

## A SHOPLIFTER?

*George E. Huff, Michael E. Sherr, & Nelson Henning*

“Good morning, Mrs. Clark,” social worker Gary Cameron stood to greet a new client as she entered his office. “I am Mr. Cameron and I welcome you to the Mental Health Clinic (MHC). I was just . . .”

“I’ve been referred by the court,” Mrs. Clark interrupted, “because I was arrested for shoplifting but I didn’t mean to do it.”

“I was just looking over the information that you filled out for the receptionist,” Mr. Cameron started again. “She informed me that you told her that. Why don’t you have a seat?”

“I meant it when I told her I didn’t mean to do it,” she continued, still standing. “I want you to understand that I don’t remember doing it.”

As the clinician on call, social worker Gary Cameron was accustomed to doing court-ordered assessments at a military mental health clinic. However, this assessment seemed different already. Mr. Cameron took a deep breath as he sat down. *I wonder where this session is headed.*

### **Mental Health Clinic**

Although part of the Medical Center on Wright Patterson Air Force Base (WPAFB), the Mental Health Clinic (MHC) was a public facility housed in a separate building within walking distance. The building, previously a small hospital,

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had been converted into well-decorated offices. Clients were initially screened at the Medical Center before being assigned to the different branches of the medical setting such as the Mental Health Clinic.

The fifteen-member staff included three psychiatrists, four psychologists, and eight clinical social workers, with professional experience ranging from 2 to 25 years. Of the fifteen staff members, two were African-American and thirteen white; ten were male and five female. All but two were military personnel. The two civilians were psychologists. Dr. Jim Dillon, who supervised the MHC social workers, had been a clinical social worker in the Air Force for the past 20 years.

MHC maintained regular office hours from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and most clients scheduled appointments in advance. However, it also provided services to “walk-ins,” people who came without appointments. All of the staff members at MHC were required to take their turn being “on call” to respond to such clients. Being the on-call staff member meant being physically available and prepared to provide crisis intervention, emergency psychosocial evaluations, and court-ordered assessments. There was always someone on call. The 15 staff members rotated being on call for the MHC, and each person’s turn came about one day every two weeks.

### **Mr. Gary Cameron**

Gary Cameron was 33 years old and had worked at the MHC for three years. This was his second job since completing his MSW five years earlier from the University of Illinois. Mr. Cameron had completed his BSW degree from Southern Illinois University and began a MSW program one week later. His previous job involved working with families who had mentally delayed children. His interest in working with military families came about while serving in the Air Force as an enlisted military policeman. Upon completing his four-year enlistment, he immediately began pursuing his social work education. He decided to become a social worker because of his commitment to his Christian faith. Mr. Cameron believed that the teachings of Jesus were consistent with helping others and that the social work profession was a way for him to honor God.

Mr. Gary Cameron was on call the morning Mrs. Clark came in for assistance. Since working for the MHC, Mr. Cameron had done many court-ordered assessments. The assessments usually involved three one-hour sessions to develop rapport with clients and to gather enough information to write a report with treatment

recommendations for the judge ordering the assessment. This was the first time Mr. Cameron could remember doing a court-ordered assessment with a female client. All the other court-ordered assessments were with men, most of whom were referred after being convicted of driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

### Session One

Mr. Cameron observed Mrs. Jane Clark as she was ushered into his office. The Caucasian lady appeared to be in her 50's, was well dressed and groomed impeccably in a three-piece suit. Her hair looked like she had just been to a beautician, and she presented herself quite properly. However, she appeared distraught and upset, switching her purse from arm to arm and picking at her nails. Mr. Cameron thought he noted tears in her eyes as he stood and introduced himself.

