

Case #11: Barbara Ross

The cement block walls of Barbara Ross's office were decorated with pictures. Behind her hung a poster of the solar system and an equally large image of the moon. Her diplomas hung beside them. When she leaned back in her chair, she could see the Physics Department's modern façade across the street.

Barbara was a prolific researcher at a large public university. Her astrophysics research analyzing X-ray data for information about the stellar life cycle was well regarded, and her record in attracting grant funding was excellent, but she knew that she needed to improve her teaching to assure her tenure.

During her pause for thought, Barbara heard a knock at the door. When she called, "Come in," Jim Burton, a thin young African-American student with glasses, entered the room. He stood awkwardly near the doorway as he greeted her. "I wanted to stop by, since you asked me to after class," he said.

"Have a seat," said Barbara, feigning warmth. Inwardly, she was bracing herself for a difficult meeting. She never liked to be the bearer of bad news.

Barbara had recently attended a presentation about the high dropout rate of minority students in science. After the presentation, she became uncomfortably aware of the small numbers of minority students in her classes, and resolved to try and mentor her students more. Jim was averaging a "C-" in the course, and she wanted to help him improve his grade.

"Jim," Barbara said, "What would you like to do after you're done with college?"

"I don't know," said Jim, looking down. "Be a scientist, I guess."

"So, then, you'd like to go to graduate school?" said Barbara briskly.

"Sure, if I can get a scholarship," Jim replied.

"There are a lot of fellowships and grants for graduate students," said Barbara. "But in order to get one, you'll probably need at least a "B+" in this class. My question is – how can I help you get that grade? Do you have any questions about the lectures or the textbook? I'm available every week during office hours."

"Oh, I'm doing all right," said Jim. "I got a "C" in high school chemistry, and I got a scholarship for college anyway. Plus, I want to major in geology... I'm just taking this class as an elective."

Barbara was not sure how to respond. "I don't usually recommend this to students," she said, "but I really would hate to see this course compromise your ability to get into graduate school. It's not too late to switch to Astronomy 150, if you'd like to see your grade improve."

Jim stood up. He looked offended. "No... that's okay," he said. "There's nothing wrong with a "C". I'm staying in your class. And I don't need extra help. I can do this on my own." He left the office quietly.

Barbara put her head in her hands. What had she done wrong this time? She had offered Jim options. She had tried to be sympathetic and diplomatic. But somehow, things had not gone as she had planned.