

Leaving My Brother Behind

Michael F. Welsh
University of South Carolina

Jason Walker, a new freshman at Southern State University, was worried about his kid brother. Things had not been good at home when Jason left for college. He and his brother were living with their father and his new wife after the custody battle that occurred when their parents divorced several years earlier. It was not a comfortable setting. The brothers had supported each other through their family's difficulties and now that Jason was away at college he wondered how he could continue to support his brother without making things worse for him.

The first great concern of traditional-aged college freshmen is arguably their personal relationships. Negotiating adjustments in their relationships with parents, brothers and sisters, high school friends, boyfriends, girlfriends, new college friends and roommates consumes much of their lives in the first few days of college. If they fail in working out their relationships, then they begin looking for and seeing the negative in their college experiences. If they are successful with their relationships, then a sense of security and confidence develops and they begin to realize that they can make it in college. This case is based on field research and was developed to initiate dialogue among freshmen during that critical period when they are adjusting to the many changes that occur in their relationships. The names and some peripheral facts have been disguised to protect confidentiality. However, care was taken to ensure that nothing essential to the meaning of the case was "made up" and that the case would ring true to freshmen in similar situations.

This case is best used with new college freshmen in a college success class or freshman seminar course during the first few weeks of class. This is when the dilemma contained in the case is most keenly felt. The advantage of using a case such as this is that it bypasses the awkwardness many freshmen feel talking about their own personal issues in class. Instead, they can work through the case and, in the process, can practice and sharpen the skills needed to solve their own issues as they move on to a hoped for successful college experience.

Jason Walker was uncomfortable with the fact that he had no contact with his kid brother since starting classes at Southern State University. Things had not been good at home when he left and, while he was glad to be away from it all, his younger brother, David, had been left to deal with it the best he could. It didn't seem fair and Jason wondered what he could do without making things worse.

DIVORCE

Jason was in third grade when his dad left. "I remember every single detail," he recalled as he told the story. "He left on Easter Sunday. What better timing than that, huh? I had come from my bedroom to find him sleeping in the guest bedroom. So, being a kid, I thought maybe my Mom was sick or something and he didn't want to catch anything from her. So, she leaves to go to church and he has me help him pack up and when he gets in the car he explains to me what's going on. He said that they just couldn't get along any more and that he was going to go stay in a hotel for a while. He never told me it was permanent. He just said, 'I might be coming back'. He never did.

"When my Mom comes home from church, he's gone. She was really angry. I remember little David coming downstairs with the Easter candy he had gotten smiling and everything. She yelled at him, 'what are you smiling about?' Then she went into her bedroom and didn't come out for a week or so." Jason's father moved into an apartment and less than a year later he was remarried.

"I knew he had cheated on my Mom. He won't admit it to me, but the woman we all thought he was cheating with was the woman he married. He didn't date anyone else. She worked with him in the same company. They were both managers. It was her third marriage. So that ought to tell you something about her."

Jason, his mother and brother stayed in the same house for a year or two after the divorce. But, then they moved. The house was just too expensive for his mother to handle by herself. They moved to an apartment and Jason changed schools for his fifth grade year. He and David visited their dad every Tuesday evening and every other weekend.

CHANGE IN CUSTODY

They fell into a routine of school and regular visitation with their dad until the eighth grade when their mom began dating Robert. Recalling that time, Jason said, "I didn't even know his last name. My dad said he was a scam artist and was busted by the IRS. I don't really know. He did seem like a shady guy, but my dad may have made that up."

Before Robert entered their lives, Jason and David got a lot of attention from their mother. Jason felt that he needed that attention but lost some of it when Robert came into the picture. He argued with his mother about Robert because he thought she was spending more time with him than with her children. Robert stayed out of the arguments although he did argue with Jason's mom about other matters.

Jason was not happy and he and his mother were not getting along because of Robert. So Jason called his dad and told him he wanted to get out of there. A custody battle ensued and the children were assigned a lawyer to protect their rights. Their mother broke up with Robert. It was then that Jason realized that he still wanted to be with his mother.

When the lawyer asked Jason and his brother, "Whom do you want to stay with?" Jason told him, "My mom." His mom told him that with a court appointed attorney like they had, wherever the children wanted to stay, they usually got to stay. That didn't happen in Jason and David's case. They got a letter saying their dad had been awarded custody.