Mrs. Clark continued to fidget with her purse as she sat down and anxiously stammered, "I have been ordered by the court to come here. I was also told that I needed an assessment as I have been accused of shoplifting at a K-Mart store." Mrs. Clark continued, "I have been married to my husband Dick for nearly 25 years. We have a good relationship even though I am concerned about his unhappiness with his job. I am not currently employed." She proceeded to explain to Mr. Cameron that they had one child, Marvin, who was a 17-year-old senior in high school. "He likes to play computer videogames in his room after school, and when he's not playing on his computer, he likes hanging around with his friends from high school." Mrs. Clark nervously cleared her throat before continuing, "Our family is a very traditional middle class family living in a middle class neighborhood of brick homes near the Air Force base. We have lived in the same three-bedroom house with an attached garage and a nice yard for eighteen years. We are just a normal family. We have no immediate family members in the area. All of our extended family members live out of state. However, we are friendly with our neighbors. I think that we have a good relationship with them."

Mr. Cameron let out a long breath and said, "Why don't you explain a little bit more in detail what brought you to the MHC and how the MHC might be of service to you."

"There is this K-Mart about one mile from my house," she explained. "I often shop there. We were planning a 'get together' with some friends and relatives who were coming from out of town over the holiday. And I was feeling a little stressed about hosting this holiday affair at our home."

"It was the middle of the afternoon, between 3:00 and 3:30 p.m., a few days before Thanksgiving," Mrs. Clark explained. "And I took a toothbrush from this store and stuck it in my purse. However, I don't remember doing it! I went out of the store not paying for it. Someone else in the store had seen me put this toothbrush in my purse. I could have paid for the toothbrush, if I really needed one, but I didn't even need one!"

Mr. Cameron thought to himself, *She was charged with shoplifting for taking a toothbrush? Why didn't the store just ask her to pay for the item?* But he asked, "Why would you have taken the toothbrush?"

"I don't know why," she responded vehemently. "I'm telling you, I don't remember. I was thinking about my plans for the holiday get together as I walked toward my car and the next thing I remember is being confronted by this security person from the store." Mrs. Clark told Mr. Cameron, "He was the one who found the toothbrush in my purse and detained me. It was the city police that took me in for questioning. They took my statement and then released me."

Mrs. Clark continued that she complied with every request of the security personnel and the police. However, she was dazed and surprised at what was happening to her. Raising her voice, Mrs. Clark repeated, "It isn't that I didn't do it. I just don't remember doing it." She paused, "What bothers me the most is having a criminal record now." Putting her head down, she added, "I've brought unnecessary embarrassment upon my family."

Mr. Cameron then asked, "Does anyone else know about this incident?"

Mrs. Clark responded, "My son and husband are the only ones that know anything about this. We agreed not to discuss this with anybody outside the family. I've never, ever done anything like this before."

Mr. Cameron asked, "How are things at home?"

"Over all, things are pretty good." Mrs. Clark commented. "Though there are some things that are causing me difficulty in my life, I love my husband and son and have high hopes for them." Mrs. Clark thought for a moment and then continued. "We have a fairly predictable routine and order to our lives. What I mean by that is that we are a family of habit; we eat at certain times, do things certain days."

Mr. Cameron then reviewed with Mrs. Clark details that he had learned about her family and the incident at K-Mart, to make sure that he understood what she had said. He said to Mrs. Clark, "It has been beneficial to hear from you directly regarding the circumstances leading to your arrest and about your family. I am looking forward to other sessions with you that would help me better understand

the dilemma that you are facing.”

Mrs. Clark said, “It is hard coming into an office like this and having to go over things with someone I don’t even know and things I don’t even remember doing. However, I appreciated the time you took, Mr. Cameron, to talk to me about the trouble I am in and about my family. It was helpful for me to finally share this information with someone like yourself.”

Mr. Cameron tried to encourage Mrs. Clark, “I’m committed in assisting you through the upcoming weeks that we will be meeting.”

