

Case 6



One Little Boy (A)¹

ROBERT JAY PALMER
KAREN A. GRAY

It was a gorgeous March day, but school social worker Bonnie Cross was indoors doing paperwork when her phone rang.

"Bonnie, this is Marcia. Do you have a minute? I think we have a problem."

"Sure. Go ahead."

"Well, you remember Ben Hartin? This is kind of a long story so bear with me. As you know, Ben's in fifth grade and has been doing fairly well—a little truancy, but overall okay. Today I go in for my weekly visit to Edwards Elementary, and Ms. Hamilton, the principal, tells me about an incident that happened last week. Ben apparently said something disrespectful to Mrs. Scott, his teacher. I don't know what he said, but she told him to go to in-school suspension. He refused to go, so she took the rest of the class to the library while Mr. Almgren, the assistant principal, came in to talk to Ben. Mr. Almgren told Ben he had to go to in-school suspension.

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"Then apparently Ben said, 'I won't go with you anywhere. My granddaddy has a gun at his house in the coat closet and the bullets are in the coffee can in the kitchen. I'm going to get them and kill you and Mrs. Scott and that lady in detention.' I don't know if the fact that Mr. Almgren and the in-school suspension supervisor are African American has anything to do with Ben's response—knowing his family, I wouldn't be surprised. Anyway, they called Ben's dad to come get him.

"Well, Ms. Hamilton freaked out and called the assistant superintendent for administration. She told him about the threat, and that Ben knew exactly where the gun was. He talked to her strictly from the administrative standpoint—that she needed to refer him for expulsion, etc.

"So they wait until I stop by now to tell me this! This happened a week ago! I don't want to get anybody in trouble or anything, but shouldn't they have called the police?"

"Of course they should have!" Bonnie exclaimed. "Oh, god. I think this is an administrative issue now, Marcia, so I'll follow up with the school principal."

"That's fine with me, Bonnie. Thanks for listening and stepping in."

Bonnie hung up the phone and thought, *And after the police, then what?*

ROWAN SALISBURY SCHOOL SYSTEM AND SOCIAL WORK SERVICES

The Rowan Salisbury School System offices were located in Salisbury, a community of 26,500 in the Piedmont area of North Carolina. Salisbury, the county seat of Rowan County, was 57 percent white and 37 percent African American with 16 percent of the population living below the poverty line. The school system consisted of 17 elementary schools, 7 middle schools, and 6 high schools.

The school district had been employing social workers for 11 years. Starting in 1989, Social Work Services consisted of a coordinator, Bonnie Cross, LCSW, and four full-time LCSWs. Because their duties included internal advocacy for parents, they were district level employees and, therefore, did not report to school principals.

The social workers offered a wide variety of services. Three staff members provided services as school-home liaisons to seven elementary schools and one middle school. These services included home visits, referrals, student and/or parent education groups, peer mediation and conflict management training, and case staffings for special education. One staff member was assigned full time to Early Head Start, where she and family health educators managed the family component. All staff shared the other two middle schools as needs arose. They were also the "crisis response and recovery team" for the school district, and they occasionally developed truancy intervention plans. In

addition to serving children and their families, the staff served the district by doing staff development and training for teachers, administrators, and others on topics such as school safety, crisis response, suicide prevention, and dealing effectively with explosive students.

BONNIE CROSS

Bonnie Cross, a native of the Salisbury area, had been the school district's Social Work Services coordinator since the program's inception in 1989. Prior to that position Bonnie was the program director of the Human Services Program at the Rowan County DSS. In addition to the above named duties, Bonnie's responsibilities included serving as a temporary employee assistance program person, the district representative to a variety of community agency task forces and boards, and as a social worker for the alternative school program.

Bonnie was a middle-aged, white woman. She was always impeccably dressed and articulate—she exuded professionalism. She was very productive, and between her other duties, she managed to write several grants per year. Bonnie's accomplishments and demeanor earned her the respect of most of the school district's employees.

MARCIA McNEAL

Marcia McNeal was in her seventh year as a social worker for the Salisbury School District. Marcia received her MSW at age 24 from California State University San Bernardino 9 years earlier, and worked in a day treatment program before moving to North Carolina with her husband and young daughter. During her tenure with the Salisbury School District, Marcia had established a reputation among the district's personnel as being a talented and committed social worker. She, too, was energetic and well respected.

