

CASE STUDY 8.2

Ellen Norton

“Hi, Miss Norton. Is this a good time?”

“Sure, Abby. Come on in. Just let me get these things cleared away.” Ellen Norton smiled at the slight, dark-haired student who stood at the threshold of the classroom doorway. She stacked the papers she had been grading in order to clear a work space on her desk and made a waving gesture to indicate that Abby should come in.

“Pull up a chair, Abby. How did you do on the problems I gave you yesterday? Did you understand them?”

Rather nondescript in appearance and in behavior, Abby Maxwell impressed Ellen as an average high school sophomore. Abby’s family had moved to Littleton recently, and Abby had not made many friends in her new school. She was withdrawn and shy—pleasant enough but always alone.

A few weeks ago, just after the Christmas break, Abby hesitantly approached Ellen for extra help in math. Ellen was touched that the child sought her out for help and tried to make her feel comfortable during their tutoring sessions. She attributed the child’s shyness to the typical adolescent hesitancy about interacting with adults and sensed that Abby needed a more mature friend with whom to converse.

“Well, sure, I think I did all right. Here.” Abby smiled tentatively as she slid her paper toward Ellen and sat down in the chair she had brought to the front of the room. She sat on its edge and leaned forward toward Ellen to look at the paper with her.

“OK, you had the right idea on the first problem, but you forgot to divide. Remember, to find the area of a triangle, you take half the base times the height. Do you remember why?”

“Oh, sure, I forgot. I guess I was going pretty fast on these,” Abby replied. She hesitated and then abruptly changed subjects. “Miss Norton, did you decide to go into teaching when you were in high school?”

Ellen smiled at the question and leaned back in her chair. Abby’s increasing tendency to want to discuss subjects other than math and her interest in Ellen’s own life were the clues that made Ellen believe that Abby needed an older friend or role model. She knew little of Abby’s family life, but she was young enough to remember that universal teenage need to identify with someone older than oneself but less “ancient” than one’s parents.

“As a matter of fact, I did, Abby. I had a camp counselor the summer between ninth and tenth grades who taught English during the school year.

She sort of befriended me, I guess, and I decided I'd like to make my living the same way."

"Do you like teaching?" Abby seemed encouraged by Ellen's response and began to let down her reserve.

"Very much, Abby. I like working with young people, and I like math. Which reminds me that we should get back to work." As Ellen steered the conversation back on track, she reflected that it was a good thing she liked her job, since she spent so much time at it. Besides teaching math at Littleton High School, Ellen coached the cheerleading squad, chaperoned dances, and volunteered for most extracurricular "duties," particularly those surrounding school sporting or social events. Ellen grew up in a community near Littleton and now lived at home with her widowed mother. She was a bright, attractive 25-year-old, and Littleton High School and her teaching responsibilities consumed a major portion of Ellen's time and energy.

This was Ellen's tenure year. In the Littleton school district, teachers were evaluated throughout their first three years of teaching, and at the end of the third year were either granted tenure or dismissed. Ellen's evaluations since beginning her career had been positive, and she had always been careful to adopt the suggestions her principal did make, so she had little concern about the administration's decision in the spring. Even so, she knew it didn't hurt to make herself as useful outside the classroom as she could. Besides, Ellen had few personal obligations that would compete with her career, since her fiancé, a law student, worked even longer hours than she did.

Ellen and Abby finished their review of Abby's work, and Ellen felt fairly confident that Abby understood the material. "Tomorrow in class we will be starting areas of geometric solids, so it's important that you feel comfortable with this chapter, Abby. Was this helpful?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Norton," replied Abby. "Thanks a lot!" Abby rose and pushed the chair back toward the front row. Ellen also stood and began to fill her briefcase with the papers she had not finished grading. "Are you going home, now, Miss Norton?" asked Abby as she observed Ellen's activity.

"No, I'm headed for the gym," said Ellen as she locked the desk. "Cheerleading practice at 3:30." She smiled ruefully as if to minimize the importance of this responsibility. Ellen was always sensitive to the reaction cheerleading evoked in others. Some girls who were not on the squad desperately wished they were, while others thought cheerleading was a ridiculous throwback that mocked every advance feminism had achieved in two decades.

"Oh, can I walk with you? I left my English book in the gym before, and I have to go get it anyway."

"Well, I have to stop by the math department office and do a few other things first. I'll see you tomorrow in class, Abby." Ellen smiled again, and Abby, looking a little disappointed, took her cue and ducked out the door.

Ellen smiled to herself as she headed for the gym. She had felt slightly “crowded” by Abby’s interest in accompanying her, but now she thought of Jane Caldwell—the camp counselor—and chuckled aloud. “I used to be poor Jane’s shadow,” Ellen thought as she took the stairs two at a time. She was a little late.

