
LEARNING TO FAIL

CASE STUDIES OF
STUDENTS AT RISK

Phi Delta Kappa

Maynard R. Bernis Center
for Evaluation, Development, and Research
Bloomington, Indiana

NICOLE, SEEKING ATTENTION

Algebra Class, 8:00 a.m.

A few minutes after algebra class began, a sullen-looking girl entered the room. The teacher, who had finished distributing last week's graded quizzes, silently handed Nicole hers. She looked at the grade, rolled her eyes upward, and slumped into a seat at the back of the first row. Hanging a denim jacket across the seat, she revealed a blue and white striped oxford shirt emblazoned with beer patches. Despite the cold Midwestern January, she wore tennis shoes without laces and without socks.

"On Thursday, we'll have the final quiz before semester exams," the teacher announced. "So pay attention as we go over the formulas." He filled the blackboard with equations, explaining each. Twenty-seven sophomores sat silently. The class was half girls and half boys and about one-quarter African American. A boy asked a question and, as it was answered, Nicole raised her hand.

"Yes, Nicole?" queried the teacher. As he answered her question, he added another equation to the board.

"I did that part," said Nicole, "but. . ."

He responded with a series of guiding questions, which she answered. "You just need to slow down and take your time. Don't be in a rush to plug in any old number," he encouraged her before taking the next question.

Turning to the day's assignment, the teacher demonstrated how to check the accuracy of answers and urged the students to do so. Nicole bent over her paper and began to fill her paper with neat, bold numbers. She pulled on a long curl of dark hair absently. The boy next to her drew a detailed hot rod.

"For homework, turn to pages 230 and 231, numbers 13 to 24," said the teacher. "Pick four problems and do them for tomorrow. Choose the ones that are hard for you so you can get help before the semester exam. Don't forget to see me before or after school if you need more help."

The bell rang. Nicole put on her jacket, dug in her purse for a brush and pulled it through her hair. Stacking her books, she seemed not to hear the teacher's final words about tomorrow's test.

"I just got my hair cut and I hate it," she said in a disgusted voice. Peering at the notes I took while observing the class, she wrinkled her nose and asked with a half grin, "What bad things did you write about me?"

"I just wrote what I saw in class," I replied. "What makes you think I wrote something bad?"

"I'm always doing something bad," she said with a shrug.

"Don't worry. Everybody's nervous when they see somebody taking notes about them," I said. "I just have to write it down so I don't forget the details."

"Oh, OK," she said, brightening up. Then she whispered conspiratorially, "Isn't he gorgeous?" She nodded toward a slight boy with wavy hair and the beginnings of a mustache.

When I can get her to work and to think about things, she doesn't do that bad. She sometimes feels she is working hard, but I ask for homework and it's at home. I plan to give her an incomplete. I W base her first quarter grade on the second quarter. I mean, I understand a little about the home problems and all that.

She has a tendency to get frustrated because she thinks she understands it, and then it doesn't work out the way she thought. She has trouble remembering how to solve the equations; we learned that earlier in the year when she was absent so much. The first part of the quarter, she was coming to see me during her study hall for help, but I'm not real sure it wasn't to get out of study hall. She may have wanted some attention, too.

She really doesn't strike me as rebellious. The kids tolerate her to a certain extent. It's not like she's an outcast or that she causes all the problems.

- Nicole's algebra teacher

Study Hall, 9:55 a.m.

As Nicole took her assigned seat, Aileen stuffed a note into her hand. "This'll be a good one!" Nicole said with anticipation.

Big Sis,

Yes, he's kissed me and he is a real gentleman.

I can't tell you or anybody else, not even him how

much i like him. Every time i think about him i get all crazy inside, like i'm on a fun ride. Do you think if someone else told him how much i care or fell for him, do you think he would understand?

Well, gotta go, have to get some ZZZZ's.
Little Sis

Nicole shared this note with me and then rummaged through her papers for another:

Nicole,

Hey Chick what's up. Not much here. that's cool about the \$120.00 you got from Greg. if you see Keith tell him to tell Tom G. that I want to meet him. God he's so fine. Well thanks

F/F Julie

P.S. find out if Tom has a girlfriend. O.K.?

Nicole explained, "See, I was going out with this guy and ... you know... Well, then he told me he got VD from me. So, I said I didn't think so, but my mom takes me to the doctor it was humiliating! And I was fine! So my mom says to tell him I was pregnant. So, I did and he said to find out how much an abortion costs. Well, I didn't really call but I told him \$250, but I only expected him to pay half. So two weeks later, he gives *me* \$120!" She grinned, as if surprised but satisfied that the boy, an Asian-American, got what he deserved.

About 70 students filled half the chairs in the double room. Walking down the aisle, Aileen stopped to chat with Nicole and slipped her another note. An African American boy also walked by, stopped to touch the beer patch over the front pocket of *Nicole's* shirt; they smiled and chatted before he moved on. "He used to tease me when I ran track," she explained. "He said I ran like a bird. I run straight up but I was fast."

"You run track?" I asked.

"I used to. I used to be in basketball, too," she shrugged. "But not no more. Grades."

Finally, Nicole took out a calculator and her math book and wiggled into a comfortable position. A few minutes later, she was at the teacher's desk. She moved around the room, exchanged words with another boy, and returned to her desk, the boy watching her progress. She propped a foot on the chair in front of her as its occupant complained mildly.

"Check you out!" she retorted in a friendly skirmish. The foot remained.

