

Track Meet

This story is fictional; there is no Ricky, and this is a conversation I've never had. I really am not very good with little kids.

But I'm trying to change that, and I've had my eyes opened in the past few weeks by someone who is.

I don't enjoy Track and Field days much. They're either long and exhausting because you're kept busy the whole day, or long and boring because there's nothing to do. Not being involved this year had meant I had no event to look after, and with most of my students either participating or helping, I was wandering around the field out behind the school, watching a lot of running and jumping, and trying to avoid the swarms of mosquitos that seemed to follow me everywhere.

The kids were having fun, at least. And the elementary teachers who'd organized the day were moving from event to event with clipboards under their arms and big smiles on their faces. It was a good day for a track meet.

I headed past the high jump competition, deciding to go back to my empty classroom and get some work done. I had a grade eight/nine period coming up later in the afternoon, and the class would start a lot more smoothly if I had notes prepared for them on the board. Being prepared is a good thing when you're a Jr. High teacher, if you hope to keep your sanity. It usually works.

That's when I spotted Ricky. He was sitting all alone behind the softball backstop, his chin resting on his knees, and he was crying.

I didn't know Ricky at all. He was in grade three, and as a Jr/Sr teacher, I don't have much to do with little kids. I guess I like it that way; I don't know what to say to them, and I'm not much good at dealing with their problems, especially when they're upset.

Ricky was definitely upset. I knew his name only because he always said hello to me whenever I passed him in the hallway. He usually had a big smile on his face.

Right now he was in tears. I sat down beside him and looked in his direction.

"Ricky? What's the matter?"

He wiped his eyes and turned his head. "I don't want to high jump. Please don't make me! I just want to sit here". He started to cry again.

"Ricky ...". I wasn't sure what to say. "You don't have to high jump if you don't want to"

"But my teacher said ..." he wiped his eyes again ... "she said I had to stay in the line and take my turn with everybody else. But I don't want to. I hate it. They all laugh at me!"

I think I knew what the problem was. Ricky was not athletic. In fact, he was very overweight, a kid someone might refer to as 'chubby'.

“You don’t like high jumping.” Stupid. Of course he didn’t. He’d just said that. But I didn’t know what else to say, except to state the obvious. Ricky started to cry again.

I knew exactly how he felt. I’d been ‘chubby’ all the way through school. I remembered how awful I’d felt in gym class when kids picked on me because I was overweight. How bad it felt always to be chosen last because I was overweight and couldn’t run fast. How I’d cried many times on the way home from school because of the names other kids had called me.

“Ricky ...you don’t have to high jump if you don’t want to”.

“But my teacher ...”

“It’s OK, Ricky. Why don’t we just sit here for a while”.

Ricky had stopped crying, but he didn’t look very happy. “Are there any other events here you like, Ricky? How about the ball throw?”

I knew he wouldn’t like the races, or the long jump. He probably hated always being last at everything, and being laughed at. Kids are cruel.

“Yeah, that’s OK. I can throw a ball pretty good. But we did that already. I don’t want to do anything else!”

We sat for another few minutes, not talking.

I was wondering what else I could say to him, when one of the teachers walked up to us.

“There you are, Ricky! Come on, it’s your turn!” She wanted him to join the lineup at the high jump event, where the rest of his group was.

“It’s OK”, I told her. “Ricky’s with me. Just keep going without him for now.”

“But the exercise will ...” She caught my eye. And in that instant she figured it out. I expected she would; she’s a wonderfully caring teacher. “Well, that’s OK. You join us later if you feel like it, all right, Ricky?” She went back to the other kids.

I looked at Ricky and smiled. “Well, that was easy! Come on, let’s go for a walk!” I got to my feet and headed towards the school, with Ricky following after me.

“Where are we going?”

“Well, there are some jobs that need doing, and nobody wants to do them, so I thought I’d help out. Want to come with me?”

“Sure, I can do that.”

So Ricky and I found our way to the cafeteria, where he and I made ourselves busy clearing off tables and picking up garbage.

“People sure are messy!” That was Ricky.

“Yeah, I guess so. Some people just don’t care if they leave a mess behind for other people to clean up”.

“Not me! I’m always neat. Except my bedroom. That’s pretty messy!” I laughed. “Mine too!”

After the room looked presentable, we went into the kitchen. There were some students cooking hot dogs and selling food items at the booth window. I approached one of them.

“Can Ricky and I help?”

“Sure, you can take over! We have a class now anyway!”

“No, we just want to ...”

But it was too late ... they were heading out the door. Ricky and I found ourselves alone at the window. A line was forming on the other side. I’d never done this before. I didn’t even know what things cost.