BEN'S HISTORY

After hanging up the phone, and before calling Ms. Hamilton, Bonnie decided to quickly review Ben's records, which began when he was 3 years old. Over the years, Bonnie supervised Marcia regarding Ben's case, so she was familiar with the child, but she wanted a quick refresher. Ben's file was thick, so she quickly flipped through it.

Ben's first referral came in 1992 when a pediatrician referred him for possible developmental delays (see Appendix A). Marcia did an assessment but the family refused preschool services. The next referral came when Ben was in the

second grade, and his teacher referred him for behavioral problems (see Appendix B). Ben's parents again declined services, choosing instead to home-school him. Marcia saw Ben next when he was in the third grade (see Appendix C). He was still being homeschooled, but the school district required that Marcia make a home visit. Marcia was concerned that Ben was not actually receiving any educational instruction and the interactions between him and his mother also gave Marcia concern. Once again, Ben's mother declined help. The following year, Ben returned to school for the fourth grade. Ben's principal referred him for repeated absences (see Appendix D). Ben's parents told Marcia about some increasingly serious behavior problems, but still they declined services. At the beginning of Ben's fifth grade year, Marcia checked in with his teacher and found Ben to be adjusting fairly well (see Appendix E). While reviewing Ben's records, Bonnie remembered the details of his history very clearly, and felt ready to proceed.

AFTER MARCIA'S PHONE CALL

Bonnie tried to keep in mind that Ms. Hamilton was in her first year as principal. She had been an assistant principal the previous year and just for one year.

Bonnie called Ms. Hamilton and explained the necessity of calling the police. "When a child makes a threat like that you have to call the police for his, other children's, and your own protection. Remember it's our new policy after Columbine."

"I understand now, and you're right," Ms. Hamilton said, "but I called the assistant superintendent and he didn't tell me to do that."

"I assume he thought you had already done that and you were just looking for the procedural things. Call me back after the police have talked to Ben and his family."

The next day, Ms. Hamilton called Bonnie. "The police said they were quite familiar with Ben because he'd been picked up several times for shoplifting at the mall. They knew where he lived so they went to talk to Ben. They decided not to do anything because Ben said he was just kidding."

Great, Bonnie thought. "Okay. Marcia said you were going for expulsion, so I guess our next step is the expulsion hearing."

THE EXPULSION HEARING

The expulsion hearing, usually held within 3 days of the incident, was postponed for another week to allow Benjamin's mother to attend. But Mrs. Hartin did not attend the hearing after all, though Mr. Hartin did. The school district panel included Dr. Moody (a psychologist from Juvenile Justice), Mr. Almgren,

Mrs. Scott, a school board member, a retired assistant principal, and a retired teacher.

Bonnie could not attend, so the next day she asked Marcia about the hearing.

"Well," Marcia replied, "after Mr. Almgren described the events, Dr. Moody asked if there had been other incidents. Mr. Almgren described some of the other things that have happened since Ben started school. The more questions Dr. Moody asked, the bigger her eyes got. Dr. Moody asked the dad, 'Do you have any control over your son?' He responded, 'No,' with the child sitting right there! Then she said, 'Why do you think the school should be able to control him if *you* can't control him?' Dad said, 'They are trained to do that, I'm not.' Ben sat quietly throughout the entire proceeding. The panel recommended that Ben not be expelled but that he receive a psychiatric evaluation before he returns to school."

"The administration office takes care of those referrals," Bonnie responded, "so there's nothing more for us to do right now."

THE WRONG ASSESSMENT?

A week later, Chrissie Nickels, one of the school psychologists stopped by Bonnie's office. Ms. Nickels was a master level clinician who did psychoeducational assessments to determine eligibility for special education services but not counseling.

"Hi, Bonnie. Ben Hartin was referred to me for a psychological evaluation. Could you give me some background on him?"

"Ben was referred for a psychiatric eval," Bonnie responded, "not a psychological."

"Well, here's the letter the superintendent wrote the parents. It says Ben's been referred for a psychological assessment to be done by a psychologist in his school district."

