

“My students inspire me way more than I
inspire them. They give me energy!”

STEPHEN RITZ



Make It HAPPEN!



Before Reading

Think about your own goals. Do you want to play soccer or make music? All of these activities take time and practice.

During Reading

During reading, review the highlighted vocab words. While learning about Stephen, understand how he got to where he is today. What **skills** has he shown that have helped his **career**? In each chapter, the Make It Happen! activity will help you, too, build skills to reach your own goals.

After Reading

Look in the back of the book for questions and activities to help you think about Stephen's story. Share these with a friend, parent, or teacher. Also, talk about the skills you need to reach your goals.

skill: the ability to do something that comes from training, experience, or practice

career: a job or profession that someone does for a long time



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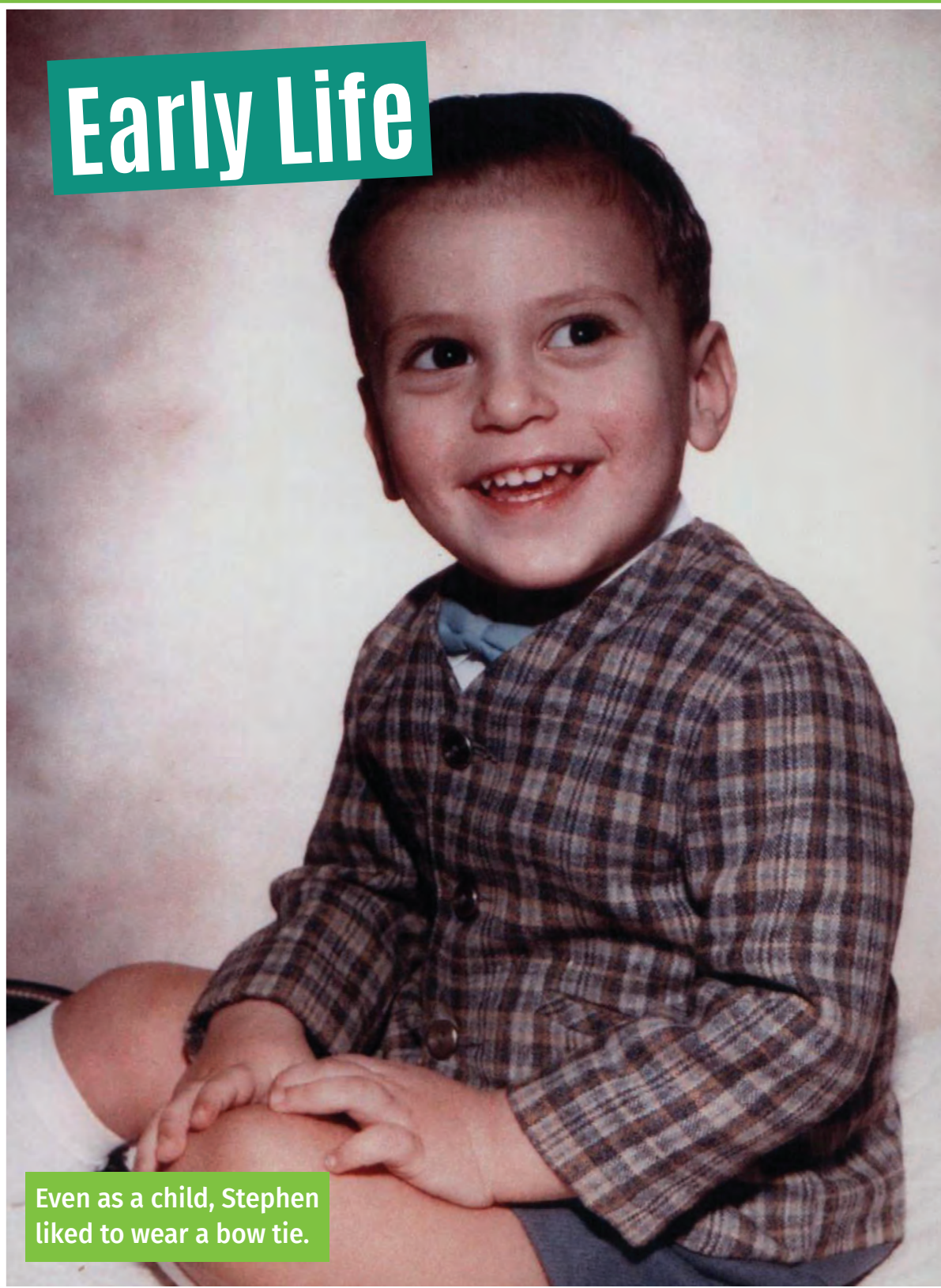
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Early Life



