

# The dinner lady

by **Antonia Hoyle**

Carol Hill knew that being a dinner lady would never make her rich. But what her job lacked in financial rewards, it made up for in emotional fulfilment. It wasn't so much serving lunch to primary school pupils that she enjoyed, but the bond she built with the children. After they had eaten, she would teach them how to play cricket, help them make daisy chains and participate in endless games of What's The Time, Mr Wolf? She encouraged them to say 'please' and 'thank you' and to treat others with respect.

The majority of them saw her as a friend and she, in turn, became fiercely protective of them. So when, one afternoon last June, she came

## She was disciplined, humiliated and sacked for telling a parent her daughter was being brutally bullied. Now dinner lady Carol Hill reveals her heartbreak – and what she thinks should happen to the headmistress

across seven-year-old Chloe David tied to a fence at the end of the school's playing field, sobbing as she was whipped with a skipping rope by four male classmates, she was understandably horrified.

She brought all five children back to the school and told headmistress Deborah Crabb what had

happened. The boys' parents were called as Chloe – who had rope burns on her right wrist and red welts on her right thigh – cried in shock.

Most people would have expected Chloe's parents to have also been told. Carol certainly did. But when she saw Chloe's mother Claire that evening and asked how her daughter was, it emerged that they had not been informed about the brutal bullying.

Instead Chloe had come home with a letter from Mrs Crabb saying simply that she had been hurt.

Driven by a sense of duty and the knowledge that, as one of the school's trained first-aiders, Carol was supposed to tell parents of any incidents that caused injury, she told Claire what had happened.

But when the school found out she had done so, she was sacked for breaching pupil confidentiality. Her dismissal sparked a furore.

Carol became a heroine for those who believed common sense and compassion come before bureaucratic rules and regulations. Great Tey Primary School, in Essex, meanwhile, was accused of an attempted cover-up – not least because one of its governors was the mother of one of the bullies.

Chloe's outraged parents withdrew both Chloe and her younger brother Cameron from the school, and Chloe's father Scott vowed to take the matter further. His perseverance paid off – last November, Schools Secretary Ed Balls wrote to the chairman of the school's governors, demanding an investigation into what he described as the school's 'totally inadequate' handling of the affair.

The investigation opened last Thursday in Marks Tey, two miles away from the village of Great Tey.

It is being chaired by three independent school governors from surrounding counties and is expected to conclude next week. Giving evidence will be Carol and Deborah Crabb. There will also be a written statement from a fellow pupil who witnessed the bullying.

In her first interview about the ordeal, Carol, 61, says: 'Mrs Crabb has done far worse than I ever did. I was a threat to her. I hope she does lose her job. She definitely deserves to.'

Yet Carol is a reluctant whistleblower. She doesn't want to become a cause celebre. Neither is she driven by a desire for revenge. All she ever wanted – and still wants – is her job back. 'I'd work for free if they'd have me back,' she says. 'It was heartbreaking to leave.'

She has lost over a stone in weight since her dismissal. Her hair has started to thin and her blood pressure has risen through stress.

The four-bedroom home she shares with husband Ron, 65, sits directly behind the school's playground. At times she has to close her patio curtains because she can't stand to watch the children playing.

A diminutive woman, Carol left school at 16 and was herself bullied as a schoolgirl. Married to Ron for 17 years, she has three children from her first marriage – Darren, 41, a window cleaner, Nicola, 34, herself a mother of three, and Denholm, 24, a carer.

She was thrilled when she was offered the dinner lady job in 2002. 'I love working with children,' says Carol, who also helps out at her local Beaver Scouts. 'They're innocent, they look up to you and it's rewarding.'



**ACCUSED:** Deborah Crabb, the school's headmistress

With a wage of just £6.20 an hour and just five hours' work a week during term times, it was not a lucrative position. But, having saved throughout their working lives – Carol used to be a cleaner and Ron is a retired van driver – money was not an incentive.

They had already paid off their mortgage and saved enough for two holidays a year. 'Ron pointed out that we spent more money going abroad at peak season during school holidays than I made,' she says. 'But it wasn't just a job to me.'

She had fond memories of dinner ladies from her own schooldays. 'They were caring women whom I would confide in when I was picked on for being shorter than my classmates,' she says. 'I modelled myself on them.'

As one of just three dinner ladies at a Church of England State school with only 61 pupils and six teaching staff, it was a close-knit, Carol found it at times a claustrophobic environment, in which tempers occasionally frayed.

'I think it was because there weren't any male teachers to control the boys,' she says. 'The bullying was often physical, pushing and shoving.'

Vulnerable children gravitated towards her. 'I cared and kept their secrets,' Carol says.

Reluctant to report bullies for fear of breaching their victims' trust, she adopted her own strategy of handling the situation. 'I stayed with the children over their lunch breaks so the bullies couldn't hurt them,' she says.

Three-and-a-half years ago Mrs Crabb – aged 35 and with no children of her own – was promoted from teacher to headmistress. Her appointment, Carol believes, exacerbated the bullying. 'She didn't appear to care what the children were doing, as long as they didn't interrupt her lunch break,' says Carol. 'She would make them go outside in the pouring rain.'

There were occasions, she says, when Mrs Crabb put the children's wellbeing at risk. She recalls one incident a couple of years ago when a new routine was introduced, in which Carol and the other dinner ladies would take dishes out of the oven to the tables and children would serve their own lunch.

