



## CASE STUDY #2: DAVID (The Bull)

David Jamison is part kid and mostly BULL...not the lying type but the "china shop" type. When I, as his truant officer, first encountered David he was transitioning from junior high to high school, all arms/legs and mouth! A call from the assistant principal initiated a home visit--he had been out of school for two weeks and there was no response at home. Driving down the street gave an immediate answer to the phone situation. A burned out skeleton stood in place of his address. Neighbors provided the address of a local residence motel that the insurance provided while rebuilding was completed. Identifying the government plates on the truant officer car prompted the neighbor to inquire if David was being formally charged with setting the fire.

Upon arriving at the Jamison's temporary housing I found Mom and son arguing about school attendance. My timing was perfect: "I'll take him into the assistant principal's office...no problem". On the way to school I made small talk to reduce the tension and to explore any underlying causes. I asked why he was reluctant to go to school. "Kids make fun of me" was his response; the one that always struck a responsive chord with me (maybe from my own background?).

We all can recall the burn of our classmate's sharp tongues. In the assistant principal's office we talked about his special education placement and other possible placements. His teachers saw the teasing thing a bit differently than David did- it seems that he could dish it out pretty well and sometimes even before it was sent by the other students. David was sent back to class and I spent a few minutes with the assistant principal's before driving to my next call. About a block and a half from school I spot a recognizable figure loping down the sidewalk.

David hadn't lasted 10 minutes in class!! I circled the block to head him off. He was clearly surprised and upset to cross paths again so soon. I force him into the car and explain how I feel when people make me look inept. To make sure this doesn't happen again I will ask the school to escort him from class to class for the rest of the day.

For the next day I requested the Mom attend all classes with David. (This tactic has worked well in the past, providing parents don't work or can afford to take the day off.) The following day David left home but didn't arrive at school. He was playing the odds that I couldn't afford to spend any more time chasing him.

I found him at a video arcade. After giving the owner hell for letting an obviously school aged kid in during school hours I took David to school for a solid week of minute-by-minute attendance monitoring.

David's downfall accelerated when his parent's home burned. The resulting rebuilding process meant that they would live in a nice "residential hotel" for a few months. Many young people don't handle change well (major understatement!). David became slovenly because arriving back at the apartment resulted in a clean room with a professionally made bed. Pretty good stuff for any of us but death to a lazy slob ambition. His natural rebellion kicked in and he now steadfastly refused to do anything his parents would request.

He became argumentative with his Mother particularly and with any authority figure in general. David was in the midst of a rapid growth and strength spurt quickly out growing his parent's ability to physically control him. One fateful afternoon truant officers received a panicked call from Mom that David was threatening her. When they arrived at the newly refurbished house they discovered David with one hand around his mom's neck and the other drawn back in a fist ready to make mom a wall

ornament. A patrol officer was called immediately and David was transported to Juvenile Hall post-haste.

It's important to note: there aren't many things kids do that will get them sent to "juvie" this quickly. But, given his history with school authorities and the threatening nature of the offense; he qualified. As the CWA's tried to help put mom back together it was decided that David needed some major help.

Mom finally followed through and attended her first parent support group. Other seemingly "normal" parents also had similar disturbing stories to tell so she felt better from the "git-go". Upon the insistence of more experienced parents she decided to forgo the traditional counseling/therapist route and opted for a kid's support group run by one of the truant officers. This particular "I CARE" group was run under the adult school authority. Students were allowed to earn high school credits for "working on themselves".

David's first goal was, of course, to be thrown out of the group for being obnoxious to other students and to the group leaders. This had worked for him many times in the past. Sharp thinking adults identified this game and instructed David's peers so they could combat it. He got the message and settled in after a few trying weeks.

The major component of this self-help group for kids is volunteering in the community. Giving to others was David's self-described turning point. A local riding stable had a program, which enabled severely handicapped and impaired kids to ride horses. It takes up to five volunteers per rider, however. David took to helping these kids and working around the stable with the same energy his friends were taking to dope. He was soon exceeding his required volunteer time by six to eight hours per week. In his words: "It's such a rush to see those kids grinning ear-to-ear on the top of one of them horses...Man it's just great!...they need me there to help or they wouldn't be able to ride". By the end of his first year David had volunteered in excess of 400 hours and was offered a job working at the stable.

David still had problems with authority figures and occasional marijuana usage but for the most part he turned his life around. He graduated in five years with a legitimate diploma. Using his experience working with horses he secured employment on a cattle ranch in the valley and became a contributing member of society. (Talk about a long shot...)

ANALYSIS: So what does it all mean?

David was a lower functioning student who needed to feel valuable and worthwhile to others. His schooling was not rewarding because he wasn't good at it and no one had time to find out what he did like. The erroneous assumption is that oppositional kids "don't care about anything or anyone for that matter". In reality, David had a sincere compassion for handicapped kids and animals. Traditional educational curriculum would never showcase these wonderful talents.

We, as educators and caring adults, need to look closely at kids who don't do well in school and find ways for them to show what they can do. Service Learning programs get students out of the classroom and into communities to assist people in need. The best way to feel good about yourself is to become valuable to someone else!

In thirty-plus years working with "at-risk" (and aren't they all) kids I haven't seen one yet that can't make some contribution to society thereby feeling just a little better about themselves. Yes, even the murderers can make a contribution from their jail cells. Socializing stray dogs is just one well documented example.

UPDATE: Two years ago I received a call from David. After sharing his success story about his career as a long-haul trucker, who owns two houses, he wanted to visit the "I CARE" group. I truly appreciate these offers when they come in because it gives the current attendees some hope when they see that a lot of the returnees had a tougher background than their own but managed to discover the "life after high school". For most it is found to be more bearable than they expected. David's major motivation for checking in with us was to introduce me to his 15 year old son. (I'm always a little blown away by the realization that those immature "problem kids" from "I CARE" can take on the responsibilities of parenthood just like regular people.) In fact David was having some difficulties with his son (Wouldn't it be nice if they didn't have to suffer the misery their parents had with them? Or maybe they deserve this?!!) Some afflictions skip a generation but being a pain in your parent's ass doesn't seem to be one of them.