

12. TEACHING ART

“I can’t teach art. I can’t even draw a picture.”

“You’re a teacher. You can draw a straight line.”

“I can’t even do that! Maybe you should have asked one of the math teachers.”

“I’m short of math teachers. I have one of the librarians teaching math. Just jump in there, and get it done!”

For the first few weeks, the class becomes Art Appreciation. Things go pretty well. I get some slides from the library. We look at art books. We take a field trip to a gallery.

“When are we going to get to paint? I could do better than that crap at the gallery.”

I can feel the anxiety. I need to do my best to fake it.

“Some of the kids in this class are really great artists. They are heading off to art school next year. Maybe you could have one of them teach.”

I can feel the rebellion brewing.

“I’m the teacher. Let me do my job.”

“Let us do ours. We want to paint.”

I satisfy them with some lessons in drawing. I set up some objects for them to draw. We work on drawing each other’s faces. I never have to touch my pencil to the page. They like my helpful suggestions and encouragement. I read up on techniques of pencil drawings. I sound as if I know what I am talking about. No one realizes that I have no training for this class.

“Let’s have another field trip!”

I give in to the requests. We head off for some landscape work.

Even though the pencil sketches have gone so well, the students pressure me to start painting.

“We need more sketch work. We could work from live models.”

Students take turns posing in front of class. There’s some humor as students will mug in front of class.

“We need to do nudes.”

“There have never been nude models at this school.”

“Yes, there have!”

“When?”

“Miss Thomas last year.”

“She got fired.”

“It wasn’t over the models.”

“Didn’t she sleep with a student.?”

“She was so young.”

“She looked like she was still in Middle School.”

“I would have done her.”

“She was hot!”

“I hear that she modeled for her class!”

“Simmer down class. I don’t think that we could do full nudity. Maybe some swimming suit sketches.”

One of the bigger guys starts to remove his shirt: “I’ve got it girls!”

“Sit down, Robby. No one’s going to do anything if we aren’t mature about this.”

“Most of us are adults. We can be mature.”

I explore the rules with the other teachers.

“This is a private school. So the rules are different.”

“People pay good money so the kids don’t have to deal with indoctrination by the government.”

“You’re teaching art. Use your discretion.”

I think about paying some models to come in. This is better than having the students parade in bathing suits.

“I can’t have you do complete nudes. You’ll have to use your imagination.”

“Janet had a lot of imagination last night.”

I ignore the stupidity.

“I called the college. They’re sending over a couple of models. And we are going to deal with things appropriately.”

“You are putting us at a disadvantage. We should be able to sketch the whole body. It not as if we’ve never seen a penis before.”

“Speak for yourself, Mindy.”

“I could go to the library and get a book that shows penises.”

“Even diseased penises.”

“But we can’t draw one in class.”

“You can draw one. I just can’t let someone model completely naked.”

“Isn’t there any freedom in this country?”

“Your parents pay for you to come to a private school. They want to protect you.”

“Private prison.”

“I’m eighteen. If I want to see a penis, I should be able to see one.”

“Not everyone is eighteen here. This is a classroom. Not a movie theater. If you want to see nudity, you can pay for it in a theater.”

“Yeah, pervert.”

“The problem is that we can’t be free about our sexuality. So we feel guilty. That’s what makes people perverse.”

“Yeah, Doctor Mindy.”

“Me and my boyfriend get naked. It’s part of life. I can sketch his dick from memory.”

“That’s the only thing that you’re good at.”

“Shut up, weenie head!”

“I don’t think my allowing some naked models in class is going to cure your psychological problems. If you have problems of course.”

“But we’re not allowed to have this kind of conversation.”

“This is what art is about. All those artistic movements that you described!”

“They wanted to challenge the status quo!”

“Art and freedom go hand in hand.”

“Penises and freedom go hand in hand.”

“Get your hand off my penis.”

“Some of us may be offended by explicit nudity.”

“Are you offended, Carly?”

“Art is beautiful. It’s not the same thing as pornography.”

“We’re blurring the lines.”