Before the period was over, Nicole conferred, math book in hand, with three more boys; accepted another note from Aileen and melodramatically advised her to write on her face, "Oh, baby, I I-o-v-e you;" offered to "beat up" a boy who was kicking Aileen's desk (she told me that she was "everybody's bodyguard"); and offered to bring me notes from home "that I don't even let my mom read." At the sound of the bell she left. The boy who touched her shirt walked out with her; his hand firmly placed on her shoulder.

Even after I've gotten short with her, Nicole will turn around and say, "nice day." She's cooperative but she will talk until I tell her not to. I had her up for detention one day and she talked non-stop. She had come in with a forged pass. When I called her on it, she was up-front and that was when she served detention.

I find her moody. When she's feeling good, she's real social and talks a lot, When she's angry, she's quiet, sometimes puts her head down on her desk, mutters under her breath.

Sometimes, she W come back to my desk and start talking and, sometimes, I W let her stay there. I don't want to make more of it than it is but I really get the sense that she needs somebody just to listen to her I get the impression that she's got a lot of problems with her home life - that's what she was talking about with me when she was up for detention.

- study hall teacher

Physical Education, 10:50 a.m.

The first of two volleyball games began. Nicole overpowered her serves, then giggled or stamped her foot. She volleyed energetically, good at both the net and the baseline. She laughed when she fell, robot-danced when she scored a point, congratulated teammates with a high-five slap of the hands, and participated in any jokes in her area of the court. She separated two squabbling boys and showed them where to stand. Her frequent laugh was a distinctive rat-a-tat-tat followed by a shrill screech, sometimes delivered arms akimbo, back arched.

As one ball crossed the net toward her team, Nicole called "Out!" before it touched the ground.

"You can't call it out before it touches the ground!" yelled an opponent.

"It was out! Didn't you see it?" she countered, throwing out her arms.

"It hadn't even touched the ground yet!" argued another opponent.

"You could see it was gonna go out!" Nicole said, giving the player a don't-jive-me look.

Both sides appealed to the teacher who didn't raise her eyes from the paper she was writing on as she said, "It has to touch the ground."

Nicole's mouth hung open for a moment in surprise and disgust. "When were the rules changed?"

She returned to play without resentment, however, and agreed when someone said, "We're having fun!"

Lunch, 11:45 a.m.

Nicole and I shared lunch four times, twice in the school cafeteria and twice at fast-food restaurants. Regardless of the cold, she always smoked a cigarette with a regular group of friends just off school grounds. Once, as we finished lunch at Burger Haven, Gloria drove up, flopped down next to Nicole, and complained about parenthood and marriage. Accepting Gloria's offer of a one-block ride back to school, Nicole was tempted when Gloria asked, "Sure you don't want to come on with me?"

"God, that woulda. been fun to skip this afternoon - especially since we have Julius Caesar in English today. I hate Julius Caesar! Before, I woulda done it." She sighed, then in a determined voice concluded, "But not now. I've been absent too much and I wanna graduate."

General Business, 1:15 p.m.

The teacher asked the class to take out the typed notes she had given them. Some asked for another copy, and she had a few on hand to share. Aileen asked for a belt and flashed her belly-button in the first of many attention-seeking behaviors. Nicole and the teacher shared a brief private conversation, as two girls privately discussed their relationships with older men. "He had to get married, but then she had a miscarriage," one said. "They've only been married for six months and they're already planning to get a divorce."

The teacher guided an oral review of different kinds of check endorsements, money orders, telegraphic money orders, travelers' checks, bank drafts. Nicole raised her hand and was called on a couple of times. Once, she blurted out an answer to another student's question. The teacher didn't object but extended the answer with additional information. Nicole french-braided her hair, made a face to show me she was bored, rested her head on her desk, chuckled when Aileen ostentatiously answered a

question, and then pointed to herself, clowning to others that she, not Aileen, had known the correct answer.

Someone entered the room and gave Nicole a slip of paper. She left immediately for the office of her counselor.

"Your stepdad just called," the counselor told her. "He got a note from your PE teacher saying that you haven't dressed six times in PE and that your grade is going to be dropped four letters."

"I forget to bring my clothes sometimes, but I didn't think it was that much," she responded anxiously. "I borrowed clothes a few times."

"Did you know about this?" the counselor asked.

"No, but it's my fault," she responded. "Boy, am I going to be restricted."

"What about your court date? How's that going?"

She told him the date and that she thought she would be sentenced to time in the county Youth Detention Center. "I'm paying for my own lawyer."

"Are your parents anxious or angry?"

"No," Nicole responded vaguely. "My mom isn't crazy about having to take off from work to go to court but that's all. I haven't seen my stepdad much lately 'cause he's working evenings."

"How about you? How are you taking it?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I won't get worried until I get there," she said, looking unperturbed.

"Well, try to do as well as you can before the semester ends. Your attendance has really improved and I think your grades are up, too." He gave her a pass. "Do you think you can get your mind on biology? Do you need a few minutes?"

"Nah, I'm fine," Nicole said as she retrieved her books from the room and headed for biology. "I don't think they should take you out of class like that," she muttered, "unless it's really important. You're not learning. And he's always, like, prying into my personal life. I think he should just ask about my grades."

It's hard to pinpoint Nicole. There are some days when she is on target and does well in class. There are other days when it's as if she's somewhere else. All she cares about is who Aileen went to lunch with.

