

## MICHAEL

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He was your typical snot-nosed, defiant, twelve-year-old kid. I was a new counselor. I had goodness and warmth in my heart. I was going to help him. I was easy pickin's.

After serving my time at the facility for three months as a "night man," I was given a unit. In those days we had 10-12 boys in a unit. I had Unit II. These kids were 11-14 years old. Like all pre-adolescents, they were a pain. I couldn't get them to do anything.

Back in 1974, quite frankly, the state-of-the-art in residential care resembled more the techniques of Neanderthal Man than "professional services." Some of it still remains. Not that we pulled kids by the hair. More that we were limited to restriction-restriction-restriction-terminate. As I said, this tried and true "technique" can still be found in many agencies.

I knew this after watching as a nightman for the three months of my "internship." The veterans, my teachers, showed me how it was done. A child behaves poorly, he is restricted from a privilege (often followed with some threat about termination or Juvenile Hall) until "he learns his lesson." Invariably this leads to more restrictions as the child did not complete the first restriction, or learn his lesson.

Michael was one of the boys in the unit at the time. He and his roommate Cameron defied every rule, broke every restriction, ignored all directives, and frowned at all adults. Both were gifted at verbalizing just the right creative, multi-letter invectives so as to ward off anyone's attempt to engage in a regular conversation. Whether in the on-grounds school or in the "milieu," they were on the outs.

Never fear. I was going to change all that.

As a novice, I watched the veterans work with the kids. The agency did have a system. It was something like this: anyone in the facility, for any reason, could restrict any child, from any activity, at any time. That was the system. A teacher, day counselor, afternoon counselor, night counselor, social worker, or administrator could, and would, come up with a restriction of some sort in order to "make sure he didn't get away with it." I was never sure what "it" was other than "we are in control here!"

By the way, this is by no means an indictment of the staff or the agency. Hell, I was one of them. There was no lack of love, care, empathy, or compassion. These were the only attributes that saved us. No, this was more a reflection of the "Zeitgeist" if you'll excuse the word. Everyone was doing the best possible at the time.

Every agency did it like that despite what they may say. Ask any counselor from any facility in those days. Yes, we all had point or level systems of some sort. But even these were tied to what a child could or couldn't do. Management was the rule of the day, as was "treat them all the same." It still occurs. We should all remember our profession is just now evolving from latency to the early stages of adolescence.

I'll give you an example. I came to work one day and every one of the kids in my unit was on room restriction. (Room restriction was a biggie.) All ten. I got to work at 2:30, the kids got out of school at 3:00 and my job was to enforce the restrictions.

What did I do? I got a chair, positioned it strategically in front of the five bedrooms where the kids were, and I kept them in their rooms. All day and night. I felt like a lion tamer. "Michael! Get your butt back in there! Cameron! Quit stepping out of the room! All right Greg, you got another day!" Of course I still had to get them to clean their rooms, get them to dinner, get them back in their rooms, get them showered, get them snacks, get them to bed on time, and get them quiet and manageable. No easy trick from a lion tamer.

I suppose it was that day I decided this was so much B.S. I can remember sitting in front of those rooms with my imaginary whip and chair thinking to myself there must be more to the business than this. Either that or I should go back to coaching, my original pursuit. At least in coaching the kids know the whip and chair is part of the game. Hell, coaches are supposed to be tough. More importantly, when coaching, there is a sense of teamwork, with a desired end and it's supposed to be fun for kids.

This was no fun. For me or the kids. There was no desired end either. And, to be sure, somebody had already been "tough" with them long before they got to the agency. There were some kids I was sure I could beat over the head all day and still they wouldn't make their bed, because I beat them over the head all day. These weren't restrictions we were using. This was punishment, pure and simple. And it didn't work. Pure and simple. Punishment is perhaps man's second original sin.

I was to find out, years later, that many scholars of the human condition, much more adept than I, had studied the results of punishment on people. They all say that it is ineffectual. Conclusively. Well documented. Real honest-to-God scientific studies.

Try to convince anyone of that. No matter how educated, empathetic, or experienced, most still think that if poor behavior is linked somehow, to an undesirable consequence, then the poor behavior will go away. Not true. Really.

The best that can happen, according to these same men and women, is that poor behavior will "disburse." It will occur somewhere else at some other time. Maybe he would clean his room for me if I beat him over the head enough. Maybe. But he certainly wouldn't do it for someone else, and this new "good" behavior certainly wasn't internalized.

Anyway, back to Michael (Cameron is another story). As I said, he was a jerk. All counselors like jerks. I don't know why. No, for me it wasn't the "challenge." I never liked the term. I would just as soon not have them be jerks and be less challenged. At the risk of sounding pollyannish, "there was something about him I liked." I know, that's as bad as "challenge." We all have to make up some reason to keep showing up for work.