“It’s one thing to talk about this. Even then we have to watch out that we’re not offensive.”

“A lot of people may be offended, but they’re afraid to speak up because that will make them seem unpopular.”

“A lot of people don’t have dicks!”

“Get a clue: they’re called women.”

“So we can sketch vaginas. That is OK.”

“We can’t keep the classroom wholesome. But we can exercise some taste.”

“Do you want to taste my pussy?”

“Pussy power.”

“We can’t let this degenerate into a screaming match.”

“We can’t scream about our degenerate match! Penis power.”

“The models are going to come to class. And we will have to sketch them wearing swimming suits.”

“I’ll get naked for any of the girls at their home if they want extra help.”

“Penises and stupidity seem to go hand in hand!”

The model takes off her top.

“You’ve got to put your top back on. School policy.”

“Give the kids a break. They want to see my tits.”

“This is not a strip bar.”

“They all want to see. It’s for the art.”

“Put the top back on.”

“Just turn your back to the window, and pretend that you didn’t see a thing.”

“But I did. It just takes one person to report. Or someone could come in.”

“This is all for art.”

“I agree. But this is a private school. They have strict rules.”

“They have nude models in the public high school.”

“Not in this city.”

As she puts her top back on, she grabs her breasts.

“I saw that.”

After class, she questions me.

“You are leading the students on.”

“I’m doing the best that I can.”

“But they are curious.”

“I give them the freedom to discuss the matter. I just can’t have any nudity in the classroom. It would send the wrong message.”

“You have to be the one sending the message.”

“If I was a music performer, I could live with ambiguity. But I am a teacher. I need to take a stand.”

“Then your ideas just dominate the classroom.”

“I allow for alternative points of view. I just alert the students to our location.”

“It’s silly. Like fig leaves on statues.”

“I agree. It’s just not me who’s going to pull off the fig leaf.”

“They want more from you.”

“I also have to please the parents, the other faculty, the administrators, and the board.”

“Are you pleasing yourself?”

“It difficult to walk the fine line. A lot of girls here are almost adults. If they feel that we can get away with anything in the classroom, they’ll feel more subject to harassment. Once you’re that vulnerable, it’s so easy to upset your composure. Then you are in a bad situation. I don’t want to be that kind of teacher. I want to anticipate a bad situation before it happens.”

“But you are create a situation with your iron-fist. You are saying: be sexual, but do it in my way. That really is harassment.”

“Maybe, if that was what I am saying. But I’m not!

“You’re not getting them a little excited.”

“There are loads of messages that I can’t control. So I am very clear with those messages that have a say over.”

“How is that?”

“I can’t leave these emotions to develop haphazardly. I need to raise some appropriate question to think about to strengthen their character.”

“But that may simply be your excuse. You’ve opened up a can of worms.”

“How so?”

“You’ve already got the girls thinking about sex. And they’re so young. It’s hard for them to say no.”

“That proves my point.”

“Not at all. You have to respect them so that they can make up their own minds. Otherwise it appears that they’re just trying to please you.”

This is a difficult decision. I just have no choice.

“What is this?”

“I don’t know what it is?”

“Of course you do.”

“It’s a male sex organ.”

“It’s an erect penis. Where did this picture come from?”

“I’ve never seen it before in my life.”

“It’s from an artist sketch pad. It’s a penis. One of your students drew an erect penis.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“I was told that you had nude models.”

“We’ve been through this already.”

“And you tried to pul a fast one on me. Now we have one of your students drawing an erect penis.”

“None of my students draws like that. The proportion is all off. There is no sense of perspective.”

“Now you’re an art teacher.”

“That is what I am being paid to do.”

“And you told your students that it was OK to draw erect penises.”

“I have no control over what students do on their free time. But this drawing did not come from my class. I know that for a fact. One of the parents could have done this to mess with us.”

“This is the work from your class.”

“Was it found in my classroom?”

“It originated there.”

“Look at this picture. The testicles are misshapen as if they have some kind of disease. None of my students would shade like that. There is no depth in the picture. Someone is trying to set me up. Worse, you are being set up.”

