

LOLLIPOPS

By James Collins

Betty was frustrated. She completed four years of college in 1958 and just had her second anniversary at her new job with the New York City Welfare Department. As a rookie, the department assigned her to one of the more dangerous sections of New York, the Puerto Rican section of the South Bronx. She loved the kids and she loved the families so she ignored the dangers. She made it a point to be finished with her days work well before dark. What she had learned was that many of the families were cheating the system by claiming more children than they really had. As a result there was barely enough money to go around to other needy people. She reported this to her supervisor and he said, "We can't do anything without proof. If you find proof of fraud, we will consider it but your job is to verify the numbers and make sure that people get their checks." Betty thought about the problem and figured out a way that she might obtain some proof.

She selected a day in the summer time when there would be no children in school. She scheduled a visit to check out a four-story apartment building in the South Bronx that held 24 families. Half of the families were on welfare. Four of these were elderly couples who had no children. The remaining eight families had an average of five children apiece. Betty purchased 48, large, lollipops of four different colors, yellow, red, green, and orange. Each set held 12 pieces of one color.

As soon as Betty entered the street with her briefcase, she was recognized as the "welfare lady" and news flashed to each of the buildings and to each of the welfare recipients of her arrival.

Betty climbed the steps to the ancient building, opened the door and was accosted by many odors, some of food, some from animals, and some she didn't wish to identify. She didn't even attempt to ring the doorbells since she knew none of them worked.

She knocked once, and Mrs. Ramirez opened the door wearing a big smile.

"Mrs. Welfare lady welcome. I hope you brought my check."

"Mrs. Ramirez as you well know, this is just an inspection and your check will appear at the beginning of the month. Could you ask the children to come in to the living room so we can all chat together for a few minutes?"

"Mihael, go upstairs and get your two brothers and bring them down here."

Mihael slammed the door behind him and disappeared. Five minutes later, he appeared with two smaller boys. Mrs. Ramirez identified each of the six by name. Betty

checked the names off her list and handed each of the children a bright yellow lollipop. Betty knew that once one of these children had a lollipop in his or her hands, no power on earth would be able to extract that lollipop.

At the other two families with children on the first floor, she also handed out yellow lollipops. The families with just elderly people, she met and chatted with but did not give them lollipops.

Following the standard tradition, she climbed to the second floor. The first apartment she visited was the Diaz family who had six children on their list. When the six children appeared, three of them were holding yellow lollipops. To the other three children she gave them red lollipops. All the children who did not hold a lollipop on the second floor received a red lollipop.

On the third-floor, Betty repeated the process and met families with children holding both yellow and red lollipops. Not to let any children go without a candy, Betty passed out green lollipops on the third floor to those without a lollipop.

The fourth floor repeated the process and each of the three colors of lollipops appeared among the children. The few without lollipops on the fourth floor got orange lollipops. Betty made her count and found out that she had distributed 29 lollipops to an expected population of 40 children. She now had her proof. Every one of the eight families participated in the fraud. There were not 40 children among the eight families. There were 29.

Creating the report was simple and direct. Betty outlined her process and attached copies of all the signed documents from the eight families, which attested to the 40 children. She then made her notes as to the number of children who showed up with lollipops at each family. Betty presented all this information to her supervisor, who said,

"A very cute idea but I don't think it will hold up in court and nobody here will pursue it. I recommend you forget about it and just do your job."

Frustration exploded within Betty. She knew the fraud cost the taxpayers and other poor families, who could use the money, received less. However, the people in the welfare department did want to do anything about the problem. Within two months, she used her education credentials to land a teaching position at a small school in the North Bronx. In her resignation letter, she indicated her frustration and attached the report she had submitted to her superior. She never received another communication from the New York City Welfare Department.

THE END

