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The Two Worlds of Ken Gibson

This is another installment in our writer's ongoing series documenting some of the city's toughest jobs

by Barry Friedman

World One

If you ask, he'll tell you he's a house manager; if you push, he'll tell you he's an inpatient psychiatric counselor for adolescent boys

Don't push.

Ken Gibson works at a local non-profit adolescent treatment center--let's call it that for now--that houses dangerous kids, even if the danger is mostly to themselves; it's like a hospital, but not really; it's not a mental institution, either, but some of the kids clearly need institutional care; it's a place for adolescent boys, but many of them are older than their age, while others are younger than they appear.

There's a lot about Ken's job that's about something else and he's not going to talk about it all.

Sometimes, he's Mrs. Garrett from *The Facts of Life*; sometimes, he's Nurse Ratchet from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

The kids he watches, teaches, disciplines, worries over, and then tries to forget about when he leaves for home, are between 7 and 13. There are 9 kids in the house; 30 total in the facility. And they are, as Ken says, "Almost 75 percent abused."

It's a buffet of abuse, too: emotional, verbal, drug and alcohol, social, psychological, self-inflicted.

"Worse," says Ken, "many of their mothers were abusing drugs before they're born, so they're hooked before they get a start in life."

Ken says this without emotion, which reminds me of story about a reporter who watched a doctor, without emotion, tell a woman she had double breast cancer; so I tell Ken about the exchange.

"When the reporter asked the doctor later, 'Don't you care? The doctor responded, 'I didn't give her cancer.'"

Ken nods as I talk.

"You have to be attached when you're there, detached when you're not," he says, but you get the sense it took him years to master the switch.

Such are the legalities these days that I'm not allowed inside the facility. In fact, it took Ken three weeks to get permission to even be interviewed for the story. Not only can I not mention the name of the place, I can't give its location, or, obviously, any particulars of the boys.

You can forget about pictures of paint peeling off walls, though, the smell of urine, and the sight of dazed children sitting by themselves, staring aimlessly out windows.

Ken says the point of the facility is to make it not feel like a hospital, to be a transitional place--even if the transition sometimes leads backwards. It's not a prison.

"We try to keep it decorated, try to keep it nice."

Ken and I go over the ground rules, trying to figure out how to explain what he does and where he does it without betraying confidences, without getting himself fired.

Ken's job starts by dispensing medication in the morning. As a Medication Administrative Technician, as well as a Certified Nurses' Aide, Ken literally hands out the medication to the boys who need them. And then when the boys are at breakfast--and this is an in-house facility--he does his paperwork: ordering in new meds from the pharmacy, controlling the stock.

When describing the kids' afflictions, Ken sounds like a reporter chronicling the emotional wounds of returning troops.

"There's bipolar, schizophrenia, depression more than anything else, and, mostly, post traumatic stress."

"Post traumatic stress?" I ask him. "Sounds like a war zone."

Ken nods, adding the kids' maladies are a result of attachment disorders: parents who neglected them, parents who sexually abused them, parents who never should have been parents.

Most of the boys here have been taken from their homes and brought to this facility. There are three houses in the complex: Lock down, RTC (Residential Treatment Center), and the Group Home.

Ken works in the RTC. His kids get to go to school, have recreational activities, so even though they're not in lock-down and could conceivably walk out, they don't.

"It'd be a step-back."

I ask if he's ever been scared, he says no, but quickly adds, "I've been afraid for the other kids."

The goal, he says, is to return these boys to a healthy environment, preferably to their biological families, ironically to many of the same families that caused them to be here in the first place.

That replacement only occurs, though, if the families agree to treatment as well. When they don't, foster care is the next option.

There are two classes in RTC. The first, the rehab group, sees medical and psychological specialists. The second, the expressive group, is the one that learns life-coping skills.

"I take care of them," Ken says. "Expressive is what it sounds like--music, art, painting. They also learn manners, interpersonal skills. I teach them about money, taking medications.

"It's all about developing bonds. If they don't develop one, they won't talk to you. For some of them, it has to be a cultural bond or a bond with someone of the same gender, but you have the best chance to reach them if you develop a connection."

I ask him about ham; he knows what I'm asking.

"We don't cure anybody," Ken says. "We try to teach them how to cope."

"If the kids learn to function and make it on their own--it's a good day."

While Ken says some of his kids have gone on to the Marines, been employed by major oil companies, the vast majority struggle just to survive.

"Sometimes I get calls and I'm told, 'I'm taking my meds and I'm not in jail.' For that kid, that's it. Not being in jail is success."

Ken doesn't talk about a favorite, one who got to him; rather, he smiles when talking about the small, general victories.

We then get on a topic that sits like a hanging curve to a pull-hitter: parents.

His expression changes.

"You have to have a driver's license to drive a car," says Ken, "but any fool can have a kid."

He continues:

"It's a vicious cycle. You abuse your kids and then it comes back around where the abused kids abuse, even after swearing they never would."

He then says something only a man who's done this for 16 years can say: "Unless you don't have kids and stop the cycle. And that may be the best option for these kids--is not to have any."

As he talks, it occurs to me: Ken would be a great father.

