

## CHAPTER ONE

# Are You Sure You're the Principal?

*One time, in search of the principal, a visitor came to the front office. First he looked at the office clerk and asked if he was the principal. When the clerk, a man my age, indicated that he was not, the visitor turned to the secretary. Upon learning that she, a woman older than I, was not the principal, the person at last looked at me. He asked, "Where is the principal?"*

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

"Carl, if you don't get your black butt in that building, I'm going to pick you up and carry you in there!" said Eva, the social worker, to a student in front of the school.

"Well, I'm not going," he replied angrily.

Her statement raised all kinds of red flags for me. My mind raced with questions: She's also African American. I'm not. Am I missing something? What did she mean? Why did she say it that way? How did Carl hear it? Unsure, I focused on the power struggle that was definitely unfolding in front of me.

It was the first day of school. I couldn't believe this was happening. Eva's threat to carry Carl inside might have seemed plausible if he had been 5 years old, but Carl was 11 years old and he looked

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very strong. At this point, my youth and my wish to be taken seriously as a new principal overrode my common sense. I was afraid that my authority was going to be judged by whether I assumed responsibility for Eva's threat, so I took over. When I looked at Eva, I was sure that she didn't expect me to insinuate myself into their conversation. I felt that I was being judged as someone who was too young, too inexperienced, or too scared to death to deal as effectively with this situation as she had.

Carl glared at me, as if to frighten me away, and he will never know how close I came to retreating. I took a deep breath and asked Carl why he didn't want to come into the school, trying to find a peaceful solution to this problem. He wouldn't talk with me and remained adamant that he was not entering. Finally, under what felt to me like Eva's watchful and challenging eyes, I honored her threat and told Carl that if he didn't go into the school by the time I counted to three, I would carry him in.

Carl was just half a foot shorter than I, and he was much more agile and strong. Yet I picked him up and struggled to get him up the four steps of the entrance and into the school. I think my initial success was because he was so stunned that I actually would pick him up that he didn't completely resist. By the time we were in the building and Carl saw that I was serious, he intensified his refusal.

There were eight more steps to get to the corridor, unfortunately complete with a long banister, which Carl grabbed to keep me from moving us forward. I reached for his fingers, trying to pry them off the banister while still trying to move his mass and mine up the stairs. For a few moments, it was not at all clear who would win this battle, and I was compelled by the feeling that my whole principalship was riding on my victory. That is probably how I was able to do the impossible: I got Carl up the stairs!

Huffing and puffing, I asked the office clerk to please call Carl's mother. The office clerk, a male, asked if I would like to call her while he held Carl, but after coming this far, there was no way I would let go.

Probably only a matter of minutes elapsed before Carl's mother arrived, but it seemed like an eternity to me. As soon as she looked at me, I started to explain why I was holding Carl with such force, fearful that she might be angry with me for doing so. To my surprise, she had in mind a much more vigorous handling

of Carl than I ever would have considered. She glared at Carl and demanded to know why he had acted this way, forcing the principal to carry him in. I thought I detected some respect for my accomplishment in her voice as she interrogated him. Carl cowered in her presence and mumbled an apology to me before promising to be good and go to class. Carl's mother then directed her attention to me, saying that if I had any more trouble with Carl, I should just come and get her, and she would take care of him. It turned out that Carl's family resided across the street from the school and I mused how much simpler it would have been to go and speak to Carl's mother before embarking on my unheroic efforts.

After she left, I had a chance to notice what everyone else in the front office was doing. Everything had come to a standstill as people watched this drama unfold. I wonder whether they would have been as surprised if a large male principal had done what I did. They seemed very aware of what I had managed to do, and were perhaps a little frightened, not knowing how out of character this was for me.

As I stood there, I smoothed my clothing and ran my fingers through my hair in an attempt to achieve a look of composure. I felt something very strange happening to my lips. I went to a mirror and saw my lips swelling and turning a bluish purple before my eyes. Evidently I had bitten down on my lips in an effort to haul Carl up the stairs, and now I was wearing a badge of my courage in the form of bruised and swelling lips. Here I was, on the first day of school, and I looked like I had been in a brawl. Things were not starting out as I had envisioned, and this would be only the beginning of that problem for me.

## **LARGER THAN LIFE**

I often wondered whether I would ever be widely regarded as the rightful inhabitant of my position. Despite my efforts to establish myself as a caring and collaborative principal, I was continually amazed at how my staff clung to their old expectations of a principal. In the minds of some people, the image of a principal is firmly rooted in stereotypes of age, gender, and style. Because I didn't match some teachers' expectations, they perceived my actions

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with a more skeptical eye. Whatever I did or said always seemed colored by people's projections.

