

## Second Time Around<sup>1</sup>

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Social worker Jadah Johnson's heart started to accelerate as Felicia Cooke kept talking, "I know I keep asking you, Jadah, but if you could enroll them, my parents, I mean, you'd really help us out! We sisters need to stick together . . . It's how we get by in this community, we've got to help each other." Felicia paused to take a bite from her cream cheese bagel.

Jadah's head spun, as she unpacked the coded message, a veiled signal for community fidelity. *I know what she's asking me to do . . . and I really feel for her situation. . . I don't know.*

As Jadah raised her eyes to meet Felicia's, Felicia shrugged in expectation, "Well?"

### Jasper, South Carolina and the town of Ridgeland

Jasper County was the southernmost county in the state of South Carolina. Located in the low country portion of the state, an area of distinct geography and cultural heritage running through several of South Carolina's coastal counties. Jasper was a rural county, with stagnant economic growth and a median household income of just \$30,777, well below the national average. Jasper was predominantly African American, with African Americans comprising 53% of the population.

The county seat of Jasper was Ridgeland, a charming yet older town marketed as the *High Point of the Low Country*. Not because it had an extensive range of entertainment and eating options, but rather Ridgeland was literally the highest point between Charleston and Savannah. The town was founded in 1894 as a railroad stop between these two cities. The original name of the town had been *Gopher Hill*, after the gopher tortoise, a type of tortoise distinct to the low country region and unique in the way it burrowed to avoid predators and spent most of its life underground. However, the town moniker was changed to *Ridgeland* when the original name was not considered suitably dignified. The train between Charleston and Savannah still passed through Ridgeland but no longer stopped there. In 2017, the town had about 4100 residents, was economically ailing, had a slightly higher than average crime rate and limited social service infrastructure. Extensive local government effort was focused on developing the town's economy.

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<sup>1</sup> This decision case was prepared solely to provide material for class discussion and not to suggest either effective or ineffective handling of the situation depicted. While based on field research regarding an actual situation, names and certain facts may have been disguised to protect confidentiality. The authors wish to thank the case reporter for cooperation in making this account available for the benefit of social work students and practitioners. The case was completed under the ICARED grant XXXX

## **Aging Matters and Meals on Wheels**

Located in the town of Ridgeland SC, Aging Matters was a nonprofit organization that coordinated services, provided interventions and facilitated individual support so that Jasper County's senior citizens could remain independent. Aging Matters programs included its flagship Meals on Wheels, home visitation, active seniors, and health education. Aging Matters was intended as the safety net for seniors living in Jasper County and offered all services for free or at a greatly reduced rate.

The Meals on Wheels program delivered hot and nutritious meals to eligible elderly residents across the county. A team of caring volunteers with oversight from staff social workers delivered meals to seniors five days a week. Typically, those seniors receiving Meals on Wheels were at or below 200% of the national poverty level. Without support from Meals on Wheels, most of these seniors would be forced to choose between paying for food and paying for other essential expenses such as medication. Meals on Wheels was subsidized on a generous sliding scale. While some recipients paid a nominal amount, no senior was ever denied a meal on the basis of income.

It was a struggle for Aging Matters to keep Meals on Wheels and other programs at full funding capacity. The funding for their programs came from a variety of sources, with almost 85% of the funding from grants and donations from foundations and corporations, with only a paltry 3% of funding in the form of federal block grants.

### **Jadah Johnson, Director of Services and Programs**

Jadah Johnson was the director of social work for Aging Matters. She was a 54-year-old African American woman who had spent most of her life in Ridgeland. Jadah was 5'7" tall, with medium build, and short natural hair. She described herself as graceful and poised, a carry-over from her time in the U.S. Army. Others described her as generous and an open and honest leader.

In her mind, Jadah had always been a social worker. Jadah's father died when she was twelve, and because of her mother's work commitments, her grandparents became a vital part of her upbringing. As a result, she became comfortable around seniors, having spent long hours as a girl in the social world of her elderly grandparents.

