

A Helping Hand

“He won’t do anything! I’ve run out of ideas!”

“I know what you mean. I have to send him to the office just about every day!”

My first staff meeting was making me aware of the kinds of things that go on behind closed doors in a school. I wasn’t much liking what I was hearing.

“I don’t mind so much that he doesn’t do any work. He can choose to fail if he wants to. I just don’t like how his attitude is affecting the other kids.” That from the English teacher.

I’m a fourth year education student, and I’m in the middle of my second and final practicum. I get to spend nine weeks in an upper elementary classroom practicing teaching.

As an added perk, I also get to attend staff meetings.

It was my supervising teacher’s idea. “Kimberley” she said, “You really need to see how things are run around here. It might open your eyes a little.”

My eyes had been opened, all right. The teachers were discussing a grade six student who apparently had been causing problems since birth. Or at least, since the start of the year.

“Look, let’s face it. We’re not getting anywhere with this kid.” That was the Principal talking. “He isn’t doing any work, he’s being disrespectful to other students and teachers, he’s frequently late for class, and he’s always causing problems in the hallways. Did I miss anything?”

“Yeah. You forgot the part about him being a miserable little ...” Frank, the Math teacher, stopped there. But everyone was nodding their heads.

The English teacher, an older lady who was doing her marking while the discussion was going on around her, put in her two cents worth. “Has anyone called his parents?”

“Yeah, I did. Several times, in fact. We’ve suspended him three times already; his mother says she’ll try to talk to him, but I don’t see much support there.”

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, he can just keep on getting zeros for missed work, until he smartens up!” That was Frank again.

Sandra, my supervising teacher, taught Social Studies, although the boy in question wasn’t one of her students. “What is his home life like? Does anyone know the family?”

No-one said anything.

“Just keep suspending him. It will make all our lives easier!” Jennifer, the Science teacher, seemed angry. “I have to deal with his laziness every day, and I’m getting tired of it.”

The English teacher voiced her agreement. So did several of the other teachers.

I had to say something. When I opened my mouth, Sandra looked over at me and silently shook her head. She didn’t want me to get involved in this. But I wanted to help.

“What’s the boy’s name?” That seemed like an innocent enough question.

“It’s David. You won’t see him in any of the classes you teach, Kimberley. And count yourself lucky!”

But I continued. “Does anyone know him well? Or have some sort of relationship with him, someone who could talk to him?”

Again no-one answered.

“I can try to get to know him if you want. Maybe I can help.”

“Kimberley, I don’t think ...”

“It’s OK, Sandra. I want to help.”

“Well, Kimberley ...” the Principal was looking right at me. “If you want to help, I’m not going to stop you. But I would have thought that, as a practice teacher, you’d have enough work to keep you busy!”

“I’ll manage. Thanks for letting me try.” Always be polite.

After the meeting, Sandra met with me in her classroom.

“Are they always like that?” I asked her. “They’re all so negative! Don’t they care about this kid at all?”

“Some of them do care, Kimberley. But there are a lot of frustrations in this job, and ... well, some teachers don’t handle it too well.”

“I understand that, Sandra. But shouldn’t they be looking for ways to help ... what was his name ... David? Shouldn’t they be trying to help him, instead of looking for ways to punish him, or to make their jobs easier?”

“Yes they should. But it’s difficult to change attitudes. Especially when the Principal doesn’t seem to care much.” She put her hand over her mouth. “Oh, I shouldn’t have said that. Forget I said that, please, Kimberly, all right?”

“It’s OK, Sandra. But I don’t understand how you can keep working here. You seem like a very caring teacher ...” I smiled. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said that, either ...”

We both laughed. “Thank you, Kimberley. I’m glad that you’re going to try to get to know David. Maybe you *can* help him. I hope so.”

So in addition to planning lessons every night, and teaching them during the day, and volunteering for supervision, and coaching softball, I took on the responsibility of getting to know David.

The first time I talked to him, I knew I would have my work cut out for me.

“Hi David. My name’s Kimberley Allen. I’m a student teacher in Mrs. Roselli’s room.” Roselli was Sandra’s last name. “How are things going?”

“Why should you care?”

He said that with a sneer. I didn’t know grade six students could sneer ... apparently I had a lot to learn.

