle that can help create the space for laughter, recognition, and reflection. And if kids connect to the power of stories and reading, that is a bonus.

INTRODUCTION

Middle school is a crazy place. Why are teachers so cranky? Why are some kids mean on Thursdays but not Mondays? Why do adults try to fix problems and only make the situation worse? I try to answer these questions by telling stories and legends that explain life today. These stories are based on my own experiences as a student as well as a middle school teacher. I hope the stories are entertaining and inspire you to share your experience about what it's like to be a middle school student. Please visit www.middleschoollifeskills.com to share your own stories and laughable legends.

PART I

Illustrations

by

Andre Vitali



EIGHTH GRADE WILL BE THE BEST THREE YEARS OF YOUR LIFE

Students are threatened every year that they better do their work or they won't graduate. It is an empty threat that gets twenty-three seconds of respect. After that, students return to gossiping, daydreaming, or whistling pop songs to no one in particular. There is a reason these threats never become reality. And that reason is Charlie Humphries.

Twenty-three years ago, Charlie failed every class on his report card, failed to show his report card to his parents, and failed to care about failing. What no adult understood is that Charlie loved Middle School 99. He loved spending two hours' detention after school. He loved his punishments before school. He even loved summer school. When Charlie failed, he actually succeeded. Because of his odd version of love, Charlie managed to spend more time at Middle School 99 than any student in history. And his method was failure.

Charlie managed to get a -10 on his spelling test. He would only write about the future in history class. His science labs would explode. His algebra was poetic, and



his poetry assignments solved algebraic equations. In gym, he would sing, and in drama class, he would wrestle. Charlie was brilliant in getting the lowest possible grades in every possible subject.

Charlie was also smart about getting in trouble. He once brought a water pistol to class. Most troublemakers would simply shoot it at people, but Charlie was special. He sat in the back of class and shot the ceiling. That way, when the water dripped on the students, they thought the



ceiling was collapsing. Every day the custodian would inspect and swear that nothing was wrong. And every day, Charlie would find a new spot to create a phantom leak. He was never caught until he took a selfie with the water pistol, and posted it on the principal's door. When he got five hours of detention, he celebrated quietly, looking at the ceiling with great pride, joy, and belonging. He loved Middle School 99.

Charlie was brilliant, and he successfully repeated the eighth grade two times. Something different needed to happen for a kid who loved punishment. The school psychologist, Dr. Kerensky, was called into the school to observe Charlie. Dr. Kerensky watched Charlie's health class learn about meditation.

Everyone knew Charlie was going to ruin the lesson, but to everyone's surprise, Charlie was quiet. The health teacher, Ms. Lester, challenged the students to see if they could match her inner stillness, her unique calmness of mind, by not moving or talking. What no one knew is that Charlie hid a remote-control fart machine in her seat cushion! He had the remote in his palm, and he was determined to challenge the Zen mind of Middle School 99's health teacher.

The first fart sound was a light squeeze of wind that clearly came from underneath Ms. Lester's butt. To Ms. Lester's credit, she didn't move or say a thing, but her nose did sniffle in curiosity. After one minute of controlled silence, Charlie pressed the green button firmly. This released a stronger plush sound that was impossible to

ignore, and the students either snickered or laughed or inched away because they were afraid of the smell. Even Mr. Kerensky wondered what Ms. Lester had for lunch.



Ms. Lester could not stay in her meditative pose and had to react to the accusatory eyes. She told the class not to be rude, as she circled five times around her seat cushion trying to figure out where the sound came from. She even lifted the cushion but could not find the source of the mysterious sound. She too thought that maybe her lunch was too gaseous, or maybe she was getting too old to control her butt. Either way, she returned to her seat, settled the class down, and was determined to teach the value of meditation. She was also thankful that the fart did not smell.

Unfortunately for Ms. Lester, there was a red button on the remote. Charlie hesitated for a moment, because

the instruction manual stated that the red button was only for emergency revenge scenarios. But it was too tempting. Just as Ms. Lester fell into a peaceful position, he pressed the button as hard as he could, and the explosion was amazing. It was the wettest, nastiest fart you have ever heard, with bonus sounds of diarrhea. The reaction was even more impressive. Not only did Ms. Lester scream—she ran. And not only did the class follow her, but they also mimicked her fart as they chased her down the hallway. Charlie left the remote on Ms. Lester’s desk, made sure his initials were visible on the back cover, and gave Mr. Kerensky a look of triumph. Massive detention would be coming his way.