"That won't do! That child needs a psychiatric evaluation! We need a psychiatric evaluation! We really would have liked to have one the day he made these threats. If we'd been called that day, we'd have followed our department policy that says if we think a child is suicidal or homicidal, we require that the parents come pick the child up and take them to a qualified mental health professional to be evaluated. We want an outside professional opinion. I'm sorry, Chrissie, but can you hold off?"

"Sure," Ms. Nickels replied. "I'll wait to hear from you," and she left.

Bonnie was fed up. *This kid's been slipping through the cracks for years. Two weeks ago, he threatened to kill somebody and nothing's been done! He's a ticking time bomb and we're just plodding along like he's some kid who's not dangerous. We could very well be the next Columbine. What do I need to do to wake administration up?!*

Appendix A

Rowan Salisbury School System Intake Form

Intake Date: 10/14/92
Client Name: Benjamin Hartin
Social Security: 555-55-5555
Parent/Guardian Name: Don Hartin
Parent/Guardian Name: Dorothy Hartin
Sibling(s) Name and Age: None
Sibling(s) Name and Age: _____
Address: 1111 Pineview Rd, Piedmont, NC 28144
Race: White
DOB: March 10, 1989
Phone: 704-111-1111

Reason for Referral:

Benjamin Hartin was referred to this office by our consultation team's developmental pediatrician, Dr. Joseph. Dr. Joseph feels that Ben should be in preschool because he might be developmentally delayed.

At 9:30 A.M. on 10/14/92, I arrived at the Hartin home to complete my intake assessment. Dorothy reported that she took Benjamin to the doctor, as he was overly "fussy." She reported that the doctor told her that he might be developmentally delayed. Dorothy was not sure what that meant and assumed it explained his behavioral problems.

Developmental History:

Dorothy said that her pregnancy with Ben was difficult and that he was a "difficult baby." Dorothy did not know when Benjamin began eating solid food. He began to crawl at 9 months, walk at 20 months, and was toilet trained around age 3. Benjamin's first words were "no" and "ma" at 13 months.

Health:

Benjamin has had no major health problems and no allergies.

Family History:

Dorothy and Don Hartin married in 1988, after dating 2 years, when they found out Dorothy was pregnant. Both grew up in Salisbury and received their high school diplomas from the same high school. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Hartin report that they were ever in LD classrooms as a child. Neither partner has any previous marriages or children. Dorothy reported that Benjamin was her first and only pregnancy. Dorothy's parents live in Salisbury

and she has one brother who is in the military. Don's parents also live in Salisbury and he is an only child. Dorothy reported that her parents drink daily but there have been no mental/physical health problems in her family of origin. Don reported that there are no substance abuse problems in his family but his mother's cousin has a cognitive disability.

Behavioral Concerns:

Dorothy and Don report that Benjamin "does not listen." He throws things when he is mad or wants attention. They also report that he cries a lot.

Assessment:

When I arrived, the Hartins invited me into their living room. The house is located in a working-class neighborhood and the house was clean. Don was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, Dorothy in a housecoat. Don had a full, untrimmed beard and his hair was not combed. Benjamin was in the kitchen, peeking around the corner. As I began to introduce myself to Benjamin's parents, Ben began throwing things at me from the kitchen—toys, books, and whatever he seemed to find. Neither parent acknowledged that anything unusual was happening. After several minutes of this behavior, I finally told Benjamin that he had to stop. At that point, Benjamin slowly crept into the room.

After a few minutes of describing the program to the Hartin's, Ben retired quietly back into the kitchen and played with pots and pans. I continued the intake session and learned that Dorothy was 33 and Don was 34, although Don looks older. Dorothy stays home and cares for Benjamin and Don works at the airport in Charlotte. This was their first marriage and neither had any other children. Dorothy reported she had a difficult pregnancy and that Benjamin was a difficult baby as he cried a lot. Dorothy then sighed and stated, "he still is difficult." Although they have some family around, Dorothy reported that they have had very little help. Don interjected that there was no help from Dorothy's family, as her parents were known to "tide one over." He then commented that they would not need help if Dorothy would let him "take out the switch."

Don asked for help reading the forms. In addition, I explained the program several different times to make sure that he understood. After that, both parents seemed to understand the program and indicated that they were both interested in getting Ben into preschool.