'The four-year-olds would burn their wrists,' she says. 'I told Mrs Crabb it



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# finally lets rip



**ANGUISH:** Carol Hill, shown left and far right with Scott, Claire and Chloe David, just wants to return to her old job at Great Tey Primary, top



STEVE BRADING / DAVID POOLE

had to stop. At first she refused, but when I said I'd call Health and Safety she backed down.'

Of course, Carol's detractors would accuse her of being a busy-body, of having ideas above her own station as to how the school should be run.

'I was always in her office, complaining, I admit that,' she says. 'But it was only because I cared. Mrs Crabb said she'd sort out any problems but they were never taken any further. I felt like I was being kicked in the teeth and eventually I gave up.'

But when she saw what happened to Chloe David, she knew she had to make an exception.

Chloe had been at the school for two years and was often picked on for not having the latest shoes or smartest clothes, but nothing could prepare Carol for the level of violence directed at her on June 24. She compares the scene to that of the murder of Jamie Bulger, the toddler killed

by ten-year-olds Jon Venables and Robert Thompson in 1993.

'The image of Jamie Bulger ran through my mind. It was the idea of older boys harming a powerless child,' she says. 'If the rope hadn't been round her wrists it could have been round her neck.'

**T**wo of the four boys were seven, one was nine and the other ten. Two were known bullies. Carol took them back to the school, where their punishment was to miss the last five minutes of their lunch break.

Chloe – who'd had eight knots tied round her wrists – was looked after by the other first-aider. 'I was told I'd done my bit,' says Carol. 'I wasn't asked for a statement. I heard Mrs Crabb say she had some calls to make and I assumed that included to Chloe's parents.'

Yet that evening Claire David – who helps out at the Beavers with Carol – seemed unaware about anything out of the ordinary. 'I spent over an hour with her at Beavers,' says Carol.

'I knew her well and couldn't understand why she hadn't even mentioned it. I had to check Chloe was OK. As this was such an extreme case of bullying, and on my first-aid policy it says I am to inform the parents, I assumed it would be all right. In any case, I thought they knew.'

It transpired that Chloe – whose injuries had been hidden by her school uniform – had been too traumatised to tell her parents. The letter said only that she had been 'hurt in a skipping-rope incident' without any suggestion of bullying.

When Claire found out what had happened she burst into tears. 'I was stunned the school had tried to cover it up,' says Carol. Furious, Chloe's father Scott – a steel worker, 33, also

from Great Tey – demanded to see the school's own official report the next day. It stated that Chloe had in fact been tied up and whipped. He immediately withdrew his children from the school.

A week later, Carol was called into Mrs Crabb's office.

'She said she was suspending me for breaching confidentiality,' she says. 'I walked out in shock.'

Notes on Carol's dismissal that she later saw showed that a member of the school's HR team had recommended that Carol should be simply reprimanded for her indiscretion.

'Mrs Crabb used it as an excuse to get rid of me,' believes Carol. 'I was a nuisance to her, bringing things to her attention that she had to deal with when she couldn't be bothered.'

The next day, Scott told the local paper what had happened. The media coverage both helped and hindered Carol's cause, enraging the school while drumming up support.

'The children would come up to my fence and say they loved me, begging me to come back,' says Carol. 'Chloe asked me to work at her new school. Only a couple of parents were against me and they were friends with the governors.'

While one bully's mother was on the board of governors, another helped out at numerous school events.

'It was a cliquy atmosphere and everyone involved wanted to keep it to themselves,' Carol says. Her

disciplinary hearing – chaired by a panel of three governors – was held last September.

Carol wasn't allowed to bring legal representation. 'It was like being in court – they pulled me apart,' she says. 'I broke down in tears twice.'

The school sent her a letter of dismissal. 'I couldn't believe it,' says Carol. 'Ron and my children were angrier than me. I had to stop them going to the school and making a fuss on my behalf. Ron was so stressed he lost weight as well. But it made us stronger as a couple.'

She was given hope when the trade union Unison offered to represent her in an internal appeal against the dismissal. Dave Prentis, general secretary of Unison, told The Mail on Sunday: 'To lose your job when you have the safety of a child at heart is a disgrace. The school treated Carol appallingly.'

**B**efore the appeal in November, other parents threatened to withdraw their children from the school in protest. And it emerged that Mrs Crabb – who lives in the nearby village of Birch – had previously been accused by Sarah Harris, the former chairwoman of the school's PTA, of a 'lack of co-operation and support' after vetoing a proposed carol concert, cheese and wine party and Mothering Sunday event.

But Carol lost the appeal and left the hearing in tears. The school refused to comment, leaving Councillor Stephen Castle, Essex County Council Cabinet Member for Education, to say simply: 'The last few months have been a turbulent time. The school must now be left alone to focus on what is really important, the education, development and well-being of the children who attend.'

Yet Ed Balls disagreed after Chloe's father Scott wrote to him. In November Mr Balls in turn wrote in a letter to Robert Deal, chairman of the school's governors: 'Despite previous correspondence from the Department in which we have set out our expectations that there were lessons to be learned – the school appears to have once again dismissed the concerns of Mr & Mrs David.'

He added: 'There is more that the school should be doing to address this issue – your written response to Mr David's complaint is totally inadequate and does not follow the school's published procedure.'

Carol now faces an anxious wait for the investigation to reach a conclusion. She then plans to claim unfair dismissal at an industrial tribunal.

She says: 'The past few months have been devastating. I acted in the children's best interests and I was within my rights to tell Chloe's parents. I didn't bring the school into disrepute. Mrs Crabb did that.'