She had a real attendance problem first semester. They have a new attendance policy that, if you miss more than nine days, you don't get credit for the semester. Apparently, they gave her a break and let her make up the work she missed. She seemed to buckle down. I don't know - maybe she realized that we were helping her. I spent quite a bit of time writing out all her missing assignments. She had a month to get it done, but the deadline came and went. I spent time waiting on her to take a test and she didn't show.

She doesn't turn in half her homework and then gets an A + on the test. Academically, she definitely has the potential to do well. She does seem to care about how she does and she's proud when she makes a good grade, but I don't think she's quite motivated. In class, she does fine.

I used to have her in the back of the room and she was easily distracted. Now, she sits right in front of me, and I think that gives us a little better rapport. When she sat at the back with her friends, I think she just saw me as the teacher. Now, maybe I'm a person, too.

- general business teacher

Biology, 2:10 p.m.

Nicole distributed plastic bags containing earthworms for dissection.

There was much talk and laughter. As usual, Nicole contributed to the noise.

The teacher raised his voice, "OK, let's get started." His expression was serious. He projected a transparency of a dissected earthworm, identifying seminal vesicles and seminal receptacles, which the students had to find on their specimens. Then they had to label the parts on mimeographed drawings.

"During mating," he explained, "two worms line up head-to tail so that the seminal vesicles of one attach to the seminal receptacles of the other." The explanation elicited no giggles. "On tomorrow's test," he continued, "there will be pinned worms with parts for you to identify. I can guarantee one of those parts will be a seminal vesicle. If anyone can't find these parts, put your hand up and I'll help you."

Nicole, among others, raised her hand. She and her lab partner, Samantha, were talking and laughing at their table in a back corner of the room. A girl passed by and fluffed Nicole's hair. The teacher arrived at their table and directed them to open up their worm more. He indicated the correct organs, then moved on.

The teacher resumed the lecture, but the students' attention was scattered. Eventually, the students returned their materials. Some students misplaced pins or scissors and others put the implements where they belonged. The teacher stacked the dissection pans.

The school day ended with the sound of the bell and his final reminder to study for tomorrow's test.

Nicole craves attention. She's been carrying an ice bag around on her finger for two days. I think she's using it to gain my attention and, secondly, to go to the nurse. She can be gone ten or fifteen minutes.

She's already missed damed close to twenty days in my class. She's been truant. This is not a question of the girl being sick. / get a feeling that she feels - maybe rightfully so, / don't know -her parents may be too tough on her, too strict, That may be totally incorrect, / don't know. But, since she came back, she hasn't done very much, and she is not an unintelligent girl. There are brief periods in which she seems to be very interested, in which she asks questions.

Sometimes she is sullen when / correct her. Earlier in the year, there were times she just came in and put her head down. Don't get me wrong - she's not at all unfriendly. For the most part, she's a polite girl. She will interact with certain members of the class, but there are some who do not think very highly of her.

- biology teacher

After School

Nicole babysat about three hours after school each day and about five hours on weekends. She arrived at her babysitting job and entered without knocking. Taking off her shoes at the door, she called, "Hi."

Tony was eight. He was watching cartoons on television and playing with Attack Ants, a contemporary version of tin soldiers. Nicole sat by him on the carpet and asked him about his ants. The two played quietly, changed the TV channel, and glanced at the set occasionally. When "The Brady Bunch" appeared on the screen, they were more attentive and attacked each other's ants only intermittently. Nicole distracted Tony to win a battle and he yelled, "You cheated! I'm gonna show your butt up!"

They looked through groceries in sacks on the kitchen counter. Nicole got a diet soft drink. Tony pulled apple juice frozen on a fork from the freezer.

"I got in a fight with the fastest guy in school," he told her mournfully. "He called me a F-A-G, and we started kicking each other."

"Did he get in trouble?" Nicole asked sympathetically.

"No!" Tony exploded. "He lied his guts out!"

A moment later he asked, "See my new glasses? See how they bend?"

"They must have been expensive," she flattered him.

"A hundred and eighty dollars. We got them at Lensmakers last night."

"Are you supposed to be wearing them?"

"I don't have to," he said. "Oh, crap! Look what just fell on my lap - my apple juice!"

"Did any get on the floor?"

"No," he answered, as the frozen remains fell on the carpet.

"You better throw that away. It's dirty now," said Nicole.

Tony shook his head.

"Please?"

He began to suck the frozen juice again. "Oh, boy! 'Gilligan's Island!'"

Later, he went outside to play basketball. Tony's mother -arrived and smilingly told me that Nicole was their favorite babysitter.

Nicole at Home

Nicole lived with her mother and stepfather in an attractively decorated mobile home in a tidy trailer park. Five Siamese cats, which her mother bred and sold, met her at the door. Nicole glanced inside a pizza box - "Yuk!" - and shoved it in the microwave.

Using a spray cleaner, Nicole wiped glass tabletops, door, and storm door while listening to rap music. "See," she said, "this was full at the start of the week." It's only about a third full now. My mother is a clean freak. I do this every day." She polished the furniture, transferred clothes from washer to dryer, and fed the fish. She examined the glass chimneys of hurricane lamps. "Disgusting!" she said as she washed off microscopic dust.

A car horn sounded and she stepped outside for a few minutes. "Roger," she explained. "He's a sweetheart."

Changing the tape mid-song from rock to country, she swallowed a birth control pill and explained that her periods were too frequent and cramps were painful.

She had forgotten to get cigarettes, so we went out for some.