“Hi, Miss Norton!”

“Hi. Hello.” Various greetings echoed through the cavernous gymnasium as Ellen entered through the locker-room door and met her squad. The girls were attired in gym clothes and ready to go.

“Hi, girls, thanks for starting without me. Sorry I’m late. Becky, have you received the schedule yet?”

Becky Kaplan handed Ellen a clipboard and nodded affirmatively. Becky was the captain of the cheerleading squad this year, and Ellen couldn’t have asked for a more responsible leader. Becky, a senior, had been on the squad since enrolling at Littleton. Her dependability and her popularity with the other girls made her invaluable to Ellen. She had already covered the schedule of upcoming games with the squad, noting which members couldn’t perform and jotting notes about routines in the margins.

As Ellen started the girls on their warm-up exercises, she watched Becky bend and stretch and felt the ache of sympathy swell again. Rumor had it that Becky had been physically abused by both parents since childhood. Her parents were now divorced or separated—Ellen wasn’t sure which—and apparently the mother’s new boyfriend was no improvement. Sometimes Ellen wondered if she should try to find out more about Becky’s status at home; her knowledge was based only on hearsay.

The situation was the basis for gossip among the teaching staff, and Ellen and some of her colleagues had spoken about whether or not they should help or intervene. But Becky never displayed a specific need that would justify district action. She was tardy and absent more than other students, but her schoolwork was not adversely affected. Becky often lingered after practice as though hesitant to go home, but Ellen wasn’t sure whether or not she was imagining that.

Last spring, Ellen discovered from another girl on the team that Becky wanted to go to the prom but that, because Becky’s parents didn’t allow her to date, she had no escort. Ellen enlisted the support of a young male teacher on the staff, and they arranged a date for Becky. Ellen called Becky’s mother and explained that the “cheerleading captain-elect” really should be at the prom and that Ellen would be chaperoning. Mrs. Kaplan’s reaction was supportive. But beyond this brief interaction, Ellen had no personal knowledge about Becky’s home life.

Suddenly Ellen’s heart skipped a beat, and she stared at Becky again. “Ten more windmills,” she directed. The girls groaned and resumed the exercise they had just finished. As Becky bent at the waist to touch her opposite toe, the shadow Ellen thought she had seen before was clearly visible. Becky’s motion bared the skin between her gym shorts and blouse,

revealing a dark purple and yellow bruise spread across her waist from hip to rib cage.

Ellen could hardly breathe. “Five laps,” she said as the girls finished the exercise. She desperately needed time to collect her thoughts.

“You’re kidding!”

“What is this—September?”

“Is she mad at us?”

The girls griped loudly as they raggedly fell into a trot around the gym. Ellen hadn’t asked them to do laps since the early days of the school year when conditioning was most important, but she needed the time to think. Suddenly the innuendo and rumor surrounding Becky’s situation had become painful reality, and Ellen didn’t know what to do.

As the girls ran, Ellen took several deep breaths and forced herself to calm down. “I cannot ignore this,” she thought, and with that realization Ellen felt the courage of conviction. She led the girls through the practice she had planned, vowing to draw Becky aside later.

An hour later, as the girls headed toward the locker-room door, Ellen called to Becky, motioning with the clipboard as if she needed her help on a scheduling matter. “Becky, can you help me here?”

Becky turned back from her conversation with another cheerleader and retraced her steps to Ellen. “Come into the office with me a minute, will you, Becky?” asked Ellen.

“Sure.” Becky looked puzzled but followed Ellen.

Ellen had developed a comfortable relationship with Becky and the rest of the team in the two years she had been coaching cheerleading. She was a competent coach and physically capable in her own right, and she felt she had earned the girls’ respect. Besides, Ellen knew from her own experience that cheerleading was fun, and her youth and attitude were assets when the squad traveled to games on the bus or decorated the boys’ locker room on game night. Several of the girls had even tried calling Ellen by her first name. She had resisted the urge to encourage them, but Ellen sometimes did feel as though she had more in common with her students than with her colleagues.

Becky had always seemed slightly aloof from the more raucous team activities, but her relationship with her peers was friendly. Now Ellen wished she knew Becky better personally in order to predict her reaction to the topic at hand. Her courage began to evaporate as she searched for a way to introduce the subject. “Becky, I hope you feel comfortable about coming to me if you need to talk about anything. You’re a great asset to me, and I want to help if I can.”

Becky looked apprehensive. “Well, thanks, Miss Norton, but I’m OK.”

