Dear Teacher,

It's the season of grand finales, the time of last things.

I took my kids' first-day-of-school pictures, shook your hand at the Open House, blinked and now here we are, sprinting down the home stretch of another school year. Caught in the dizzying whirlwind of end-of-grade tests and end-of-year assemblies and end-of-everything parties.

It's exhausting. Expensive. And a little depressing.

It's bittersweet that my kids are another year older, scribbling their closing lines in another ending-too-soon childhood chapter -- but it's more than that. I'm sad that my children's time with you is drawing to a close. Not just their time in this grade, with these friends. Their time with you. Their teacher.

When I look at you, I see someone with sparkling talent: Clever. Creative. Charismatic. Compassionate.

You could have used those gifts to pursue any career you wanted.

You chose teaching, the noblest profession of all.

You chose to get up early and stay up late.

You chose to be underpaid and rarely thanked.

You chose to help raise other people's kids.

You chose to tolerate "the system" because you believe in the children.

You chose to find ways to put your own innovative spin on education, in spite of the complex requirements thrust upon you from Distant Powers That Be.

You chose to push through on days when you were sick, or overwhelmed, or tired--because your students needed you.

You chose to give your kids -- my kids -- second, third, fourth and fortieth chances, and to always believe they could be better tomorrow.

You chose to worry about children whose difficult home lives are beyond your power to improve.

You chose to care even though it was a gamble.

You chose to care even when the kids didn't care back.

You chose to care, period.

This could have been just another year you had to survive.

Another year to slog through, counting the days till summer.

Another year closer to that too-small, still-have-to-moonlight-as-a-tutor-in-order-to-make-it retirement package.

My child could have been just another project.

Just another name, on just another class roster.

Just another number, one of 25.

But they weren't. Not to you.

For the past nine months, you chose to love my child, though you did not have to. (Nine months! The time it takes to grow a person... coincidence? Perhaps not.)

And it's not like you had the luxury of handpicking each of your students, choosing the ones who would make a perfect match for your methods, your style. No, someone handed you a roster one hot afternoon as last year's summer waned. You read down that list and took these children -- these people-still-becoming -- into your class, and into your heart.

From that first butterflies-in-tummies morning, that day of new shoes and perfect pigtails and fresh pencils, you decided to love those kids -- all 25 of them. It was a risk, that decision to love. To fully invest. To put your own heart and happiness on the line. To intertwine your grown-up joys and struggles and successes with their growing-up ones.

You took that risk.

I could see it in your eyes, the way you laughed at their endless immature jokes and anticipated, even came to enjoy, all their crazy quirks. After a few months, you understood things about my kids that I thought only I knew: the way she chews her eraser when she's nervous; the way he gets quiet when he's got hurt feelings; the way she melts down when she doesn't get her homework just right.

And it's not just my kids -- you've done it for the whole classroom, all 25 kids. You've cared enough to study them. To figure out what makes sense to them, what motivates them, so you could teach each one in the best way you know how.

When I walked into your classroom to volunteer, I could feel the sense of "we," the community you had built. I felt like an outsider -- not because you or the kids were rude, but because you were all so close. I wanted in on all your class secrets, your silent pacts, your private jokes. Your crazy "remember when we all fell out of our chairs laughing" stories that only the 26 of you can fully appreciate. Your funny sayings that you all shout out at the same time. Your silly songs you sing when it's time to "flash-flash-ding-ding, change that sign" (whatever that means -- I still don't know).

It couldn't have been easy, forging this connection, creating community from chaos. You took a hodge-podge group of random students -- children with varying abilities, from every imaginable family structure, from a broad sampling of cultures and religions -- and you built a culture and family of your own. If the whole world could see what you have accomplished in these short months, in this cinderblock classroom, with these precious, different-but-same children, I have to believe the whole planet would be different. Better.

And you know what? The world is different, the world is better, because of what you have achieved here in this tiny room, with this growing group.

And while building unity may have been one of your biggest accomplishments this year, I also treasure the countless small gifts you gave my kids along the way.

You hugged them when they fell on the playground, and I wasn't there.

You talked them down when they were fighting with friends.

You drew them out when they were quiet, or worried, or discouraged.

You cheered the loudest when they finally got it, that thing that had them confused for so long.

You put up with my kids when they were less than they could have been. I'm sure they annoyed you sometimes. Stumped you. Maybe even made you mad. (Believe me, I know what their bad days are like. I live with them.) But you pushed on anyway. You chose to keep giving.

And this letter is to say thank you, from me and my children.

Your name is inscribed in the pages of our family history: Who was your kindergarten teacher? Your third-grade teacher? Your eighth-grade English teacher? Your name will forever live on in that list, and in our hearts.

Your influence is a thread woven into our family fabric. Your teaching has shaped my children's upbringing, character, and path. You have changed them, helped them on their way to becoming the people they're going to be.

For all this, and so much more, to all my kids' teachers -- past, present and future -- thank you for who you are, what you do, and all you give. We will never forget you.