Jadah's route to the social work profession was nontraditional. After graduation from high school she decided to join the Army. Jadah had served in the Army for several years, where she met her husband, an infantry sergeant also from South Carolina. Jadah was as an accounting specialist, a role in which she excelled. However, with Jadah settled into her career and her husband preparing to leave for Germany, disaster struck. An automobile crash took the life of her husband while she was pregnant with their first child.

Jadah felt she had no choice but to wrap up her military career and head back to rural South Carolina for support from her family and community. Soon after her return, Jadah completed her undergraduate degree in Sociology with a minor in Social Work. Jadah's undergraduate experience sparked a deeper passion for social work. She felt a definite connection with social work, and the idea of working with older adults really

appealed to her, which led her to complete a MSW degree at the University of South Carolina. In her first year, Jadah completed a field placement with Aging Matters, and she really enjoyed the experience. During her second field placement, she went to the Veterans Administration, where she showed an aptitude for working with veterans. Jadah excelled in the MSW program, and at the end of her second-year field placement, she had a difficult decision to make. Jadah received offers from both the VA and Aging Matters. She was deeply committed to working where she would be most effective and would make the biggest impact, so she chose the lower-paying Aging Matters over the VA position.

After 15 years at Aging Matters, Jadah was the director of social work. Accountable directly to the agency CEO, she supervised a team of seven social workers in various programs, as well as line staff and the volunteers who contributed to the success of Aging Matters.

### **Meeting Felicia Cooke**

Every fall, various local or regional agencies provided a series of trainings to expose local human service professionals to the most current social work services and innovations, as well as to provide CEUs for licensure. Every social worker in Jasper attended; the trainings were like social gatherings. Jadah relished these trainings as an opportune time to catch up with social workers and other human service professionals.

The first training Jadah attended was for gerontological social workers at the senior living facility in Ridgeland. The facility was a relatively new building with a great conference room; it was light and airy with a high ceiling and large windows flooded the room with light. Jadah felt a sense of expectation, scanning the room for familiar faces.

Jadah noticed a gaggle of old social work friends milling around a refreshment table in the back of the conference room, and she bounded over with quick hellos and hugs amidst pleasantries such as, "How are you doing? How are things at the Council? How is your Mabry—he must be two now?" Given the smallness of the town, understanding and knowing everyone's births, divorces, and other matters was always a part of catching up!

As she made her way to the rear of the conference room, a petite and stylishly dressed African American woman in her early 30's suddenly approached Jadah and assertively stuck out her hand.

"Hi, I'm Felicia, Felicia Cooke," said the woman. "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, Felicia. My name is Jadah Johnson. What do you do?"

"I'm a health social worker at Jasper County Primary Health Care clinic," Felicia explained, "and I just returned to Hardeeville a few weeks ago. I've been working in Savannah, GA, after getting my MSW degree from the Savannah State University, but am returning to help care for my family here. You know the Jenkins, right? That's my family."

Felicia explained that she was at the training because the primary care center where she worked was treating seniors with extensive needs, and she had secured federal

funding to support the clinic's senior health outreach program.

*That sounds impressive, Jadah thought. That's just the type of innovative thinking the aging population in Jasper County needs.* The conversation between the two of them was pleasant and flowed back and forth. Jadah enjoyed listening to Felicia's description of the many and varied ideas that she had for writing grants to expand work with seniors in the county. Felicia seemed particularly interested in hearing all about the resources that were offered by Aging Matters.

Jadah was eager to encourage a new social worker and was impressed by Felicia's ambition to obtain resources that would help people in their small town. *Felicia seems very motivated. She's a real go getter. She reminds me of myself when I was first in the field. It's going to be great having a new and dynamic addition to the work force in Jasper County.* Jadah beamed with excitement imagining the possibility of collaborations with Felicia. *Felicia would be a great community partner to the Aging Matters team, especially with her skills in grant writing.*

As the excitement of their initial meeting was winding down, the tone suddenly became serious, as Felicia looked down sadly and, with a strained longing in her voice said, "My parents still live in the house that I grew up in. . . . They could really benefit from some services." Felicia paused, then continued, "Umm, my mom is pretty incapacitated right now, and my Dad tries to take care of them. It's a real struggle for them most days if I can't stop in and see them, and they are on the other side of the county. And you know how busy we are in this line of community work."