Returning, she made me a thick ham sandwich for supper and said she was worried that I might be bored. We watched "The Cosby Show," which she said she loved. She lip-synched part of the dialogue. She cleaned the cat box during a commercial.

I was surprised to find this girl, described as headstrong and boy crazy, spending the entire evening cleaning house. "Does your mother appreciate this work?" I asked.

"Sometimes. I mean, I'm sure she does, but she doesn't always say so."

Her mother called and Nicole catalogued the chores she had completed.

She came to my attention after nine days of absence. She was at the point of not getting credit in any course. I'm very hesitant to withdraw credit. We tried a/1 the avenues rather than being hard right to start with. We had a conference with her parents in October. Nicole accepted responsibility. She said all the right words and was very plausible, which made me suspicious. It creates some doubt when somebody has that little speech all ready to go. You see a lot of that, particularly in the brighter students - and I think this one is fairly bright. But the meeting had an effect, and it shows on her attendance record. I think maybe the moving around that she did from school to school - I think three moves last year, her freshman year - hurt her.

In December, her stepdad called for about the tenth time in two or three days to say that he was coming to take her to Round House, a time-out and runaway shelter. She had stolen the family car, and they had just found out about it. That same month, we asked her why she had been absent several times for a particular class. She said, "I was going behind Hamburger Haven to sell drugs to pay for gas when I took the car at night." I said, "What?" because this is not your common everyday admission. She'd gone over with another girl, a dropout, to sell marijuana at noontime. That's how they were financing their escapades. We talked to her about the consequences for that kind of thing, but I don't know if she took it seriously. She said they'd stopped. I'm becoming cynical, the longer I stay at this desk, about the role of parents. I see a lot of kids really screwed up, and you don't get that screwed up that young without somebody helping you. I don't know a/ of Nicole's background. I know that she has a stepfather, who, at times, seems genuinely caring and, at times, antagonistic. In his estimation, Nicole got away with a lot of things and somebody needed to clamp down on her. I get mixed feelings from him and the mother. Some of the things that they were wanting us to do were clearly not our function. I'm not into chastising and punishing children for behaviors at home.

She's very mature - physically and probably sexually. I don't know that Nicole's promiscuous, but promiscuity is common for kids that don't have guidance from home. Why? A product of moving around; a product of parents too busy. And children of alcoholics quite often fee/ responsible for their parents' alcoholism. You can't say parents don't care - they just don't know how to care.

- director of student services

We started talking on a regular basis in October as a result of an attendance conference with her parents. Nicole would talk about her home life - her mother considering divorce or separation from her current husband and getting involved with a former boyfriend, other people coming to the house to go out drinking with or without the husband. Her parents work at a liquor store, so they come home with alcohol, especially her stepdad. She described him as an alcoholic. Blowups were frequent with her stepfather, less frequent with her mother. Nicole would say it was her fault. We worked on helping her realize when these incidents were occurring and how to cope with them - some strategies. That seemed to work.

One of the moves last year, her freshman year, was to live with her real father. She had major troubles with him, but she didn't get into those with me. I do know that, at night when she would take the car, drugs were involved.

I think her home life puts her at risk. Her attitude, knowing something is wrong but going ahead with it, puts her at risk. Plus the alcoholic environment at the house and the on-again off-again relationship between her mother and stepfather.

She knows the importance of staying in school because she had the opportunity to be out of here months ago when she turned 16. If you're not in school, it's hard to keep up, hard to make up all the work once you turn things around - which she did. It was a lot of work to stay and catch up, but she did. If she can get through another year she will have enough credits to graduate with her class. For some reason, I think she's going to stay with us - hope so because, with all of the trouble that she has, she's really a likable student.

- counselor

This fall she was skipping school, and we were trying to work with her. She had obvious family problems. At one time, I think, she was living with a boyfriend. [For about two months early in the 1988-89 academic year, Nicole shared an apartment with two friends, Jenny and Matt.] She was in my office from time to time, but most of these episodes were related to what was going on at home. She does these off the-wall stunts - taking the car - bold things for someone her age.

She always appeared to be listening. Occasionally, we would hear that she'd done some dumb things, but when I saw her, she always appeared to be receptive. It's been my experience that, down the road a couple of years some of what everybody has been telling a kid soaks in and they begin to do OK. Some parents don't care; some give up. Those who keep trying, even if the kid is misbehaving those kids have a lot better chance.

- associate principal

I've given up on her. I'm going to exist until she gets married or goes to college and that's it. Last fall, I questioned whether she would even finish school. I don't know what changed - in seventh and eighth grades, she was an A and B student. I just don't understand her. I never know what to expect. I don't know whether I'm too strict on her and she feels like breaking loose, or whether it's "Who cares? I'm going to do what I want to do."

I don't think Nicole is much of a drinker; she does it to be with her friends and not that often. Once she told me she had drunk two Budweisers. I didn't smell any beer on her breath, and, owning a liquor store, I should know. If she had,

she ought to give up drinking because she was really out of it. I'm not sure about marijuana and drugs. I have no idea what she was doing.

She has a bad problem with lying. It's just to protect herself; just when she gets caught in a situation, she lies. She denies smoking.

Last year, she went to live with my sister upstate. When she left, I felt relieved. I wasn't worried about her. My sister is probably stricter than I am. But her aunt wouldn't tolerate the lying, so she sent her home. I thought, "Yeah, I knew the vacation would end soon." Later that year, she went to live with her father. I had some reservations about that. I got two different stories. Her father said she was sneaking out at night, and she said that he was - I can't say making sexual advances - but making her feel uncomfortable.