So, it was about March or April of his eight-grade year that he and David moved into their father's home. "It wasn't too bad at first," he explained. "My stepmother even tried to be nice and say, 'I'm glad to have you over here.' That changed quickly enough".

Jason finished out the last month or two of eighth grade in a new middle school. Visitation with his mom was now what it had been with his dad. He saw her every Tuesday evening and every other weekend and spent time with her in the summertime. About the visitation, Jason had this to say, "The funny thing was just how odd my dad could be about visitation things. Like there would be some nights where Mom would have a PTO meeting or something and couldn't come. They would have a big blowup about it. But how many times when he had come to visit us and had to go out of town on business and miss those nights. Mom would understand. I thought it was funny how in the opposite situation, he would freak out even though he had done the same thing before. It never made any sense to me".

Reflecting back to the night he called his dad to say he wanted out of his mother's house, Jason became philosophical, "Two things happened because of that decision. First, I'm here at the university. If it hadn't been for that night I wouldn't be here. Second, my dad and I don't get along at all. If it weren't for that night, my dad and I would probably get along. Here's why. My mom wasn't really strict about grades and everything. I got B's, C's and D's in middle school. To be honest, I probably would

have continued that in high school and wouldn't have made it into the university. My dad cracked the whip you might say. He was pretty tough with me about my grades".

HIGH SCHOOL

Jason didn't find high school to be much fun. When he moved in with his dad, he was in a new school district. This meant that his friends from middle school would not attend the high school that he attended. So when he got to high school he didn't know anybody. The rest of the kids knew each other from middle school and he was always the new kid. But, as difficult as it was, he still made some friends. He never really got involved in any high school activities. He and his friends went hunting sometimes, but mostly they played video games.

When he was a junior he got a job as a bag boy at a supermarket. That changed things. He worked evenings from 5 to 11:30 p.m. three or four days a week. When business was slow and the cashiers were tired, they would let him run a register. So he learned the cashier's job. The manager liked that because whenever they were short a cashier, he could call on Jason to step in and help out. It worked so well that all the bag boys were trained to run a cash register so that when things got backed up any of them could step in and open another register to help out.

There were several store employees who, like Jason, attended the same high school and he was able to expand his circle of friends from this group. That made his junior and senior years of high school much better. The money he made all went into a college savings account.

HOME LIFE

Life at home for Jason was pretty rocky. He rebelled at the routine: an endless cycle of sleep, school, work and television. On weekends yard work was added, but the routine didn't change and was enough to numb any teenager's spirit. He argued with his dad and upset his stepmother. She pleaded with his dad to bring more discipline into Jason's life and that added to the stress that they all felt.

Jason had the sense that his dad liked David. That made living in his dad's house different for David than it had been for Jason. But, one thing was not different and that was his relationship with his stepmother. Like Jason, David did not like his stepmother at all and he missed his mom a lot.

David was now in middle school and had made a number of friends. But none of them lived in his neighborhood so he couldn't do much with them after school. Actually, he did not do much of anything when he came home from school. It was pretty much the same pattern of school, homework and television that Jason had so detested.

GOING TO COLLEGE

In Jason's senior year he had four male teachers. Those were the first he had ever had and it gave him the idea that he might like to be a high school teacher. Because his dad had "cracked the whip", Jason's grades were better than they would have been otherwise. He also did well on his SAT's. He decided to apply to Southern State because it was in the same town where he lived and his dad had told him that had no money to send him away to college. Jason applied for and received a scholarship that, along with his savings from his supermarket job, was what he would use to pay for college. He was on his own, but reasoned that if he remained in town he could continue with his job and make the finances work.

He rented an efficiency apartment close to campus to save on housing and transportation costs and moved in a week before his high school graduation. He was anxious to be on his own and away from his dad's house. Still, he spent his regular summer visitation time with David and his mother at her house. But he was pleased to go to his own apartment when the visitation was over and it was time for college to begin.

LEAVING MY BROTHER

Once classes began, Jason only saw his brother when he went over to his mom's house and David was there for visitation. He did not see him any other time.

"We've always been pretty close", he recalled, "I've never had a problem being away from him. I can handle it, but I'm not sure he can handle it. He doesn't have anyone he can really talk to".

Jason did not want to call David at home, because he was afraid that his dad or step-mother would answer the phone and he really did not want to talk to either of them. He also worried that somehow David would suffer the consequences if it were known that he was spending time on the phone with his brother. "They'll watch him like a hawk thinking I am a bad influence," Jason thought.