The staff never guessed that loneliness and fear were two of my most frequent companions. I had taken a big risk to become a principal, leaving a school where I was well established as a 1st-grade teacher, and moving to another state where I didn't know a soul. Rumor had it that I lived with a celebrity, but no one knew who he was because "he traveled incognito!" I was flabbergasted. Another version of the rumor was that I lived with an international airline pilot, but he was often away, so that's why no one saw him. How I wished that either of those rumors were true, when in reality I lived alone and longed for companionship.

Where did those rumors come from? Certainly I didn't create this image, yet people seemed convinced it was true. The belief that I had a glamorous lifestyle with exciting men was some sort of exaggerated fantasy that was flattering and baffling. As I tried to understand what engendered these assumptions, I wondered whether their speculations were really about me at all or whether they were about their projections. If only people knew how solitary my after-school time was.

Around that same time, I decided to take up jogging for exercise and to reduce stress. At first, I could barely go around the block without being totally winded, but I persisted, jogging each morning with a couple of neighbors before showering and going to work. In a meeting one day, I reached for a doughnut and one of the teachers exclaimed, "You eat doughnuts?" She asked how I managed to jog eight miles a day if I ate junk food.

"Eight miles a day!" I exclaimed. "I am working my way up to an eighth of a mile a day. Where did you ever get the idea that I could jog so far?" She didn't know, but she had great difficulty believing me when I said it was not true. In our school, I think that some of the female teachers were not only comparing me with my predecessors, they also were measuring their lives against the exaggerated versions of the life they thought I had.

Children also have had specific ideas about my image and role. Years after I became a principal, a kindergartner noticed a refrigerator in the staff room and asked her teacher, "Is that what Dr. Villani does, buy food for everybody?" Fourteen years older and I had moved from jet-setter and athlete to mega-mother. Another teacher once told me that she had explained to her class

that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was not a medical doctor, he was a doctor of freedom. "Oh, like Dr. Villani," replied an 8-year-old, elevating me to the stature of one of my own heroes.

One commonality of these stories is that they represent me as being larger than life. The principalship is a job that certainly has many responsibilities with many constituencies. Students, faculty, staff, families, and the community all have needs and expectations that often find their way to the principal's door. Maybe it shouldn't be surprising that there are stories depicting the principal as superhuman. It would seem to take someone with extraordinary abilities to do such a job successfully. Some people occasionally might revel in the myth of being perceived as superhuman, but I was very uncomfortable with it because it meant that I wasn't being seen as a real person. No one is superhuman, and any such expectation may result in disappointment, resentment, or anger.

During my first year, I found that some staff members were continually dissatisfied with much of what I was doing. I had difficulty pinpointing exactly why they were dissatisfied. I later realized their dissatisfaction was as much about the person I was and what I represented as about what I did. Although they were upset with their new principal, I believe they were even more upset that she could never be like her predecessors, let alone be superhuman. I was an unconventional principal in many ways, and it was very clear that some members of the staff were having great difficulty accepting me as their principal. Apparently, so did some of the community.

## **THE LOOK OF LEADERSHIP**

Before I began my first principalship, I heard that a large crowd had stormed a school committee meeting to protest my appointment the previous month. One man summed up their upset this way: "There are three reasons why she shouldn't be principal. First, she's a 1st-grade teacher and this is a school for 5th and 6th graders; second, she's five-foot-four and weighs 117 pounds; and third, she's a girl!" According to this speaker, only males, preferably large ones, could be effective principals.

I was probably the youngest adult on the school staff and I was nervous. I was eager to show everyone that I was the right

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choice for the job, so I tried to look the part for a job that didn't typically include young women. Instead of the more colorful suit I wore for the interview, I chose more somber-looking suits to wear to work. Although I understand my reasoning, I feel sorry for the young woman I was who felt she had to look more like a man. Instead of being excited about beginning my new career as a principal, I chose to deny parts of myself in an effort to be accepted. I was being unauthentic in order to survive and to dispel the predictions of my failure based on the stereotypes held by some members of the community. While being female is not as unusual now, there are other aspects of difference that these days may engender similar feelings in a principal.

Early my first morning on the job, I met a man who had once been the school principal and was still an administrator in the system. He offered to help me place incoming students.

Walking over to the telephone that had once been his, he dialed the other principal. "Hello, Mike, this is Sam. I'm in the new little girl's office." I barely heard the rest, being so stunned by both the comment he had made and the fact that he didn't seem to have the slightest idea of how dismissed and invalidated it would make me feel—or did he?

While we waited for Mike to arrive, Sam reflected on his years as principal. He was a tall, muscular man, a former athlete who struck an imposing stance. "Some of the kids here are very tough," he told me. "I used to play a little basketball with them, one on one, you know. And somehow after we played, they got the message and they would straighten out." He looked me over, noting my size, and then added, almost with a note of concern, "I don't know what you're going to do." Neither did I.

