

# A Friend for Kenny

When I first met Kenny, he was a bright, enthusiastic second grader with a charming smile, quick wit, and artistic bent. Over the course of the next two years, however, nearly everything changed. Homework wasn't turned in. Grades declined. Kenny became argumentative with adults and isolated from classmates he once considered friends. Even his appearance changed, as he started wearing clothes that made him look older and meaner. The only area in which he showed improvement was in finding increasingly clever ways to get removed from class.

Kenny's mother worked in a factory in a nearby town and couldn't always immediately come to the phone if I called her at work to discuss my concerns about him. But she almost always got the message and called me back when she could. Her reactions to my concerns were mixed. Sometimes she seemed worried and anxious for help; at other times she was angry, asking why we were "picking on" her child. Though I never knew which reaction would greet me, I continued to call and talk to her about Kenny on a regular basis. Despite those conversations, as well as many conversations with Kenny, we could make no headway in helping him, or even in understanding the reason behind his self-destruction.

Then one day I received a letter in the mail. The plain white envelope was hand-addressed and bore a local postmark, but had no return address. Inside, the unsigned letter said:

*Dear School Principal,  
I am a friend of Kenny's. He is a third grader at your school. Kenny cries every night because he is afraid. His father has a gun and uses it to scare his mother when they fight. Please help my friend Kenny.*

After my initial surprise, I phoned the factory where Kenny's mother worked and told them it was imperative that I speak to her as soon as possible. She called back quickly and agreed to see me before the end of the school day, even though I didn't tell her why I was in such a hurry to meet with her. Then I went upstairs to Kenny's classroom and asked to speak

to him. He followed me outside. I asked him some pretty pointed questions. I told him I was worried about him and that I knew his friends were worried about him as well. I specifically asked about his parents' arguing.

Kenny told me that his father would drink, and his mother would cry, and he would put on headphones and turn up his rap music to drown out their voices. He enjoyed this kind of music and had even begun writing lyrics of his own. When I asked if there was a gun in his house, he said his father had a gun but kept it locked away. Finally, I asked if he was afraid to go home. He shook his head "No," but I wasn't convinced. I let him return to class and reminded him that he could always come talk to me if he needed something.

## The Truth About Kenny

I now had answers to some previously perplexing questions. Kenny had withdrawn from relationships because his closest relationships had failed him. He wore clothing that would make him appear older and meaner because he was older and meaner. He was argumentative because he had grown accustomed to arguments as a tool for communication. And I knew where he was expending his creative talents: writing rap lyrics and, as I learned later, drawing violent illustrations that he hoped would one day grace a CD cover of his rap music.

Not long after I sent Kenny back to his class that afternoon, his mother appeared in my office. Behind closed doors, we sat at a small table and I handed her the letter. She read it and then set it on the table without looking

up. "You must be feeling pretty desperate," I said, "to have sent me a letter like that." Her eyes finally met mine. "You are Kenny's friend," I explained. "You wrote the letter and sent it to me. You're obviously in need of help."

While she never admitted writing the letter, she didn't need to. At the same time I received the anonymous letter, the school received a second letter with the same type of envelope, stamp, ink, and handwriting. The only difference was that the second letter, which was about a conference and addressed to Kenny's teacher, included his mother's return address and signature.

She didn't say much at our meeting, but she did listen as I explained how to file for a PFA (Protection from Abuse) court order and reminded her of how much Kenny and his sister needed her. She then picked up her children and walked them home.

After school was dismissed, I called the police department and spoke with a detective about my concerns for this family. In my years as principal of an urban public school, I came to know and trust the guidance of a number of our local police officers. I felt I would be remiss in my duties if I didn't report my concerns. Besides, it felt good to talk with someone who understood the struggles of urban life and its impact on children.

## "You Can Always Come Talk..."

Later that evening, alone in my very quiet suburban home, I considered the sharp contrast between my life and Kenny's. The only sounds I heard that night were those that I made myself. Kenny was probably hearing rap played loudly to drown out the sounds of arguing and crying. I wondered what could have made his mother turn to me, the local elementary school principal, when she and her children needed help. What was she hoping I would be able to do for her?

Then my own words to Kenny came back to me: "You can always come talk to me if you need something." They were the same words I had said to

others so many times in so many different circumstances. They sum up why we do what we do. We want to help people. We want to make lives better. We want to affect the future. And so we go looking for problems to solve, and we ask people to come to us if they need something.

It dawned on me that in this community, as in so many others, the local school principal is regarded as someone who can help, someone with resources and answers and guidance. Despite the many times our judgment is questioned or our work is underappreciated, our communities still see us as agents of change and trust that it will be change for the better.

