



Overnight Resident Counselor in a highschool

My student life in Gent ended the moment I received my college degree, a Bachelors in Orthopedagogy. Now what, I thought? I wasn't planning my future. I wasn't thinking what is next. I pretty much lived in the moment. Sometimes I did wonder what my life would be like in the future, but I couldn't see it, I couldn't feel it and I couldn't imagine it. I would have loved to stay in Gent, but without a job that was not an option. The next logical step was to temporarily move back into my parents home in Deinze.

I had tasted the freedom of having my own space and knew that getting a job would support this goal! I walked into an employment agency and not long after I received a letter that an overnight resident counselor position came open at a high school in Deinze. I applied and got the job. In my interview I soon discovered that the previous counselor had a nervous break down, couldn't handle the group of seven students and they needed someone else to take over the job.

I decided to go for it and take on the challenge. I knew I would be dealing with some teenage behavior problems and decided to be very transparent from the beginning. I would be open and honest and make it very clear that my intention was to be a supportive, respectful and loving team player. I expected the same from them.

It didn't take me long to figure out that it was the oldest in the group of 7 who was the trouble maker and was controlling and influencing the

groups energy. The first morning at breakfast her behavior was very disruptive. I didn't give her much room for that and immediately told her to get out of the room. "OUT!", I said, while pointing my finger to the door. I let the group know that such a behavior would not be tolerated. Nobody expected me setting that very strong boundary at our first breakfast together. It was necessary and it worked. The instigating student stormed out of the room. I stayed with the rest of the group and invited them to enjoy the rest of their breakfast. I gave her about 10 minutes outside by herself and then went to look for her. She was sitting on the bench with her head down and her arms crossed. I sat down next to her, gave her a moment to adjust to my presence and then talked to her in a relaxed and gentle voice. I told her I liked her a lot but that I could not let her act out like that. I let her know that I was aware that she probably had some trouble in her life and doesn't really like to be there in boarding school, which I totally understood. I had been in boarding school myself, I explained. I shared with her my intent of creating our time together as fun and with as much freedom as possible. I mentioned that her disruptive attitude had no place there. I explained if she wanted to be respected for who she is and be supported, she would have to stop testing my boundaries. I just sat there in silence with her for a while, holding space, observing how she was taking it and how she was responding. After a moment of silence I told her I was going back to the group and warmly invited her to grab some breakfast or a cup of coffee so she didn't have to go without breakfast. At first she refused but realized I wasn't attacking her, only supporting her. Five minutes later she came back to the group, grabbed a cup of coffee and sat down in silence. I acted like nothing happened and wished everyone a great day at school promising them I would be back by dinner.

I was thankful that my intuitively invented technique worked. If she had rebelled more it would have been a different story. I think she sensed my sincere intent and knew I was honest with her. It was quiet an energetic experience. That whole event shook me to my core as well, but I knew if I hadn't acted on it from the beginning, it would have been much harder to set boundaries later.

Now that I had gained employment, I started looking around for a home to rent. In the street between my parents home and the bookstore there was a row of six very small houses. They were all attached to each other and each had a narrow long garden. Most likely build around 1825. One of them was for rent. My mom who had been remodeling two

apartments came to inspect the house with me. The electrical wires were still the old type, wrapped in cloth. There was no insulation in the walls. The toilet was in the outhouse. My mom's advice was to rewire the electrical wires up to standard. She also suggested to break down the wall between the house and the outhouse so I didn't have to go outside in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. At first I didn't want this to be done because I wanted to move in quickly. Ultimately I agreed with her professional suggestions. I am still grateful she made that happen and I didn't let my stubborn young impatient self prevail!

It was 1994, I was almost 24 years old, I had a boyfriend, a job and my own little house.

One morning, the first week I was working there, I hopped on my bike and drove through the green metal school gates to go back home. A teacher stopped me and asked where I was going. Students weren't allowed to leave the school once they had arrived. I explained that I was the new overnight resident counselor and after her profound apology, I proceeded. After this incident, the school director introduced me as the new counselor via an interview in their school magazine.



This is the interview as it was published in the June 1994 school magazine. My 23 year young voice spoke out and shared her thoughts and experiences.

