



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# The Alex Saunders Case

## Year

1999

## Description

A case where a student who would like to get a master's degree ends up getting accepted into a Ph.D. psychology program and does not tell her advisor that she does not plan to get the full degree. The second part of the case deals with a problem with consent when observing a child as part of a research study.

## Body

**Speakers:** Narrator; Alexandra (Alex) Saunders; Graduate Secretary; Professor Philip Thompson; Alex's Mother; Pre-School Teacher.

### **Part 1**

**April.** *Alexandra (Alex) Saunders, who will graduate with a BS in Psychology in just a few weeks, is visiting TKU as she considers whether she wants to attend the graduate program at TKU or OKU, both of which have respectable programs in her chosen field (developmental psychology, with an emphasis on second language acquisition). She is speaking with the graduate secretary. No one else is present.*

SECRETARY: No, we don't, technically, offer a terminal master's degree. But only about a quarter of our students stay on for the Ph.D., and the ones who only get the M.S. do quite well.

ALEX (*looking at the application materials*): So when I sign on, I am signing on for a Ph.D.

SECRETARY: Technically, yes. But it's just a technicality. It has to do with the way the program was set up years ago, and it simply isn't worth the bother going through the university red tape to change things. Really, the master's program has been a stand-alone program for years.

ALEX: Well, I really don't want to spend the time and money to get a Ph.D. It doesn't really offer me anything I want. Two years for a master's is a big commitment as it is.

SECRETARY (*nodding*): Yes, many of our students feel that way. It isn't a problem, really. After all, no one expects a recent graduate to really know whether she wants to go on for a Ph.D.

**Two hours later.** *Alex is in the office of Phillip Thompson, a researcher at TKU, nearing retirement and highly respected in the field of second language acquisition. To Alex, the main attraction of TKU over OKU is the possibility of studying with Thompson. They have had a very amiable conversation and Alex is feeling very comfortable about working with him.*

THOMPSON: Well, I have had a delightful time talking to you, but I must get on to a meeting. I do want to be sure you realize, though, that this program takes on between seven and twelve new students each year, but for ethical reasons I only work with one new student each year. My research and teaching commitments are such that I simply cannot do justice to more than that.

ALEX: I have heard that about you, and it is precisely your commitment to training your few students so thoroughly and giving them so much individual attention that makes me want to work with you.

THOMPSON (*beaming*): Well, I can't make a promise right now, but I can say that your background, your GPA, this introductory letter from the chair of your undergraduate psychology department, and our little chat here has made me think that you are the most interesting and promising of the new batch of Ph.D. students. I have a strong feeling that we'll be working closely together for the next five or six years.

ALEX: That would be wonderful.

**A week later.** *Alex is talking to her mother.*

MOTHER: So you lied to him?

ALEX (*distressed*): Not really. I didn't say I was going to go for the doctorate. And who knows, maybe I'll change my mind in a year or two and decide I do want the Ph.D.

MOTHER: You have never wanted a doctorate.

ALEX: I know! But I can't predict the future.

## **Part 2**

**Early November.** *Alex has almost completed the first nine weeks of her graduate career. She is talking on the telephone with her mother.*

MOTHER: There's something you're not telling me, dear.

ALEX: Oh, mother.

MOTHER: I can hear it in your voice. Are you getting enough sleep?

ALEX: All you hear is stress. I can't believe how hard I've been working.

MOTHER: Tell me about it. ALEX: Well, Thompson has kept his word. He really gives his students intensive training. I'm learning so much! But we work together two or three hours a day, seven days a week.

MOTHER: That doesn't sound so bad.

ALEX (*sounding more and more upset*): That's on top of my course work! The other graduate students who aren't working with Thompson are swamped. The first semester workload is amazing. I learned a couple of weeks ago that only about half the students come back for the second semester.

MOTHER: He's working you too hard, then.