The car has been a serious problem. The first time she took it was about a year ago. She was just turning fifteen. I had taken the car for new tires and noticed a big dent. Then, I found a note in Nicole's room saying she'd taken the car and backed it into a garage. I was ready to strangle her, I was afraid my insurance wasn't going to cover it.

I suspected she was taking the car. There would be either more gas or less gas than before or I'd find it in a different gear. She would deny it. I decided I needed help last year when there was a military air base sticker on it. That's federal, and she wasn't insured or licensed. So, I went to the police station. They talked to her, but it didn't do a whole lot of good.

When school started this year, a// hell broke loose. She decided she'd rather move out than go by my rules. One day, she came down to the liquor store driving a car. I guess I wanted her back home, but I couldn't physically force her, so I called and reported that she was driving this car. She got a ticket, but she continued to stay in this apartment with these two friends until they decided they didn't want her there and moved her back home.

Then, I suspected that she was taking the car again. I never understood what she was doing in this town at one or two in the morning. One night, I heard her on the phone, heard the front door close, heard the car start, and I called the police. She got her second ticket.

She's going to court for it tomorrow. I'm not really worried because I've talked to her attorney, and I know what's going to happen. She's going to be put on probation for a year. She'll have to report to somebody, and they will give her guidelines to go by. This sounds terrible, but I'm looking forward to it because she is going to be responsible to somebody else for a while. The probation officer tried to scare her by saying she might spend some time in the Youth Detention Center. Actually, it might be good if somebody with some authority put a jolt to her because she's going to be in big trouble if she continues through life like this.

The school has been very cooperative. I feel Nicole could get more help if she would ask, but she's there to socialize. I don't think there's too much chance of her deciding to go to college; I have hopes, but I really doubt it. They're keeping an eye on her for me this year because of the skipping she did. If I have a problem, I can telephone the assistant principal. I've talked a lot with a counselor, but I almost feel like he's given up on her, too.

We've had a counselor from Round House meet with the family since, maybe, October. He was looking for something medical because he couldn't understand why she does what she does, but there was nothing there.

She has a lot of good qualities if she would use them, but she doesn't I've tried everything: rewarding her, taking the phone or stereo or TV away, but she watches anyway when I'm gone. I can't even get her to quit smoking - here I sit smoking. I'd just be wasting my breath if I told her about drugs, I guess I've kind of used her stepfather because she can put a lot of pressure on me - she won't speak to me or she W give me a rough time. She won't give him a rough time. Her brother Jim is in Texas in the service. Bob is here in town, but any guidance he tries to give her, she resents.

Nicole is my youngest, and she was the only girl. I wanted a girl real bad. She never seemed to take advantage of it when she was younger and I always thought I could depend on her. She'd come home on time; she was good in school. We would play school and she caught on real quick. I don't know what happened. She was only about six at the time of the divorce. I think it bothered her, but she seemed to adjust fairly well. I think we had a close relationship until she was about twelve.

We're trying to cut down on help at the liquor store, so I work evenings. Nicole gets home from babysitting about five and I get home about 10, so we don't spend a lot of time together. On the weekends, she'd rather do things with her friends. I think any more time and we'd probably be ready to strangle each other.

- Nicole's mother

I guess my friends would say I'm wild, crazy, and understanding. I'm a clown. I W say stupid things and everybody will laugh. I like attention; /// admit it. Some of my friends are good students, but some are not. I usually study by myself because if I'm with a friend, there ain't no way it ~ going to get done. Well, with Samantha, we get it done. We listen to music and we laugh and it gets done. But, with Aileen, wed start talking about a guy - who her boyfriend is this week or who it will be next weekend, same thing with me, though.

It's kind of weird, you know. I can talk to some of the teachers just like teenagers. Like the study hall teacher, she was real fun to talk to. But, some of the teachers are so uppity and trying to dress in a little tie and be all perfect. I've talked with the assistant principal a couple of times when my mom and stepdad were in fights. She'd say, "Just stay out of it, " but it won't work. I've heard that same thing over and over again.

When I went to that October attendance meeting, I said, "I realize I've got things I've got to do and I'm going to. " I was lying out of my teeth. But, it worked; I got my credit, and I have been going to school. No skipping. Doing my homework. I guess, since I lied I had to live up to it. I wanted to.

I did really good in elementary and junior high - honors, sports, everything. I was one of the popular people. Then / started getting in arguments with my mother. She would say things to me I didn't like. So I moved from my mother's house, and I started going downhill. Everything's been in a two-month cycle. I think it's because I don't like the way they live or I just get bored. But you can't keep running away.

I started getting in trouble probably the summer after seventh grade. I hung out with people that were in high school I looked older, but I wasn't being responsible like an older person. I start thinking about the past like, "God, that was stupid!" Your parents say, "When you're older, you're going to thank me for this. " But, then, you don't care.

Second quarter of my freshman year, last year, I moved in with my aunt upstairs. Then we got in a fight over my grades. So, fourth quarter, I went and lived with my dad. While I was there, my stepmom and the two kids packed up and moved. My father and I were left together about a month, and he tried something on me. I was standing up, and he had his arms around me and was rubbing me up and down. I called a friend to pick me up. I got my checks where I'd been working, called my mom, and bought a bus ticket back home. My mom told me to call the cops, and I did but they said they couldn't do anything because he didn't get in my clothes.