He was the first child I got close to. I was on him all the time. Do this, that, and the other. I discovered, after about a year of "counseling," I said "no" to about 90% of what the kids asked me.

I knew Michael for about three months. Not much had changed. Oh, he would talk with me now, especially at night when lights were out. His voice changed, he was less angry, and he even cried a few times while I was alone with him. He liked me. He even trusted me a little. Though his behavior hadn't changed much during the day, as professed by the many adults that interacted with him, there was something there. I mean, after all, he was a kid.

Then one day when I came to work, I got the word from the social worker that Michael was being "terminated." I had been avoiding this for a while. I had made excuses for Michael, feigned "progress," all in an attempt to buy time. It was too late.

Keep in mind the type of counselor I was. No wimp here. No "cry on my shoulder and all would be well" bleeding heart. It was much more serious than that. I didn't care if the kids liked me or not. I really didn't. And the more I seemed to not care if they liked me, the more they seemed to like me. More important issues were at hand than being friendly. They were to get better—whatever the hell that meant—somehow. A throwback to my coaching days I suppose. Shove good behavior down their throats. Mandate it. This style was to get me through the first two years in the business.

I also was naive enough to think termination wasn't an option. This was a boy's home. We all knew the kind of kids we were taking in. Where were they to go from here? Why did we expect them to behave well and follow the rules now? I was to learn more of my "naivete" from the veterans as time went by.

This wasn't unusual. This was the norm. "Failure to adjust," "inability to follow the program" were phrases that would ring in my ears for a long time. It seemed to me we said them to take us off the hook. I never use those terms anymore.

So how do I tell a child he is to be "terminated"? (I never use that term anymore either.) This was my first. I mean, the social worker didn't want to do it. Nor did I want her to do it anyway. It was up to me. I wasn't sure how the "old pros" did it. I asked around.

Some said to just come right out and say it. Others said to wait until the P.O. showed up so the child wouldn't "go off" and break something. Still others said the best way to handle this was to pack his clothes while he was in school, have his allowance ready, meet him after school, put him in the car, and tell him on the way to the airport. This didn't sound right to me for some reason.

I took him to a restaurant for lunch.

He thought he had done something good. He had a big grin on his face, like he was eager to get back to the facility and tell Cameron where I had taken him. He said no one had ever taken him—just him—to a restaurant before. He ordered the biggest hamburger on the menu. We ate. He talked more than he ever had, especially about his plans. I'd never seen him like that. And then I told him.

I was quiet and matter-of-fact. I'm not sure what I said, but I explained it like a divorce. I said we both could have done better. I said he could look forward to his next placement. I said I was glad I got to know him and that he was a good kid. There was no need to "make sure he understands he's responsible for his actions." He always knew that. I always knew we were responsible too. Nor was there any reason to boot him in the ass out the door.

His eyes welled up, just like a twelve-year-old little boy. He wasn't angry. He didn't break anything. He thanked me.

I took him back to the facility. He got his clothes and belongings, and he even shook hands with a few of the staff. I took him to the car and he said he would write. He was still smiling. I never saw or heard from him again.

Of course I took a lot of crap from the vets. Rokie jokes. "Took the little shit to lunch? Are you kidding? The kid was an asshole!" So he was, so he was.

About five years later I was the vet. I was training the rookies. Precious little had changed, but enough to make a difference. I no longer restricted, and hadn't for three years. It was frustrating for the staff then working for me, for all the same reasons. "The kids will get away with murder," is an old wives' tale still in the business. "The kid can never win" is another that long ago should have died a not-so-peaceful death.

I was directing an adjacent 12-bed facility for 15-18 year olds. It had a fireplace. I was asked by the agency to burn some old files.

One night while having an informal group with the boys, I began to throw these files into the fireplace. As we were talking I looked down and there was a picture of Michael on his file. The irony.

You see, I had learned just two days earlier what had happened to him. He was placed in another facility in Northern California. He didn't do very well. He was placed in another. At his third facility after leaving the one I worked at, when he was 14 years old, they found him one night hanging from the shower head in the bathroom. He was dead.

I learned later they did some sort of investigation. Nothing conclusive. Some said suicide, others said foul play. No one took a real interest is what I heard. After all, he was a jerk.

I didn't tell the boys at group that night. I didn't burn the file. I kept it. I tell you this: that snot-nosed, smart-assed, defiant twelve-year-old kid was just a little boy in that restaurant.

So please, don't "terminate" kids anymore.  
Take them to lunch.