SEXUAL HARRASSMENT IN THE SCHOOLS:
AN ISSUE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?

As told by Karen Jones

In the late 1980's, the overwhelmingly white, upper-middle class high school where I worked as an English teacher was integrated when a lower income, predominantly minority high school was closed across town. As students from a range of ethnic minorities began to attend school in a wealthy section of this metropolitan area, racial tensions were predicted. Coincidently, conflicts of another sort enveloped the school, centering around issues of gender discrimination and bias.

Part A of the case describes the activities that were the source of the controversy and explores the reactions of the administration, faculty, and students. Part B of the case traces Karen's personal and professional involvement as she attempted to halt what she felt was a heinous situation.

Part A

When the district decided several years ago that urban flight had left our city with too many high schools and not enough kids, they closed Crosspoint High, a school attended by low-income students and students of color. Crosspoint's students were distributed among three other area high schools. Roosevelt High, where I work, went from being a white, upper-middle class school to one with ethnic and socioeconomic diversity.

There were all kinds of meetings and plans and programs slated to ward off the racial conflict everyone anticipated. The principal at the time corralled me and asked me to go to a training program, the purpose of which was to prepare teachers to spot ethnic and gender inequity in schools, bring it to the attention of the administration, and educate other teachers on these issues so that they could eliminate them from their classrooms. I came back to the school and did some in-services, but the response was pretty typical: "Okay, fine. Just hurry up and get this over with, so we can get out of this meeting."

Surprisingly, as the school year started and the school was integrated, racial conflicts just didn't seem to surface. But issues of gender equity, which perhaps had always been there, seemed to reach a fever pitch. I'm not quite sure why that happened, but things got really ugly.

To me, it appeared that Roosevelt was run by a small group of white, upper-middle class boys—and their parents. I think that the events that occurred that year reflected issues of income and gender more than race. If there were wealthy male students of color, I think they would be accepted by this group. It just so happens that the rich and elite happen to be white, too.

Anyway, at the beginning of that first school year of integration, a group of these boys started a club. It was approved by the administration, which basically just means some student went into the office and filled out a form and an administrator signed off on it. There are no guidelines for clubs except that the club has to have a faculty advisor, though I can only hope he was clueless about what this club was really about. The boys called their club "WAC." If you asked them what it stood for, they told you WAC stood for "Women are C__s."

WAC had posters advertising their club all over the school. Here's what some of the posters looked like: There was one of a caveman and a Betty Boop cavewoman with huge breasts, and the

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caveman was dragging the woman by her hair. She was smiling gloriously, as though this was just the greatest. That was probably the mildest poster. Others showed pictures of women in chains with men dominating them. There were pictures of women as slaves, walking behind men and women in Middle-Eastern chadoras. The captions read, "We can teach our women to behave properly. All men join WAC."

Of course, as soon as the first posters went up, many teachers, including myself, went screaming to the administration. Both the principal and vice principal were men. There were men teachers as well as women teachers who were upset, but the most vocal were women from the English Department. We said, "This is a real problem. You've got to address this. Do you even know what the name of this club is?" And this is exactly what they said: "Oh, lighten up! Get a sense of humor!" They basically just patted us on our heads and sent us out the door. The one thing they did was to go to the boys who started this club and tell them that their name was offensive to a few people, so they would have to change it. They changed it first to "Women are Cuddly" and then to "We are Chauvinists." And that was that.

WAC was just the beginning of the madness that year. There was also another club, called RAM, Roosevelt Associated Men. RAM had an initiation ceremony right at the beginning of the school year, which they held right out in the courtyard during lunch. Any male students could join RAM, but their initiation rite was that they would be blindfolded and they had to grope over to a naked mannequin and unsnap a black lace bra with one hand. I guess if you could do that, then you were a real man and you could join this club. Another outrageous part of this initiation was that the mother of one of the boys provided the mannequin and the bra. She thought there was nothing wrong with what she had done or with what the boys were doing, although lots of other people thought there was something wrong. Several of the teachers went straight out to the courtyard when they got wind of it and confiscated the mannequin. They put it in the English Department office, which of course further implicated the women English teachers as the force against what these boys were doing.

Other teachers went screaming to the administration again, saying, "How dare you allow this?" The response again was, "Where's your sense of humor? Gee, you feminists don't know how to take a joke." The administration said they'd talk to the boys but basically what they told them was, "We want you to have your club, but these women in the English Department don't want you to."

This attitude was picked up by the kids, and pretty soon our own students were spouting the administration line to us, the teachers. We would say, "We're going to study a great author, Virginia Woolf," and the students would say, "Oh, is she another one of you feminists?" It would bring the whole class to a standstill. So the teachers who were really visible and really vocal in the battle were being ridiculed publicly by the students.

But not all the students felt that way. I have my students write journals and lots of girls wrote private messages to me. They'd say, "I'm so glad you're fighting this." Or, "I really hate how what's going on makes me feel." The majority of girls were embarrassed or upset, but they blamed themselves. They would write about how they felt it was their fault because if they had a good enough sense of humor, they wouldn't find it so offensive. But some of the girls did stick up for their boyfriends to prove they could take a guy joke. They'd tell me to back off: "If we don't mind, why should you?" I'd say, "Well, excuse me, but I do mind, and if I mind you should mind also."