So, I came back home and lived with my mother for the summer. After a week of school this year, I moved to an apartment with my friends, Jenny and Matt. My grades had gone to Ds and Fs third quarter of my freshman year. This year, my sophomore year, first quarter, I didn't pass anything because I wasn't going to school; I was at the apartment. I like to sleep in. I started drinking and getting in trouble.

I had a job at Big Burger. My mom had told me to lie about my age. Then, as soon as I moved into the apartment, she told them I was underage. Of course, they fired me, but they told me I could come back when I turned sixteen because I was a good worker. That was important then because I was paying rent

One night when I was having supper with my mom and stepfather, my roommates brought over all my stuff. They were kicking me out. I wanted to live at home, but my mom said I couldn't unless I straightened up. So, I promised I would start going to school.

My parents divorced when I was about seven. My father had been going out on my mom. I remember one time when I was four he shoved her against the wall. I thought my older brothers would help, but they just stood there. So, I grabbed one of them big black skillet and knocked him over, My mom cried and hugged me. .

People at school keep telling me to stay out of fights at home, but it don't work. Mom will say, "Nicole, come here. I need your support. " What am I supposed to do?

My parents want me to make good grades, but I don't think my mom's really interested in my career plans. I told her I wanted a typewriter because I'm taking a typing class right now. She goes, "I wouldn't mind buying you a typewriter if I knew you were going to college.

I said, "Well, I am going to college. "

She goes, "I want you to prove it to me first, and then we will see about a typewriter. "

My mom's always got work on her mind. She comes home in a bad mood, and she puts me in a bad mood. Then, I get mean towards her and that's not the way it should be. I wish they weren't so stressed.

We don't talk much, but when we do talk, she's real open about sex and drugs. That's one good thing. But she's a clean freak. Every morning I have to have my room spotless. Tonight, I've got to vacuum, fold the laundry, do the dishes. If I don't, I'm dead meat. I wait until fifteen minutes before she gets off to fold the clothes. I don't like to do them, but I like to have clean clothes.

It's when I'm depressed that I take the car or do something stupid. It's like I don't care if I get caught. When I'm on restriction, that's when the craving comes so bad. I've been on restriction a lot this year but it's my own fault. I've been a pain in the butt. Like, about the ticket for driving without a license. I don't blame my mom for reporting me. She's just doing what a parent tries to do to save her butt and mine.

I wasn't nervous when I walked in the courtroom. Then, the judge started going off on me and I thought, "You dickhead! Don't talk to me like that!" He said all my friends are hoodlums and I was a troublemaker and I was going to end up in jail. My attorney said I had improved at home. The state's attorney requested I get probation. The judge read the reports and decided without asking me. Then, he started talking about a weekend in the youth detention center.

I asked my attorney, "When am I going to be going?"

He goes, "Now."

Somebody came up and grabbed my arm and put handcuffs on me and hauled me out of the room. I didn't even get to say goodbye to my mom. They put me in this room and walked out. Then, we got in this van with bars and a screen thing and it took us to the detention center. We had to fill out all kinds of paperwork. They strip-searched me and made me take a shower and put on these clothes and go to my room. The strip-searched took maybe 10 seconds. I was embarrassed but not to the point where I cried.

I had a bad cold. I bet I slept 16 to 18 hours a day. My mom bought me cherry cold medicine and nice cough drops. She took care of me.

I had four days - 78 hours - in the detention center, \$141.06 in court costs, 40 hours of public service. I got a sheet of house rules like no smoking, do your chores, a curfew. I was to check in with my probation officer at police headquarters every Wednesday, but, when I met him, he told me I could come every other Wednesday.

I had 10 ways to kill that judge. I was outraged that he sent me to the detention center for something as little as driving without a license. I mean, it is an offense but it's not like getting caught with pot. Those kids get a \$63 fine, a slap on the hand. I can't say it's unfair. He was trying to teach me a lesson. In the long run, it was best because I'm not going to get in trouble and go back there again. I realized how much / take for granted. The first thing I did when I got home was go in the bathroom all by myself, no one watching.

After I got back to school, the vice-principal called me in his office. I thought I was in trouble. He told me he wished they had contacted the school because he would have told them it was a bad idea. He was impressed by how much I've improved. I was surprised because he's like an ogre.

I'd like to go to [a state college]. I might be able to get in if I get my butt in gear, but I don't know. My grades are OK but I could do better. Just so much has happened in the past few years. I lost interest in everything. I want to get my graduation requirements taken care of if you don't graduate, you ain't got nothing. My mother got her GED. She worked in a factory for eight years. I don't want to work in a factory. You need your diploma but, anymore, you need to go to college to get a job that pays good and that you W like. I want to go to college and join the Marines; I've been planning that for about two years.

I thought about dropping out when I was living in the apartment everybody that I know that has dropped out says, "I am glad I dropped out." Then, a couple of months later, "God, I wish I hadn't dropped out." You hear what they say- it sinks into your brain after you hear it so many times.

I've smoked pot maybe ten times. I've done speed once. I've never done cocaine or shot up or anything like that I haven't smoked pot in probably six months. I don't need that stuff to have a good time. Some of those kids are screwing their lives up.

Once I had been drinking and I was stoned. We were in a truck and there was a girl driving. She wrecked it, but luckily nobody got hurt bad. It was a miracle. I think there's only been once or twice my friends have come over and drank but I wouldn't let them drive if they were totally wasted.

