

***“IT’S NOT THAT I DON’T TRUST YOU,
I DON’T TRUST THE SYSTEM”***

Bonnie’s Story

Obviously having just awakened, Bonnie answered my knock in her pink bathrobe. She had forgotten our appointment, and Saturday is her only day to sleep in. Unfortunately, it was also the only day Bonnie could find the time to meet with me. I felt a sense of dread similar to what it must feel like cutting off a needed air source from a deep-sea diver below decks. I could see this woman needed her sleep.

We were off to a shaky start that was not profiting from my having forgotten to call the previous day and remind Bonnie of our earlier scheduled interview. I walked into the apartment as we both began apologizing for our forgetfulness. Trying to determine if rescheduling wouldn’t be the best idea for everyone, I realized my intentions were not merely to be charitable to Bonnie. Were we going to be able to get anything done under these circumstances?

At Bonnie’s insistence, we decided to forge ahead, and as she rushed off to the bathroom to perform her daily ritual, I introduced myself to two of her three children. We sat around the dimly lit kitchen table, the youngest eating cold cereal out of an orange plastic bowl, as I asked the battery of questions typically inquired of school-aged kids.

- “How old are you?”
- “What grade are you in?”
- “Are you enjoying school?”
- “Do you like your teacher?”
- “What’s your favorite subject?”



They were eager to give information to this inquisitive newcomer. Even, in the 10-year-old boy’s case, when it elicited a negative response.

“I’m getting bad grades”, he shared.

“How come?”

“I don’t know, my teacher keeps losing my papers, then she makes me take another test. It’s not fair.”

I couldn’t help but think of my own son, also in the 5’ grade, currently at home surrounded by all the creature comforts of an upper middle class upbringing, and his similar “it’s not fair attitude” adopted whenever school and its demands didn’t come easily enough. Like most moms, I did a quick “compare and contrast” of the two boys. “Yeah, I know what you mean,” I said trying to offer some semblance of support.

Sprinkled with a steady stream of interruptions, the next hour spent at Bonnie's home continued much along similar lines. Who could blame the kids? I could see their eyes drift down to the tape recorder every time they broke in on the conversation, eager to verify if, indeed, their own words were being saved for future posterity. Bonnie whispered to me, *"I don't like to talk about their father when they're around."* Consequently, whenever anyone came in at an inopportune moment, conversation drifted to a far removed topic, most notably the pregnant house cat who also made several appearances and who was due at the vet later that morning. It was "OK" to talk about things with a more positive end result, however, and so the conversation turned to Mothers and Sons. *"It must have been when my oldest son was in about the 7th grade and took a knife to school that I found out about the program."* When she received the phone call that every parent dreads, the boy was about to be expelled not only from school, but from the school district. According to Bonnie, the case worker for Mothers and Sons and the school psychologist were both very involved and provided a pivotal role in getting him transferred, instead, to another school within the same district.

It wasn't long after that Bonnie found herself in a group of women who provided something she'd had little experience with - support. ***"Even thinking about it now I get teary-eyed because normally I don't ask anybody for anything and these women supported me."***

Bonnie

Mothers and Sons supported the family unit as well. While the oldest son received mentoring, the two younger children were kept busy in a nearby play area. *"The kids all enjoyed going there, and I was always able to get a ride. We had Bar-B-Qs and swimming parties, and the kids always looked forward to going."* Her blue eyes looked huge behind the eyeglasses that magnified them. *"It mainly helped when my son got in trouble. We did a lot of drawing and a lot of talking. I'm the type of person that keeps to myself I kind of take it all in and then bring it home with me. I like it when people give me suggestions and don't just tell me what to do."*

Bonnie continued her story with yawns frequently interrupting her speech. *"About eight months ago, we moved into our current apartment. I'm not good at a lot of things, I just have a high school diploma. They just shoved me through the system."* To make ends meet, Bonnie does housekeeping for three different clients. One morning a week, she helps in her daughter's classroom before heading out to the playground for yard duty. On Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons, she and her middle son go to a center so that he can get help with his learning disability. This is all done via the bus lines and on bicycles. *"The other day I got groceries on my bike. I had a bag on each handle, one on the rack on the back, and Chinese food and a gallon of milk in my front basket. Most people can't do things like that,"* she says with a laugh. (And I think to myself, No wonder she's yawning.)

With her sister coming by in less than an hour to pick up both Bonnie and the cat, it was obvious that Bonnie's valuable time for tending to chores of the day was passing quickly. On the spur of the moment, I made a suggestion in the form of an offer to give her a ride to and from the bank to pick up cash for the vet. She quickly accepted and soon we were in the car heading for the ATM. But not only were we in the car, we were alone, and the tape recorder was not running.

Within the first few minutes, Bonnie looked over at me and said, *“It’s not that I don’t trust you, I don’t trust the system.”* With her defenses now somewhat lowered, she proceeded to paint the picture of her childhood. A childhood growing up in a home where one of the main themes was sexual abuse. It began at the hands of her father who neglected no one when it came to the females in her family. From her mother, to herself and each of her sisters, none were spared so that when Bonnie heard of her father’s death she simply thought, *“Good, he’s gone.”* Not realizing that she had repeated the pattern in her own choice of a partner, she says she was surprised to find herself playing out similar scenes in her marriage—only now it was her husband playing the male lead. Like Bonnie’s father, her husband’s sexual abuse also extended to his offspring. But this time the couple’s eldest son was the victim, and his story is further complicated by his difficulties with speech and other problems associated with having an extra Y chromosome. The abuse didn’t come to Bonnie’s attention until her son started “acting out” at school. When he pulled his pants down, he was sent to the principal’s office.

When her husband walked out on them, Bonnie was left with three children, the youngest not even a year old. *“It’s a blessing for me, really. He was abusive, an alcoholic, and a drug user. He wasn’t supposed to do this at all.”*



Even though Bonnie and her kids are no longer involved with Mother and Sons, she continues to seek out people who will listen and lend support. She has found two of them a nearby neighbor and in a church member who has taken on a supportive role in her middle son’s life. *“I’d rather be a single parent than to be out sleeping around and showing my kids I have no respect for myself In the seven years [since their father left] I have not been on a date, out with a man, or had one man come into my home. My kids have seen me stay single, and I choose to stay single until I find the right man, and then I’m going to get to know him. I never got to know my kids’ dad I went straight from home and into marriage at age 21.”* The kids’ dad has never once looked back since he left, and I wonder, has there ever been a system this woman could trust?

After finishing with the ATM, Bonnie returns to the car, turns to me, and says, *“I should probably tell you about something really important that (an Alliance staff member) did for me.”* Not realizing her son’s eligibility, Bonnie was skeptical when the staff suggested she fill out an application for him to receive SSI. Because of her years of experience working within this system, Bonnie was informed that it was, indeed, possible and was further advised to appeal when the claim was “automatically” turned down its first time through. It worked! To this day, this very valuable piece of shared information continues to impact Bonnie’s life and the lives of her children every month in the form of a check. For that she is forever grateful. And, perchance, a bit more trusting of the system as well.