

Ken's Story

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As I picked up the folder labeled "Memorabilia", a funeral brochure fell out. Its cover instantly transported me back to the 1970s when I was in my late twenties and taught behavior-disordered adolescents in Des Plaines, Illinois. On the cover was the face of young man I had almost forgotten, but I hadn't forgotten his story. It was the story of too many young men back then and the story of too many young men today.

At the time I had a vocational education class where we talked about working—how to find and keep a job. The students were wards of the state who lived in a residential treatment facility, either in dorm-like settings or in houses set up like homes. As a teacher, I didn't have to deal with these students' parents, just with their case workers and social workers. They had been removed from their own homes because of their behavior or because of their family situation.

Imagine youth from the west and south sides of Chicago thinking about working somewhere in Des Plaines. They were already convinced that, as their teacher, I could be making more money selling drugs or standing on a street corner. And they definitely knew *they* could make more money that way. What could I hope to impart to these students about the value of being on time, being polite, not swearing, cooperating with a boss? How could I help to make them "productive members of society?"

In class we talked, role-played, watched films about the good qualities of an employee. They jeered, swore, poked fun (and elbows), rolled eyes, and could not find themselves in any of the scenarios. So I decided we needed to get out into the community and see what could be seen. I had a connection with an employer who ran a seafood restaurant. He had helped other youth in the community with jobs and was willing to give my students a chance. We talked and decided to have my class come for lunch.

What an experience! We talked about what to wear, how to read a menu, what to do with all of the silverware, and how to handle the other patrons staring at us. But no matter how much you talk, explain, and role-play, it really doesn't sink in until you walk in the door and sit at a table.

Ken, Curtis, Ray, Anthony, Ben, Angelo, and Marcus had all dressed to the nines. A couple of them had even worn hats. Take a hat off in the restaurant? Why? Where would I put it? I can't leave it at the front. Somebody might take it. My jacket? I ain't leavin' that up there either. I don't like this already!

A menu? With five pages? At Mickey-D's you read the menu off the board or chose a picture. How would they ever decide what to eat here? Appetizers? What does that word mean? Too many choices.

At Mickey-D's you didn't need real silverware. What do you do with all of it? A cloth napkin. Now what would I do with that? Tablecloths? Wow, what was that about?

All of this was becoming too much for them. They fidgeted and fussed. Why are people looking at us? They're staring. I don't like that. Let's do something about it. "No, no," I said. "Relax. We'll be okay."

After much discussion it was decided—burgers and fries for everyone. That was the safest choice. They all knew about burgers and fries.

As we waited for the meal to arrive, the owner came out and talked with the boys. That was where some of the classroom discussion and coaching paid off. They were able

to answer questions politely. A couple of them even spoke in multi-word sentences rather than with that low, one-word answer that is the norm among adolescents everywhere.

The owner hired two of the boys. One was hired as a busboy, and Ken was hired as a dishwasher. Now they had jobs. How do you keep a job? Much talk went into arriving on time, listening to instructions, and following directions. Our school was based on a behavior modification system with the ultimate goal, of course, being for students to function in “the real world” by keeping their anger in check. So everyday we worked and talked about how to that on the job.

The two boys would share their stories. Ken felt he was better than a dishwasher. “Why should I just be washing dishes? Why can’t I be out with the customers? Why don’t dishwashers make more money? I could be making more money on the street. Why do I have to be nice to the boss? Why does he get to tell me what to do?”

How could I make him see the value of having a steady job? What was the incentive to work your way up from a dishwasher? Where would he go? His questions made me stop and consider what I was teaching in the class. How could I promote a lifestyle that seemed so foreign?

As I continued to contemplate all of these questions, Ken stormed in one Friday morning announcing that he had been fired. “What happened?” His boss had asked him to do a better job at stacking, cleaning, and putting the dishes away, basically telling him that he wasn’t handling the whole job well. He also had been late many times. Ken blew up. He screamed and swore at the manager and stomped out the door. Rather than call for a ride from the residence hall worker, he walked six miles home from the restaurant.

When I phoned the restaurant manager during lunch, he told his side of the story. He was trying to instruct Ken and help him understand how to do the job better. However, Ken didn’t take it that way. He took it as a personal insult and attack. Rather than draw on what we had talked about in class, he reverted back to the old ways of dealing with an uncomfortable situation.

On this Friday, Ken was going home to his family for a weekend visit. I told him we’d talk more on Monday and figure out his next step. We’d talk about if he’d learned anything. Maybe he could apologize to the boss. Monday we’d talk.

Monday arrived without Ken. He’d been murdered in a gang shooting. So, there’d be no talk. There’d be no more discussions. There’d be no more work training to prepare him for “the real world”.