

## CASE STUDY 8.1

### Amanda Jackson

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Amanda Jackson rounded the corner of the front hall of Twin Pines School and tried to hide behind the box of ceramics she was carrying. Too late. Mrs. Stewart spotted her and strolled over, grinning.

“Goofing off again, Ms. Jackson?”

Feeling foolish, Amanda smiled and said, “Sure, Mrs. Stewart, I’ve got nothing at all to do.”

“Well, don’t stand here taking up my time. Get busy!” Joanna Stewart, principal of Twin Pines School, gave Amanda a mock serious look and continued down the hall.

Amanda practically ran to the open display case at the front entrance, where she was arranging work done by her third-grade art classes. “Why do I give her such stupid answers?” she asked herself for the hundredth time. “I smile and try to joke but never understand what I’m really supposed to say. The rest of the teachers seem to find her genuinely amusing. Why can’t I just relax about her kidding?” Amanda thought she knew why, but it seemed so preposterous to her that she stopped thinking about it and concentrated on arranging the clay pieces.

Twin Pines Elementary School was one of two K–5 schools in Eastvale, a small district in a neighboring community to Chicago. Eastvale had a population that was quite heterogeneous, but because it was small, there were few services to both children and teachers. Nevertheless, the district was known for its innovative programs, and Amanda thought it was a small miracle that she had found a job as an art teacher immediately after she completed her teacher preparation program.

Amanda had worked as a medical illustrator in San Francisco for ten years. Two years ago, her husband was transferred to Chicago, near the area where they both had grown up and gone to college. Amanda was unable to find work there as an illustrator and decided to try the career her family and friends had discouraged her from pursuing when she first started college, teaching. She was able to enter a program near her new home that offered the courses she would need for certification as an art teacher, and she completed the course requirements and student teaching in two semesters.

Since this was Amanda’s first teaching assignment, it took her about three months to settle into the routine of teaching six art classes a day, arranging student work on the big front-hall bulletin boards and in the display cases, and helping the music teacher with scenery for concerts and plays. She loved it all, but she was looking forward to Christmas vacation so that

she could relax. Sometimes, she wondered how much of her tension came from her interactions with Mrs. Stewart.

Amanda thought back to her first meeting with Joanna Stewart. The principal had an imposing presence. She was large-boned, with short, steel-gray hair, a florid complexion, and intense hazel eyes. Mrs. Stewart had been principal of Twin Pines for twenty-five years, and she was fiercely proud of her school. When Amanda interviewed for the position at Twin Pines, Mrs. Stewart took her on a tour of the building and spoke fondly of her loyal staff, of the popularity of the school as a showcase for visitors to the district, and of the high academic standards that the school maintained.

When Amanda received notification of her appointment to the school, she felt excited about being on the Twin Pines staff. She was sure that Mrs. Stewart would set high expectations but would be fair in her evaluations. Now she was confused. The woman's sarcasm and odd humor had not been evident during the interview, and Amanda still did not know how to react.

As she returned to working on the display case, Amanda watched Anne Turner's first-grade class returning from the music room. The children were trying hard to stay in two straight lines, walking behind their teacher like small ducklings. Mrs. Stewart came out of her office and fell into line with the children. "Mrs. Turner, this can't be your class. Look how big these children are. Aren't first-graders supposed to be little? Why these children are practically giants!" The children started to giggle, and the two nearest the principal reached up to hold hands with her. Mrs. Turner smiled and said, "Good morning, Mrs. Stewart."

The children called greetings to her also, and she pinched a few and tousled the hair of some others before turning back to Amanda. "You're still out here? What are we paying you for, anyway?"

Amanda gave her a weak smile, hoping the principal would find another target for her sarcasm. But she was not finished with Amanda yet.

She stood with her hands on her ample hips and in her mock stern voice said, "You better be finished loafing by the time I get back from Bartlett Street." Everyone in the district referred to the administrative offices by their location. She sighed. "I hate these meetings, all these damn meetings."

Before Amanda could respond, Mrs. Stewart was out the door. Amanda quickly finished arranging the case and stopped by the faculty room to grab a soda before her next class.

"I hope that's not your lunch," said Sandy Atherton, one of Amanda's first friends at the school. Sandy had been the music teacher at Twin Pines for six years. She had welcomed Amanda in September and readily included her in lunchtime conversations with the other teachers. Amanda found her easy to talk to and as relaxed about teaching as Amanda was edgy.

"Lunch? I think I'll be eating lunch after school. Some kids are coming down at lunchtime to finish the gifts they've been making for the holidays."

As Sandy started to respond, the school nurse came to the doorway. “Have you seen Joanna? I’ve got a sick kid and a disconnected phone number for the parent. Maybe she knows something that’s not on the emergency card.”

Amanda shook her head. “She left a couple of minutes ago for a meeting at Bartlett Street.”

The nurse looked concerned and left.

“I’m not sure I’d want to be a principal,” Amanda said. “Aside from the responsibility, Mrs. Stewart seems to have to sit through an endless number of meetings.”

Sandy looked at her friend and said nothing. Amanda was surprised at the slightly awkward silence and wondered what was wrong today. “I’m definitely in need of a vacation,” she thought. “I’m overreacting to all sorts of things.”

At 3:30, Amanda headed for the office to drop off a supply list. She hoped that Mrs. Stewart would not be around and felt guilty for the thought. But as she turned into the office, Joanna Stewart greeted her. She was practically purring now, displaying a completely different attitude from her morning interaction with Amanda.

“Heading home, Amanda? You’ve put in a full day. You know, the bulletin board looks great. Several parents were in and said some very nice things about the display.”

