

**CASE 4-5****The Careless Chaperons  
and the Unbridled Teens**

"Please don't publish this story. We're not asking on behalf of ourselves. It's our daughter we're concerned about. She's just a teenager who made a mistake!"

This plaintive plea sounded uncommonly familiar to Frank Littenfield as he politely listened to the distraught voice on the phone. As the managing editor of the *Columbia Gazette*, Littenfield was accustomed to requests from unwilling subjects of news coverage to "kill" or modify a story. In most cases, these frantic entreaties were pathetically frivolous or unreasonable, and Littenfield rejected the callers' complaints courteously but firmly. However, in those cases in which innocent victims or juveniles were involved, Littenfield's forbearance usually trumped his natural inclination to deny straightaway the validity of the complainant's request. As his newspaper's primary gatekeeper, he labored under the dual loyalties of keeping faith with the canons and expectations of his profession and maintaining a genuine feeling of moral compassion for those who were the focus of the *Gazette's* journalistic enterprise.

On this occasion, the caller identified herself as Virginia Martin. Her husband and she were plaintiffs in a rather unusual lawsuit, based on circumstances that, in Littenfield's view, should never have resulted in litigation. According to the complaint filed in the state district court in Columbia, the Martins' 15-year-old daughter had attended a Christmas party at the home of Michael and Virginia Pike, who served as chaperons for the party and whose son attended the same school as the Martins' daughter. During the evening, the girl retreated to an upstairs bedroom, unnoticed by the Pikes, and had sex with a 16-year-old classmate. The girl got pregnant and later gave birth.

The girl's parents were suing the Pikes for negligence, claiming that they were careless in not properly supervising their teenage charges. "A complete lack of supervision, guidance, and discipline provided the opportunity for this sexual encounter," according to the court records.

Virginia Martin had learned of the *Gazette's* interest in the story when Leslie McDougald, the paper's government affairs reporter, had contacted the Martins' attorney seeking additional information. McDougald had also approached the Pikes' attorney for a response to their antagonists' legal expression of indignation. The plaintiffs' counsel, predictably, accused the defendants of being delinquent in their stewardship of the teenagers

entrusted to their care. The Pikes' attorney responded that "the expectations reflected in this lawsuit are unreasonable in that parents cannot be expected to oversee the unbridled passions of sexually active teenagers. There is simply no legal duty of the kind alleged in the plaintiffs' complaint."

The story was slated for tomorrow morning's edition of the *Gazette*, according to the rundown provided at the staff meeting earlier that afternoon by city editor Thomas Sizemore. As he extricated himself from the anxious caller, Littenfield made no promises to Virginia Martin but said he would consider her request for journalistic charity.

"I received a call from Virginia Martin," stated Littenfield as Sizemore and McDougald settled comfortably into their chairs for what the managing editor assumed would be a brief meeting. "She wants us to kill the story on the negligent chaperons. She claims that her concern is primarily with her daughter."

"I assume that the Martins are distressed because of what the publicity might do to their daughter," noted Sizemore. "She isn't named in the court papers or our story, but let's face it—she will be identified by association with her parents. Her sexual rendezvous and pregnancy will no longer be a personal matter if this story is published."

"That's true," replied McDougald. "But this lawsuit is a matter of public record. Once the Pikes decided to litigate this issue rather than settle it away from the glare of publicity, it became a matter of public interest."

"It may indeed be newsworthy," said Sizemore, responding more as a devil's advocate rather than from conviction, "but the fact that it's now a matter of public record doesn't automatically answer the ethical question of whether it should be published. After all, the publicity surrounding this case will result not from the court record itself but from our reporting of what's in the court record."

"True enough," admitted McDougald, "but this case clearly meets the test of newsworthiness. It involves the court system and the circumstances themselves are highly unusual. There are a lot of teenage parties in our community, most chaperoned by parents. This suit could serve as a warning to them. Besides, we're in the *truth* business. We should not get in the habit of suppressing news

just because someone whose name will appear in our paper is unhappy."

"I agree, as a matter of principle," replied Sizemore. "But in a sense, the Martins' daughter has been victimized once in that she had an unwanted pregnancy. A story on this lawsuit will just victimize her again. We make editorial judgments all the time about what is or is not newsworthy. And we've been known to delete information or occasionally to preempt a story altogether if the potential harm is much greater than the news value. Is this one of those cases?"

With Sizemore's closing query, Littenfield decided to adjourn the meeting. As the moral agent in this case, he would make the final call. As a journalist, he knew that the burden of proof is on those who counsel restraint in publishing a story that a paper deems to be newsworthy. To assume otherwise is to compromise the independent status of reporters and editors. But as he pondered the situation, the managing editor acknowledged that Sizemore had raised some intriguing points that could not be dismissed out of hand.

## THE CASE STUDY

At first glance, this case appears to be uncomplicated. The Martins have filed a lawsuit against another couple claiming that they were negligent in chaperoning a party, an act of carelessness that led to the pregnancy of their daughter. And despite the fact that the suit is a matter of public record, they are asking the *Gazette* to withhold the story because it will further embarrass their daughter. Such requests are not uncommon in newsrooms, and most are summarily dismissed. After all, the news media are in the business of revelation, not concealment.

But there are some countervailing arguments in this case. First, this story is not of great moment. It does not involve politics, crime or corruption, or some large-scale human tragedy. The civil complaint here is a matter of public record—a fact that offers legal refuge for the media in case of a lawsuit—but, as the city editor suggests, this doesn't automatically provide an ethical justification for publishing the story. Second, although the Martins'

daughter will not be named in the story, she will be identified through association with her parents. Thus, her own behavior will be subjected to the glare of publicity because of her parents' actions and through no fault of her own.

Managing editor Frank Littenfield is the moral agent in this case. For the purpose of examining the issues raised by the facts of this case, step into the editorial shoes of Littenfield and then, using the SAD formula for moral reasoning, render a judgment in this case.