



Keeping It Private: Challenges of Boarding School Mentorship

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Setting
The Sibley School, a secondary boarding school (ages 14-18) in the United States
Primary Characters
Jennifer Montrose: Development officer and mentor Rachel: Grade 12 student Emily: Grade 12 student and Jennifer's mentee

The Sibley School was a coeducational, private boarding high school, with a long history, sterling reputation, and mission to spark a passion for learning and civic engagement. In order to foster a diverse school community, Sibley prided itself on being able to cover as much financial aid as students required in the hopes of making attendance at the school a real possibility for all young people, irrespective of their family's income. While the school had a sizable endowment, their generous financial aid policy relied largely on donations from parents and alumni. Jennifer Montrose was proud of the work she did in Sibley's development office, raising funds for scholarships and building relationships with donors.

In addition to its diverse community, Sibley also prided itself on its strong mentorship program. Every fall, each member of the new freshman class was paired with a staff mentor. In surveys conducted by the admissions department, parents reported that the mentorship program was a key reason they chose Sibley over other boarding schools in the region, which like Sibley offered well-regarded academics and a wide array of extracurricular offerings. Parents knew that at Sibley their children were well cared for by mentors with whom they formed a real, lasting bond and to whom they could turn for advice and guidance. And it wasn't just the parents who felt this way. Most students reported that Sibley's mentorship program was a highlight of their time at the school, especially for the many students away from home for the first time.

Sibley invested significant resources into their mentoring program. New staff members attended a week-long intensive to learn how to be a Sibley mentor. Among other responsibilities, mentors were required to meet with their assigned mentee(s) each morning and be a 24/7 contact for those students, with the goal of forming strong and trusting mentor-mentee bonds. The mentor filled an *in loco parentis* role, taking on many of the responsibilities and functions of a parent. With students living away from home, sometimes quite far from home, the role was especially powerful. Since Sibley worked to attract and support a diverse student body, mentors proved to be invaluable in helping to ensure all students felt welcome and supported from their first moments on campus.

A long-standing member of Sibley's development team, Jennifer was one of the mentorship program's most vocal supporters. That spring, she mentored ten seniors, all of whom she had worked with since their freshman year. The students all lived in the same dorm as Jennifer and truly adored having her as their mentor. Although dorm living had its drawbacks, Jennifer loved living among the students and getting to know them on a personal basis, particularly as her role in development was not often

student-facing. Jennifer had even become one of the assistant coaches for the women's lacrosse team three seasons ago, to gain another opportunity to work closely with Sibley's students. In fact, it was the ability to work in development *and* work directly with students that drew her to Sibley in the first place. During her own high school experience, several faculty members had helped her through tough times. She was glad to have the chance to help her mentees in the same way.

Although Jennifer was close with all of her mentees—and many of the students in her dorm and on the lacrosse team as well—she was closest to Emily. Emily had lived in Jennifer's dorm for three of her four years at Sibley and joined the lacrosse team the same season that Jennifer first signed on as an assistant

coach. Emily was a dedicated lacrosse player, in good academic standing, with only one infraction on her record for plagiarizing during her freshman year. Nevertheless, her Sibley experience had been occasionally rocky, and Emily had leaned on Jennifer for support countless times throughout her time at the school.

The most consistent challenge for Emily was her difficult relationship with her parents, who were prominent members of the school community in their own right. Emily's parents were both alumni of Sibley and made large annual contributions. In fact, their donations contributed heavily to Sibley's generous financial aid program, which was a hallmark of the school and a centerpiece of its push for a more diverse student body. As a result, Jennifer worked closely with Emily's parents both in her role as Emily's mentor and as the steward of their annual giving through the development office. Although she occasionally felt awkward at development events when Emily's parents pressed her for details about their daughter's life at Sibley, so far Jennifer hadn't run into any major challenges.

Emily had originally been concerned about coming to Sibley, not out of fear of being away from her family like a lot of her peers, but because she was afraid that her parents' stature in the community would keep her from achieving independence. Emily confided in Jennifer early on about struggles she had with her parents, including the pressure they put on her to get all A's. After the plagiarism incident, her parents even threatened to remove Emily from Sibley if she were to get more than one B or end up with another infraction on her record. Jennifer had observed the toll this pressure had taken on Emily during her high school career and had spent many hours with Emily crying in her office, afraid she was not living up to her parents' expectations.

And then, in her junior year, Emily had come out. Only to Jennifer at first and then, eventually, to one of her closest friends. She was not out to the larger Sibley community, which still had a long way to go toward fostering a truly inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ students despite its stated mission to create a "diverse school community, encouraging all students to bring their authentic identities to school." Although Jennifer—along with a handful of other mentors who had worked with students struggling with Sibley's school culture—had long lobbied the administration for new inclusion initiatives, the school was slow to act on their recommendations. Emily was also afraid of coming out to her parents because of their conservative views about LGBTQ+ issues. According to Emily, coming out to her parents would only further cement their belief that she wasn't living up to their expectations. Unsurprisingly, then, Emily had talked about not coming out to others during high school at all.

