

WIDE MARGINS

Paying attention to students who don't fit in.

By Lee Burdette Williams

THIS IS, I THINK, a story within a story. Within another story.

I was outlining my plan for Wednesday's class. On the syllabus for my Student Development Theories course was the topic of "Mattering and Marginality," as presented in the work of Nancy Schlossberg. It's my habit to begin most discussions with a story about a recent event or conversation in order to illustrate the theories we discuss. In this case, I wanted an example of how either an institution or a person had made a decision or created a policy that marginalized particular students, followed, of course, by an example of something that had communicated to students that they mattered. But sometimes I don't have a story.

And then I went to a meeting of Women's Center volunteers.

It was our usual twice-monthly meeting, the first of the Spring semester, and it went smoothly, with the usual committee reports and discussions of upcoming events. Afterwards, I was approached by a new volunteer, one who had joined us at midyear. Except for some brief conversation during our one-day midyear training, I'd not spoken to her and knew virtually nothing about her other than her name, Maria.

"Are you going back to your office?" she asked me. "Yep—I'll be up there in a couple of minutes," I responded, not without some trepidation, as this sort of entrée usually means a student is unhappy or distressed with something within the organization.

"Is it okay if I come talk to you?"

"Of course," I replied. But I didn't really feel that way. It was almost six o'clock, and I still had work to finish before I went home. Sometimes, though, stories have lives of their own, and they don't really care about my schedule.

She appeared at my door ten minutes later. I invited her in and pointed to the sofa. "Make yourself comfortable."

"Mind if I close the door?"

"Of course not," I replied. But I didn't really mean it. That's never a good sign when you're trying to wrap up your day. It's not

that I don't care, or don't want to talk with students in distress. But I sensed she had some complaint about the Women's Center, and given the particular culture of that organization, it wouldn't be an easy fix for me. It would require encouraging her to voice her concerns to the group, or whatever person she might have an issue with, and then listening to their response, and then encouraging them to hear Maria's concerns not as criticism but

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as an investment by her in the organization, and yada yada yada— this kind of thing can go on for weeks.

But that was not her story. This is.

“YOU’RE GOING TO think this is so stupid, and I really feel dumb coming to you about this.”

“You don’t need to feel that way. I’m glad you came.”

“I wanted to tell you about something that happened at training, that’s been on my mind, that I thought you should know about. It’s about when we did that name game.”

It was the standard exercise to help twenty-five people get to know each other’s names at least a little—stand in a circle, each person says the names of those who’ve gone before her, then her own name. It means the first few people who get their turn have it easy, and those at the end of the circle have it very hard. Maria was toward the end.

“You probably don’t remember this, but when it was my turn, I just said to skip me, which we did.” I did recall her making that request, and we did indeed simply move on to the next person, as time was short, and I know from experience that some people are terrible at that kind of thing.

“I remember, but it was fine. Really.”

“No, it wasn’t,” she said to me, her gentle voice hardening slightly. “Um . . . I have this problem . . . I get these panic attacks . . . anxiety attacks, whenever I have to perform in front of a group like that. I get really scared and shaky. I know this about myself, and I’m working really hard on it, but I was just really scared at that moment.”

“Maria, it’s fine that you didn’t do it. I don’t think anyone really thought anything of it.”

“That’s my point. I was so completely humiliated, so embarrassed in front of everyone. I wanted to cry. But I kept it together until the game ended. And then everyone went to the restroom or got a snack. I was hoping someone, anyone, would come up to me and say, ‘hey, it’s cool, don’t worry about it.’ But no one did. No one seemed to care—even you. And I thought, wow, here’s this organization that always talks about how inclusive it is and how much each volunteer is cared about and matters to the group, and no one cared about me, and I was just . . . I was . . .” Her voice trailed off and tears welled in her eyes.

I sat there, stunned and stung. The game was my idea—just a last-minute idea when it looked like we

had some time to fill and I worried that people weren’t learning each other’s names. I *did* notice her skipping her turn. And I had done nothing.

“So, anyway,” she continued, “I wasn’t even going to come to today’s meeting. I wasn’t even going to stick with the Women’s Center because it just feels pretty hypocritical to me. But I thought I owed it to myself to tell you how I felt. And I owed it to you.”

I had no idea how to respond to all of that. Suddenly, the hour didn’t seem so late. In fact, I was embarrassed by my initial hesitation even to have this conversation. What I knew at that moment was that I was in the presence of one of those students who would lead me down some difficult, but ultimately important, path.

“Maria, first of all, I am so glad you came to tell me this. I know it wasn’t easy to do. And I am really glad that you came to the meeting today, and I hope you won’t give up on the Women’s Center. We’re not perfect, but this is a great group of people, and you have a lot to offer. I am so sorry . . . I am . . . not sure how to explain how I feel . . . Can I tell you a story?”