### **Staffing with Dr. Dillon**

Later that day Mr. Cameron discussed this case with Dr. Dillon. Mr. Cameron reported the facts of the shoplifting incident as well as Mrs. Clark’s understanding and reaction to them. Dr. Dillon wondered whether Mrs. Clark had experienced a Dissociative Fugue prompted by some precipitating stressful event in her life. He suggested that Mr. Cameron read the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition (DSM-IV), to see whether Mrs. Clark met the criteria for a dissociative disorder. He also suggested that Mr. Cameron spend the next two sessions identifying the stressful events in her life and develop a report to the judge with a plan for effective management.

### **Session Two**

The following Monday Mrs. Clark arrived on time but appeared anxious. She sat on the edge of her chair and clung tightly to her purse. Wanting to put her at ease, Mr. Cameron gently asked her to share about her husband.

“He retired about 15 years ago after 20 years in the Air Force. Immediately after retiring, Dick started a second career as a U.S. postal service worker.” Mrs. Clark said, “I thought it would be a good career move for him. It is a stable income, and he retains his service benefits. After 20 years of service, Dick could retire and draw two pensions—one with the Air Force and a second with the postal service plus Social Security. Financially, we are doing well and are financially secure as we anticipate our retirement years.”

“Dick was content with his employment until the last couple of years. Since then he has wanted to move into some other area of the postal system to get off the streets, preferably something in a supervisory capacity, but there have not been

any openings. I think this has truly frustrated him; he has become very dissatisfied with his job. He now counts the days until he can retire even though he had aimed to reach the 20-year mark of retirement status. He has five years to go before he is eligible to retire." Mrs. Clark sighed. "He is so unhappy now with his job. It just eats him up inside. I hate to see him like this."

"What about your relationship with him?" Mr. Cameron asked.

"Our relationship is loving," she replied. "I'm comfortable with it. We haven't had any significant marital conflicts during our marriage." She attributed that to the fact that she does not like conflict and, for that matter, neither does her husband. Mrs. Clark described their family as "a very close-knit family, spending a lot of time at home together but each doing our own thing. Probably the closest thing we do is go out to dinner together every other Friday." She related, "But a typical evening after work and school is I get dinner ready, we eat supper, I clean up afterwards, then Dick goes off and watches some sports game, depending on the season, while I work on some kind of craft. We sit in the living room until bedtime, while Marvin goes to his room to watch TV or does something on the computer. We are just an average family."

Mrs. Clark then put her head in her hands. "But now look at the trouble I'm in. I've certainly never done anything like this before. I haven't ever been a client at the MHC before nor have I been to any other counselor."

Mr. Cameron asked, "Have you and your husband discussed the shoplifting incident anymore?"

She responded, "We haven't discussed anything. I am leaving it up to my husband to raise the subject, but he has chosen not to discuss it or ask any questions."

Mr. Cameron and Mrs. Clark then discussed during the rest of the session how Mr. Clark's job situation added stress to her life and possible ways the two of them could communicate about the pressures in their lives. Mr. Cameron spent some time after the session reviewing his notes and praying for wisdom. He decided to inquire about other stressful life events with Mrs. Clark during the next session.

### **Session Three**

Mrs. Clark walked in the next week appearing much more at ease. She appeared calm, so Mr. Cameron decided to get to the heart of the matter. After brief preliminaries, he asked her, "What are the primary stressors in your life right now?"

"Being convicted of this crime and perhaps doing time in jail," Mrs. Clark responded immediately.

"I understand how that possibility would loom heavy on your mind, but are there any others?" Mr. Cameron probed.

"Cancer."

Mr. Cameron immediately thought about his own father who was undergoing aggressive treatment for cancer. But because this was her concern, Mr. Cameron wanted to learn more about her physical health and why she had this fear of cancer.

Initially, she responded, "I guess I'm OK, but I don't know for sure."

Mr. Cameron asked, "Why do you think you are OK but don't know for certain?"

"A little over five years ago," she began, "I was diagnosed and treated for cancer of the bladder. I went for regular visits and was on a treatment plan. They were able to get all the cancer through the various treatments I was on." Mrs. Clark explained that she took medication and had gone through a series of chemotherapy and radiation treatment sessions. However, now she was living in fear of the worst case scenario. With teary eyes, she acknowledged, "I am afraid of the possibility of the cancer returning." Holding a handkerchief, she periodically dabbed at her eyes.