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It is my honor to introduce Mieke De Clercq - Overnight Resident Counselor in our school

Anyone who does not know Mieke De Clercq can, at first sight, mistake her for being a student. She looks very young with her slender shape and youthful clothing. One morning, a diligent teacher once called her back when she cycled swiftly out of the school gate. Very forgivable, because not all of us have met our new resident counselor who disappears in the morning and appears in the evening. Therefore this interview as an introduction.

Resident boarding school counselor, is there a specific training for this, Mieke?

After graduating high school with a degree in business, I went on to study Orthopedagogy in Ghent. A natural choice of study because in our family there are several people with a disability. My father is very visually impaired. I wanted to work with people and help them. The training was particularly interesting. I learned to guide groups, to deal with disabled people and people in problem situations.

When and how did you get in touch with our school?

I graduated in June 1993, so I was looking for a job. I received a letter at the beginning of December from an employment agency stating that I could present myself here. The interview went very smoothly and the same day I received a message that I could start working here.

What expectations did you start with this job?

In fact, I had no specific expectations. The only thing I knew about the assignment came from my own childhood experiences. I myself was a student in a boarding school in Kortrijk for two years. As a teenager, I wanted that, although my mother didn't like it at first. Overall it became a

positive experience. So I knew what it was like. My intention is to offer the students a sense of home. I want to be a counselor which is supportive and create a beneficial relationship for the students.

What does your job consist of? What is expected of you?

On the one hand there are a number of practical tasks. I wake up the students in the morning and insure that they have a nutritious breakfast. I leave at half past seven. On Wednesdays I am back at half past twelve. On the other weekdays I arrive at a quarter to seven. We first have dinner together. I also do study counseling and then there is free time in which we play cards, games, watch TV or just hang out and talk. Money management is also part of it. More importantly there is the social and educational aspect of the job. I guide the students and show them what is possible and what is not. I offer them a place of safety and peace. In the beginning they naturally were testing me. That is why it is important to be clear from the beginning, to make agreements and to set boundaries. This is needed to steer a group in the desired direction. I do not do this in a dominant authoritarian way but by consultation. I communicate a lot with the students and make it clear to them that I also have my responsibilities. I demonstrate what it means to be responsible. That's how they learn themselves. I'm not curious about their private affairs, but if they feel like a chat or if there are problems, they know they can come to me and count on me. This is how a trust relationship is established.

Isn't it a pretty lonely job? You do not have any colleagues you can rely on for consultation and support.

I am indeed on my own, but I do not feel that as a loss. If serious problems arise and I feel that I can no longer manage it myself, I know that I can count on the school management staff. I know that they will listen and help me out. It is sometimes a bit of a balancing act, however, not to jeopardize the relationship of trust with the students. But they know that they are being cared for, they realize that I am concerned with their over all well-being. We have a fine group of seven students. They also take care of each other. I can openly and honestly talk with them and point out to them if they are doing something unsupportive. Of course it is just as important to underline the positive. A pat on the shoulder, a compliment, a word of confirmation or appreciation, is very supportive and helps create their positive self-image. I believe much more in rewarding than punishment.

You hear quite a bit of complaining about the youth of today as if they were no good, uncultivated, uncivilized. How do you look at young people?

Young people often don't have it easy. We live in a challenging world. In today's society, you have to take on many responsibilities at an early age. They are less cared for. Young people lack safety and security. I think that every person - young and old - has good qualities, but due to certain circumstances, e.g. skewed home relationships, their character and behavior may become somewhat distorted. Every person is good at their core and still have their qualities and flaws. I want to emphasize and encourage those good qualities. I am also young, almost twenty-four. I am raised in a happy home. My parents have a good relationship.

As a child I had a lot of freedom, but there were also rules. I could try out all sorts of things, but knew that I could fall back on my parents if I had any problems. That back up support was there. I also saw how my mother always went out of her way to help everyone. Honesty, not taking what is not yours, was a value that was strongly emphasized in our home. I am very grateful for my upbringing. It has helped me a lot. I can now live according to those principles myself and pass them on to others so that they too can continue this way.