Even as a child, Stephen liked to wear a bow tie.



Stephen Ritz grew up and worked within the unique world of the Bronx.

It was a hot August morning in the Bronx, New York, in 1984. A tall, thin man walked quickly down St. Ann's Avenue. His name was Stephen Ritz. He was hurrying to his first teaching job at South Bronx High School. He was only 21 years old.

At first, Stephen's students didn't trust him. On his first day, he asked a student named Vanessa to sit down. "What do you know about what we go through?" she asked. "You're here to get paid. Go home!" But Stephen didn't go home. Instead, he shared his lunch with Vanessa. The two became lifelong friends. This was the first step on a journey that would transform Stephen into a teacher like no other.

The Bronx Is Home

Stephen Ritz was born and raised in the Bronx. When he was young, Stephen learned to interact with **diverse** people and points of view. “There is no place on Earth like the Bronx,” said Stephen. “My friends’ families were Irish, Italian, Jewish, and African,” he said. In the Bronx, Stephen learned the importance of **teamwork**. Whenever Stephen or his friends needed help or advice, there was always someone who could lend them a hand.

The Bronx was also where Stephen went to elementary school. Stephen didn’t get very good grades. “For me, school wasn’t just about my classes,” Stephen said. Stephen loved to learn, but didn’t always like the way he was being taught. He also loved to play basketball. School, parks, and **community centers** were Stephen’s favorite places.

diverse: made up of many different types of people

teamwork: the working together of a group of people in order to achieve something

community center: a place where people can gather for activities

Stephen didn't enjoy **academics**.

This later helped him become an **innovator**. He became the kind of teacher who could change students' lives.

academics: the classes taken at school or in college

innovator: someone who uses a new idea or method of doing something

Make It!
HAPPEN!

Ask for Help

Asking for help takes courage. Growing up in the Bronx, Stephen and his friends relied on their community for support, ideas, and supplies.

