

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished: When School Volunteering Goes Wrong! Very Wrong

Description



This is a true story. The movie, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" is brilliant fiction, but occasionally real-life imitates the movies. In this instance, it certainly did. My experience co-chairing the Willows School Auction introduced me to one mom who could have been a character in that memorable movie.

This is a cautionary tale about what happened when I dedicated six months of my life to volunteering at my kids' school under the false assumption that hard work and professionalism would be valued. As you may have begun to suspect, this experience didn't end well. Let's just say I'd much rather know the head of the school parent association (and school board member) hates me *before* she sends an email to everyone calling me every vile name in the book.

It all started—or should I say—ended one evening in March at precisely 6:00 p.m. The summer before, I was asked by the parent association to co-chair our school's largest annual fundraiser, the school auction. I agreed and began work almost immediately.

For many months, I spent about five hours or more a day planning the event. I felt like I was back at my full time job as vice president at a big public relations firm. Meetings, letter writing, soliciting *pricy* auction items, financial targets that needed to be met, reports to the board of directors, memos, more meetings. Most of the time I had the job of moving us toward specific goals while the parent association moms used the meetings as therapy sessions to discuss their inadequate husbands and issues with their kids, or lashing out at other moms—mostly the ones who (a) cared about their appearances and (b) had a life. But, I rationalized it by reminding myself that it was for a great cause: my kids' school.

Fortunately, my auction co-chairs and our volunteers were amazing to work with. The event went well. It raised more than \$200,000, an all-time record for our school. There were a few "minor" glitches. One memorable screw-up happened when party planner to the stars, Mindy Weiss, one of my auction co-chairs, had to make an emergency dash to In N Out Burger because the parent volunteer who catered the event was unable to feed a much larger than expected crowd. But, we carried on, drinking, bidding generously and having a grand ol' time.

After the event, I was exhausted. Not suspecting anything seriously amiss, there was follow-up work to be done and I dragged myself back to the school to help supervise the event clean up. (Note to self: When the second parent association co-chair temporarily refuses to give you the box for the diamond earrings your husband bought

you at auction, realize they *hate* you).

Then, three days after the event, the email hit my in box at home like one of the U.S. missiles into Tripoli. It was the draft of the official “thank-you” to all the auction co-chairs from the two moms who ran the parent association. They had glowing and kind things to say about everyone on the committee, except for me. Under my name they had written the most hurtful, insulting, unprofessional words I’ve ever heard in a professional capacity. Here’s an excerpt:

“Christina is arrogant, aggressive, and difficult to work with, with a true Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde personality. Oh, they did throw me a bone, saying I was “skilled at soliciting auction donations.”

WTF???

I froze. I felt like someone had slapped me across the face. Hard. Really hard. I couldn’t believe this was the thank you I was getting from the school’s parent association. I was embarrassed and furious. My tears flowed for days.

I was stunned because during the entire time I worked with this mom, we’d never even exchanged harsh words. We’d been cordial and friendly with each other. I had no idea how much she despised me.

But, I should have known. At the time, this mom was mid-50s, gray haired, granny-ish frumpster with three kids, including a set of twins in kindergarten. Her husband, she’d gripe, was useless with the kids. He was even older than she was. She’d complain constantly about the difficulties she faced raising her three kids. She complained she was often mistaken for her kids’ grandmother. She wore a neck brace for a period of time. Money was not the issue for this family, but they sure had other problems. I always listened and tried to be sympathetic, but I just couldn’t relate to her situation. Luckily.

The evil email was intended for the other co-chair of the parent association and not the entire auction committee, which included me (and to which it was sent). Was I perfect to work with? No! When I’m working, I make decisions and keep moving. Doing “face time” in the parent lounge just wasn’t my style. Did I deserve this meanness? No!

A few weeks after the incident, she emailed me (yes, emailed me) a lame “apology” blaming me for the episode.

After the email debacle, I don’t think I set foot on campus for many months. I felt unwelcome and in some ways, I still do. It set the tone for my volunteerism at the school, which has never again involved anything having to do with the parent association.

So, what’s the lesson learned? When you encounter a menopausal, unhappy, bitter, frumpy, overwhelmed mom, run for your life. Don’t listen to her. Don’t try to be nice. Don’t gently suggest she color her hair. Don’t pretend like you have anything in common just because your kids are at the same school. Don’t hold the auction photo shoot at your home and invite her in. Act like a “Real Housewife Of New Jersey.” Hop in your minivan (or in this case, hers) and step on the gas pedal. Drive until you run out of gas. Make up some lame excuse as to why you can’t volunteer anymore and spare yourself the risk of having your reputation sullied by an “email illiterate” as she described her self in her “apology” to me. Trust me on this one. Oh, and tell Facebook to stop suggesting her as a “friend”.

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