And this is mine.

“I USED TO BE a hall director at a women’s college. I had six students on my staff. Another hall director, Amy, and I decided to take our two staffs, twelve students, to a high-ropes course at another campus about an hour away. Both Amy and I were pretty experienced with other outdoor activities, and thought this would be a lot of fun and useful in team building. Our staffs agreed, and one morning we drove north to this other campus.

“Now, I should tell you about my staff. Two were on the crew team, one played basketball and volleyball, one was training for the Boston Marathon, and one was an accomplished dancer. And one, whose name was Karen, was not any of these things. She was the only African American on our staff. She was new to our hall; all the others had been there the previous year. And she was on the heavy side, physically.

“As the day went on, the others on our two staffs did pretty well on most of the elements. They were risk takers and really confident about their athletic ability. Karen didn’t do as well, but the course facilitators were really good about encouraging her and not pushing her to do more than she wanted. Sometimes I look at pictures I took of that day, and I see her up pretty high, balancing on logs, so I know she did some things she probably didn’t think she could.

“Anyway, at the end of the course, we got to the wall. You know about the wall, right? Where the group has to figure out a way to get everyone up and over?”

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Well, it wasn't too hard for some of my Amazonian RAs to hoist one another up there, and pretty quickly, it was Karen's turn. I think they were certain they could pull her up and over, but as they tried, it was obvious this was going to be a serious challenge. Not only was she kind of . . . well actually, quite a bit overweight, she didn't have a lot of upper-body strength to help them. Several lifted her from below, and the two tallest, who were close to six feet each, reached over to pull her up. They couldn't do it. They strained, and Karen strained, but it wasn't happening. They wanted to keep trying and convinced her to reach up again, but after about the third time, she was in tears and asked to be lowered to the ground.

"I think the others were embarrassed to have failed, but not nearly as embarrassed, I realize now, as Karen was. Her poor physical condition, her weight, her newness to the staff . . . it was like we put a spotlight on it all, you know?"

"So the course ended, and we had a discussion, but this thing never came up. The facilitators didn't mention it, and no one on either staff did, either. And I didn't. I never did. I can't believe that now—that I was so uncomfortable that I didn't ever talk about it, not to Karen or anyone else.

"She had a tough year as an RA. She was only a sophomore and was struggling academically, and she never really fit in with the staff. The truth was, she had originally applied to be on staff in another building, but because of her age, the Department of Residence Life traded her for an RA I had recruited from my own building. I know I resented them making that trade without consulting me, and I'm sure the whole wall thing—and my own inability to deal with it and with her—made the chances of a good year pretty impossible.

"You know, I blew it. Totally. Absolutely. And I know that now, because it's been ten years, and I've learned a lot about these kinds of things. One of the things I've learned is that ropes courses are risky for reasons you don't always think about. And here's what's different, Maria: I have never, not once since then, approached a ropes course, high or low, or any kind of physical activity with students, without thinking about Karen and how bad she felt at that moment and the rest of the year. I never got to say this to her, but it's my promise to her—

that I will always take into consideration the feelings of my students and never allow anyone to be humiliated in that setting. I also remind others, pretty regularly, of that same thing, and have convinced some people to try less risky activities, or at the very least, to carefully assess the physical condition of participants. And no, she'll never benefit from what I've learned, but lots of other students have, I think, since then.

"And now you tell me this, you tell me about this name game, and I can't help but think that you're not the only one who's felt this way playing this game. So I want to promise you this: I will never use that exercise again. I'll find other ways for people to learn one another's names. But please stay with us. And give me another chance. I promise you I'll be a better person and a better professional because you were brave enough to come talk to me."

And she did stay, I'm relieved to say.

A few weeks later, I was with a group of staff members planning some icebreaking activities for another group of students, and someone suggested that same exercise. "No, let's not do that," I said. "I had a student tell me that those sorts of activities cause her to have anxiety attacks, and I promised her I wouldn't use that one anymore."

My colleague looked irritated and said, "Hey, life's full of tough things."

"Yeah, it is," I agreed. "That doesn't mean I have to add one more. Let's just do it some other way," and the group agreed.

BACK TO my original story: I went to class the next day, made a few announcements, listened to some others, collected some papers, and then sat up on the table in front of the room. "Today, we're going to be talking about Schlossberg's idea of Mattering and Marginality—how some students feel they matter to people and to organizations, and how some others feel they don't, and what role we play in all of that. I'd like to tell you a story—two, actually, about two different women, ten years apart, who taught me a lot about how easily I can make people feel marginal when I'm careless.

"At the end of last week's Women's Center meeting, a new volunteer came up to me and asked if I was going back to my office . . ."

