

Fat Boy vs. the Cheerleaders

by Geoff Herbach

Sourcebooks Fire

MEMORANDUM

From: Henry P. Rodriguez, Attorney at Law

Submitted To: Seventh District Court, Otter County

Re: Case No. 1745321—Gardener et al v. MLA Independent School District

SHORTLY BEFORE MIDNIGHT ON JUNE 15, GABRIEL JOHNSON, A SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD FROM MINNEKOTA, MN, WAS APPREHENDED OUTSIDE CUB FOODS BY OFFICER REX McCOY. JOHNSON POSSESSED \$17.75 IN SMALL BILLS AND CHANGE, WHICH HE CONFIRMED HAD BEEN REMOVED FROM THE VENDING MACHINE AT MINNEKOTA LAKE AREA HIGH SCHOOL.

POLICE SUGGESTED THE ALLEGED ROBBERY WAS RELATED TO A LARGER CONFLICT INVOLVING ASSAULT, VANDALISM, AND DEFAMATION OF CHARACTER THAT HAS COME TO BE KNOWN AS THE SPUNK RIVER WAR.

THE FOLLOWING TRANSCRIPT IS GABRIEL'S VERBATIM ACCOUNT, RECORDED IN A CONFERENCE ROOM AT THE MINNEKOTA POLICE DEPARTMENT BETWEEN 10 A.M. AND 5:40 P.M. ON JUNE 16.

WE SUBMIT THIS DOCUMENT AS CONTEXT FOR THE ABOVE NOTED CASE. THERE IS A SPECIFIC HUMAN COST WHEN THOSE IN POWER WIELD POWER ARROGANTLY. THIS CASE SUPPORTS A TEENAGER'S FIGHT FOR DIGNITY, OPPORTUNITY, AND FAIRNESS.

Chapter 1

Ripping off the pop machine last night wasn't meant to be funny. It was my duty to all the geeks, burners and oddballs in school, because that machine sucks. Robbing it was serious business, okay?

Why are you laughing, Mr. Rodriguez?

I did it myself. I robbed the machine all by myself.

There were sheep in the school this morning? Real sheep?

How—? Oh, wait, I remember now. I must've let them in there by accident. Whoops. Like, left the door open after I robbed the machine and all those sheep wandered in by themselves.

No, it's not funny, sir. Really.

I'm telling you, I'm the one who stole the money. It was eighteen dollars, but I lost a quarter when Officer McCoy roughed me up. Look at my chin! I have scrapes all over my stomach and knees, too.

That stupid pop machine. Stupid pop! It all started with that stupid...

Yeah I hate that machine! For so many reasons.

For instance, in May, me, Justin Cornell and Camille Gardener did this pop study for health class. The study was Camille's idea, because she turned into a health nut when her dad started organic farming last year (they grew like two tomatoes and a one giant zucchini—they're not the best farmers). Anyway, out of Camille's concern for student health, she got us to study usage of the pop machine, her theory being that unhealthy kids would be the heaviest users.

Big, bad study, sir. Mr. Luken, our Health teacher, gave us passes to hang out in the cafeteria all day. We made a chart of jocks, brains, music geeks, gamers, burners, and "others" (sad sacks who are hard to categorize because they have no social connections to anyone) and we took note of who purchased a product from the pop machine and what specific product they purchased.

Almost nobody paid attention to us while we took notes. Only a couple said stuff like, "What are you staring at, dorks?" Seth Sellers, a jock, made fart sounds when he saw me.

This pop project was eye-opening, sir.

After school that day, me, Camille and Justin went to Bitterroot Coffee Shop down on

Main Street to tally things up.

“Nick, *Gamer*, purchased three Pepsis in four hours,” Justin said.

“Kendra, *Burner*, four different pops in five hours,” Camille said.

“She’s pretty overweight,” Justin said.

“Not as big as Tiff, *Other*, who bought four bottles of Sierra Mist,” Camille said.

“Oh Lord Mother of all Balls,” I said.

Camille plugged the data into a spreadsheet, squinting.

Justin shook his head, sucked his latte and was all like, “Whoa.”

Then Camille sat back, sipped her green tea and was all like, “Just as I suspected.”

I smiled and said, “Holy Mother of all Balls, right?” I drank a mocha with whipped cream, which has a million calories, by the way.