“Well, David, I’m a teacher. At least, I plan to be. And I like talking to people. I like playing softball, too. I noticed that you aren’t staying after school for that. How come?”

“Don’t like softball!”

“What *do* you like?”

“Nothin’.” And with that he walked off.

As a Christian, I know that I’m supposed to love everyone the way Jesus loves me. I hoped I was up for this challenge.

I tried again the next day, before classes started. I was eating some grapes, and I noticed David standing in the hallway with some friends. I walked up to them and said hello.

“Good morning, David. Would you like some grapes?” I held out the bag to him.

He looked at the bag. Then he turned and again walked away.

I turned to the two boys who had been standing with David. They both looked like grade six students too. “What’s with him?”

They both laughed. One of them said “Ahhh, don’t take it personal. He’s like that with everybody he don’t know!”

I’m not sure whether I felt encouraged by that or not. But I wasn’t going to give up.

The next day I found some help. Two of the boys in the grade six class I was practice teaching in were quite nice, and I think they liked me. So I shamelessly took advantage of them by asking them if they’d eat lunch with me. In the lunchroom I led them right to the table where David was sitting, alone this time. We sat down.

I decided to ignore David at first. I asked the other boys what they liked to do for fun, and we got into a decidedly one-sided conversation about the latest video games. I pretended to listen as I watched David. He seemed to be interested in the discussion, so I asked him a question.

“David, do you play video games?”

“Uhh ... yeah.”

“What’s your favourite?”

“Definitely Warhammer!”

“Oh? I’m not familiar with that one. What’s it like?”

David and the other boys spent the rest of the lunch period filling me in on how Warhammer was the best first-person shooter game ever made. I was suitably impressed, and nodded a lot, but I let them carry the conversation. David seemed quite enthusiastic about the game.

I never did figure out what a ‘first-person shooter’ was.

But I’d made some progress. David had actually talked to me civilly. Maybe I could get somewhere with that.

That afternoon at break I found him in the hallway, and asked him a few questions about the game. Like, could I get it for my Nintendo DS (no, and he found that quite amusing, for some reason). Or, how many people could play at the same time (one to four, apparently). And, did I need an internet connection to play (no).

I don’t play video games much, so I didn’t completely understand everything he was telling me. But I didn’t care in the slightest. He was talking to me, and that’s all that mattered.

I asked him where I could find out more about the game. He suggested I look it up on-line. I told him I didn't have an internet connection at home. (OK, I was fudging the truth. I did have an internet connection, but it was on my laptop back in the classroom).

"Well, Miss Allen ... I guess I could find something for you ..."

It was the first time he'd used my name.

"Oh, would you, David? Thank you!"

"No problem."

Maybe I was getting somewhere. We now had a rather dubious connection ... we both were interested in Warhammer. I say dubious because my only interest was in getting to know him ... the game was just an excuse.

So the next day David found me in my classroom and handed me several sheets of paper. He had printed some 'screenshots' from the game, along with part of a review that someone had written. I asked him about the review.

"It's not that great" he told me. "The guy who wrote it isn't very good at the game. But it's all I could find. I used the school library computer."

"Oh, that's too bad. I'd like to find out more, and maybe get the game if it looks like fun." I wasn't lying. I was pretty sure I could find someone to give it to if I bought it. Maybe.

"You don't suppose ..." '*Here goes*', I thought. "David, you're really good at this game, right?"

"Yeah, I guess ..."

"Could *you* write up something for me that describes how to play it, and what's so great about it?"

"Well ... I guess ..."

"Thanks, David. I really appreciate this!"

"Uh ... no problem, Miss Allen."

Hah! Hook, line and sinker! I had him now!

David gave me his write-up on the following Monday. I thanked him sincerely, and sat down to read it.

David was a good writer, although his grammar was a little confused. His enthusiasm for the game was very evident in what he'd written. And he'd written seven pages!

At lunch break I went to David's English teacher.

"Mrs. Markham, I have something for you to look at" I said. "This is something David wrote for me. It's a description of a video game. Could you mark it for me, and maybe give him credit towards one of his missed assignments? I think it's pretty good writing for a grade six student."

"David wrote this?" She looked the pages over. "The most he's ever written for me at one time is three sentences." She sat down and read what David had written.

