

# Thriving

children • youth • families

 Learning online journal



It started with a piece of gum...

***Susan Jones***

**K**aren was a student from the alternative middle school who stood out to me. There was just something about her that indicated she was an adolescent in pain. She displayed a tough exterior as she walked, and sometimes ran, in the hallways. She often engaged in verbal and physical conflicts with others. I remembered seeing her in the gymnasium playing basketball. I told her how impressed I was with her ball handling and asked if she was playing on a team from her home district. She was not, and I wasn't really surprised by her answer.

As the school year progressed, I continued to see Karen. With her protected exterior, she was trying to keep anyone from getting too close. Although she wasn't part of our program, it seemed she was struggling and could possibly benefit from positive interactions.

During the school day, I would often wear an apron that had pockets sewn into it. I wanted to make sure gum, sticky notes, pens, pencils, and positive reinforcement tickets were in close proximity to be able to give away when there was an opportunity. One day, I walked with a student of mine to the van that would take a group of kids to an after school program. Karen was sitting in the front seat. I offered my student a piece of gum for the long ride and then asked Karen if she wanted one. She didn't answer at first or even turn around to acknowledge me. I asked her again, and she responded, "What?" I repeated, "I was wondering, would you like a piece of gum?" She appeared a little confused by my question but took it. She was polite and thanked me but then turned right back around in her seat. I wondered if she seemed confused because I offered her a piece of gum without any expectations. The fact that she accepted it sparked a little hope. This interaction was the beginning of "the dance." Chambers and Freado note that one of the first steps in engaging a youth is to meet her wherever she is (Chambers & Freado, 2015).

After this small interchange, I was determined to consistently greet Karen in the hallway. If I walked my student to the van and Karen was there, I always offered her a piece of gum. One day, Karen approached me in the hallway and asked if I had a piece of gum. Of course I did! Another day, she appeared at the doorway to my classroom and asked if I had a piece of gum. I gave her two. The dance continued.

### ***We understood the value and impact one caring adult could have on a child.***

On one occasion, I was prepared with a pack of gum. When she asked if I had any, I offered her the whole pack and asked to share it with some of her peers. Although it may have been a small gesture, my hope was that Karen would experience what it feels like to be generous, which has proven health benefits. Karen needed to feel better, and I thought perhaps that might help.

As special education teachers in an alternative education setting, we learned about trauma and the impact on brain development. We understood that

to reach these kids, we would need to approach education differently. Although our program was located in one wing of the school, we would try to do what we could to connect with other students throughout the building. Our doors were always open. If students were hungry, we fed them. We understood the value and impact one caring adult could have on a child. We knew that belonging, power, and purpose, as found in the Model of Leadership and Service, were three of the universal needs, that when met, promoted positive development in youth (Strother, Maikoetter, Freado, & Brendtro, 2016).

I truly didn't know anything about Karen's story. I didn't know if she had a mom or a dad with whom she lived, how her grades were, if she had siblings, or why she was at the alternative school. It didn't really matter to me. What did matter was she needed to discover that despite all of her frustrations, sadness, and anger, there were others who cared about her.

As the weeks and months passed, Karen and I seemed to cross paths more often. She would call out to me in the cafeteria. When we met, I offered a quick hug, some small talk, a word of encouragement, and a piece of gum. We were able to set up an arrangement in which Karen was able to "mentor" our students, providing her an opportunity to realize her strengths. She was able to connect with some of the students and support them academically and socially.

As a former case manager, home visits were one of my requirements. As I was pursuing my degree in education, I promised myself that I would complete a home visit for every student with whom I was entrusted to work. My goal was to meet the student and family prior to them stepping into

our classroom. Incorporating home visits as part of my non-negotiables made sense to me. This was the foundation for building trusting relationships with my students and their families.

One day, when Karen was present, I was talking to another student about our most recent home visit. Surprised, Karen asked, "You went to his house?" It was apparent that Karen never had a home visit from any of her previous teachers. I explained that this was something I believed in doing and that I made home visits a priority. She then asked, "Would you do a home visit to my house?" Although she was not a student of mine or even in our program, I responded, "Of course I will!" I explained that she would have to talk to her family member first, but we would work out something.

Shortly after this, I made some professional changes that would result in my departure from the alternative education site. I was very sad to leave the students, including Karen. I approached her in the lunch room to tell her I was going to be starting a new job at a different location. She tried to act as if my leaving did not bother her, but I explained that I would do my best to connect with her again. I had not completed her home visit and knew it was critical to follow through on my word.

After being gone for a number of weeks, I had to return to the alternative education school for some business. When I walked into the main office I saw Karen having a conversation with the principal. She turned, and when she saw me she ran with open arms and gave me such a big hug that, even as I write this, it brings tears to my eyes. It was the kind of hug that said I was missed, I mattered to her, and she cared. After this, I realized more than ever that it was imperative I hold true to her home visit. I asked her if she had talked to her mom about me contacting her. She did and provided me with her mom's phone number.

I made the call the next day. After explaining to Karen's mom who I was and why I was reaching out to her, we set a date and time to visit at their home. When I arrived, Karen greeted me with that awesome hug and introduced me to her mom. We went outside and played a little basketball. (Well, Karen played basketball; I tried.) We visited a couple of hours in her home, and I learned much more about Karen's experience in the educational system, the impact that suspensions and expulsions had on both Karen and her mother, and their hope and aspirations for the future.

It has been a year since that first visit. Karen has since returned to her home district. Her academics continue to improve, and as a 9th grader, she was able to make the girls' varsity basketball team. Although there have been many positives for her, this transition has not been easy for Karen or her mom. We continue to remain in contact and support each other as we all move forward in our lives.

As I reflect on how Karen has grown, progressed, and matured from when I first encountered her, it validates the importance of forming positive, trusting, and meaningful connections with students who are struggling. We all encounter students like Karen in our work regularly. Please, acknowledge them, reach out, and be prepared to support or encourage them. It could start with the simple gesture of offering a piece of gum.

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## References

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