To Charlie’s surprise and disappointment, he was not punished, but he was praised for his prank. Teachers gave him high fives because Ms. Lester was considered a snob and needed a humbling experience. Charlie thought

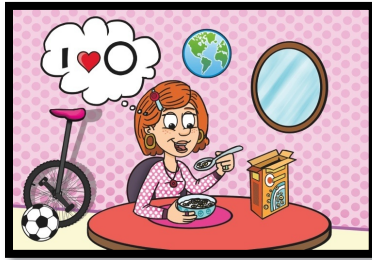
this was an odd response, but he didn't think it was suspicious until he received a letter of commendation for falsely pulling the fire alarm. The certificate said that he was commended for thinking ahead and preparing the school for an emergency. He absolutely knew something was wrong when his picture of stealing a computer was on a green wall devoted to recycling unused materials. What was happening?



Charlie remembered that the consequences of his mischievousness changed the day Mr. Kerensky showed up to observe him. Charlie went to the psychologist's office and demanded the truth. Mr. Kerensky was transparent, explained everything, and gave Charlie the worst possible news. No matter what he did, Charlie was going to graduate. Charlie felt defeated. He pleaded for more detention, more punishments, more parent conferences, and more tests to fail. But it was too late. He had to admit he was scared to leave middle school. He didn't want to start all over again in a new school, but he had no choice. Charlie failed for the first time in his life, by not being able to fail.

Charlie graduated and is no longer a student at Middle School 99, but his presence is everywhere. Whenever a teacher gets weak with consequences, a dean gets soft with punishments, or a principal gets forgiving, they are probably thinking that you might be failing on purpose. Never mistake their true motivation. It is not kindness. It is not caring. They are scared of Charlie Humphries. You can thank him anytime. And, oh yeah, if you ever farted but really didn't fart, do not get scared. That's the revenge of Ms. Lester's ghost, whose presence also can sometimes be felt, smelled, and definitely heard. She is still looking for Charlie Humphries and always will be.

THE GIRL WHO LOVED CIRCLES



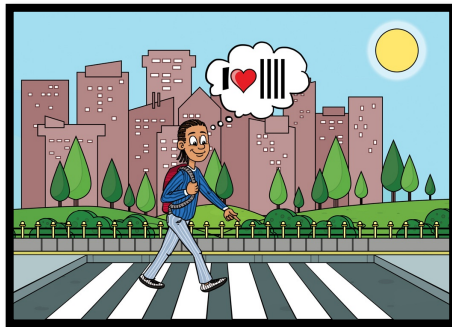
Nobody likes to get in a line, but you would be surprised to know why. Forty-two years ago at Middle School 99, Ophelia stood out for loving circles. She always wore clothes with polka dots. Ophelia liked the words "oops" and "boobos." She had Cheerios for breakfast, Oreos for lunch, and Spaghettios for dinner. She came to school early so that she could circle around the school. She used a hole puncher whenever she could and loved sprinkling the paper circles over her head. Whenever she took the bus, she always sang, "The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, 'round and 'round..."

School life often supported Ophelia's passion for circles. She thought Venn diagrams were masterpieces of

art. She was mesmerized by the spinning globe in geography class. In gym class, she loved soccer, Hula Hoops, and Frisbees, although she never threw or kicked anything in a straight line. Ophelia brought her own paper plates to lunch because she hated rectangular trays.

Sometimes, life at school was tough for Ophelia. She refused to look at any corners in a room. She would protest anytime x beat o in ticktacktoe. She cried whenever a pizza pie was sliced. And worst of all, the geometry teacher once demanded that she ruin a circle by drawing a radius. Surprisingly, there was another student, Lionel, who made the tough times bearable.

Lionel loved lines. He woke up every morning excited by waiting in a line for a bagel. Lionel walked in one direction to school, even if it meant walking through someone's house or even traffic in the street. Lionel loved wearing stripes, writing timelines, and staring at the beauty of lined paper and was ecstatic over graph paper.



Astonishingly, Lionel always knew what to say to Ophelia. He told her that if you went in a straight line

around the world, you would make a circle. He talked about using straight bars of steel to build Ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds. He told her that politicians pretend to be straight talkers but actually talk in circles. And when life at Middle School 99 felt incomplete to Ophelia, Lionel spray-painted the school sign, so there were four circles, "Middle School 88."