“How would you know?”

“I know pictures. This was done by a pervert! Everything is exaggerated. It’s not one of my students.”

“You’re too loyal!”

“If I was using nude model, that might be a civil liberties issue. This is worse than that. It’s an absolute defamation of character.”

“This isn’t a public forum. It’s a school.”

“All the more reason that you need to have some integrity.”

I feel that I have negotiated my way through the maze. We have agreed to have the models. We have completed the assignments. And I have dispelled my critics.”

“It is not going to be that easy. The board has heard about your classroom. You may have to appear before them.”

“For what?”

“They think that you let the models get naked in your classroom. One member of the board is using the erect penis picture to make his point.”

“Did you tell him that the picture is bogus.”

“That didn’t stop him. He may take his case to the press.”

“And make the school look bad.”

“It will make you look like a pervert.”

“I did nothing wrong.”

“That isn’t what they say.”

“My students can vouch for me.”

“Your support may not be as universal as you think.”

I bring my case to my students.

“You all tried to pressure me to have the models disrobe completely. And I resisted your pressure. Now I am being accused of giving in. I admit that our discussion was pretty intense. If there is even one among you who feels that I went too far, you can stand up now, and I will give in my resignation.”

“Do you want us to raise our hands?”

“We all support you.”

“All of us.”

“I’m afraid that some of you might be feeling peer pressure.”

“We’re not children. Not like some parents think.”

“If we took a vote, we’d all be with you.”

“Even a secret ballot.”

“I admit that this was new to me. I couldn’t open myself to art. I was taught that the body is dirty. But this class has changed all that.”

“I wish that we could convince them. But they are acting mighty tough right now.”

“Don’t give in. We are behind you.”

“This is the best class that we have ever had in this school.”

“We’re not going to let them do this to you.”

“I don’t want to falsely raise your expectations. This is not about democracy.”

“If it isn’t, it should be. They force us to go to this stupid school. Then we whine when we state our opinion.”

“We are not robots.”

I tell the principal that I am going have legal representation with me.”

“We don’t have to resort to that. Not yet. I will support you.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ll do what I can.”

Ben’s support is enough to convince most of the board. But Greg Coleman is not ready to yield.

“You should not only be ashamed of yourself. We can take criminal action. One parent has agreed to go along with us in that matter.”

“Against the wishes of her daughter.”

“They are both on board.”

“You are going to have to prove that!”

“I have the penis picture.”

“For all I know, you did it. It doesn’t look like something that a student would do.”

“You’d defend one of these kids if they killed someone.”

“You can’t even argue rationally. This is not a murder case.”

“But it is a sex case. And deviants often kill to evade capture.”

“Mr Coleman, I respect your tenure on this board. But you may have crossed a line into an actionable matter. Do you want to pursue this course of action?”

“I will do what I please.”

I am excused from the meeting.

“He didn’t like the fact that you argued with him.”

“He was way out of bounds.”

“The other members of the board know that. They’re just waiting for his term to expire. But they made me agree to relieve you from the class.”

“How can they do that?”

“You admitted it yourself. You’re not an art teacher. They’re worried about the accreditation issues.”

“A little late for that!”

“Better late than never. “

”This is still a matter for a law suit. It appears that I am being relieved based on an issue of defamation.”

“All this is well within your contract.”

“This won’t stand up in a court of law.”

“You have to know that this a pretty conservative county.”

“I don’t care. I have the law on my side.”

“I agree with you. But if you don’t make waves, we can bring you back to teach English. Isn’t that what you want?”

“I went to bat for my students. If I give in now, they will never respect me.”

“You have no choice.”

“No, you have no choice. If you were courageous, you would have removed Coleman right now. You’ve given him free rein. That has empowered him even more.”

“This is the board’s decision. I told them that they were making a mistake. But there’s nothing more that I can do.”

“Are they going to let me meet with my class today?”

“I don’t think that they thought about that.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I’ll give you a free pass. Just don’t do something stupid.”