Mrs. Clark related that over the last couple of years she had been involved in follow-up appointments with her doctor who thought annual checkups were adequate. These follow-up visits at the Medical Center included an invasive procedure to determine the condition of her bladder, and specifically to see if there was any cancer. As the five-year anniversary date had approached, the doctor recommended that she get a thorough checkup. Mrs. Clark said, "At this point, he has requested that I come into the office for a full-scale physical to be sure that all the cancer is gone." She informed Mr. Cameron, "The five-year point was a couple of months ago and as of today's date I have not scheduled this appointment. I'm worried about this procedure; it is just so painful, and I don't know what the reports might reveal."

Mr. Cameron asked, "What specifically are you worried about?"

She responded, "I am afraid there still might be cancer." Subsequently, Mrs. Clark disclosed that she was fearful of dying and that she equated having cancer in her system with dying.

Then Mr. Cameron asked, "Have you had any indications of its recurrence?"

"No," Mrs. Clark's eyes filled with tears, "I'm just afraid and don't want to go alone."

Given Mrs. Clark's worried responses to his last two questions, Mr. Cameron could identify her fears as similar to his father's fear of dying. Mr. Cameron also felt a strong desire to be helpful and asked, "What would you think of my meeting you at your appointment?" Almost immediately he wondered, *Should I have said that?* However, he couldn't take back his question so he went ahead with his first thought.

"I guess that would be OK with me," she said, apparently caught off guard by his offer.

"It won't be a problem for me," Mr. Cameron explained, "because the Hospital Center is the building right next to ours." Mr. Cameron then continued to probe a bit. "I sense that there is still something troubling you. Is there anything else you would like to share?"

Mrs. Clark hung her head for a moment, and sighed. "Well, I guess there is an issue I recently had with my son." She paused before continuing, "My son got into trouble the day before I was caught shoplifting. We had just learned that he's been taking drugs. He obtained the drugs at his school from a friend." Mrs. Clark exclaimed, "I had no idea that Marvin was even thinking about drugs, let alone experimenting with them."

Mr. Cameron nodded for her to continue.

"He was an excellent student in junior high school, but when he got to high school, I noticed a gradual deterioration of his grades. He used to get As and Bs, but now he gets Cs with a few Ds. So far, he has not failed any courses but I'm worried that he will sooner or later." She continued, "Dick also doesn't seem to care. I'm the one that has to attend the parent/teacher conferences alone. Dick just says, 'Hey, I've had a hard day at work, and I just want to stay home and rest.'"

Mrs. Clark started fidgeting with her rings. "I am sure Marvin will come to his senses. We would like to see him go to a university. We want him to attend Wright State because it's so close. We are open to him studying anything he wants, as long as he gets a college education and goes to a nearby university." Mrs. Clark said, "Marvin staying home during his four years of college sounds like a good idea to Dick and me." She assured Mr. Cameron that Marvin was "OK with the idea." As though trying to convince Mr. Cameron, she said, "Marvin is really a good boy, but I know that some of his friends have influenced him in not caring about his grades."

"Who are these friends?" Mr. Cameron asked.

"I haven't the foggiest idea who they are," Mrs. Clark shrugged. "They don't



come over to the house. I think he meets with them at school functions, like dances or football games, but I'm not sure what they do together." After pausing briefly, she continued, "He's not involved in any extracurricular activities. When he comes home after school, he either plays videogames or, if the weather's nice, he goes outside and skateboards in the neighborhood. He's in his room a lot watching TV or using the computer."