Jadah just listened, wondering where this was going.

Felicia hesitated, with wet eyes and a tear escaping as she continued, "I'm trying to make a difference in the world, but it's so difficult having to take care of my parents. But I feel so responsible for them. They are older, and yet they supported me through college and grad school, looking after me. It's hard to be a single mom and to go back to College. They'd let me drop Jarel off for weeks at a time."

A swell of empathy rose up in Jadah's chest. She genuinely felt for Felicia and was transported back to her own experience as a single mother while attending college and needing the support of her parents. "Felicia this seems like a tough situation," Jadah replied compassionately, "I know what it's like to need support from your parents, and then need to care for them as well. You feel an intense sense of responsibility to pay them back for supporting you."

"When I went back to grad school," Jadah continued, "I was a single mom just like you, and my parents-in-law were a source of great support. They really shouldered a big burden, and I continued to take care of them for the rest of their lives. I had such an intense sense of gratitude to them, so I understand, Felicia." Jadah felt a surge of affection for the young woman. She was usually reserved when it came to verbal affirmations, but she felt such a strong connection to Felicia that she felt obligated to verbally support her.

"Jadah," Felicia responded, "you know what it's like. There's no small-town markets anymore. They've got to drive all the way to the Walmart in Hardeeville, and then it takes a lot for them to manage all the food for a week. I try and bring them meals

when I can." Felicia became emotional as she continued, and her voice cracked with emotion.

*She probably doesn't get to talk about this very much, Jadah thought, it'll really help to affirm her and encourage her through this. "Maybe there is something Aging Matters could do to help?"*

As Jadah said those words, Felicia's face lit up.

"We have a Meals on Wheels program and home visiting," Jadah continued.

"That would be wonderful!" Felicia replied, eagerly.

Jadah took a moment to educate Felicia about the Meals on Wheels and the sliding scale so that seniors were never turned away because of income.

"It's great that you don't ever turn anybody away!" Felicia responded, relief evident in her voice. Then, more hesitantly, "I'm not sure about the other eligibility requirements, though."

"Oh, okay," Jadah felt a sense of uncertainty about the direction of the conversation. "Well, what concerns do you have?" Noticing Felicia's apparent disappointment, Jadah continued, "Well it's not that we won't turn anybody away, but eligibility depends on the fact that the seniors must not be able to make nutritious meals for themselves, and there can be no other person living with them who could make them a nutritious meal."

With this information, Felicia grew quiet, her countenance sullen.

*Oh no, what did I say? Jadah's mind began to race. There's probably an issue with eligibility, but I don't want to dash her hopes when that may not be the case. And besides, it would be best if she at least applied and somebody else could convey the bad news—if there is bad news. She's clearly emotional, so might not have heard me correctly. Best let someone in eligibility handle this.*

In an attempt at reassurance, Jadah added meekly, "Hey, just give us a call, and somebody can talk you through the application for your mom and dad."

Felicia nodded awkwardly. Then, as the trainer called for everyone to take their seats, she asked with a tinge of desperation, "Is there anything you can do to make sure this application process runs smoothly? You know, to speed it up? Can't you just add their names to the list if I give you their details? We are literally all family, here."

"Felicia, why don't you call the office and complete the application next week, and we can see if you qualify," Jadah's words tailed off to a noncommittal ending, as the two women made their way back to their seats for the training.

## **Bye, Felicia**

Jadah felt a nagging sense of guilt for the rest of the training. She avoided Felicia during the break in the session, but caught herself taking furtive glances towards Felicia just to see how she was doing. Jadah recalled and replayed their conversation while driving back to the office later that afternoon. *I probably shouldn't have just come out and said, Jadah reflected, 'I'm sure there is something Aging Matters can do to help.' I've been practicing in this town for a long time, and I've worked really hard to make sure everything we do here at Aging Matters is above board given all of the dual relationships. But Felicia is so vulnerable. I know what she's going through in a way that other people probably don't. It's*

*natural of me to want to help, right?* Jadah tried to reassure herself. *She's a good social worker, and she's just trying to help her family like we all do.*

## A Second Opinion

As Jadah pulled into her parking spot, she pondered, *What if I run this situation by Latoya to see if she knows Felicia? If she does, maybe there's another way we can help.* Latoya was the assistant director of social services and had been at Aging Matters for six years. She was a MSW graduate of the University of South Carolina like Jadah. Latoya was an African American woman with long dreadlocks and a pleasant disposition. Jadah pensively poked her head into Latoya's office.