The students clap for me when I go in the class.

“This is my last class with all of you. I am sorry about that.”

“You shouldn’t let them take you down.”

“I don’t think that I did. I stood up for what I believed. And they didn’t play fair.”

“You have to tell us what to do.”

“I’ve taught you enough for the time being. This is not about me telling you what to do. It’s about you being encouraged to figure it out on your own.”

“What do we do now?”

“Put your heads together. Take a stand. Learn from your lessons in the classroom.”

“What can that possibly mean?”

“You tell me!”

“You should have had the models get naked. You got fired anyway.”

“The law is on my side. If I had have let them take their clothes off, I might not have had a leg to stand on.”

“He’s so right. Trustee Coleman really looked like an ass.”

“And the board looked like cowards for going along with him.”

“They still got their way.”

“Their way meant controlling the school. But we are revolting against their control.”

“How are we ever going to do that?”

“We need a plan.”

“See! You’re already moving things along. You’re asserting yourself.”

“Is that all we had to do?”

“You should have told us sooner.”

“You had to figure it out.”

“We can make signs in art class.”

“Remember, I never told you to do any of this.”

“I can use the internet to contact all the students.”

“We need a plan.

“We have to analyze the situation.”

“What do we want the administration to do?”

“They have to rehire Mr. Evans as our art teacher.”

“I have nothing to do with your protest. I am leaving after class.”

“Are you going to sue them?”

“I really can’t say. I’m just not going to take this lying down.”

“Mr. Evans, we love you.”

“We need to have a party.”

“I need to make myself scarce, or I really will get in trouble.”

“I used to believe in this school.”

“I believed in the sports teams.”

“You don’t have to give up. You just have to take the school back!”

“We are going to win!”

Mindy Parker decides to lead a school walkout.

“It’s the social event of the year!”

The school is taken by surprise. Some of the parents try to pressure their kids. But to no effect. The wave has affected everyone.

“This is about more than freedom. We are fighting for our lives.”

“You’re exaggerating a little.”

“Only in so many terms!”

“Last year Greg Coleman tried to get some books dropped from our curriculum.”

“If they had a chance, they’d try to drop Shakespeare.”

“Or even the Bible.”

“We’re not children any more.”

“And we’re not doing anything illegal.”

“We need a set of demands for the administration.”

“We want Mr. Evan back.”

“And we want naked models in art class.”

“We want more say in the books that we read.”

“Or a class in rock music and hip hop.”

“Better computer classes!

“Someone needs to write all of this down.”

“I’m getting it down.”

The administration are frantic. They try to get the faculty to bring the students back. But it is too late. Mindy has a megaphone, and she is reciting instructions.

“You have to stop this nonsense.”

“How am I going to do this?”

“You have to get the students back in class.”

“The board doesn’t want to give in.”

“If they don’t give in somehow, there will be no board.”

The school always depended on the fealty of the students. But that bond has been broken in one fell swoop.

My lawyer seems a little impatient with me.

“Why didn’t you have me show up at the meetings sooner?”

“The principal encouraged me to be more conciliatory.”

“You shouldn’t have listened to him. However, we have the minutes from the open board meeting. And we’ve subpoenaed for the closed session. We have affidavits from your students that none of them did the paintings. And the models followed your instructions to remain in their bathing suits. You have pretty strong case.”

“I want to go back to the school.”

“I’d advise against it. You can get a better job. And they will settle. You’ll be set for life. It isn’t as if you did anything wrong.”

“There is the principle of the matter.”

“We are adults. We can’t live on principles. But there are laws. And if we play by the rules, sometimes the laws work in our favor. It is important to document everything.”

“Should I have videotaped the class?”

“You don’t want to go overboard. You don’t want to make it appear that you planned this kind of thing.”

“I won’t have to testify.”

“The school doesn’t want this to go to trial. They will lose big. They don’t want all their files in the open.”

“Will I be gagged?”

“Not completely. You just have to be careful. You don’t want to be in contempt.”

“Are you telling me to stay away from the press?”

“There are other ways to make all of this public. You are an educator. Educate.”