Mrs. Clark volunteered, "I was the one that found out that my son was using drugs." She continued, "I am a meticulous housekeeper. One day I noticed that Marvin's room was a mess so I went into his room to rearrange and pick up things. When I opened one of his drawers I found the marijuana cigarettes. I let it go for a day or two and didn't say anything to him. On the third day I decided I had to say something to him about the drugs. When I confronted him, Marvin said, 'I was only experimenting with it. I only tried it once, last weekend.' He told me the person, a friend at school, who gave him the drugs and then promised me he would never use drugs again. I don't think he was telling me the whole truth, but that's how we left it."

"Later that evening I decided to talk to Dick about my confrontation with Marvin," Mrs. Clark said. "He listened but didn't do anything about it."

"After my discussion with Marvin and talking to my husband, I decided not to discuss this with the school personnel, as this would only bring more attention to our son. After all, he was only experimenting with it; he's not a user."

There was a brief lull in the conversation as Mrs. Clark lowered her face in apparent disappointment. She then said, "Marvin used to attend church with me and is still on the membership roll; but when he became a teenager, he gradually stopped going and now only goes to church occasionally." She continued, "I go to the First Presbyterian Church every Sunday where I am a member. I believe you should be involved in your church. Other than that I don't think our family has any other ties to our community or even to the Air Force base."

"I'm a Christian," Mrs. Clark volunteered. "I think Dick is a Christian, because he used to go to church with us and his name is still on the roll. But I'm really not sure anymore, whether he is a Christian or not." She commented, "Church is important to me. I wish that church was as important to my family as it is to me and that we could pray together."

Mr. Cameron responded, "I'm also a Christian and can identify with how important church is to you."

She asked, "Could we pray together?"

Mr. Cameron agreed to do so. But first he asked, "What would you like me to pray for?"

Mrs. Clark said, "For strength and wisdom... that I will do the things I need to do. To have a better understanding of what I didn't have before now and what would make me a stronger person and a better Christian."

Though Mrs. Clark did not pray, she smiled after the prayer and commented, "I feel more relaxed and confident that God had not abandoned me."

Hearing her comments, Mr. Cameron responded, "It seems as if prayer is important to you." He continued, "Have you considered talking with your pastor?"

"I'm too embarrassed," Mrs. Clark replied, "to talk to my pastor or anyone at church about the shoplifting incident. I suspect that some folks at church can tell something is wrong, but I am too embarrassed to explain what happened."

Mr. Cameron starting wrapping up the session by once again encouraging Mrs. Clark to schedule a follow-up evaluation with her oncologist. They also discussed what feelings she might experience depending on the outcome of the oncologist's report.

"If I get a clean bill of health," she said, "all the other things in my life will be OK; my son's drug experimentation and court findings. But if not, then nothing else will matter to me."

Because he had already committed himself to accompanying Mrs. Clark to her appointment earlier in the session, Mr. Cameron reminded her, "Let me know when you make the appointment to see the oncologist and I will make sure I meet you at office."

Apparently relieved, Mrs. Clark said as she left his office, "That would be great. I'll call you with the appointment time and meet you there!"

### **Writing the Court Report**

As Mrs. Clark left the office, Mr. Cameron pulled out the necessary forms to write his report to the judge. Based on past experience, Mr. Cameron knew the judge would use the report when rendering a sentence for Mrs. Clark. Although Mr. Cameron had gathered a lot of information on Mrs. Clark and her family, he was uncertain about what to write. Mr. Cameron contemplated the several conflicting thoughts and emotions he was having about the assessment. *In some ways, he thought, Mrs. Clark should not have been charged with a crime. She's a woman in her 50s with no prior record. She only took a toothbrush that she could have easily paid for.*

*Moreover, Mr. Cameron thought, several situational stressors could have contributed to the incident occurring. She really needs support and encouragement, not the additional stress of being charged with a crime. After stopping to pray for Mrs. Clark, he thought, She seems genuinely remorseful for what happened. At the same time, he thought, justice must be done. I have to consider what is best for society and not just what is best for Mrs. Clark. In some ways, her cancer and her problems with her son don't have anything to do with her taking the toothbrush. Staring at the paperwork, he wondered where to begin.*

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