A staff member once said, "When Sam was here, it was different. He was like a father to us." I was stung by those words. I remember how my head throbbed. I could never be the father for whom some longed, and I knew I didn't want to be a mother to them either. I couldn't possibly give them what they wanted and still be myself, but could we find a way for them to get enough of what they wanted, while I would retain enough of the person I was?

I remember the queasy feeling I had in my stomach when I heard Sam's words. He had described a school where physical intimidation was part of the climate, and it scared me. I even wondered, briefly, whether I should register for a karate class. In

retrospect, it may have been Sam's comments that influenced my decision to respond to Carl as I did on the first day of school.

When I was a junior high school student, I had sympathized with boys who struggled because of the expectation that they show their strength by fighting. I had been glad to be a girl. Now, many years older, I was again facing expectations about using physical aggression to prove strength.

I didn't want to deal with discipline in Sam's way, not because I am a woman, but because it wasn't consistent with my values. I knew I couldn't lead in Sam's way, nor did I want to. I didn't know what my way would be, but I had to find a way that used my own strengths, the strengths I hoped I had.

The staff was confused by my attempts to lead; my approach was new to them. I was confused also; I had expected to be a principal the same way I had been a 1st-grade teacher, that is, to be authentic, to be myself. Yet it seemed that people had great difficulty accepting me the way I was. To Sam I was "the new little girl." To some teachers I was "larger than life." The more they saw what they expected, the harder I worked to be seen and understood as myself.

Sometimes I felt as though I was in one of those carnival mirrors in which the image was so distorted that I just wasn't me anymore. But we weren't in a carnival. This was real life, in a public school, with children to teach and a community to serve. They needed a real-life principal, not a distorted image of one.

So I became more and more intent on being a leader who was authentic and down-to-earth. Yet to overcome the varied and exaggerated perceptions, I had to put myself even more on display than I typically would in order to correct the misperceptions of the people in our school. People who are atypical for their role in a specific community may find that their differences are hard for others to understand and accept. If misperceptions result, we each must find our own way to be ourselves, while clarifying the misunderstandings.

I had not intended to be a leader who was so much in the center of things. I had wanted to work alongside colleagues and constituents as part of my leadership. I kept trying to change the focus from supposition about me to the educational goals and challenges of our school. I hoped, at least, that my persistence, as a demonstration of my caring, would convince more of the staff members to join me in doing what was best for the students. As things turned out,

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changing the focus from me to the needs of our school community was something I would have to do in each of my principalships.

### **A LITTLE RESPECT**

Although I had 10 successful years in two principalships behind me, this, my third principalship, challenged me as painfully as when I began my first. When I began my career, I naively expected that if I worked very hard to do the right thing, people would respect me. I was confronted quickly with the reality that effort and good intentions are not enough to do the impossible, which is to please everyone. Although the specifics were different in this principalship, some of the underlying tensions were just as powerful and painful. In fact, they may have been worse. Because I had had 10 years of experience as a principal, I felt ashamed to be in this predicament at this point in my career. Colleagues at my previous school were openly distressed about my departure, yet some of the staff at my new school were up in arms about my arrival. I asked myself, "How could this be happening again?" Dashed expectations and unmet needs are powerful forces in the dynamics of schools at any time. Is it even more dramatic when the person in the role who is not meeting these needs is different from the predecessor, or possibly different from people's expectations?

In this school, some teachers and I had worked very hard to build bridges. To create a more positive school community, a "lip sync" show was planned, and students, families, and staff were invited to participate. I had chosen Aretha Franklin's well-known song, "Respect," for my performance, and several students joined me as backup singers and dancers. The night of the Lip Sync Show, I arrived wearing a gold lamé blouse, a tight black skirt, mesh stockings, and lots of makeup. I started to relax when a 5th-grade girl looked me up and down and said, "Gee, Dr. Villani, you should look like this all the time!" A male teacher whom I had hired the previous year was visibly surprised to see me like this and said with some disbelief, "Wow, Susan, you look . . . you look sexy!"

Once on stage, I dramatically asserted the song's chorus and its plea for a little respect. I danced freely to the music, to enhance this plea for respect. I had taken a risk by stating my needs, and what I believed to be the needs of the school community, on stage.

At first, the audience was so stunned they were silent, but soon enough they were laughing and whistling. By using humor and music, and portraying a character people could relate to, I had acknowledged a tense situation at school without seeming to be self-pitying or belligerent. By the end of the song, I felt that I had earned some of the respect I so badly needed if I was ever going to be effective in this principalship.

Respect is the cornerstone of mutual relationships. My vision of a school community where collaboration results in heightened understanding and achievement required that all members respect each other. The strong differences of opinion among the staff about my value to them as a principal negatively affected their relationships with each other, as well as with me.

My sassy statement of the issues in my rendition of Aretha Franklin's song brought the complexities of our plight at school to the surface. Honestly and boldly acknowledging the problems our entire school community faced because there was a question about my efficacy brought us an important step closer to a solution.