Amanda took a step back. She could smell the alcohol and knew she had not been imagining the same odor on other occasions. She mumbled a few words of thanks and quickly left the office.

That evening, Amanda called Eric Harris. Eric was an artist and an art teacher at the middle school. He and Amanda knew each other from college, and Amanda was delighted when she found her old friend teaching in the Eastvale school district.

“Eric, how well do you know Joanna Stewart? I know you’ve never worked for her, but you must know something about her.”

“Why are you asking? Is everything OK with your job? It’s a little early for evaluations.”

“My job is fine. I love it. The kids are great; the other teachers are easy to be with. I’m happy. . . . I’m happy. It’s just that there’s something funny about Joanna. I thought maybe there was something I should know that no one is telling me. Everyone at school gets a little weird when I talk about her.”

“I really don’t know much. I know that she likes things her way and that Twin Pines is definitely Joanna Stewart’s school. But you must know that by now.”

Amanda began to get exasperated. “See? You’re doing it now—being evasive when her name comes up, only talking about what a strong personality she has or all the positive things she’s done for teachers or how good she

is at getting what the school needs from Bartlett Street. And you're right: I do know all that. But no one talks about her drinking."

Eric was silent. Amanda was thinking about what she could possibly say next when he spoke. "It didn't take you long, Amanda. Some people, especially parents at Twin Pines who are friends of mine, never mentioned it to me until after their kids were out of the school."

"But why? If a new teacher like me can pick up on Joanna's drinking after a couple of months, why won't anyone else acknowledge it? Eric, no one ever mentions it; no one makes a joke or a snide remark. . . ."

"I don't know why they're silent, Amanda. I guess people think that it couldn't be too bad because the school runs so well. A couple of my friends said that as long as their kids were with good teachers, they weren't going to make waves. As for the teachers—maybe she leaves them alone."

Amanda knew that part to be true. Joanna took care of the teachers she liked and got the ones she didn't like transferred to other buildings. While she wasn't the only principal to do this, she seemed to have the most success keeping the teachers that she wanted in her building and getting rid of the others. And most of the teachers seemed content with their jobs. Amanda had not been there long enough to judge how creative the classroom programs were, but in her wanderings through the rambling, single-story building, she saw and heard few disturbances. She knew that most of the teachers used basal curriculum texts, because she often asked what the students were working on so that she could relate art projects to the curriculum. Only one teacher had taken her up on her offer, and Amanda was working with her on a joint project for second-grade science. Amanda hoped to do more projects as she got to know the teachers better.

Eric brought Amanda back to the present. "Amanda, you're new and treading dangerous waters. I'm sure folks at Bartlett Street know about Joanna, but if no one else is talking, then you shouldn't say anything either."

"This must be the best-kept open secret around. I can't talk about it to anybody at school."

"Maybe you should just let it go. Get through the year, and stay on Joanna's good side. She seems to have a lot of pull. You're right, though. It's not a new problem. But you won't get anyone other than me to talk about it."

Amanda hung up the phone feeling worse now that she had confirmed Joanna's drinking problem. She knew that not even Sandy would discuss it with her. Everyone covered Joanna's absences and ignored her erratic comments and behavior. Amanda sighed and thought, "Why should I care if parents and older staff don't? If I can just get through until Christmas vacation, I'll get a chance to relax and maybe I'll figure out how to deal with it."

It was late in the afternoon in early February. Snow had started falling heavily, and Amanda was anxious to leave for home. Most of the staff had already gone, and Amanda was hurrying to finish the front bulletin boards before she left.

“Well, Amanda, you are a real eager beaver. You’re supposed to go home when it snows.” Joanna Stewart stood right behind Amanda, and the smell of alcohol was strong. “Why don’t you finish the display tomorrow? The snow is getting worse.”

Amanda straightened up, concerned. This was the first time she detected some slurring in the principal’s speech. Between the alcohol and the weather, she wondered how Mrs. Stewart was going to get home. They both turned at the sound of a child crying. The buses had left nearly an hour ago. A first-grade boy had opened the front door and stood there, sobbing.

“Clifford, what happened?” Amanda knelt down to comfort the child.

Clifford sniffled. “I had a note that said my mommy was coming to pick me up, and I waited and waited and then I went outside and she didn’t come.” He began to sob again.

Mrs. Stewart had gone into the office when Clifford started talking. She came out now shaking her head.

“I just tried to call his home. There was no answer. I’ll check his emergency card in the nurse’s office.” She walked only slightly unsteadily into the room adjoining hers.

Amanda continued talking to Clifford, calming him. She looked up and saw Mrs. Stewart smiling and giving a thumbs-up sign. “Good news, Clifford. Your Aunt Glenda is home, and I’ll take you there. You mom is fine, and she’ll pick you up at your aunt’s house later.”

Clifford immediately stopped crying, but Amanda was alarmed at the prospect of the principal driving Clifford anywhere. “Oh, Mrs. Stewart, I’m finished here. Let me take Clifford home. It won’t be any trouble at all.”

“Don’t be silly, Amanda. You finish putting your children’s work away, and then take off. I’m ready to leave right now, and his aunt’s house isn’t too far out of my way.”

Amanda became more upset. The principal’s slurred speech was becoming more pronounced. Amanda wondered how drunk the woman really was. “Please, Mrs. Stewart, I can be ready in just a minute. The road seems pretty bad out front. Look! A car is skidding on the hill. Let me take Clifford.”

Joanna Stewart’s eyes narrowed, and she stood directly in front of Amanda. “I *said* that I was on my way out right now. I’ll take Clifford home. You be careful, Amanda, when you go home.” With that, she turned toward her office to get her coat.