It's sometimes overwhelming, the many "somethings" that others bring to us: problems they hope we can solve; fears they hope we can allay; magic they hope we can work. I have listened to the worried, the frightened, the exasperated, the confused, the angry, the hopeful, and the naive. My advice has been sought not only about children in my school, but about babies, teens, spouses, divorce, money, drug addiction, violence, prejudice, and sex. I can't even guess the number of times I have listened to complaints from school neighbors that children were stealing their newspapers, picking their flowers, or arguing in their streets. Once a woman even called to say that she had seen children, whom she assumed were students at my school, putting rocks into her sewer line over the weekend. Her toilets were backing up, and she wanted my help!

And so the problems come, from the mundane to the inane. They knock on our doors, ring our phones, arrive by mail, and erupt in our classrooms, hallways, schoolyards. Some of them we can solve or help with; others we can't. But for all the Kennys out there, I am glad to have the chance to try. ■

**Beth Carlson** is principal of the Morris Early Childhood Center in Lincoln, Delaware. Her e-mail address is [ecarlson@mail.milford.k12.de.us](mailto:ecarlson@mail.milford.k12.de.us).

# "It passed every test at our school!"



- ✓ Volunteer Check In & Out
- ✓ Volunteer ID Badges
- ✓ Visitor Check In & Out
- ✓ Visitor ID Badges
- ✓ Security – who's on campus
- ✓ Late-Tardy Passes
- ✓ Early Dismissal Passes
- ✓ Faculty/Staff Check In & Out
- ✓ Family Service Hours
- ✓ Comprehensive reports & more

[www.SchoolCheckIN.com](http://www.SchoolCheckIN.com)

to download your FREE 21-DAY TRIAL

✓ **School Check IN**

## ADVERTISERS

Company	Page	Phone	Web Address
AIG VALIC.....	29	800-448-2542	aigvalic.com
Artwaxer.....	60	800-321-2183	artwaxer.com
Binney & Smith.....	1	800-CRAYOLA	crayola.com
Accucut.....	53	800-288-1670	accucut.com
AIG Valic.....	29	800-448-2542	valic.com
Artwaxer/TEK Industries.....	60	800-321-2183	artwaxer.com
ASCD.....	56	800-933-ASCD	ascd.org
Assessment Training Institute.....	40	800-480-3060	assessmenttinst.com
Binney & Smith.....	1	800-CRAYOLA	crayola.com
Bright White Paper Company.....	49	800-321-5716	brightwhitepaper.com
Cambium Learning.....	27	508-647-1340	cambiumlearning.com
Computhon.....	67	888-CAPELLA ext. 6151	capella.edu/apple1
Curriculum Associates, Inc.....	45	800-225-0248	curriculumassociates.com
Custom All-Hear Systems, Inc.....	48	800-355-7525	customallhear.com
das designs/Talk Light, Inc.....	16	877-809-6250	talklight.com
Elevator Escalator Safety Foundation.....	49	888-RIDE-SAFE	eesf.org
Ellison Educational Equipment, Inc.....	15	800-253-2238	ellison.com
Fun Craft Publishing.....	21	800-390-2129	schoolplanners.com
Geico/Forrest T. Jones & Co.....	35	800-368-2734	geico.com
Ident-A-Kid.....	49	800-890-1000	ident-a-kid.com
International Schools Services.....	48	609-452-0990	iss.edu
Life Skills Training/NHPA.....	33	866-686-9777	lifeskillstraining.com
NAESP.....	69	800-386-2377	naesp.org
National Association for Sport & Physical Education.....	41	800-213-7193 ext. 414	naspeinfo.org
National Beta Club.....	23	800-845-8281	betaclub.org
National Staff Development Council.....	65	800-727-9288	nsdc.org
Nationwide Learning, Inc.....	17	800-867-2929	studenttreasures.com
NEILL-Wycik College Hotel.....	44	800-268-4358	neill-wycik.com
NOVA Southeastern University.....	34	800-986-3223	fgse.nova.edu
Paralyzed Veterans of America.....	57	800-424-8200	thankyouveterans.org
Preferred Education Software.....	39	888-959-2016	pes-sports.com
Primex Wireless.....	38	800-537-0464	primexwires.com
RHOMAR Industries, Inc.....	19	800-688-6221	rhomar.com
Riverdeep, Inc.....	Cover 2	888-242-6747	riverdeep.net
School Specialty.....	9	888-388-3224	schoolspecialty.com
Seton Hall University.....	26	973-275-2728	education.shu.edu/execedd
Student Success Systems.....	34	800-576-2525	studentsuccesssystems.com
Target Stores.....	7	800-800-8800	target.com
Texas Instruments, Inc.....	Cover 3	800-TI-CARES	education.ti.com
Thomas Publishers.....	28	800-258-8980	ccthomas.com
Wenger Corporation.....	2	800-4WENGER	wengercorp.com
Wong Publications.....	Cover 4	650-965-7896	harrywong.com
WySys.....	57	925-846-6547	wysys.com