"Well, you're right, it certainly is good writing. I'm amazed you were able to get this out of him. I never would have believed it."

"Will you give him credit for it?"

"Well ..." She thought for a moment. "It's not something I would normally do ..."

'*Why not?*' I wondered. But I didn't say it.

"But all right. I'll count it. Better this than nothing."

The next time I saw David I let him know what I had done. I wasn't sure how he would take it.

"David, thanks again for the game write-up. I think I may end up getting that game. Oh, and, by the way ..." '*Here goes*', I thought. "It was so well written that I gave it to your English teacher. She's going to give you credit for it. She liked it too!"

"Uh... cool!"

OK, that wasn't so bad.

In fact, it had gone so well that I decided to pursue the Wandhammer ... no, wait, *Warhammer* ... connection some more. I cornered my two accomplices in my classroom and sat down with them to ask some questions.

I asked them what the toughest part of the game was, and what their strategies were for beating it. Call it research.

The next day I found David. We talked in the hall.

"David, a friend told me that the hardest level in Warhammer is level seven. He told me how to beat it, but I didn't really follow his explanation. Could you write it out for me?"

“Level seven? That’s not so hard. Yeah, sure. I’ll write out how to beat it. No problem.”

And he did ... by the next day. I gave it to Mrs. Markham as soon as I got it, and once again she agreed to count it for marks. She didn’t ask how I was getting David to write things, but I did suggest to her that if David were given a choice about what to write about, he would probably be willing to write about video games. She said she would consider it.

I was pretty pleased about the connection I had made with David. He was even smiling back at me in the hallway. Now it was time to take it to the next level!

I called his mother.

She seemed quite surprised when, after introducing myself, I told her I was calling with good news about David. I don’t think she’d ever had a positive phone call about David from the school before.

‘*Teachers should do that more often*’ I told myself. Maybe I’d ask about it at the next staff meeting. In one of my college courses, the instructor had talked a lot about the value of positive reinforcement, and in fact he had even suggested that teachers make as many phone calls to parents about kids who were doing well as they do to parents of kids with problems. That had seemed logical to me.

I told her about the things David had been writing for me. Then I asked her some questions.

“Mrs. Sampson, what does David like to do for fun?”

“Well, he never has been much for schoolwork. And I can’t get him to read a book. But he sure does like to tinker around with engines. Him and his father.”

I asked her to explain what she meant.

“He loves to take apart things and rebuild them. Especially engines. Like, you know, in trucks and things. His father owns the garage here in town.”

I hadn’t known that.

“Him and his father are always buying old wrecks and fixing them up. Last year David rebuilt a motor in an old truck we had sitting out in the yard, and he sold the truck to one of his friends. Got five hundred dollars for it.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Sampson. I always like to learn things about my students.” *Even if they’re only mine for another four weeks.*

The next day after school I decided it was time to spend some money. I really needed new shoes. But I also had an idea about how to help David.

I sat down at the table next to David at lunchtime.

“Here. David, I thought you might like these. I’m through with them.” I put some magazines down on the table in front of him.

It was true. I’d looked them over in the store. But small engine repair and muscle cars don’t interest me much. I’d found whole shelves full of them at a convenience store. How do you know?

By now you may be wondering what *does* interest me. You already know that video games aren’t my thing. Neither are engines or cars. (If I turn the key and it starts, that’s all I want to know.)

Well, I’m obviously passionate about teaching. You must have figured that out by now. And I like to help people. I guess those two things sort of go together.

I’m also involved in activities at my church. I don’t play any musical instruments, and my mother has told me that I sing like Wayne Newton. I don’t know who Wayne Newton is, but I choose to take that as a compliment.

I also play a mean game of table tennis. Too bad there aren’t any pro leagues ... I’d be a star!

Anyway, back to David. After I put the magazines down, I noticed that David’s eyes lit up. And he responded. “Cool. Thanks, Mrs. Allen.”

Over the next week I continued to seek David out and talk to him. We talked about my non-existent Warhammer skills, and cars. David could talk endlessly about cars.

I asked him if he would mind having a look at my seven year old Nissan Pathfinder, the one that my father had given me when I’d started college. It was three years old when I’d gotten it, and already had two hundred thousand kilometres on it then. In its present condition I never knew from day to day whether it would get me to school or die a horrible death and leave me stranded somewhere. Just this morning I had thought it was sounding rather asthmatic.

