Little Boy Lost

by Doris Stenschke, RN, MSN

This is the first of a series of articles describing one nurse's ethical dilemma and how she chose to resolve it. How would you have handled this situation? Would you have contacted the patient's family? Were the nursing interventions appropriate? Write us with your comments and we'll publish them in a future issue of the Journal.

Deputy Brown brought Steven to my desk in the medical facility of the county jail. As a clinical nurse specialist working in a jail setting, I am accustomed to seeing human beings in various stages of physical and mental illness. I was shocked, however, to see this emaciated, blond-haired boy, leaning heavily on the deputy, his sunken eyes staring at me with no signs of recognition.

It had been three years since I had last seen Steven. He and my son Jerry once had been constant buddies. Steven had eaten at my table, slept in a bunk bed in Jerry's room, and I had baked him a cake for his fifteenth birthday. Shortly after the birthday celebration, his family had moved to another section of town. This move caused Steven and Jerry to lose touch with each other. After several attempts to communicate, they drifted apart. Now Jerry was staying with his grandparents while he attended the University of Iowa. And Steven was here, thin and dirty, with the unmistakable stamp of illness on his features.

"This is Michael Gillette," Deputy Brown said. "Overdose."

Steven had taken a different name. He stared at me defiantly, daring me to publicly recognize him. I gave an inward sigh. This was no time for a personal reunion. Steven needed medical attention, more attention than our four-bed jail hospital could give him. I gave orders to have him taken immediately to the county hospital.

Then I sat at my desk, allowing my mind to take me into the past, when I'd known Steven. He'd been nine years old, a kid in the neighborhood who became my son's buddy. He was a shy boy who seldom smiled. But, when he did, his eyes would light up. His dimples would sink in, gradually exposing white even teeth. Steven didn't say very much, but you could tell by the way he looked at you that he was analyzing every word, every movement. He struck me as a child who absorbed everything with his entire body. He was a fast learner with a photographic memory.

"Watch out for Steven," his sister Lori often teased. "He's got invisible antennae."

Steven was four years younger than Lori. He adored and confided in her. For Steven, a good game of tennis with his sister was always a treat. He preferred, however, to be in his room drawing spaceships or working on his model planes.

He'd been a lonely kid, I thought now. He had hated moving to another section of the city. Perhaps, if he'd stayed in our neighborhood... I pushed away the thought. This wasn't the time for playing the "if" game. I decided to visit Steven at the County Hospital the next day.

"Hi," I said when I visited him in the hospital. "How are you doing?"

"Okay," he replied.

"I'm glad you're okay. I was worried about you."

"Thanks," he said as he rolled over to face me, his sunken eyes still defiant. His thin body was now clean. He grimaced and I could see the shadow of a dimple. Did he recognize me? If he did he was doing a good job of concealing it. I would have to talk to him without identifying myself, hoping he'd cooperate. I pulled up a chair and sat down. My head brimmed with questions I didn't dare to ask Steven for fear he'd be unresponsive. He closed his eyes and coughed a few times. Then he began to retch. I handed him some tissues from my purse. Still retching, his trembling fingers guided the tissues as he wiped away the saliva that drooled from his quivering lips.

I felt the urge to cradle his thin body. But instead I said, "I am Nurse Davies. You used to live on the street where I live. You and my son Jerry were constant buddies. I am here to tell you that you are not alone. I sense that you feel hopeless, unworthy and guilty. But I am here to help you, and I will not reveal your identity."

At first Steven's expression was like that of a frightened child. He
looked hurt, shocked. Mistrust and disbelief swept over his countenance like bad weather creeping up on the city.

"Go away! Why do you want to help me?" he asked.

"I want to help you because I care about you," I replied.

"Nobody cares! I'll be out in the streets again soon . . .

There was a break in his voice. He turned away from me. I waited silently. "Nobody cares!" he repeated, "Not my mother, not my father, not my sister. That's why I called myself Michael Gillette in the streets," he said as he regained control. "What am I going to do, Mrs. D.?" I knew that I had reached him and that he hadn't forgotten me. He had always called me Mrs. D.