The sexism, and the general attitude that it was okay, was so pervasive that even school assemblies were affected. Occasionally, the whole school would come together for an assembly put on by a student group or a class, or for an occasion or a holiday. But that year, these assemblies were the most obscene things. The students had started a new sport that they called "pole clumping." It went like this: A boy would run up to and jump on a pole, climb up, and writhe on the way down in a sexually suggestive way. The crowd would go wild while the boy did this. They'd do it during lunch too, on the columns in the hallways downstairs in the building. I saw other students gather around and cheer them on. They
would make insinuations like, "If he can clump that pole that well, I bet he could clump his girlfriend real well, too." The students would videotape the pole clumping and showed it at several of the assemblies. The faculty advisor and vice principal who were responsible for assemblies saw nothing wrong with it whatsoever. They just thought it was funny and said to us, "Come on, boys will be boys!" Eventually, though, they did ban the videotapes of pole clumping from the assemblies.

Pole clumping was only one of the mind-boggling activities that went on assemblies. When the dance club had a concert in the evening, the girls came out in skimpy costumes in one dance number and writhed around on the stage in what was a lewd dance. The boys in the audience just shrieked and hollered. And, in one assembly that involved the Pep Club, they did a skit where the girls dressed up as pregnant women and lay writhing on the stage floor while boys stood over them doing a bump and grind. It was astonishing. Even WAC, which finally was outlawed by the administration, was allowed to have skits— even when they were an illegal club. They dressed up as cavemen, dragging off giggling cavewomen by their hair.

After every one of these assemblies, some of the teachers would march out of the auditorium, right down to the principal's office, and scream bloody murder. "Did you see this? Did you approve this?" More and more teachers were getting angry, and by mid-year, about half the faculty was really up in arms. In response to this growing force, the principal would say, "I'll look into it. Yes, you are absolutely right, it's disgraceful." But then someone else—a teacher or an administrator—would say, "Get a life." "Worry about something that matters. This is so petty." "Lighten up." "We need to let the kids have freedom of speech." And so nothing was being done.
Part B

The situation came to a head in March of that school year when student body elections were held. There are some stipulations about what you can put on a poster for display in the school, but basically they have to do with cost and size and where they are allowed to be hung. The content matter is not addressed. That year, poster after poster after poster showed men brutalizing women and women in submissive roles. It was really bad.

I had had just about enough so I called the ACLU and told them what had been happening and how the administration hadn't done anything about it. They said it sounded like I had a case and told me to call the State Labor Commission. I did, and the man there told me to write a letter explaining my concerns and detailing what I wanted the school administration to do. He told me to send him a copy, give the principal a copy, and send a copy to the district personnel director.

I drafted the letter along with another teacher, a man who was very conservative and very religious. I wanted to be sure the letter was not too emotional—I wanted it to be a letter he would feel comfortable signing as well. Well, we spent a few days drafting the letter and other teachers heard about it and wanted to sign it. It turned out that out of our faculty of 120, 57 teachers signed the letter. Our major request was that the administration establish some guidelines for club charters, school activities and assemblies, and posters that were displayed on school property. These guidelines would prohibit discriminatory or degrading content based on gender as well as ethnicity.

I went to the principal and told him who I had called, showed him the letter, and told him who I was going to send it to. I said I wanted to be upfront and honest with him about it. He said, "Great. I support you. But I'd like you to take this letter to the School Improvement Council before you send it to anyone and see if the situation can be resolved there." This ugly mess had been going on all school year and I—and others—had been in his office about it countless times to no avail. I really didn't want to wait another two weeks before the Council met to take any action, but I reluctantly agreed.

The School Improvement Council is comprised of a group of teachers, administrators, and parents. On the afternoon of their meeting, I was actually hopeful as I went before them. A few of my colleagues went with me to present the case. As I began to discuss the situation, I could see that I would get nowhere with these people. I was getting the brush-off. "There's no problem at Roosevelt," they told me. "There's no need for guidelines. But, if you want, you can bring it up again next year." When I left the meeting I was furious. I walked up to the first mailbox I saw and deposited the letter.

That evening, I went to dinner with another teacher from the school. Coincidentally, at the restaurant we ran into a mutual friend who worked for a local TV station. "Hey, you've got to hear what's been going on at Roosevelt," my colleague said. Of course, our reporter friend wanted to put this story on the news.

The following Monday, this reporter showed up at school, got copies of the assemblies that were on video, took them back to the station, and aired segments that evening on the news. Another teacher and I were asked to go down to the station and make comments, which were aired later that same evening.

Half the community was outraged by what they saw. Many parents called the administration in outrage saying, "How dare you let my children see assemblies like that! What's going on? Who's in charge over there? But, the other half was outraged that this other teacher and I would dare say bad things about Roosevelt. Even though 57 other teachers had signed the letter, it became my problem. "If she was not such a feminist, we wouldn't have this problem."

