

Those Kids Need a Lesson!

It was late. The middle-class suburban neighborhood was settling in for the night. Suddenly, the insistent barking of the dog from the backyard shattered the sleepy quiet.

“Not again!” Jim exclaimed as he threw down his newspaper and jumped to his feet. “I’m not putting up with this anymore! Those kids need a lesson and they’re gonna’ get one tonight!”

“Be careful, Jim!” Althea called out as her husband rushed out the door.

The Clarks had lived in this neighborhood for 20 years. The house had been the fulfillment of their dreams to raise their four sons in a safe environment. She remembered how excited they were to finally be able to buy their own home on Jim’s teaching salary. They had been the first blacks on the block, but the area was diverse and they had not had any problems; at least, not until the graffiti started.

The ugly spray painting appeared so regularly on the backyard walls facing the street that the City sent out crews to paint over it weekly. Unfortunately, the Clarks lived around the corner in a cul-de-sac and their fence was not visible from the street. The city crews never came to the Clark’s home. Frustrated, Jim had insisted that his sons paint out the graffiti on their fence every weekend, instead of joining their friends in sports and other activities. The boys were grown now, but the resentment he felt that his boys had missed out because some other father couldn’t keep his kids from defacing the neighborhood still festered. Even the dog they finally got to scare away the vandals had done nothing to deter the activity; in fact, the dog had destroyed the yard. Althea worried about what Jim might do if he caught a kid with a spray can near their property.

She went outside and found Jim with a young white boy. The two were sitting on the curb, Jim’s firm hand on the boy’s shoulder. In spite of the boy’s shaved head, broad-shoulders and stocky build, he only looked to be about fourteen. Jim looked at Althea and explained in a low calm voice, “He didn’t know this was a cul-de-sac and got himself trapped. His buddy made it to the car and left him behind. I’ve called the police. They should be here soon. You go back in the house. I have a few things I want to spell out for Jason here while we wait.”

Jim didn’t say much when he came back in the house. When Althea started to ask him about what had happened, Jim just shrugged. “He doesn’t even have a father, Althea. That kid is headed for real trouble if somebody doesn’t do something.”

A few days later the Clarks received a call from a caseworker with RJMP (Restorative Justice Mediation Process), a non-profit organization that was working with Jason’s case. She explained that Jason had been referred to them since he was a first time juvenile offender. The purpose of RJMP was to get the victim of a crime and the perpetrator together to mediate resolution. She asked Mr. Clark if he and his wife would be interested in helping them get Jason to take responsibility for what he had done. Jim did not hesitate. “What do we need to do?”

A mediation meeting was scheduled for the Clarks to meet with Jason, his mother and the RJMP mediator. When the Clarks arrived, Jason and his mother and the mediator were already there. Althea stared at Jason’s mother. “Don’t I know you?” The two women looked searchingly at each other. In surprised recognition, Althea exclaimed, “I know where I’ve seen you before!”

You work with my son at the donut shop!"

Hesitantly, Jason's mother nodded. "That's right! Now that you mention it, I remember seeing you pick Mark up sometimes at the end of our nightshift." She laughed nervously. "Small world, huh?" She was a small woman compared to her stout teenage son. It was hard to tell her age though she was probably in her late 30's. She had the worn-out look of a woman who had not had an easy life.

Jason sat with eyes downcast during this exchange. He now reached over and took his mother's hand and she began to weep. "Don't cry, Mama," he whispered.

The mediator explained the mediation process to them. Jason was asked to apologize to everyone at the table, which he did through tears of remorse. He then shared that he had been placed in a special class for anger management training and was attending special schooling. Jim was pleased to hear all this and encouraged Jason to surround himself with positive people. "Listen to your mother, Jason. She wants what's best for you. You can call me too. I'd like to hear about good decisions you've made." And so the first mediation meeting ended with Jason committed to sending a copy of his report card to the Clarks through RJMP, reporting any positive changes, and the families exchanging phone numbers.

The first few months went pretty well. Jason's report card showed A's and B's. Jim was encouraged. Then the Clarks heard from RJMP that Jason's grandmother was in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's. She lived out in the country and Jason's mother could no longer take care of her from a distance. As a result, she had taken Jason and moved in with her mother. Their situation was pretty grim. Since Jason's mother spent most of her waking hours working or with her new boyfriend, Jason was left alone with his grandmother who acted crazy and was angry all the time. Jason had few friends at the new school and his grandmother wouldn't let him use the phone or have any friends over. He had grown more and more depressed and withdrawn.

Then the call came that Jim had feared. It was Jason's mother telling him that Jason had locked himself in the bathroom and was threatening to kill himself. Jason was asking to speak to Mr. Clark and no one else. Jim said, "Put him on, Mary."

With his heart in his throat, Jim talked to Jason as though he were his own son; telling him that he was loved, that his life was important and worth the struggle. He suggested Jason get out of that house, get his GED, and start managing his own life. Jason agreed through shuddering sobs to go live with his girlfriend's parents. Later, he was successful in getting his GED and at last report he had been promoted to manager of the retail store where he was working.

Jason still calls the Clarks from time to time. After one such call, Jim commented to his wife, "That was Jason, Althea. He's doing fine. Remember how I thought I was going to teach him a lesson that night when I caught him? Well, I guess I did, but I didn't know how much I was going to learn in the process!"

As told to Barbara Smythe by Linda Case, the RJMP Mediator