Next scheduled appointment 10/21/92 at 10:30 A.M. to complete preschool paperwork.

Social worker's opinion: Parents signed a medical release form so that I can review Ben's records. Ben has some unusual physical features, and I want to see if there was a genetic consult.

Client Name: <u>Benjamin Hartin</u> SS#: <u>555-55-5555</u> DOB: <u>March 10, 1989</u>	
Date	Progress Notes
10/21/92	The Hartins did not show for office appointment. I called and spoke to Dorothy. She reported that they had forgotten. The appointment was rescheduled for 10/25/92.
10/25/92	The Hartins did not show for office appointment. The appointment was rescheduled for 10/31/92.
10/31/92	The Hartins did not show for office appointment. When staff spoke with Dorothy, Dorothy reported that it is too difficult to get out. Dorothy agreed to a home visit on 11/8/92.
11/8/92	I arrived at the Hartin's home at 4:30 P.M. and found the family in the front yard. Dorothy was sitting in a chair while Don was fixing the screen door. Dorothy pulled up a chair for me to sit down. I did so just as Benjamin picked up a kitten. He was pulling the kittens legs apart until the kitten was screaming. The parents did not intervene so I instructed Ben to put the kitten down, that he was hurting the kitten. He did so. I attempted to talk to his parents about the incident when Don interrupted me and asked me to leave, as they were about to leave. They refused to set another appointment, instead asking me to call them later.
11/15/92	Spoke with Dorothy on the phone. She stated that they have decided not to send Benjamin to preschool and would not need school services at this time, saying, "We can handle Ben ourselves."

Appendix B

Client Name: <u>Benjamin Hartin</u>		SS#: <u>555-55-5555</u>	DOB: <u>March 10, 1989</u>
Date	Progress Notes		
11/12/96	Lucia Mathews, Benjamin's second grade school teacher, referred Benjamin Hartin to this office. Refused to do work. Refused to come to school. Parents asked for testing. Due to classroom behavioral problems, she requested that a psychoeducational test be completed on Benjamin. Per Ms. Mathews, Ben's mother and father separated for a while and Ben lived with his mother in another school district. He never did attend preschool but attended kindergarten there. The parents got back together and Ben began in our school district in the first grade. Per Ms. Mathews, other than having a tendency to isolate himself from other children, it seems he did pretty well. He is currently in Ms. Mathews' second grade class. Ms. Mathews reported that she has been having difficulty getting Benjamin to do his work at school and he has missed several days. He had some extreme behavioral disruptions and was having difficulty completing assignments. She thought he should get some psychoeducational testing to see what's going on with him, so she went through all of the necessary documentation and referral procedures. On 11/12/96, I arrived at the Hartin residence. Dorothy met me at the door and invited me in. She reported that Don was at work and that Benjamin was in bed sick. Dorothy reported that Benjamin yells at her and refuses to listen. Dorothy agreed to have the psychoeducational test completed on Benjamin. She signed the paperwork. At the end of the session, Benjamin came out of his bedroom and sat on the couch. When I spoke to him, Benjamin did not answer.		
12/4/96	Dorothy and Benjamin Hartin met with Dr. Moody [the school psychologist] and me to discuss testing scheduled for tomorrow, 12/5/1996.		
12/5/96	Received a phone call from Benjamin's mother. She stated that she was concerned that if Ben is tested as being "handicapped" he would be placed in special education classes and that she did not want that to happen. Consequently, she is canceling the testing appointment. I explained that the purpose of the tests was to assist Ben in getting the supports he needs to get the best education possible, but was unable to dissuade her from canceling the appointment. Ben's mother then said, "I'm tired of trying to get Ben to go to school and I'm tired of the attendance people calling me all the time, so I'm going to school him at home." We discussed the pros and cons of this idea, including whether Dorothy would be as capable as a teacher, whether Ben would get as good an education, etc. Dorothy still feels that homeschooling is best. I referred her to the home-schooling association.		