Ophelia and Lionel's friendship was not perfect, and they argued at times. However, Ophelia could never stay mad at Lionel because Lionel always said, "Sooooo soooooory!" He would give her flowers, and she would cut the stem to make the flowers rounder. To no one's surprise, the relationship turned romantic.

On a full moon in October, they had their first date. Ophelia arrived at a barbecue restaurant on a unicycle and Lionel used a zip line. For dinner, Ophelia ordered a



hamburger, and Lionel decided on a hot dog. When dessert was served, they split a cupcake in the most unusual way. Ophelia took a knife and cut the cupcake into a square. Lionel smiled and then shaped what was left into a circle. This thoughtful division continued until unfortunately there was nothing left, except a lot of laughter.

They decided to take a walk to look at the stars. While Ophelia admired the circular planets and stars, Lionel appreciated the constellations that connected them. They held hands as Lionel walked in a straight line and Ophelia walked in a circle around him. As they approached the top of a hill, Ophelia stared into Lionel's round eyes, while Lionel looked at Ophelia's straight nose. Their lips met like magnets, and the world was forever transformed.



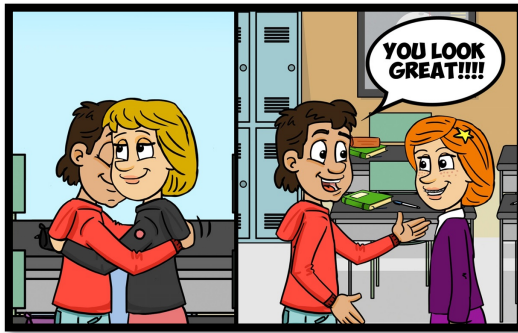
Suddenly, ice cream lovers didn't have to feel bad about not liking pie or cake. Dog lovers stopped arguing that cat lovers were weird. Apple juice fanatics let orange juice lovers drink in peace. And best of all, adults let kids be kids.

Ophelia and Lionel's first date turned into a partnership for life, and their love still affects people today. Do you know that moment in an argument when you don't hate the other person for having a different opinion, when you can agree to disagree? You can thank the love Ophelia and Lionel had for each other. You can see that energy every day when some kids line up and some kids refuse to get in line. And if you look closely, Lionel is standing with those in line, while Ophelia is with those students who hate lines, dancing in circles.

3

THE BOY WHO CARED AND THE BOY WHO DIDN'T

Angel Domingo was the kindest kid Middle School 99 ever had. Seventeen years ago, he created his own lost and found for broken hearts. He whistled warnings when bullies were on a warpath. His handshakes could last for two minutes, and his hugs could last two days. He complimented everyone on his or her appearance, even those students who appeared to not care about their appearance.



Many people were baffled by Angel's behavior. He clapped sincerely whenever his teacher remembered his name. Upon a refreshing sip of water, Angel gave thanks

to the many men and women who built pipes to bring water to the water fountain. Angel played traffic cop in the hallways and even gave out tickets. And if there was a fight, he would distract the students until they calmed down or until he could trap them in a closet.



Angel's positivity inspired a reaction in everyone. Some were inspired to be kind, but others were inspired to feel spiteful, irritated, and dismissive. Damian Batton was in the last group and felt all three of these emotions, which was unusual because Damian worked very hard to not feel anything at all. Damian realized very early in his middle school life that you were cool if you pretended not to care and you insulted those kids who did care. Insult my face? Doesn't bother me. By the way, your face looks like a minefield. Bad grades? I don't care. You're a nerd. I slip on



the floor, drop my soda on my pants, and get mustard on my face? No big deal. Look at that other loser!

Unfortunately for Damian, Angel was making kindness cool and popular. The Random Acts of Kindness club placed candy bars under seats in the math class and gave out donuts at lunch. The Pay It Forward club lent people money with an unlimited time for reimbursement and no paperwork. The Inclusion club made sure no one sat alone, stood alone, and even felt alone. Damian found that his detachment made him a target of attention and that his insults were drowned out by appreciations. This was not acceptable!

Damian took out a book from the library about being cool and retreated to an isolated corner of the boy's bathroom. The first chapter had only a title and no other words. The title read, "It's Not Cool to Read." The second chapter also had no words except for the title. It read, "Stop Trying So Hard, It's Not Cool." The title of the third chapter was, "Stop Being So Desperate, Seriously." Only when Damian reached chapter ten, did he find the information he needed.



The title of chapter ten read, "Make People Afraid of Difference." Damian knew exactly what to do.