The next day, when I came to school I stopped in the office to pick up my mail from the teacher
mailboxes. The principal came flying out of his office, screaming at me. Many other teachers were standing around as well as students and the secretaries. He was screaming so loud that a lot of what he said was incomprehensible. He kicked me out of the office and told me never to come back. The principal did not speak to me for the rest of the year, and someone else had to go down everyday to the office to pick up my mail for me.

Immediately, students said to me in class, "I saw you on the news last night." There had been students in the office when the principal was screaming at me and, of course, that quickly got around the school. Some of the more concerned students asked me if I was going to get fired. But, there were boys who stood just outside my classroom and called me a "f__ing b__h," "lesbo," "Nazi," and "man hater" through the door. Those first few days, I'd be right in the middle of a lesson, on anything from Herman Melville to editing a passage, and a student would raise his hand and say, "Why do you hate men so much?" Both boys and girls would ask me that. So a lot of class time was given over to fielding their questions and explaining my position. I was worried about spending time in that way because I'm an English teacher and it really isn't subject matter. And, I felt the administration was scrutinizing every word I said and every move I made. But still I felt I had to answer their questions, even the silly ones like "If you sued, would you get a million dollars?" They really wanted to understand, and in the end it was a good social studies lesson for them. This was something I had done because I felt strongly about it.

Besides the conversations with the students, the notes from the parents really sustained me those first few days. The very next day I started getting handwritten notes from parents, which the students brought in. I never got a note from a parent who thought I had done anything wrong. Rather I got notes that said, "Thank you very much. I'm glad my daughter has a teacher like you." I'd pull the notes out of my desk and read them every once in a while when I was feeling kind of shaky and scared.

The situation was so divisive in the school, with teachers who were for and those who were against. For the first few days after the letter was mailed and the TV station aired the segment, I was terrified to step out of my room. I thought, "I'm going to lose my job. I've only been here a few years. I just know that somehow the principal will figure out a way to get me out of here."

There was a lot of discussion among the faculty about whether or not I had a right to speak up. Had I broken some unspoken bond by bringing shame to the school, by airing our dirty laundry in public? The teachers who had signed the letter were in shock those first few days too, because the principal was just going in and out of classrooms, screaming at people. In fact, one of the teachers in the school put a sign up on his door that said, "I stand in solidarity with Karen Jones and the teachers who signed the letter." The principal came screaming into his class one day, ripped the sign up, threw it on the floor, and stomped on it in front of his class of students.

But after a few days, many of the teachers rallied and said, "Gosh, she is carrying this weight for all of us. We believe in what she did. We all signed the letter too." And they started coming into my room to give me hugs and say, "You hang in there. We're behind you 100%" And when the principal would stop someone in the hallway and say, "That d__ Karen Jones, she started all this trouble." They'd say, "No, you're the administrator. You needed to do something about these problems." They were standing up to him.

A couple of months later, right at the end of the school year, a group of faculty got together and put a lot of pressure on the principal to apologize to me. We hadn't spoken since that run-in in the office in March. So it was the final day of school, and I had to go in and have him sign me out for the year. It was just procedure. He said he was very sorry things had turned out the way they had, and he was looking forward to working with me again in the future, and maybe our communication would be better enhanced. It was really a round-about apology. But his approval wasn't really what I was looking for.
I was actually feeling pretty good about how things had turned out by then. Of course, there still weren't any guidelines—and there still aren't. To this day, five years later, we still have inappropriate clubs. For instance, last year, the boys had a "Hooters" club and they elected one girl a week as an honorary member for her "enthusiastic spirit." Of course, these girls were always very large chested. This club even put their honorees on the school television network. Eventually, the club was banned, but because there are no guidelines upfront, things have to happen after the fact.

But there are some things that are different. Parents who didn't feel they had any power in the school feel differently now. You know, there was always that group of parents—the parents of the most popular boys who seemed to run everything. Those wealthy parents all stuck up for their sons in this controversy. They were the ones who didn't see any problems at the school. But a lot of the other parents were on my side, and they were saying, "Boy, we wondered when anybody was going to do something about that. That was pretty disgusting." So when this all happened, those parents were happy to support me because it was also a retaliation against those very powerful parents.

I think the whole experience was also good for the teachers because they gained a voice they never had before. They are more vocal and more confident now. The next year, when they went into the principal's office to complain about inappropriate activities, they would say, "Have you learned absolutely nothing from what has happened? We have the government and the parents behind us now." One group of female teachers actually held a retreat and discussed filing a sexual harassment suit. The administration doesn't dismiss us so readily anymore or tell us to learn to take a joke. For example, the Hooters club was eventually banned. But because there are still no guidelines upfront, all action is still after the fact.

And finally, I think the whole experience has been really good for the students. They've found out, especially the girls, that they don't just have to sit quietly and feel bad about what's going on. I've seen lots more students stand up and say, "Wait a minute. Something wrong is going on here." I'd like to think I've had something to do with that. You know, at the beginning, it was really hard and I was vilified by a lot of people. But now, people are more inclined to say, "Boy, she really sticks to her guns. She'll back up what she believes in. She's a really moxy lady." So at least I have that to feel good about.