"Your family. Do they know you're here?"

"My family? I don't have a family. What do you want with me, lady? I don't even know who you are. And I don't care."

"But you just this minute called me Mrs. D. And you just said that your family didn't care."

"Big deal. So."

"Steven . . ."

"Michael," he corrected.

"Okay, Michael, to me you are Steven. But whether you are Steven or Michael, I still care for you as much as I did when we were neighbors. And I want to help you."

"You can start by leaving me alone," he snapped. "I don't know who you are and I don't care, so why should you care?"

I reached in my purse and pulled out a picture of Steven and his mother at his fifteenth birthday party. At first, he wouldn't look at the picture. But when he did, he made me promise not to tell his family where he was. I replaced the photograph in my wallet. Could I keep this promise? I did, but I also promised myself that I would continue searching for the reason behind Steven's antisocial behavior and self-destructive tendencies.

I had to fight back the tears that welled up inside me as we parted. I wanted to turn back the hands of time. The kid who had been so dear to me, the kid who had been constant buddies with my son, was lost. What was I going to do about Steven? Where was I going to start?

At first I thought of searching for his parents. I had not seen them since his fifteenth birthday celebration. I remembered his mother Jan telling me Steven was getting a little out of hand and that they didn't quite know what to do with him. What if I found his parents? How would I tell them Steven was in jail? Why should I humiliate them? Why should I betray his trust?

Understanding what happened in Steven's life to make him turn to drugs had become my problem and I was determined not to give up. I thought of him constantly, hoping and praying that soon he would tell me what went wrong. This would enable Steven to sort through the problem and its implications and associated feelings. Eventually, moving toward a phase of positive action through which he would begin to make appropriate changes in his life and grow toward a happier, more fulfilling and self-accepting level of functioning.

I knew that what happened to Steven must have occurred at a stage of his development when he was increasingly susceptible to crisis. It was a time when he should have mastered childhood problems and been ready to face the challenges of today's adult world. He should have been confident in making decisions—adult decisions. Instead, he'd become a juvenile delinquent. A juvenile delinquent. No, not Steven! Steven was a good boy. Now, how could I help him? I knew helping him would entail finding his parents. This way I would get a sense of what was going on within the family without letting them know where Steven was.

I turned to the telephone directory and found them listed. I called several times before Jan answered. She'd just come in from shopping but she was so happy to hear from me that she invited me over immediately. She'd said that the rest of the family was away for the weekend and we'd have a chance to catch up on old happenings. I accepted her invitation and planned to see her the next day.

We met for lunch the next day and the conversation covered a considerable range of topics. Jan talked a lot about her writing career and the novel she was about to publish. Her husband Tom, an international lawyer, gave up working overseas and was now practicing in San Francisco where he could be with his family. Lori was studying medicine at Stanford University, and Steven . . .

"And what about Steven?" I questioned.

"Oh, Steven. You don't know?"

And then it came out. "Steven left home shortly after his fifteenth birthday. We tried desperately to find him, but all attempts failed. Steven's father felt responsible for his son's leaving and has not been the same since Steven's disappearance."

Without giving myself away, I asked Jan to tell me what had been happening within the family before Steven left home. I assured her that she was not alone, that there were hundreds of distraught parents blaming themselves for not being responsible parents. I told Jan we'd tried to locate them after they'd moved but couldn't, and was happy we'd found them now.

Jan said that she and Tom had spotted the changes in Steven's behavior. He was a shy boy and liked to be alone to paint abstracts or build model planes. He was a bright boy with above-average grades until his fifteenth birthday. Then his grades
started to slip. He had a difficult time getting up to go to school in the mornings. He stayed out late at night with nameless friends. He spent hours on the telephone whispering.

"We should have known what was happening," Jan confided. "We thought Steven was going through normal problems of adolescence. We never had thought for one moment that Steven would get involved with drugs."

"I understand," I said.