“I don’t know whether you can do anything with it or not, David. Whenever I start it, it sounds like my cat does when she’s coughing up a hairball. But it runs. Usually.”

“Hah hah. You’re funny, Mrs. Allen!” Obviously he appreciated my keen wit. “OK, I’ll have a look at it. Why don’t you bring it around to my dad’s shop after school?”

I drove over after school was finished. I left my vehicle in David's hands, and his father volunteered to drive me home.

"So you're David's teacher, is that right?"

"No, Mr. Sampson, I'm just a student teacher in the school. I don't have him in my class ... I'm just trying to get to know him a little better so I can help him do better with his schoolwork."

"Well, you're the first one of them teachers that's taken any interest in David at all, that's for sure. They're always calling us about some problem or other he's having."

He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts.

"Look, ... Kimberley, is it?"

I nodded.

"David don't do so well in school, I know that. And we can't help him with his homework. Not that he ever does any." He chuckled. "All he does is work on those cars of his. But he sure knows his engines."

"That's great. And you should encourage him ... it would be a good career!"

"Oh, I know that. But no need to encourage him ... we can't keep him away from them! Thanks for those magazines, by the way. David was up until all hours last night reading them. He even ordered some parts from one of them."

"Wow, that's fantastic. But, you know, David still needs to do well in school."

"Oh, I know that, young lady. Believe me. The engines they make these days are all computerized, not like the old days when you could just fix things yourself. I've had to take a few courses in the past year or two just to keep up ..."

"Mr. Sampson ..." I had an idea. "Does David have a computer?"

"No. But I've been meaning to get him one. He keeps asking. Just haven't gotten around to it yet."

"You should. It will help him with his schoolwork, and, uh, researching engine information, I guess." At least, I thought it might.

"Better than that, Kimberley. There are auto mechanics' courses he can enrol in, on-line. He'd learn a lot. I do them through the internet at the shop, in my office". He thought for a minute. "Guess we'll have to get internet at the house too."

He dropped me off at my friend's home, where I was staying while practice teaching. I spent several hours that night catching up on my lesson planning. The teaching was going really well; Sandra, my supervising teacher, kept telling me I was doing a fantastic job. Her only criticism was that sometimes, when I got excited about a lesson, I tended to talk too fast. But she said that was way better than not getting excited at all. I guess I knew what she meant.

That evening I also thought a lot about what I was going to say at the next staff meeting. I was hoping not only to say something positive about David, but to give the teachers some suggestions about how they could help him themselves.

My car was ready two days later. I got a lift to the shop from Sandra, who asked me "Are you really letting David work on it? Do you trust him?"

"Are you kidding? That kid is a genius with engines. You should see some of the cars he's rebuilt!" I hadn't seen them, but his father had told me about them.

Davis met me beside my Pathfinder. "There wasn't all that much wrong with it, Miss Allen. I replaced the air filter ... have you ever replaced it before? It was really dirty!"

"Uh ... what's an air filter?"

He laughed. "I thought so. And your oil and fuel filters were pretty clogged up. I replaced all the fluids too, and did a few other little things. That's all it really needed."

I got in and turned the key. It started with a powerful 'vroom'. I think that's the correct car term. 'Vroom'.

"You know, Miss Allen, you really should take better care of your car. It's in really good shape for its age."

"I know, David. I just never seem to have the time. How often should I replace the ... uh ... filter thingees?"

"I'll tell you what, Miss Allen. I'll make up a maintenance schedule for you, for the next few years. Then you can just follow it. I'll use the computer here in my Dad's shop. Did you know my Dad got me a computer?"

"Yeah, he told me about that."

"It's really great. I'm using it to catalogue all the spare parts I keep for rebuilding engines, and to keep track of what I need to order ..."

This was amazing. The kid was only in grade six, and already he knew the basics of inventories.

“And my Dad says I can enrol in a small engines course. He’ll even pay for it!”

“That’s fantastic, David!” And it was.

And then I had another idea. I called the supervisor who was in charge of the practicum placements at my college, and asked about something. She said I could do it, as long as Sandra was okay with it.