“I’d like four hot dogs and a coffee please!” Our Social Studies teacher was the first in line, and he looked like he was in a hurry. He was always in a hurry.

“OK ... hot dogs ... how much ...?”

Ricky reached across the counter and grabbed the price list. I hadn’t noticed it. “Right here ... see? Hot dogs are two dollars”.

Ricky already had the four hot dogs on the counter. Where had he got them from? “You pour the coffee. That will be nine dollars please!” he said to Adrien.

I poured the coffee as Ricky took the ten dollar bill from Adrien and efficiently made change. I didn’t know that grade three students were that good with money.

“Ricky, where did you learn to do that?”

“My mom works at the store. She lets me help sometimes. Can I have a hot dog?”

“Sure. Can I have one too?”

“I guess. Who’s gonna pay for them?”

“We don’t have to pay. I’m the Assistant Principal. I get hot dogs for free. Didn’t you know that?”

His eyes got wide. “Really? That’s so cool!”

I laughed. “I’m just kidding, Ricky. Here ... put this in the box”. I gave him the money.

We served three more people; I let Ricky get the food and handle the change. He had a little trouble when someone paid with a handful of quarters, but I helped him work out the total. He really was good with money.

It wasn't long before the cafeteria was empty, and Ricky and I were alone in the kitchen. We both sat down.

"Ricky, it really hurts when people make fun of you, doesn't it."

He looked like he was going to cry again, but he changed his mind. Instead, he said "Yeah. They do a lot. Some of them."

"What do you like to do? What kinds of things are you good at?"

"Uh ... I dunno. I can throw a ball pretty far. I like video games. And I like to hunt with my Dad. We shot a deer last fall. That was fun!"

"Anything else?"

"I like to read! My teacher lets me take books home to read. I'm a good reader. She said so!"

"Do you have lots of friends?"

Ricky thought about that for a minute or so. "I guess so. Mostly I like to hang around with kids who don't tease me about ... you know ... being fat."

"Ricky, do you know why it is that some kids like to tease, and make other people feel bad?"

"No. But it's not very nice."

"I know. And I think mostly they do it because they feel bad about themselves. Sometimes they're not happy. And it makes them feel better when they can hurt other people."

"It doesn't make me feel better when I hurt other people's feelings. I do sometimes. Not on purpose."

"I know, Ricky. Everybody does that once in a while, and we feel bad about it."

"Even you?"

"Yes. Ricky, even me. Sometimes I do things that hurt other people, without thinking about it. And I always feel bad about it. I try not to do it again. Sometimes people hurt my feelings too."

"What do you do about it?"

"It's hard, Ricky. Mostly I try to understand why they are saying the things they do, and try to see that it's their problem, not mine. And I try to forgive them. Sometimes I ask God to help."

"God? I go to church sometimes. With my mom. But some of the kids are really mean. They say things that make me want to cry. They're not nice."

"I know, Ricky. But maybe they really are nice people inside, and aren't showing it very well."

"You think so?"

“What are you going to do, the next time somebody calls you names?”

“I don’t know. Usually I just ignore them.”

“That’s a good thing to do. But you can do some other things too, you know!”

“What things?”

“You can try to forgive them. They aren’t happy, and they’re being mean because it makes them feel good. If you understand that, maybe it will be easier not to be upset by what they say.”

“That’s hard!”

“And you can tell a teacher when kids are saying mean things to you. They can help.”

I know our elementary teachers; they would want to do something about it. Mindy and Kate are two of the most caring teachers I’ve ever met.

“I guess.”

“And next time you’re in church, you could ask God to forgive them. I know that would make you feel better.”

“Sure, I guess.”

Ricky was looking thoughtful. I asked him if he was feeling any better.

“Yeah, I feel good now. Mostly because I didn’t have to do that stupid high jump!” He laughed. “I’m not very good at it!”

“But you’re good at lots of other things, Ricky. That’s what’s important.”

Just then we were joined by several of the elementary teachers. The grade one teacher was complaining. “Boy, I’m glad that’s over. What a lot of work! My feet are killing me! But the kids sure had fun ... oh, Hii Ricky.” She hadn’t seen him sitting beside me. “Is everything ...?”

She looked at me. I smiled. “I think so. I’ll talk to you about it later. And I think Ricky is ready to go join his friends back in the classroom now. Right Ricky?”

“I guess so. Thanks for the hot dog. See you later!”

As the three of them headed down the hallway, I continued to sit. I was a little confused.

I don’t have much to do with little kids. I guess I like it that way; I don’t know what to say to them, and I’m not much good at dealing with their problems, especially when they’re upset.

But ... maybe I’d learned something too.