Here’s the scoop, sir: Purchasers of pop at Minnekota Lake Area High School are fat asses, trailer park kids, addicted gamers, and burner chicks who eat cigarettes for breakfast. Dozens and dozens of these kids. Most of them went for second rounds later in the day. Some for thirds. A couple, fourths (me, for instance). Very few jocks purchased pop from the machine. (Seth Sellers bought one bottle of Pepsi late in the afternoon, so he was able to greet me with the aforementioned fart sounds.) Two cheerleaders purchased from the machine, but they both bought diet. That diet stuff will kill you, but not make you fat on the calories.

What does that tell you, Mr. Rodriguez?

I tried not to show my concern, but Justin and Camille were clearly concerned.

“You drink a lot of pop, Chunk,” Justin said. “Could be part of the problem,”

“Oh, is there a problem?” I said. “I wasn’t aware of a problem!” I smiled big and raised my fat mocha like I was making a toast.

“There’s a problem, Chunk,” Camille said. “A big problem.” She didn’t smile. She didn’t toast me.

“I’m just sayin’,” Justin said.

Yeah. Really. A problem. I drank a hell-ton of Code Red Mountain Dew every day—four bottles, five bottles—and the only pants that fit me were stretchy pants (elastic waistband, sir).

I knew it, too, knew pop was part of my issue. But, see, I also thought it was part of my success! I was winning by buying all that pop! All the vending machine money went to fund the band! I’m a trombone player, you know? That’s one badass, hilarious instrument, right?

Trombone! Awesome instrument. I love band so much so I figured I was paying myself by drinking all that pop. Winning it huge.

No. Stupid.

The truth is, I've gained a load of weight in the last couple of years. Kids call me fat ass, sausages, fudge balls, butter balls, cake balls, lard ass, 8 Butt Johnson. All kinds of names. I laugh and go along with it, but those names hurt my feelings.

Even my stupid gym teacher calls me names!

The day after our pop study, I was depressed, so it took me a long time to get to school, so I was late to gym class, so Mr. McCartney ordered me to "orbit," which means run laps. I didn't want to get detention (McCartney had been threatening me with detention, because I make jokes and I'm quote unquote *mouthy*). So I did what I was told.

While I was jogging around the gym, Seth Sellers shouted, "Planet turd in orbit!"

I smiled. "Yeah, watch out, planet earth. This shit ball might crash out of the night sky!" I faked being out of control and weaved off course like I was crashing.

McCartney got pissed. "This isn't a joke, Chunk," he said. "This is a punishment."

"Okay," I said. "Sorry." I jogged on, but when I got to the far end of the gym, Janessa Rogers, this nasty cheerleader, said, "Shake it, Chunk! Shake it!"

I puckered my lips duck-face style and started shaking my ass while I jogged.

Everybody laughed.

Everybody except McCartney. He freaked. Way out of control. His face turned dark red and sweat streamed down his forehead. He started yelling, "You wanna be a clown, Chunk? You wanna disrupt my class? Oh, you're real hilarious!"

I stopped my ass shaking,

"God, I'm sick of it," McCartney shouted.

I stopped jogging all together. Stared at him, because he was screaming. Everyone else stopped whacking their birds (we were in a badminton unit).

McCartney walked toward me fast. "I'm so sick of your baloney. Sick of your face."

"My face?" I asked, because I was surprised, because I always thought McCartney sort of liked me, even if I annoyed him.

"Your fat face! Get out of my gym, you sack of shit. Get your fat ass out of here."

Everybody stared. Everybody's mouth hung open.

I swallowed hard. Stared at McCartney for a second. Then said, "Okay." I put my head down and bumbled out of there as fast as my fat legs could carry me.

Terrible. Teacher verbally assaults you like that?

Hey. Why are we talking about this, Mr. Rodriguez? Shouldn't we be talking about how...how you're going to keep me from going to jail or something? I'm a little nervous about my crime.

The whole story, huh? Okay. You asked for it. I can talk forever.

Pop. The night after I was kicked out of gym, I pulled five empty bottles of Code Red Mountain Dew out of my backpack (there isn't recycling at school, so I bring my empties home). One bottle didn't have a cap on it. A little Code Red dribbled out onto my bedroom rug. It made a little stain. I squinted at it and my heart beat hard.

This stain reminded me of Doris our cleaning lady back when Dad was trying to pick up the pieces after Mom hit the road (Mom ran away to Japan while I was in eighth grade, by the way).

Doris was a tiny old lady. She spilled dirty mop water on the carpet. She said, "Better laugh than cry." She broke a lamp when she whacked it off a side table with the duster. "Better laugh than cry."