The guys act like sixth-graders. It's like one thing on their minds - bang. I tell them to back off and if they don't I use the old knee. Everybody knows how I am. / don't have the reputation of being an easy lay. My first boyfriend was a freshman and I was a sixth-grader. He'd come over when my mom wasn't home. I'd kiss him and hold hands. Then he started wanting to do other things and I was like, "I don't think so." Well, I ended up giving in completely. It was the summer I was twelve. I felt so terrible. My mom came home from work that day and I was crying. I couldn't tell her so I made up a lie. I finally told her two years later. She was real understanding because she got pregnant when she was in sixth grade. She told me, "Your body is yours. Don't let anybody do something with it that you don't want them to."

I wish I could quit smoking. I just wish I had more willpower. I want to care more about what I do - have more respect for myself, more, morals. I decided I better get my butt in gear or I'd have to spend another year in school. Now, I've got my priorities straight. I ain't been in trouble. I don't lie anymore at all I don't drink either. If I want to have fun, I go bowl or play pool. I have two jobs now - babysitting [about 20 hours a week] and I help out at my mom's liquor store.

I used to have an attitude of "Fuck it - if it gets done it gets done. If it don't, it don't. No sweat off my back." But it is. If I pass, I get the credit. I get to graduate. It's not what someone else does. If I want to get anything, I've got to earn respect. I've got to start doing what's expected of me and what I know is right.

Mom and I are becoming actual friends. She's a lot more supportive. I think she wants to help me. I want to have a good relationship with my mom. We sat down - my mom, my stepfather, and me. We talked about how we wanted to be as a family. My stepfather is drinking less. He's working now. There's no fighting.

I can honestly say that the change started when I started talking to you. I've had counselors, but they're dipwits. It was like you really cared. And I didn't really have anybody who cared. I guess at the start you didn't bitch at me. You were here and you listened and you were just so supportive.

- Nicole

The Case Study: Background and Methodological Notes

Phi Delta Kappa wanted to know about students considered to be at risk of school failure. Of all the stories, whose might be neglected? Perhaps the

story of a white, middle-class girl attending school, living at home, in a small town's average-sized high school of 1,500 students, in a community of about 18,000 – would be neglected. Teachers and counselors at the school immediately agreed on a candidate: disarmingly candid Nicole.

Between December 1988 and March 1989, I spent about a dozen days on site: in classes, conferences, interviews, with school records; in the cafeteria; at the local burger joints, Nicole's house, and at the house where she babysits. I planned to blend in unobtrusively, but Nicole would have none of that. She seemed to relish having her footsteps dogged by a curious stranger. She stopped worrying about my note taking, acquiesced to my tape recorder, tried not to smile into the video camera when it, too, turned a relentless eye upon her. What would I like to know? Would I like to read this note from Aileen? What did I think she should do about her boyfriend? Did I agree this class was boring? Did I think that guy was cute?

She made research easy, but my role as researcher difficult. She undermined my attempts to recede into the background, insisted on seeing me as a person rather than as an observer, and invited me into her life.



Reflections

The adults in Nicole's life held contrasting opinions about Nicole's behavior and influences on it, and about her goals. The judge predicted and prescribed incarceration. Trying to be patient and flexible, teachers reacted to her attention seeking and wondered about her home life. The assistant principal thought Nicole might find success within social standards if her parents could persevere during her apparent failure. The director of student services was less optimistic, largely blaming her parents for Nicole's being "screwed up," even as he acknowledged that they would care better for her if they knew how. Nicole's counselor - who, of the school personnel, interacted with her most - noted she'd survived considerable adversity, thought she'd stay to graduate if she could hang on a bit longer, and encouraged her to attend college. Most of the school people suspected that she was more promiscuous and involved with drugs than she evidenced in interviews and observations. Nicole's mother was not uncaring, but felt her emotional resources exhausted and her authority diminished. She could summon little consistence or flexibility. She believed both she and the school had done all they could. She attributed Nicole's missteps entirely to Nicole and wondered what happened to the well-behaved little girl who made good grades. Her stepfather did not meet me.

During the three months of the study, Nicole's attitude changed noticeably from if s-my-life defiance to ifs-my-life-and I don't-want-to-blow-it responsibility. Throughout, she saw the negative consequences for her behavior as just. She saw that her effort was inconsistent but improving through her own conscious attempts. She expressed more and higher goals than any of the adults in her life perceived. I thought they would be surprised and heartened by her attentiveness to domestic chores, her work ethic outside school assignments, her fondness for children, her realistic attitude.

First and foremost, the disruptions in her family and living situation clearly undermined her academic motivation. Shifting family loyalties and frequent moves created instability and, probably, the attitude that life is essentially unstable. Second, her rebelliousness fueled family instability and contributed to a dysfunctional loop. Perhaps her rebelliousness would have remained within the bounds of typical teenage independence seeking if not for this vicious circle. Third, one manifestation of her rebelliousness was disregard for authority. Her willingness to escape rather than follow rules, to break the law, caused serious repercussions and grave concern.

Perhaps Nicole would have benefited from more consistent, positive encouragement. But many cared about her, listened to her, encouraged her; sometimes they threatened or punished her. Remarkably, she credited them with acting in her best interests whether she liked their actions or not. Her sense of responsibility was puzzling. Why did she misbehave when she knew it would bring trouble? Why did she accept all the blame for situations she only partly controlled? I wondered, and she and her counselors wondered with me, without much explanation. Was her sense of responsibility, or overresponsibility, innate? Did she acquire it in the discontinuities of her life or by default from her parents?

