



### Picking Battles

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On an afternoon in January, Caitlin Crosby, a freshman social studies teacher at Kenan High in Crossville, Florida, invited two of her colleagues to meet with her after school at a local Starbucks. Ms. Crosby was troubled by the news that Kenan’s beloved football coach and history teacher, John Upchurch, was in the process of getting approved to carry a handgun on campus. In order to do so he would need the approval of the principal, the district, and the sheriff’s office. In one week there would be a school board meeting, for which many members of the community (faculty, parents, administrators, students) were expected to be present.

The meeting had been organized in order to gain community feedback on the prospect of arming faculty members at Kenan, and would directly address Coach Upchurch’s pending application. It looked likely that the application would be well-received at the meeting, based on the loudest community members’ ongoing support for armed security on campus. When she heard about the meeting, Ms. Crosby was immediately inclined to speak out against having guns on campus. She invited her colleagues to meet with her in the hope of gaining their feedback on the issue, and to ask for their advice on addressing the community.

Ms. Crosby’s colleagues, Angela and Gene, had both been teaching at Kenan longer than she had. Gene came in as a professionally certified teacher after majoring in education in college, and had been teaching English at Kenan for seven years. Like Ms. Crosby, Angela came to Kenan with a temporary certificate, and was approved by the district for her professional certification after teaching science and taking required education courses for three years. The three teachers were all young, twenty-something white women who had grown close in their time working together.

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“You know how I feel about guns in school. If we let this happen, who’s to say other teachers and staff won’t get on board and try to get approved themselves?”

It was a warm afternoon in the fall, and Ms. Crosby had brought two of her close friends and colleagues to meet with her after school at the local Starbucks. Crosby getting visibly agitated by her colleagues’ responses to her concerns over the changing gun policies at their school, Kenan High. Going into the meeting, she had expected more support; in the past, the three of them had laughed over Facebook posts and suggestions from parents that teachers should be armed in the classroom. Angela had once remarked that if she didn’t even have a place to lock her purse at school, where was she supposed to lock up a gun? But things had changed since the Parkland shooting.

Stoneman Douglas High School, where a gunman opened fire and killed 17 students almost one year prior, is less than four hours away from Crossville. The shooting, which devastated students and teachers across the nation, was followed by a strong student-led push for gun law reform in Florida. The state responded to this push by moving legislation which both raised the minimum gun-purchasing age to 21 and allowed for some school employees to be armed under certain conditions. The new law stipulated that teachers who exclusively perform classroom duties would not be allowed to carry a gun unless they had military or law enforcement experience.<sup>1</sup>

Coach Upchurch qualified on both accounts: in addition to being the school's football coach and therefore not exclusively a classroom teacher, he was an army veteran. If anyone was going to be approved to carry on campus, he was the obvious choice.

"Caitlin," Angela responded to Ms. Crosby, "you know that no one wants this. The idea that anyone would be allowed to carry on campus, especially in the classroom, makes us all uncomfortable. But it's not like there aren't already guns at school."

Gene nodded. In the past academic year alone she'd had three students bring guns to class, and that was only counting the ones who had been caught.

"So you want to encourage that by introducing one explicitly? You don't think giving the football coach permission to bring a gun to school normalizes it even further?" Ms. Crosby retorted.

"What I'm saying is that there will always be guns at school, whether we're aware of them or not. Isn't there some security in knowing that one of them is in the hands of someone who has our kids' safety at heart?"

"Regardless of whatever he has at heart, Upchurch is a veteran in his sixties. He hasn't been in combat for years, and even if he had, you think his handgun is going to protect the school against an AR-15?" Ms. Crosby rubbed one of her temples after she spoke. She was trying to be patient with Angela, but the topic was hitting too close to home for her to remain neutral.

"Caitlin," Gene said to Ms. Crosby, shifting her attention from the latte she'd been quietly nursing, "you know I agree that we shouldn't be arming teachers. But if you speak out on this, I don't think it's unreasonable to say that you could get a bad rep with the district. What about your sex education initiative, the one you wanted to propose as soon as your professional certification was secured? Couldn't this jeopardize your opportunity to introduce projects like that?"

It was true. Ms. Crosby had come to Kenan High with a number of hopes and ideas for future projects. Having grown up in the area herself, she knew how deeply entrenched the culture of the community and the school were in what she considered to be antiquated, toxic ideologies;

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<sup>1</sup> "Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act," Florida Department of State Library and Archives of Florida, <http://laws.flrules.org/2018/3>. See page 6.

gender-charged body shaming was amongst these. As a college student out of state, she had decided that coming back to her hometown would be an opportunity to be a force of meaningful change in a community that seemed resistant to progress.

“Gene,” Ms. Crosby responded, moving into one of the points over which she was most concerned, “over half of Upchurch’s team is made up of black and brown student athletes. How could you ignore that our minority-identifying students are at a greater risk of being seen as a threat than their white peers? And you want to introduce a *gun*, wielded by a white man, to that equation?”