Poor Doris! She was terrible. She could barely lift a broom, she was so old. Dad had to fire her, which made him cry (serious sobbing breakdown, which he did a lot back then), but what was he going to do? She plugged the toilet with Clorox wipes. She broke a whole set of plates. She fell off a stool and ripped down our shower curtain. Dad had no choice. But when the taxi dropped her off at our place on the day he actually fired her, he broke down like a weak-ass baby. "I'm sorry," he cried. "I'm so sorry, Doris."

Doris shrugged and smiled and put her coat back on. I was so nervous about how she would react. What if Doris cried about getting fired? What would we do then? But she didn't seem to care at all. "Better laugh than cry," she said. Then Dad drove her home.

And I exhaled. I relaxed. And I thought: Doris has it right, right? Better laugh than cry. I don't want to be a fool sobbing mess like my dumb dad, who can't deal with his wife leaving him (my mom left me, too, and I wanted to cry, but seriously, *better laugh than cry*). That became my whole way of dealing.

A couple years later, there I was, ass dancing in the high school hallway while Seth

Sellers mocked me with fart sounds. Laughing all the way, man.

But I stared at that Code Red stain on my rug and my heart beat and I thought, *that's not funny*. For the first time, sir, it occurred to me that my total lack of dignity is not remotely funny.

That feeling continued into the night.

Grandpa, who you met this morning, moved in with me and Dad last summer to help us out. He cooks really well and sort of cleans—better than Doris, I guess. After he got too old to be a professional body builder, Grandpa ran a diner in town and the dude can make comfort food like nobody's business.

Yes, you heard me right, body-builder.

Why are you laughing?

Everybody in town knows about Grandpa. He was Mr. Minnesota 1977, Mr. Rodriguez. I'm serious. The ladies loved him. Grandpa was Arnold Schwarzenegger's main competition back in the day.

That's what he told me and I believe him.

Long story short, sir, that night Grandpa cooked up some steaks and a bunch of mushrooms in butter sauce and mashed potatoes and green beans and fixed us salads. The deal is I never ate the green beans or the salad part. I doubled up on mashed potatoes, because oh balls, yes, do I love the awesome flavor of my grandpa's cream cheese infused mashed potatoes.

While I was sucking down the potatoes, Grandpa stared at me. He said, "Boy, the lack of roughage in your diet accounts for that big gut of yours."

I looked up, stared back at Grandpa's pinched face. I remembered Mr. McCartney calling me a fat ass in gym. My heart sank. My chin quivered. "Big gut?" I asked.

"You heard me," he said.

I swallowed hard, thought I might cry, because all these names... But then my Doris philosophy kicked in. I said, "I'm out of here!" I put the rest of the potatoes in my mouth—a giant wad—jumped up from my chair and ass-danced out of the dining room.

"Sure love the spuds, don't ya, ya Chunk," Grandpa called after me.

"Ha ha ha!" my dad laughed.

Back downstairs in my room, I stared at the stain again. *What the hell is so funny? Am I really just a joke?* I pictured Doris's quivery arms and unsteady gaze and her wrinkled old face.

Then it hit me! *Oh man*, I thought. *Crap! You're not Doris, you idiot.*

Total realization, sir. Doris couldn't help it that she was so old. What was she going to do? Cry about living so long she no longer had control of her body? Better laugh than cry makes sense for her. I, on the other hand, have a choice. I'm a powerful young buck. Ass dancing isn't the only option, right?

Don't get me wrong, sir, I like being funny. But I don't like...

You asked for it! The whole story! This totally has to do with the pop machine.

See, I was already pretty crabby that last week of school. Because I tried to limit my Code Red intake to three bottles a day, because I didn't want to be a victim anymore, didn't want to just laugh it all off. I wanted to do something for myself. I'd become dependent on the sugar and caffeine in the freaking pop, okay?

Justin and Camille both commented on my bad mood.

"Why so sad?" Justin asked while driving me to school.

"Someone hit you with the sad stick?" Camille asked during chemistry.

"Bah," I replied to both of them. "Screw everything."

See? I was already evolving the attitude that caused me to become the criminal I am today.

Then, Wednesday that last week of school we had the first tiny event of what has since come to be known as the Spunk River War.

What a stupid name. Spunk. That's a bonehead name.

Sure thing, sir. Go ahead and get coffee. I'll be here when you get back. Not like I can go anywhere.