Latoya looked up and asked, "So how was the training?"

"Good . . ." Jadah replied.

"Good . . . but?" Latoya recognized this was not Jadah's usual demeanor.

Jadah sighed. She really didn't like talking about people, but she felt the need to confess this messy situation that she seemed to have stumbled into. *I trust Latoya,* Jadah reassured herself. *She's not going to judge me.* Then, realizing a moment of silence had passed, she proceeded, "Do you know Felicia Cooke? She's a new social worker over at the Jasper County Primary Health Care."

"Yes, she came home after being in Savannah for a few years" Latoya replied. "I've known her family for years. She just wrote a grant for them to start a senior health outreach program. Sounds like a great idea. Why?"

Before Jadah could respond, Latoya probed, "Did something happen?"

"It's probably nothing," Jadah said, trying to reassure herself again. "Felicia seems really nice. We met for the first time today. We really hit it off, in fact. She's very knowledgeable—seems like she'll be a great colleague. But she's going through a really hard time caring for her parents." Jadah relayed the gist of their conversation, and then concluded, "I may have given her the impression that we'd help her, when I'm not sure if we can. But then I didn't want to disappoint her when it seemed like her folks weren't eligible. But I felt like she was trying to persuade me into just signing her parents up for the Meals on Wheels program."

"Are you sure?" Latoya asked. "This sounds like a complicated situation. You're usually really clear in situations like this."

"I know!" Jadah exclaimed.

"Hopefully, she will call," Latoya responded, "and we can determine her eligibility. You never know. They might qualify if the father isn't home all day."

Jadah never called.

## A Second Encounter

A couple of months had passed since the first training, when Jadah—along with several staff members—was planning on attending another training. Jadah and her co-workers happily signed in, looking forward to being in a different environment for the morning, and then headed to a table with coffee, bagels, and juice. Just as Jadah was

pouring herself a cup of coffee, she realized a person was approaching on her left side from the blind spot in her vision. Anticipating this, she turned to say hello.

"Jadah, it's me, Felicia," Felicia said before Jadah could speak. "How are you?"

After exchanging pleasantries, Felicia shifted the conversation topic. "Well, there may be some eligibility issues with my folks and your Meals on Wheels program. But you said you'd help us, and it's much more complicated than I first thought." Felicia was speaking quickly, as if to keep Jadah from talking. "During the day my dad works, but my sister and her teenage daughter are living with them, too, but they are hardly there."

Jadah remembered how it was when she first returned to Ridgeland with her boy and how strained everything was with her parents-in-law. It really tugged at her, because the strength of Jasper was community and family across generations. That was the beauty of rural Jasper, even though outsiders might not see it.

"I'm the only one providing for the entire family. My sister's been trying to move out for years, and it's almost as if they aren't there."

Jadah's heart started to accelerate as Felicia kept talking.

"I know I keep asking you, Jadah, but if you could enroll them—my parents, I mean—you'd really help us out! We sisters need to stick together," she winked at Jadah. "It's how we get by in this community. We've got to help each other," Felicia paused to take a bite from her cream cheese bagel.

Jadah had grown silent.

"It's how we get ahead as a people," Felicia continued, "especially out here in the country. You know this! We've got to help each other along. We've got to look out for each other," Felicia's voice rose in desperation, "Don't you care about your community?"

*This is such a confusing situation, thoughts tumbled through Jadah's mind like clothes in a washing machine. She's so desperate, and I know what that's like. It's so uncomfortable to see her struggling like this. She's right—I did say we would help. She'd really appreciate the help. I could have used the help, but not like that, surely? I know what she is asking me to do . . . and I really feel for her situation. . . . I don't know.*

As Jadah raised her eyes to meet Felicia's, Felicia shrugged in expectation, "Well?"