ALEX (*crying now*): Yes, but it's the only way to learn what he has to teach. It's not Thompson, mom. Well, not just him, not mainly him. I'm homesick all the time, I'm

lonely, I never get any sleep, I'm not eating right, all I do is work, work, work.

*Silence, except for Alex crying softly.*

MOTHER: Daddy and I will send you a plane ticket. ALEX (*alarmed*): Mother! I'm not quitting!

MOTHER (*soothingly*): Sweetie, I didn't mean you should quit. I meant for Thanksgiving. It's only a couple of weeks away. You can have a nice break, rest up, let us take care of you.

ALEX (*sniffs loudly*): Mom, you're the best. Alex Saunders case 4

### **Part 3**

**January, fourteen months later.** *Alex has survived her first three semesters of graduate school and she is flourishing. She has developed impressive skills at observing and documenting second language acquisition among pre-school age children and has considerable experience.*

THOMPSON: Your observational workload is going to be very light this semester, Alex. There is only one appropriate subject – a boy called Shally.

ALEX (*laughing*): Well, that will be a change. Five last semester, one this semester.

THOMPSON: Yes, it is disappointing. He should just provide the last data I need for the international conference this summer.

ALEX (*looking through papers*): I see you've gotten consent from his father and from the preschool, and Shally's schedule is here. It looks like I'm all set to start next week.

### **Part 4**

**Two weeks later.**

ALEX: I don't know what it is; Shally just isn't warming up to me.

THOMPSON: Give it time.

ALEX: It has never taken this long before. Usually when I start observing a child, they only take a few minutes, or one day, maximum, to get used to me and start ignoring

me. It's been two weeks with Shally, and he still acts like he's afraid.

THOMPSON: Some children are more sensitive than others. You've been lucky up till now. Just be patient and unobtrusive and he'll come around.

### **Part 5**

**The next week.** *Alex is talking with Shally's pre-school teacher.*

TEACHER: I spoke with Professor Thompson, as we discussed. I told him that there's no doubt that Shally is afraid of you.

ALEX: Did you ask him if we could stop the study, or get someone else to observe Shally? TEACHER: Yes, I did. Professor Thompson was adamant that the observations must not stop. He told me that there is no one else available to do the observations, and he insisted that Shally will get used to you.

ALEX (*discouraged*): This is so frustrating. When I show up, Shally clams up and looks like he wants to hide. I'm not learning anything from him. (*Sighs.*) Well, did you get a chance to talk to Shally's mother?

TEACHER: I should have told you earlier that Shally's mother isn't really relevant here. They come from a strict and conservative background; the father is really the boss of the family. He's here as a visiting professor in mathematics, and he has the highest regard for science, so any contribution his family can make is worth any sacrifice. He wants the study to continue, too.

ALEX: Does he have any idea why Shally is afraid of me?

TEACHER (*clearly concerned*): Yes. It's because of your eyes.

ALEX (*startled*): My eyes? You mean my one blue eye and one brown eye?

TEACHER: Yes. I'm sure you know that they are very striking. ALEX: Of course. They are usually an advantage; kids notice them and think I'm interesting right away.

TEACHER: Well, Shally thinks you have the evil eye. His father got quite angry when he talked about it. He described it as an old peasant's superstition from their homeland, something Shally learned from his mother. He says it is below his son to believe in such nonsense and that he should grow out of it.

ALEX: What a mess. What can I do?

TEACHER (*steeling herself*): You and I agree that continuing this study is not in Shally's best interest. (*Alex nods.*) And you said yourself that you aren't learning anything from observing him. (*Alex nods again.*) Well, since Professor Thompson won't call off the study, and Shally's father won't, I want you to do it.

ALEX (*chilled*): That won't be easy for me. Professor Thompson is counting on getting this data, and there isn't another child to study this semester.

TEACHER: I don't want to get on Professor Thompson's bad side any more than you do. He is a very influential man and he has worked closely with this school for years. But Alex, if you won't do it, I will.

## Notes

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