Appendix C

Client Name: <u>Benjamin Hartin</u> SS#: <u>555-55-5555</u> DOB: <u>March 10, 1989</u>	
Date	Progress Notes
11/13/97	Ben is still being homeschooled. Because his mother is not part of the home-school association and because he is being homeschooled under the auspices of the school district, I was required to make a home visit. I arrived at Ben's home and Dorothy invited me in. She apologized for her appearance; she said she hadn't been sleeping much and was exhausted. We sat down and she quickly told me that Ben's dad left at the beginning of the school year. Ben has been living with her, but he spends a lot of time with his dad and dad's parents. According to Dorothy, Don's parents aren't able to supervise him because of their frail health, and Don doesn't intervene much either. Dorothy stated she was very flustered and frustrated with Ben because he won't listen or do what he's told. When I asked her about homeschooling, she quickly stated that she was teaching him. At that point, Benjamin came into the room and sat down on the couch and told his mother to get him some milk. Dorothy immediately jumped up to get him some milk. I asked Benjamin how he was and he said he was "fine." Then he got up, kicked the door and yelled at his mom to get the milk faster. Discussed again with Dorothy whether homeschooling is the best option for Ben. She maintains that it is. She is not interested in the homeschooling association.

Appendix D

Client Name: <u>Benjamin Hartin</u> SS#: <u>555-55-5555</u> DOB: <u>March 10, 1989</u> Date Progress Notes	
12/01/98	Received a referral from Ben's principal because of repeated absences from school. I first spoke with Ben's teacher. She said Ben is back in school this year because Mom couldn't handle him at home. Mom wanted to complete the testing and this time Ben was tested. He tested as having a significant discrepancy between his ability and achievement, which qualified him as learning disabled (LD). The school psychologist thought that Ben's poor test scores may have been a result of his being "homeschooled" last year. Ben was placed in an LD course for one period each day. Ben did really well there and so they placed him back into regular classes in October. His behavior and academics seem to be fine; the primary concern is perpetual absences from school. Truancy officer spoke with both dad and grandparents. Ben moves back and forth quite a bit, spending the night at either home. Several times the officer helped parents get Ben out of bed and to school. On other occasions, he wasn't at home or at school, and so the officer drove around until he found Ben who claimed he was going to the mall.
12/03/98	Made a home visit. Ben's parents are living together in a house across the street from Don Hartin's parents. Dorothy said that while Ben was staying with his grandparents he set fire to his grandfather's bed because he was angry with the grandfather over something grandfather asked him to do. Ben set the fire under the bed, then went outside with grandparents. Twenty minutes later Ben told grandparents that they might want to check the bedroom. The fire department put out the fire. (There is no history of sexual abuse. However, see previous records re: pet abuse.) Dorothy not interested in mental health services. During conversation with Don about what he does when Ben disobeys, Don shared that when Ben was little, he had attempted to discipline him and DSS came out. Ben was 3 or 4. Don said he just "washed my hands of it. I can't do anything because it's too much." Don and I discussed other means of discipline and ways to manage Ben. Helped Dorothy make a plan to get Ben to school and on time. Dorothy quite agreeable.
12/04/98	Social worker's opinion: I am concerned about parents' ability to comprehend the seriousness of Ben's actions, and their ability to follow through with the help he needs. They seem to be overwhelmed. Relayed above information to Ben's principal. He will call me if there are further truancy problems.

Appendix E

Client Name: <u>Benjamin Hartin</u> SS#: <u>555-55-5555</u> DOB: <u>March 10, 1989</u>	
Date	Progress Notes
9/15/99	Checked in with Ben's teacher, Mrs. Scott, to see how the year was going so far. She said things were going well. Because of Ben's history and the possibility of his previous behavior recurring, I offered her some advice. I suggested that she "catch" Ben doing something good and reward him with positive behavior, but don't say, "that's so great!" I told her to say, "I see you've finished your work. Would you like a pencil or a sticker?" If they want praise, they'll ask for it, e.g., "aren't you proud of me?" Otherwise, they see praise as false praise. The best way to handle him is to give him choices. Also, if you need to pull him out of the room, the best thing to do is to have all the other kids leave the room. I gave her a handout that Bonnie made about this.
11/30/99	I checked in briefly with Ben on the playground. He was not playing with any other children. I asked him if he was still living with his Mom and Dad, and he said his Mom moved out. He told me he hates his Mom. He said he likes his teacher. Checked in with Ben's teacher. Although there are still problems with truancy, most of the time Ben comes to school and does his work.