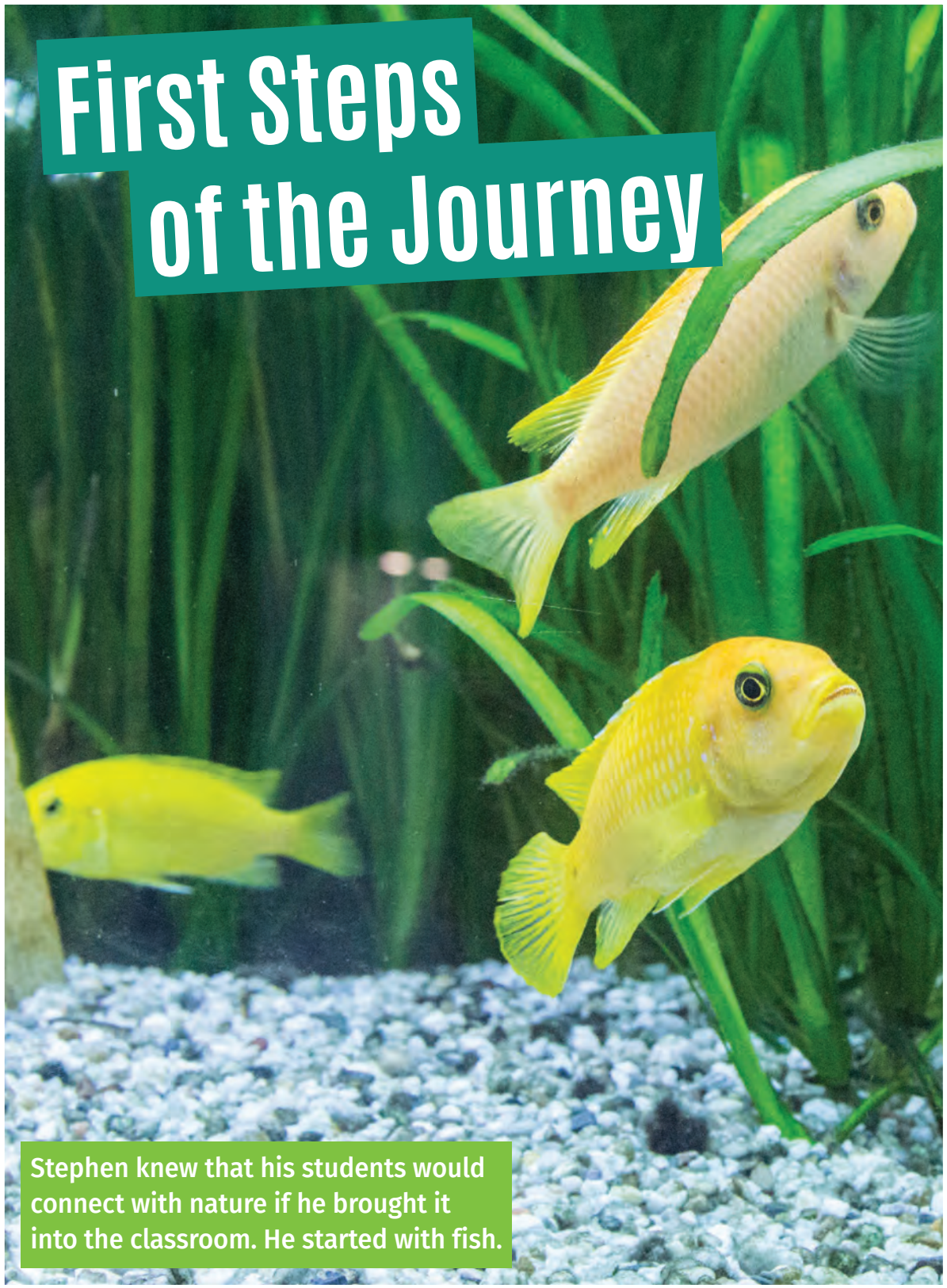
Make a list of things you want to do that you need help with. Then make a list of people who could help you. Be ready to listen to people's advice, and don't give up!

Not sure where to start? Here are some ideas:

- Ask a coach to help you improve your athletic skills.
- Ask your teacher for help in a subject that isn't your best.
- Ask a trusted friend or adult to support your interests.
- Ask a teacher or other adult to help you start a club.

What was the hardest part about asking for advice? How did it help you reach your goal?

First Steps of the Journey



Stephen knew that his students would connect with nature if he brought it into the classroom. He started with fish.

After college, Stephen wanted to play professional basketball. When he hurt his knee, he had to stop playing. Instead, he became a teacher in the Bronx. He loved the job. He shared hip-hop, snacks, and personal stories with students. This helped him to “connect with students and kept them coming to class,” he said. Students like Vanessa began to respect him.

Stephen asked his friends for help with his science class. One morning, he received a box. It was filled with what looked like moldy onions. Disappointed, he hid them behind a radiator in his classroom. Six weeks later, daffodils were growing in the box!

The flowers **inspired** Stephen and his students. They planted thousands of flowers around New York City. They also started a group called Green Teens.



Daffodils start growing in the spring when the ground begins to warm up.



inspire: to give another person the idea or confidence to try something new