

### **Case #14: Sharon Whitby**

“Ah, students,” Sharon Whitby thought as she sat with a pile of assignments to grade in front of her on her desk. Why did college students have to be so difficult?

It was the middle of a busy semester in Sharon’s Ph.D. program. Sharon was studying Computer Science after four years of service in the Air Force. She was bright, determined and disciplined. Outside of school, she volunteered for charities sponsored by her church. She planned to marry, settle down, and get a job in her field after she was done with her degree, although she was concerned about having enough time to raise a family.

Sharon did not resent working as a teaching assistant. In fact, she enjoyed interacting with her students and had good rapport with the class. Her students knew that she believed in treating people fairly.

This semester, there was a young man in her class named Jeff Eberhagen who had a mischievous sense of humor and asked many questions. Sharon quickly surmised that he was overqualified for the course when she graded his first assignment. Not only was his coding correct, but he had added extra features to the program. She gave him an “A” and wrote “Great Job” on his paper.

Jim Cruickshank, the professor for Sharon’s course, believed in giving students assignments that related to everyday life. The second assignment, which amused the teaching assistants a great deal, was to design a computerized dating program which would match people up based on their interests. During her discussion section, Sharon described the parameters of the program.

A week later, when she began to leaf through the stack of assignments, Sharon looked at Jeff’s results closely. There seemed to be too many variables. Had he misunderstood the assignment? She scanned down the printout and found a puzzling equation. “If gender1 does not equal gender2, then genderpref=0. If gender1 equals gender2, then...”

Sharon put down the paper. The assignment was incorrectly done. When Sharon referred to “dating”, she had meant heterosexual dating. But what if her best student was... well... trying to tell her something? Sharon disapproved of homosexuality in principle, but she knew that she shouldn’t let her beliefs influence her decision. Had she let Jeff get away with too much on the first assignment? Above all, she wanted to be fair. Sharon resolved to talk with Jeff after class. She was sure that he would redo the assignment perfectly once she explained it. She couldn’t bend the rules just because Jeff was an “A” student.