Do you have time for hobbies?

I make time for that. I don't have specific hobbies, there is so much that interests me. I like to go out with friends, but don't like the discos that much. Jumping around on a square meter doesn't do it for me. A nice chat at the cafe, a game of pool and getting a breath of fresh air by the sea is fun to me. I also like to do sports. As a child I participated in all kinds of sports: surfing, gymnastics, ballet, volleyball, ping-pong, jet skiing, chess, etc. I was also a member of the scouts.

Very "active" hobbies!

Yes, you could say so. Although we used to own a bookstore at home and I read a lot as a child, I hardly take a book in my hands now, except in function of my thesis. Which I must finish by September 1st. Which is approaching soon! The subject I chose is "boarding school". This way I can combine theory and practice.

And how do you view your future?

I am like most young people. I live from day to day, in the here and now. I don't make big plans for the future with an exception of traveling. I want to work to travel. When I get the chance, I'm off to places, I want to see the world. But now I don't have the money for it. In January I started to live on my own and financially I have to be careful. At the moment I am not thinking about getting married and having children, but that can change. However, with today's relationships it is difficult. At home I have seen what it means to have a good, permanent, caring relationship. What being faithful look like. But around me I see so many divorces, so many failures. It may sound gloomy, but it is a harsh reality. I often think of father's words: "You are actually alone in the world. It is very important to get along with yourself and to be able to fall back on yourself." Many seek that certainty outside themselves, they believe they need a relationship to be happy. But I think you can only look forward to a balanced relationship when you have a sense of your own strength. As for the "here and now", I enjoy coming to work here at the school, I feel good here. I find the atmosphere very positive. There is attention and care for the individual.

Being present, paying attention. It sounds very simple, but apparently they are vital conditions for human prosperity.

Thank you Mieke for this meeting. Behind your hip and bright figure is a strong and warm personality, a person to say "I salute you" to.

M. De Jaeger - M. Verbeke

I really respected and appreciated all seven of the students. And they respected me. We truly created a powerful bond. We maintained this powerful relationship for two school years. I am still in contact with some of them, which I appreciate so much!

An aspect that was less supportive was the fact that having an overnight job and having a relationship was not a great combination. My boyfriend Bart B. who had moved in with me left for his job half an hour after I arrived home in the morning and came home about two hours before I had to leave in the evening for my overnight job. There was not much time to be together. Not fun at all. Our relationship didn't survive this.



My boyfriend who recently came home from his job taking a picture of me leaving for work early evening.

I decided to not take on a third year as resident counselor in the school. I wanted a day job with regular hours. At the same time I decided I was ready for something different, the school management also decided they would no longer continue the boarding school. Which made it very clear to me, new adventures were waiting me!

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(Sharing permitted with my name and email included)
(With a simple email let me know if you like
to be added or removed from this list).

Mieke's Voice - Part 1

Week 1 - Introduction part 1

Week 2 - A Rough Start

Week 3 - Vision

Week 4 - History Lesson

Week 5 - Bookstore Caecilia

Week 6 - Invisible Hand

Week 7 - My family, a circle of 5. Part 1 - My parents Anny & Hugo

Week 8 - My family, a circle of 5. Part 2 - My brother Jeroen

Week 9 - My family, a circle of 5. Part 3 - My sister Kathleen

Week 10 - My family, a circle of 5. Part 4 - Something about myself, Mieke

Week 11 - Encounters with extraterrestrials

Week 12 - The Movie E.T. - The Extra -Terrestrial

Week 13 - What happens after the body dies?

Mieke's Voice - Part 2

Week 14 - Introduction part 2

Week 15 - Expressing my authentic nature

Week 16 - Sexuality - part 1 - Unity

Week 17 - Sexuality - part 2 - Separation

Week 18 - Sexuality - part 3 - Menstruation

Week 19 - Intimate Relationships

Week 20 - America - part 1 - Newspaper Article

Week 21 - America - part 2 - Stepping into a movie

Week 22 - Another taste of freedom as a college student

Week 23 - Riding the waves, both high and low

Week 24 - A Holistic approach to healing

Week 25 - Overnight resident counselor in a highschool