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Do What I Say, *and* What I Do!

by Martin L. Taylor

One mother's actions can have more impact than a thousand parents' lectures. Here's an example I heard recently that shook a town to its roots 25 years ago and made tsunami-like waves all over the state.

Our heroine -- let's call her Janice -- lived in a small town in a large, thinly populated middle-American state. She worked for the state social services department in addition to raising three bright, very active children. Her teenage daughter Betsy was a rising track star who expected to run in the state championship meet.

The track meet, occurring late in spring before the summer heat became insufferable, was the major event of the year for Janice's town. The high school held numerous records and competed successfully against much larger, wealthier schools from the state capital. For years, the town's population had gathered at the championship to cheer on its local participants. If you missed a meeting or a phone call in town, you could be assured of catching up with your contact at the track finals; almost everyone went.

Saturday night, the week before the championship, Betsy went out with friends -- nothing unusual in that. But when she returned, Janice suspected that she and her friends had been drinking -- a direct violation of the school rules and the track team's training covenant. When Janice asked her, Betsy confessed. She even offered to tell her coach, despite knowing that regulations would require her name to be removed from the team roster, effectively barring her from participating in the state meet. Summing up their conversation, Janice said, "Tomorrow, first thing, you'll report to your coach and tell him what happened." Betsy nodded, wiping away a few remorseful tears as she gathered her resolve for confessing to the coach.

From time to time the next day, Janice looked up from her work, reminded that she was expecting a call from the school to confirm that Betsy would be disciplined. As the afternoon progressed into what would normally be Betsy's after-school track practice, no call arrived. The shadows had lengthened into dinner time when Betsy finally came home.

"Did you tell the coach?" Janice asked.

"Of course, Mom!," Betsy replied. "He said it was no big deal and we could talk about it later, after the state meet."

Janice stared at her daughter, disbelieving. "Are you suspended from the team? Is he going to do anything about it at all? Are other kids involved?"

Betsy shook her head. "I think our conversation was the end of it. He seemed to have a lot on his mind. He didn't ask any questions and hasn't talked to anybody else as far as I know."

Betsy watched her mother's expression change slowly from blank surprise to jaw-grinding determination. "Oh, no, Mom, please don't," Betsy pleaded. "It's over now."

Years later, recalling the incident, Janice told me that "making up my mind to call the principal was the most difficult decision I ever made. Other people might have shrugged off the dilemma, but I knew what I had to do, and I knew that it would be painful, at least to me."

No one, however, could have imagined how bad it would get. "I thought that Betsy and a couple of other kids might be suspended from the team and the championship," Janice said. But the principal was aghast at the coach's cavalier disregard for the rules, particularly when the school had worked so hard with the community throughout the year to enforce the tough new anti-drug and -drinking standards for teens, hoping to prevent car wrecks and arrests. He called the school board together and advised them to fire the coach, suspend the track team, and withdraw from that year's championship. Extreme? Perhaps, but the principal wanted the punishment to underscore for the whole community -- especially students, parents, and faculty -- that the rules were an inviolable part of school life, not something to be pushed aside when there was a championship to win.

"You can imagine what happened," Janice said. "My daughter wouldn't look at me for weeks. Our neighbors avoided us. If I went into a room anywhere in town -- the library, the market, the Post Office -- conversation stopped. Some people stared. Others just looked away, embarrassed to be in the same room with me."

Time passed. The wounds healed. Janice and her family moved out of state. Betsy grew up, graduated from college, began her career, married, and became a parent. She has begun to experience what it's like to set an example for her children -- how to help them sort out right from wrong, how to help them think hard about tough decisions, and finally, to act on principle, even in the face of disaster.

Recently she brought up the incident with her mother. "When it all happened. I was sure I could never forgive you for what you did to me and the track team. I thought it was a terrible decision!" Betsy told her. "My life has changed a lot since then, and now I understand why you did it."

And because Betsy understands, and because she's a role model for her own children, another generation will be able to carry on her family's moral tradition.

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