Teachers and counselors were struck by her attention seeking, taken aback by her unsolicited frankness, skeptical that she wanted the kind of help she requested. They doubted she knew what constituted socially acceptable behavior. They bent rules for her, wondered what else to do, worried about what would become of her. Nicole expressed disdain for the faculty in general but genuine liking for teachers individually. The general business teacher seemed to have understood best that there was a difference between being seen as a teacher and as a person. Nicole branded as "dipwits" the counselors who had listened and advised, although she had sometimes initiated contact. Why had she felt differently about me? You listened, she said; others listened, I said. You cared, she said; others cared, I said. You advised me even when you weren't supposed to, she said; I thought I hadn't, but what I said was that others had advised her. Again, the difference seemed to be a matter of personalization. Not without irony, I

found that 1, who was to have personalized her in my case study, had been personalized by her.

Primarily, the attention she sought seemed a plea for someone to listen and understand without criticizing or directing. She needed to know that her concerns were taken seriously. She needed to know that someone had confidence in her. She needed to know that someone cared about her.

The summer after I had finished writing my case study of Nicole, I brought a copy of the final report to her school along with a copy of the accompanying videotape. Three of her teachers watched those portions of the tape that showed classroom scenes and faculty-staff interviews; they were not shown Nicole's interview segments. They were given similar sections of the final report. The biology teacher told me that late in the spring semester he had intercepted a note from Nicole to a classmate in which she indicated concern that she might be pregnant. During final examinations, although her grades in biology were passing, Nicole stood off-campus smoking, and so she failed. This seems to have occurred with all her classes. I wondered if perhaps she thought she was pregnant and that her life would soon change dramatically; perhaps she saw no point in taking final exams.

Later the same day, I brought two copies of the final report to Nicole's home along with a copy of the videotape. One copy was for Nicole's mother (interviews with Nicole and the faculty and staff had been excised). Me other copy was for Nicole (interviews with her mother and the faculty and staff had been excised). "When I arrived, Nicole explained that she and her mother were at odds because her stepfather had been put in jail for burglary; Nicole had refused her mother's request to perjure herself in testifying in his defense. It was necessary for us to go to her high school to view the videotape.

Driving to the school, Nicole said, "I have a million things to tell you!" She told me that she had been romantically involved with a 30-year-old man earlier in the summer. "When she suspected he was married, she told her mother, who invited the man and his wife to come for discussion. I could hardly imagine this foursome's conversation. Nicole did not mention how the school year had ended.

When we arrived at the school, I showed Nicole the classroom segments of the videotape and her own interviews. She had cut her hair over the summer and, seeing how photogenic she had been with her long, dark curls, she remarked, "God, maybe I shouldn't have got my hair cut off." She grew quiet, watching intently as she heard herself talk about her improvement at school - raising grades, increasing respect, even taking home papers to grade for one of her teachers. She heard herself talk about her improving

relationship with her mother, going to church, college plans, spending her money more wisely, not lying, her realization that it was up to her to make the most of her life and her intention to do so.

I had expected to talk with Nicole about the end of the school year and her plans; the "million things" she had wanted to say. But after watching herself on tape, she was silent. I later wondered if she had been sobered by the realization of how well she had been doing, how much she had thrown away.

After a few futile attempts at an informal interview, I asked her whether she would like our relationship to continue and, if so, in what form. I was profoundly startled at her half-joking reply: "Let me live with you. "My mind raced. It seemed highly unlikely that her mother would approve. The youngest of my three children, a son still living at home, was a month older than Nicole and very unlike her. My husband and I were at odds and, although I didn't know it at the time, would separate within six months. Thinking I had little stability to offer her, I responded to the joking sound in her tone. We decided that since we lived in different but nearby communities we would talk on the phone and get together from time to time. She asked for a copy of the parts of the tape she had seen.

Early in the fall when the tape shed requested was finished, I called before bringing it to her. Nicole's mother said she had moved to Oklahoma to live with an aunt. I was unable to get a telephone number or address. I sent the tape to her mother and called the school. Nicole had not requested her records, which suggested that she had dropped out of school. I checked with the counselors several times over the next few months but the situation remained unchanged.

She telephoned me in the spring. We arranged to get together for breakfast but unknowingly selected a restaurant that didn't open until lunch time. I waited in the parking lot, tried her home, and went to the business where shed said she was working. Her coworkers didn't know where she was. I went to her mother's place of business and got an address where Nicole and a boyfriend were living. It was a long way out in the country, a rickety apartment over a defunct meat locker. No one was home. I left a note on the door that remains unanswered.

Months later, a Christmas card to Nicole's mother's home resulted in a phone call when Nicole came to visit. One of the things she said left a strong impression: "A lot of things have happened since you saw me last. You wouldn't know me now. " We were unable to get together on that occasion. She said she expected to move back to town in February and would call me then. I called her mother in February; no Nicole.

There has been no further contact and little information to be gained in periodic requests. I called Nicole's mother again. The male who answered the phone said, nobody here gets along with Nicole. "Her mother said Nicole was living in a small city in northern Illinois and gave me the phone number of an aunt. When I called, an uncle answered the phone. "She lived with us for a while," he said, "but now she's living in an apartment with a couple of girlfriends in a different town. They don't have a phone. "Nor did he have any idea how I might reach Nicole. He said, "she stops by from time to time," and took my name and phone number to give her.

I hope she will call.