Ellen decided to come to the point. “Becky, during warm-ups I couldn’t help noticing the bruise on your left side. If you are in danger at home, I think someone should intervene.”

Becky gazed at Ellen a moment, as if evaluating alternative responses.

Finally she said quietly, “Miss Norton, everything is all right. I fell off my bike on my way home from practice last week.”

Ellen was surprised by the matter-of-fact way in which Becky reacted. She had been concerned that her question would embarrass the child, but Becky’s expression and tone of voice were calm and emotionless. Suddenly Ellen was the one who was embarrassed, concerned that she had made an improper assumption and reacted to innuendo rather than facts.

“Oh! I’m sorry. I thought . . .” Ellen knew she was compounding the error. “Never mind, Becky. Please just know that I am here if you need to talk, OK?”

Becky smiled—a little sadly, Ellen thought—and turned to go.

* * *

Ellen looked out her classroom window at the drizzly March afternoon. Her mind wandered back to those first tutoring sessions with Abby Maxwell in early January, and she wondered where she had gone wrong. For in spite of all the extra time she had spent with Abby this semester, the child’s performance in math was deteriorating. Abby was making obvious errors on homework assignments and seemed to make deliberate mistakes on tests. In fact, her grades were so bad that Ellen was worried that Abby would fail. Ellen guessed that she would be assigned to teach this class again next year, assuming the tenure decision was positive, and she frankly did not want to have Abby in class again. Abby’s demands on Ellen’s time had gradually escalated. For a while, Ellen enjoyed their after-school conversations about teaching, growing up in the area, and math. Abby expressed an interest in cheerleading, and Ellen suggested some summer activities she might pursue to make herself more competitive at the tryouts next fall. Abby seemed so lonely and so buoyed by Ellen’s attention that Ellen at first relished the opportunity to help the child adjust to her new community and school. But eventually Abby’s constant presence became oppressive. It seemed to Ellen that Abby was everywhere she turned; it was uncanny how the girl could surface at Ellen’s every move. She attended dances Ellen chaperoned and games Ellen coached. Abby always came alone to these events and hovered somewhere in Ellen’s vicinity. Some of the other teachers began to joke about “Ellen’s sidekick” or “the leech.” Ellen knew she had a serious problem when Abby began leaving notes on her desk and driving by her house. “What is it this child wants from me?” Ellen wondered as she watched the rain. Ellen was very worried that in befriending Abby she had encouraged an unhealthy emotional dependency, which she did not know how to sever. Ellen did not want to cause Abby pain, but she desperately wanted to be rid of her. Furthermore, Ellen was sure that Abby’s poor performance in math was purposeful, staged in order to justify more tutoring sessions and even a repetition of the class with Ellen next year. Ellen sighed and packed up for

practice. She was anxious for the basketball season to end so that she could close down cheerleading for this year.

As Ellen walked toward the gym, half expecting Abby to appear at every hallway intersection, her thoughts shifted to Becky. Neither Ellen nor Becky had broached the subject of Becky's personal life since their conversation two months ago. Ellen had decided to respect Becky's apparent desire that she mind her own business, and Ellen's worsening situation with Abby made her wary of personal involvement with her students, anyway. Ellen had, however, helped Becky apply to colleges that granted cheerleading scholarships and had written letters of recommendation for her. She knew that Becky had been accepted at a good school in the midwest. "In two months she will graduate and be far from home," thought Ellen, "and I can stop worrying."

As Ellen approached the gym, she was surprised to see Becky standing in the hall outside the locker-room doors.

"Hi, Becky. How's it goin'?" Let's get inside. You should be suited up by now," said Ellen. As she got closer to Becky, it seemed to her that the girl was hiding in the shadows created by the locker-room entranceway— *cowering* was the word that came to Ellen's mind.

"Miss Norton, can I ask you a big favor?" Becky whispered in spite of the fact that they were the only two people in the hall.

"Of course, Becky. What is it?"

"Can I go home with you tonight?"

The request caught Ellen totally off guard. She had become so comfortable with the idea that Becky was going to graduate and leave home that she had easily been able to deny the possibility of further danger for the girl. Now she didn't even know what to say. "What's happened, Becky?" Ellen blurted.

"I found out when I went home for lunch that my stepfather lost his job this morning. I think he'll be drinking, and I'm afraid to go home." Having asked her question, Becky was regaining her straightforward manner in spite of the horrible situation she was describing.

"Oh, Becky. I don't think it would be a good idea for me to take you to my home. Let me call the school social worker. She'll know what to do."

"No! Please don't do that, Miss Norton. She'll call the police or someone, and my stepfather will really go nuts. No, I just need to keep out of his way tonight."