

A Short, True Story About the Power of Second Chances

Benny was a high school teacher's most troubled student, a teenage boy with a drug problem who was on the list to be expelled.

His teacher begged for more time to work with him to help shift his focus. Sure, he had the classic troubled childhood background which gave him poor odds of succeeding at school. But she wanted to show Benny the power of having someone believe he was more than the labels he'd been given most of his teenage life.

Labels like ... drug addict, bully, trouble-maker. Benny was stamped for a life of delinquency according to the stereotypes.

The principal reluctantly agreed to give her a few more months, as part of an educational experiment. It was on her head if she failed. The teacher spent a lot of time with Benny, supporting him to change his life. She saw some powerful progress. He stopped bringing drugs to school, his school attendance, attitude, grades and social engagement improved.

Then she left the school suddenly to resolve a family issue and was distressed to learn he had eventually been expelled for a lapse in behaviour. Could he have sustained the change if she'd stayed? Was she silly to believe one person's support could make a difference? She would never know.

Some years later, returning to town, she spotted someone who looked like Benny. He was out with a group of young people and when he turned around, she recognised with a sinking heart that he was wearing the shirt of the local youth drug and alcohol rehabilitation clinic.

She fought back tears. She'd been foolish to imagine his life would turn out differently.

As she walked towards him, Benny recognised her with a smile and a wave — breaking free from the group to rush up to greet her.

"Hi Mrs Gee," Benny said enthusiastically. "It's so good to see you!"

"How are you Benny?" she asked, bracing herself for bad news.

"I'm doing great!" he said, grabbing her hand.

"Come on Mrs Gee," said Benny. "I want you to meet some of my friends."

Surprised at his buoyancy, she followed him across the small group of young people. Expecting to hear about his latest struggles to stay clean, she noticed he had a wide, happy smile.

“Sarah, Andy, Jessica — this is my favourite teacher from high school,” Benny said nodding towards her proudly. “The one I told you about.”

“I was hoping I would run into you again someday Mrs Gee,” Benny whispered softly to her. “I wanted to thank you for believing in me.”

The teacher smiled. But again, her heart sank. She was loathe to disappoint them — after all, they were standing in front of a failed teaching experiment. Perhaps it would have been better for Benny if she had listened to the principal after all. If she’d been tougher, like they had told her to be.

Benny gestured around at the group in front of them — and towards another, larger group behind them who were working on a garden project. Getting them out in the community was part of the rehab program.

“Mrs Gee, without you, I would never have had the inspiration to become a drug and alcohol counsellor. And now, just like you showed me, I make sure everyone I work with understands that it just takes the faith and kindness of one person to give you the courage to change.”

He nodded towards the young people.

“Now I try to be that person for everyone I work with.”

This is a true story, told to me by a long serving high school teacher. I’ve often remember the story when I am frustrated with the cynicism we have towards people’s ability to change — or help others change.