Jennifer appreciated Emily's openness and had done her best to be a sounding board for her and create a space, albeit a small one, where Emily could be her authentic self. She did, however, have concerns about Emily withholding this information from her parents. While Emily's parents could certainly be hard on her, Jennifer believed they loved her and wanted the best for her. She had tried numerous times to encourage both parties to have more open dialogue with each other, but hadn't made any major strides. In fact, Jennifer had already had a few awkward moments where she had felt Emily's parents

pushing her for information about their daughter's personal life. Although she had managed to artfully dodge their probes so far, Jennifer wondered whether her *in loco parentis* role required her to share such important information—information she believed had implications for Emily's health and wellbeing at school!—with Emily's parents.

Moreover, as a development officer, Jennifer needed to maintain a strong relationship with Emily's parents as high-level donors. She feared that if Emily's parents discovered that Jennifer was withholding information about their daughter from them, they might terminate their funding, or worse, remove Emily from Sibley as they had threatened to do when displeased with her conduct in the past. Jennifer took her responsibility to care for Emily as her mentee seriously. Yet she knew better than most people on campus just how much money financial aid and meaningful inclusion initiatives like the mentorship program cost Sibley. She worried that losing such big donors would hurt numerous students currently on campus as well as countless prospective students.

With Emily just a few months away from graduation, Jennifer looked forward to putting this conflict behind her. She was so proud of Emily for the way she had navigated her time at Sibley, and she was excited to celebrate with her and her parents in June. She hoped that Emily would find both independence and a more inclusive environment at college in the fall.

One night in early spring, Jennifer was making her nightly dorm duty rounds, checking to see that each student was in before curfew. She hoped to check in with Emily that evening about a missed lacrosse practice; such behavior was unusual for Emily. Walking up to Emily's room, she knocked on the door and heard hurried fumbling from the other side.

"Wait!" Emily called, sounding panicked.

Jennifer felt concerned—what was happening in there? She hesitated for a moment—though she knew she had the right to enter as a staff member, she tended to wait for a student's permission—but then pushed the handle and entered the room. There she saw Emily and her classmate Rachel, furiously throwing clothes back on.

"I'll give you a minute to get dressed," Jennifer said, turning back towards the hallway. She worked to remain calm, but her heart was pounding and her mind racing. Engaging in sexual activity—including undress—was an egregious violation of Sibley rules. According to school policy, Jennifer was required to tell Emily and Rachel's parents that they were undressed and likely engaging in sexual activity on school property and to write them up for a school infraction, leading to punishment that could stop just short of expulsion.

"Oh my God, Ms. Montrose, I'm so sorry," Jennifer heard Emily blurt out from the doorway. She turned to see Emily blushing furiously, looking at her with terrified eyes. Rachel looked down at the floor, close to tears. Jennifer was speechless for a moment.

"Are you girls okay?" she finally asked gently.

They both nodded, mute.

"Let's talk about this in my office tomorrow morning. 8am," she told them. "Don't mention this to anyone else before that— I won't either. Now you should get back to your rooms; it's almost curfew."

Rachel scurried down the hallway to her own room. Emily went back into her room and turned back to Jennifer for a moment. She stared at her for a moment, eyes welling with tears, before closing the door.

Left alone in the hallway, Jennifer felt a strange sense of happiness for Emily, who had perhaps found someone with whom she could be her true self. But her happiness was soon replaced by a sense of dread. What repercussions—academic and social—would the girls face if she reported the infraction? She wished desperately for a colleague she could turn to for advice. But anyone she told would be under the same responsibility to report the incident, and Emily hadn't come out to any other adults on campus. Overwhelmed and alone, Jennifer headed back to her room.

That night, Jennifer hardly slept. Her immediate thought was to handle the situation on her own by talking directly to Emily and Rachel and coming up with disciplinary action amongst themselves. She feared that Emily's parents would react horribly to the news of her being gay—they might remove her from Sibley only months before graduation, potentially retract their funding, or any other number of negative outcomes. And the fact that she had withheld the information for so long would make them even angrier. Yet she didn't believe she had the right to take away Emily's chance to come out to her parents herself. Telling her parents would be a huge violation of Emily's trust. She wasn't sure whether Rachel had come out to her family, but she didn't believe that she was out to the school community. Bringing this to either set of parents felt wrong.

At the same time, she knew that by withholding the information, she risked losing her job if anyone ever found out. There hadn't been many cases of staff being let go from Sibley, but the few that she knew of were due to staff neglecting to report infractions. Jennifer had struggled before with reporting infractions to the school, especially when doing so risked losing a student's trust, but she acknowledged that some things shouldn't be handled by individual teachers working alone. And unfortunately, students having sexual relations on campus struck her as one of those things.

Jennifer woke up early the next morning, still turning over and over in her mind what she should do about Emily and Rachel. The school rules were crystal clear. The girls had violated a major school policy and, technically, she was required to report what she saw to the administration. She knew that there would be flexibility in the exact punishment the girls would receive, but she also knew that their parents would have to be informed no matter what. Moreover, while she loved many of her colleagues, she knew that not everyone at Sibley understood just how hard it could be for LGBTQ+ students on campus. She doubted that her colleagues on the disciplinary committee would be inclined to leniency as she was.

Jennifer looked out her window onto ivy-covered brick buildings lit up by the morning sun. Her meeting with the girls was in less than an hour. Could she somehow uphold the rules and values of Sibley's disciplinary code while also honoring the relationship she had built with Emily over the last four years? What would she say to the girls?

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