The three went silent. Each of them had, at different points in the past, expressed concern over the role they played in the lives of their minority students as white female educators in a predominantly white school environment.

After a few moments, Angela spoke up again.

“You have some of his players in class, don’t you Caitlin? Have they said anything about it?”

Ms. Crosby took a moment to think before she answered. No, none of her students had voiced concerns to her directly. But it was not as though they weren’t talking about it. Recently she had overheard one of her black students, Anthony, joking with his white peer that if Coach Upchurch had a gun, all the black JV players like himself ought to start doing extra laps during practice “just in case.” The two boys had been laughing over the comment, but that moment stuck with Ms. Crosby. She knew that even if Anthony had real concerns, the social pressures of being in a predominantly white space could discourage him from voicing them. She asked to speak with Anthony after class that day, but the exchange did not go as she might have hoped.

“Please don’t tell anyone what I said, Ms. Crosby; you know we all love Coach. It was just a joke, I didn’t mean anything by it.” Anthony had said, gym bag in hand.

“Like I said, you’re not in trouble, Anthony. I just want you to know that you can come to me if you have concerns like that. I know that it can be troubling to think about someone on campus having a gun.”

“I’m okay, Ms. Crosby, and I’m looking forward to our class discussion on...” Anthony had already moved on to another topic, and was visibly uncomfortable with the conversation. Ms. Crosby didn’t push it any further, and wished him a good weekend on his way out the door.

Ms. Crosby snapped back into the present, and shook her head ‘no’ in response to Angela’s question. Angela shrugged, took a sip of her latte, and jumped back into her line of reasoning.

“Our kids are used to being around guns. If you don’t think the lot of them are out hunting in their spare time...” she began, before Ms. Crosby cut her off.

“Come on, come on. You know that’s not the same. Our kids are over-exposed to guns in their home lives, and here they’re captive to the choices we make. At least when they’re here we can ensure that they’re not in the presence of guns.”

Gene shook her head.

“We can’t ensure that here, the same way we can’t totally ensure that what happened in Parkland won’t happen here. At least if it’s their coach, then the person with a gun on campus is someone they know and trust. If the district or the sheriff’s office don’t sign off on Upchurch, we’ll just get a random officer like at Forest High.”

Angela’s eyebrows lifted with Gene’s point, as she was reminded of a conversation they’d had a few weeks back, “Exactly! Caitlin, you were the one who taught me so much about racial injustice and biases within law enforcement. Don’t you think it would be worse to have a police officer on campus?”

Ms. Crosby sighed, her frustration reaching a climax. Yes, she did believe that having a police officer assigned to the school could potentially pose an even greater risk at Kenan High, especially to the school’s minority students. But she felt hurt and confused that Angela and Gene seemed to be missing the point altogether; school was not a place for firearms of any kind, wielded by any individual, full stop.

The cappuccino machine buzzed in the background. A couple waiting in line seemed to be shifting on their feet as they overheard the conversation between the three women. One barista had been looking up occasionally over the course of their time in the cafe, his expression reflecting curiosity.

“If we let this happen, we’re opening the floodgates. Who knows how many teachers will suddenly decide they can play hero with a gun in the classroom. If we sit back like boiling frogs, we are complicit in normalizing guns in school.” Caitlin contended with a tone of finality.

Angela and Gene looked at each other, then back at Caitlin. Gene cleared her throat and delivered her response in a half-murmur.

“Just remember who’s going to be at the meeting, Caitlin. The school board, the principal. Practically everyone who needs to sign off on your professional certificate next year. Neither of us would want to see you put too much at risk over this.”

The teachers were all feeling deflated as they wrapped up the meeting and went their separate ways. On the drive home, Ms. Crosby continued to wrestle with these ideas. The sight of the highway reminded her of the journey home from college, on which she had decided to pursue a temporary teaching certificate and be the change she wanted to see in her hometown. She had attended Kenan High as a teenager; several of her now-colleagues had been teaching there when she was a student. If Kenan wasn’t such a significant part of her identity as both an educator and an individual, maybe she could leave. But in Caitlin’s mind, leaving in the middle of her first opportunity to be a force for change just wasn’t an option.

But Angela and Gene had raised some thoughtful points. The school board meeting was only a week away, and Caitlin wished she could have even just a little more time to figure out what she would do. Publicly speaking out against one of the school's most popular figureheads on an issue over which there seemed to be consensus against her could mean alienating herself. If the community didn't trust her, how could she continue to introduce her students to transformative ideas in the classroom without unreasonable scrutiny? How could she gain the collaborative relationships she would need if she wanted to make a difference at Kenan? Still, she thought of Anthony, and considered how many students like him might have fears and concerns that they didn't feel they had the power to raise. If she didn't use her power and privilege to speak out, what else would she stay silent on in the future?

Caitlin Crosby had always been an activist at heart. Now, she sat back behind the wheel of her 1995 Dodge Dakota and wondered what her activism could look like in both the classroom and the broader Kenan high community.