I talked to her the next day.

“So, explain this again for me, Kimberley?”

“What I want to do is teach for you in the mornings one day, and then follow David around to all his classes in the afternoon. Then reverse it the next day. That way I’ll get to help David with all of his class work.”

“What will you do, sit beside him?”

“No, I don’t want to embarrass him. If you could just clear it with the other teachers for me to help out in their classrooms, I can spend some time every day helping David.”

“Well, they certainly won’t object to your helping in the classrooms. And if you’re going to be working with David, they’ll be only too happy to welcome you!”

I spent the next week and a half doing just that. After every lesson I would help all the students in the room, but I made sure to always sit down beside David at least once and help him with his work. He didn’t seem to mind. I think my presence made him work a little harder.

He never had any trouble with any of his teachers during that week and a half.

I encouraged him to do some homework when he didn’t finish his work in class, and he usually managed to do some of it, if not all. Being able to use a computer for some of his assignments helped too; he was a painstakingly slow when he had to write something out by hand, but he could type fairly quickly, and the computer caught most of his spelling and grammar errors.

The next staff meeting was in a few days. I wanted to talk to Sandra first about what I was going to say. I laid it out for her.

“How much trouble do you think I’ll be in if I say all that?”

“Well, Kimberley, everything you’re going to say is true. And some of them need to hear it. Don’t worry about getting into trouble ... I’m the one who gets to grade you, and you know how I feel about your work here.”

That made me feel better.

The afternoon of the staff meeting finally arrived. When it was my turn to speak, the Principal wanted to say something first.

“Kimberley, we’ve all noticed a huge improvement in David since you started working with him. We think you’ve worked a miracle! I’d like to arrange for an aide to help him with his work, the way you’ve been doing, but I don’t think we can afford it. I hope he doesn’t go back to his old ways when you leave ... how did you do it?”

“Well ...” I wasn’t really sure I wanted to do this. But then I thought about David, and how a little nurturing had seemed to turn him around. “I didn’t do anything special. Certainly nothing that any of you couldn’t do.”

“What do you mean?”

“It wasn’t hard. I just got to know him, and let him get to know me. Once we got to know each other, I found things that he was good at and encouraged him to pursue them.”

I stopped to take a breath. I was talking to fast because I was nervous. These were all experienced teachers. Some of them had been teaching longer than I’d been alive, for heaven’s sake. Why didn’t they know these things?

“David responded to me because I developed a relationship with him. Once he got to know me, and once he realized that I was genuinely interested in him as a person, it was easier to work with him. He accepted my help and did things for me because because he knew I cared about *him* ... not about the homework he wasn’t doing.”

“But you’ll be gone next week ...”

“Listen! You’re not getting it. If you want David to respond to you, you’ll have to get to know him yourselves. You’ll have to talk to him outside of class, find out what he’s interested in, visit him at home ... do whatever you need to, to develop a relationship. Then he’ll come around for you too!

“David is a person. You were seeing him as a bad kid who never did any work and who caused problems for you. Your solution was to look for ways to punish him so that he’d ‘smarten up’.

“I got to know him. I found out that he likes video games, and that he’s an excellent mechanic. He loves to rebuild engines, and in fact he’s just started an on-line course to get credit for it. And he’s using his computer to do inventories!”

I had to stop. I was getting a little angry. But I managed to keep going.

“How many of you took the time to find out these things about David? It wasn’t really all that hard, you know. And it’s your job as teachers to do that ... if you want to do a good job for *all* of your students. And I don’t think it should take a student teacher to remind you of that!”

I paused. “I’m sorry if I offended you. Please excuse me, I have to leave now.”

I’d said what I wanted to, but I couldn’t face them after telling them that. And I was in tears.

Sandra met me later in the parking lot.

“Kimberley, you shouldn’t have left. We had quite a good discussion. Believe it or not, I think you embarrassed a few of them into admitting that you were right. I think you really did some good!”

“Oh, Sandra, I hope so. I was terrified. But angry, too, you know? They really needed to hear that.”

“You did good, Kimberley. I must say, I’ve never had a student teacher finish her practicum in such a dramatic manner.”

We both laughed. And true to her word, she gave me an ‘A’. But I don’t think I’ve ever worked harder for one in my whole life!