"Steven had always been such a shy boy that we were happy when he started getting out more," she said, lighting up a cigarette. "We talked to him about his behavior but his response had been a big broad smile and, 'Don't worry Mom. I am fifteen now. I can take care of myself.'"

"Tom had worked away from home most of the time. I knew Steven missed his father, so I compensated by giving him a little more latitude. I trusted him. Tom has been devastated by Steven's leaving," she said. "He feels responsible. He thinks if he had been home that this would never have happened. We are still hoping that one day Steven will show up somewhere."

"Show up somewhere," I thought. "Your son is in jail and I can't tell you where he is. Thank God you still love him; you still care for him."

"I am sure you will find Steven. Sometimes it takes longer than we anticipate. You must be very concerned," I said.

"Sure. Had it not been for my writing and Tom and Lori, I'd have succumbed. Of course, I prayed too," she continued, with a wan smile. "Tom and Lori are as distraught about Steven's leaving as I am, and they, too, want him home."

"I am very happy to hear you say that. Give Tom and Lori my love and tell them I hope to see them soon," I said as I prepared to leave.

When Steven returned from the hospital, I met with him and planned to see him for counseling. The psychological examination team, the social worker and Deputy Brown, who had befriended Steven, listened attentively to his story for many days.

Day after day, at the jail, I counseled Steven, using strategies to persuade him to tell me what made him turn to drugs and I never gave up. When I mentioned drugs or alcohol, that old defiant look would surface and he'd remain silent.

Then one day I asked Steven to write me something about his cell. "I don't know what to write," he said.

"You can write about the windows, the sink, the floor, the toilet, the bed sheets; just tell me what you think," I said. I gave him some yellow writing paper and he left.

The next day he returned with his finished manuscript. His impression of the jail moved me to tears. Steven wrote: "This is a jail that I will remember. I'm lucky to have food, water and a place to sleep. I recognize my punishment as another person's dreams. Immaturity and ignorance and most of all lack of faith in Christianity is why I'm here. I'll remember this as one of the benchmarks along the way."

"Steven, this is absolutely beautiful," I said.

"Do you really think so?" he asked.

"Why, yes, of course," I replied. And he gave me that old familiar smile. His dimples sank in, showing white even teeth.

"I have a surprise for you, Mrs. D.," he said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Now, I am going to tell you how I got hooked on drugs."

"Okay," I said, my eyes brimming with tears of joy as Steven began to unfold his stormy past.

"I was bored with home and school," he said. "I started sipping Mom's wine. Then I had a beer and a puff here and there with my friends. Then there were more beers and more puffs and hard stuff with my friends. And before I knew it, I was in it all the way. Mom tried to help me. She even hired a shrink, but I wouldn't go to the sessions. I wanted to be far from them and be with my friends," he said. "I'd say taking drugs was an escape and it was through peer pressure that I got hooked on drugs. How am I doing?"

I asked.

"You're doing just fine, Steven," I replied.

"Sometimes I wish I could see my family, especially Lori. I'm too ashamed. Sometimes I dreamed about Mom hugging me and crying, and asking me, 'Are you okay, Steven?'—and I'd wake up, my face all wet."

"I talked to your Mom a few days ago," I confided.

Steven's face twisted with fear.

"Don't worry, I didn't tell her. She is still grieving over you. Your Dad is working in the San Francisco office now, but he and Lori were not at home when I visited."

"Mom's okay, is she?"

"Yes. And she's heartbroken over your disappearance."

"I know. Sure you didn't tell her anything?" he quizzed.

"Trust me. I didn't. Did you want me to tell her?"

"No. I think it would be better if I told her."

"Well, here is her number. Call her."

"I have her number," he said.

"Then use it," I said firmly.

"But, but what if they don't want to talk to me?"

"They will. Do you need change? Or, better still, I'll let you use my phone so you can have privacy."

He hesitated. Then he followed me to the phone. I watched him dial the number with trembling fingers. Then, at "Hi, Mom, it's Steven," I walked away. Mission accomplished.