"From the very beginning," he says, dismissing the question, "I never wanted any kids. I never wanted to raise any more."

I ask about adoption.

"No," he says adamantly.

Ken and Kathy have been married almost 20 years--"I got in trouble," he says, "when I said it was already twenty."

Anticipating my question about the effects on his marriage, Ken says, "I try to not bring it home."

Kathy smiles, indicating he sometimes fails.

Ken is 51 and has been doing this kind of work for more than 26 years, but doesn't know if he wants to do it until he retires.

He talks about his coworkers:

"This is a calling for some. The short term people, the people who left, wanted to change the world."

It's his calling, too--you can see that.

A man doesn't do this kind of work for a paycheck.

Good thing, too, because while he won't talk about specific salaries, he does say everyone is underpaid.

"And almost everyone is working two jobs."

At the restaurant where we meet, he is relaxed, jovial, and kibitzing with John, our waiter, over the size of his pasta--John always brings them too big and Ken's trying to lose weight. Although it's all around, Ken doesn't talk politics, no matter how much I or John or the other liberals at the restaurant goad him--not because he doesn't have opinions, I suspect fiscally conservative, socially moderate--but because he says it's a waste of energy trying to change people's minds.

"I will tell you," he says, "I bet I'm the only Republican working there." He has an infectious laugh and is uncanny about surveying a room and knowing when an argument is likely, winnable, or even worth it.

He talks a little, very little, about what this kind of work has done to him over the years, so when I ask about his own depression and bouts of hopelessness, he doesn't answer right away.

"It comes and goes. What brings me out of it, though, is when there's a success story. It's hard, but not impossible. And it is rewarding.""

Then he laughs.

"And I also spread out my vacation time."

World Two

Ken's behind home plate and the game seems to be in slow motion. The last time he

was here, he was getting heckled by a team that was losing 17-2, which is funny unless you happen to be the one who's umping the game. Ken told the coach if he didn't shut up his team, he would send them all home.

Tonight, there's no abuse, for the kids only have a week left of the season and nobody cares much or has the strength to argue or heckle or, from the looks of things, play inspired ball.

The lack of ambiguity at Reed Park is a relief.

The heat, however, is not.

Here in West Tulsa in the middle of July, it is, as Neil Simon said in *Biloxi Blues*, "Africa Hot."

It's enough to fry anyone's sensibilities, and Ken's strike zone does seem a little high and outside.

"It has to be," he tells me between innings and through the backstop, "because these pitchers are not very good. If I don't give them some leeway, we'll be here all night.

"The good news is that pretty soon," Ken says, "the whole field will be covered in shade. The bad news is the mosquitos will be big enough to carry you away."

Ken is wearing a hat that's too small, underneath a catcher's mask that's too big. His blue shirt sits over a chest protector and he's got a pouch of balls at his side. He walks slowly, his chest in the lead, moving to its own beat. Having to carry all this gear, his old football injury and creeping arthritis make his limp even more pronounced.

"Yeah, my joints love all the weight I've put on, too."

He doesn't have the small whisk broom ump's carry, though, so he cleans the plate by sweeping it off with his feet. There's an ump at second base ump, where Ken will be later this evening, with much less to do. Almost every runner on first steals; they all make it.

Ken has to pace himself, for he has two games tonight and only one jug of water.

Still, he says, "Umpiring is a relief. Best of all, it pays.

"It has a number of roles for me: as an outlet for sports, a chance to make money, and

release of frustration."

This month, he's a baseball ump. In the winter, he'll ref basketball. He loves sports, obviously, but like most things in his life, doesn't talk about much about them--except, perhaps, when they let him down.

"Did you know," he asks, "you can't shake the hands of female players anymore? Yeah, some coach got sued in Vegas when a girl said he held her hand too long. Now, it's just the fist tap."

One of the managers is about to argue something about a runner who advanced to third on a foul tip, but Ken takes off his mask, walks towards the dugout, and explains that a runner can advance if the foul tip is caught.

The manager gives up, raises his hand as if to apologize for the interruption, and then sits back down.

All of Ken's life should go this smoothly.

There are perhaps a dozen well-behaved parents watching the game, keeping score, rooting for good plays, belying the stereotype of the pushy moms and dads.

For a man who's hot and padded, Ken's in a surprisingly good mood. Beneath all that armor, there appears to be something of a smile.

Tonight, he won't have to throw anyone off the field; he won't have to administer morning meds; and he won't have to hear about another kid who didn't make it.

As the game moves on and little kids run to retrieve foul balls that have been hit in the creek and other parents show up with folding chairs, a girl about 16 comes to the game and sits on the bleachers behind home plate. She shoots a wave to one of the players on the Cardinals, who quickly waves back through the chain link fence of the dugout.

It's the sweeter, more pastoral of his two worlds.

In the fourth inning, with a runner on third, a fly ball is hit to right, which is deep enough for the kid on third to tag up. He should score easily, but he gets a late jump and the kid in right's got a surprisingly good arm. The play will be close.

Strange things happen to kids on the way home.

But not this time.

Arms to his sides, palms down, perfectly positioned over a dirty plate, Ken calls him *Safe*.