I go home with his advice. This is all going to be a big step for me.

Back at school, the early strategy has been to divide and conquer. Some of the parents try to force their children back in class. But the seniors have organized thing too well. They also reason with the more enlightened parents. They show them how reactionary the board has been.

“I guess they’re proud of us two.”

“The board was created to be a reflection of the wishes of the parents. But a few vocal members have hijacked things. Now is the time to take it all back.”

“Mr. Evans taught us to assess the situation reasonably, and not ask for more than we can accomplish.”

The students remain very disciplined. There are efforts to demonize the protestors. But they are not successful. Mindy makes sure that no one does anything out of line. She works with some of the sports teams to maintain a sense of decorum. Some people used to think of her as a little odd. But now she is gaining real respect.

“This is the point that they think that they can win. They haven’t budged a bit. They think that we are children. But a lot of parents know that something is wrong.”

“Coleman tried to play that family values trip. And he wasn’t successful. The school is about the academics. And it has been losing to some of the other schools in the vicinity.”

“They had a chance to show themselves as a site of real education.”

“And they blew the chance!”

“Some of the parents are calling us anarchist. But we haven’t destroyed a thing. The

school has been the destroyers.”

“What if we can’t get Mr. Evans back?”

“He may not want to come back.”

“I don’t blame him. They treated him like shit.”

“We have to do more from him.”

“Believe me. Things will change.”

“My Dad said that Coleman doesn’t stand a chance.”

“A lot of parents want him to stick his head in a ditch.”

“Those are the nice ones.”

“Coleman has been blackmailing people with his money.”

“If he stays here, a lot of kids won’t come back.”

“The administration has to know that.”

“The principal is in Coleman’s pocket.”

“He’s his ass man!”

“We have to keep fighting!”

“We have right on our side.”

“The parents ended up agreeing with us.”

“Our demands were all very clear!”

Greg Coleman’s bluster gets the school nowhere. The board quickly realizes that he is out of control. He has a few supporters. But that doesn’t help his cause. Panic soon ensues when the board realizes that they are in a predicament. They don’t want the case going to court. My lawyer drives a hard bargain.

There is an offer for a sizable settlement. But this means that I will never work at the school again. I need to consider my options. Greg Coleman will have to resign as a trustee. And private school has never been a great fit for me. But I do have an obligation to the students.

I take a long look at the numbers. I can do quite well if I take the settlement. The student have learned the lesson well. They have carried it outside of the classroom. I don’t want to look as if I can bought. But I don’t want to grandstand.

When I finally make my decision, there are so many intervening issues, that the resolution seems obvious. The county has offered me the opportunity to conduct a seminar on art and freedom. And I have a new job teaching English in the public schools. They have agreed to review the regulations for the use of live models in art classes.

The private school works to be more open about its policies. A number of younger faculty members are hired. They can lend a more sympathetic ear to the students’ needs. The principal decides to take an early retirement. I couldn’t ask for much more. The school has learned its lesson. Even a private school needs to adapt to the modern world.

I have some free time. Some sharpened pencils. And a sketch pad. I am getting pretty good at drawing straight lines.

“Are you telling me that you drew the erect penis?”

“What good did that do you?”

“How about a million dollar settlement?”

“Who are you kidding?”

“It sounds like an idea.”

“You can’t draw a straight line.”

“I won the Art Prize in my high school.”

“You did?”

“Maybe!”

“Then what?”

“I start teaching this art class. And I know that the envelope can be pushed.”

“Is all that freedom is worth?”

“I’m not that much of a cynic.”

“If you were?”

“There would be a lesson.”

“And you are going to teach it.”

“With my magic pencil.”

“What about the argument with the model?”

“I never was going to give in to her.”

“So how did you know that someone would complain.”

“That was the easy part. Greg Coleman had already got mad about us teaching *Catcher in the Rye*. He was a sitting duck.”

“So you drew the million dollar penis.”

“I’m the one who would have trouble drawing a straight line.”

“So you got some help from a sexy math teacher!”