

Veteran bus driver fired after helping kids



LICIA CORBELLA

Veteran school bus driver Kendra Lindon should have been commended for going the extra mile for the children in her care. Instead, she was canned — thrown under the proverbial bus by First Student Canada for protecting kids.

This week, as the mercury has plummeted, school buses in Calgary have had troubles starting.

On Feb. 10, Calgary was in a similar deep freeze. Many buses wouldn't start and Lindon was asked to take on two extra routes besides the two she already does, driving junior high students to F.E. Osborne School, where her eldest son, Cameron, 13, attends Grade 8, and then driving elementary school kids to Hawkwood School, where her seven-year-old son, Cody, attends Grade 2.

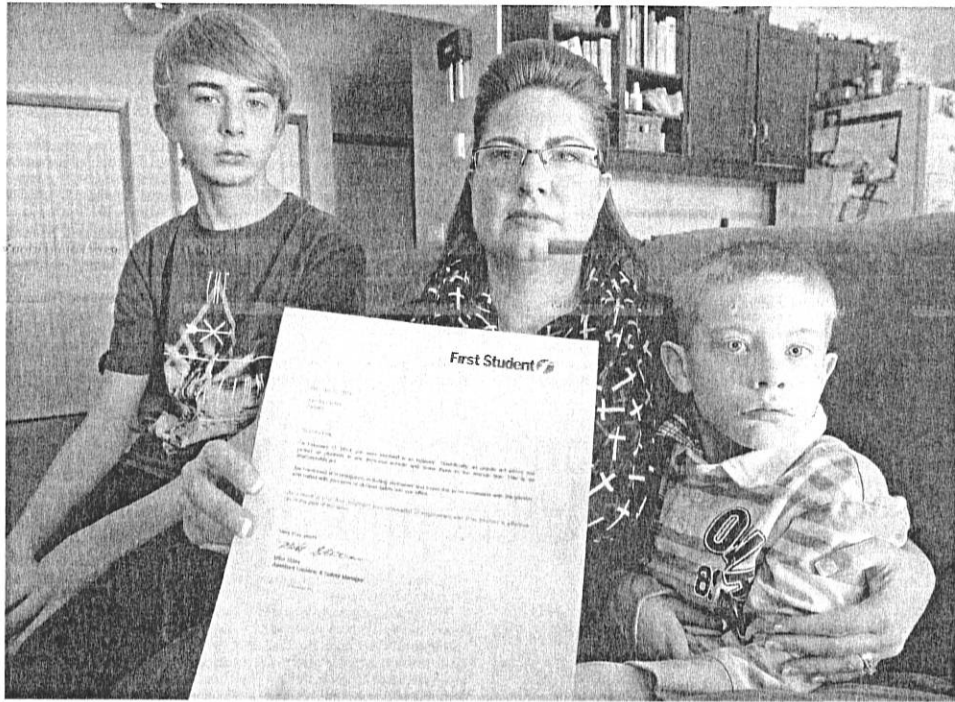
On Feb. 11, Lindon's school bus wouldn't start, so she called in a Code Yellow, the proper procedure to get her bus fixed. Eventually, she was told that someone else would be sent to drive her route. But that never happened. The kids were left stranded — either having to walk back home and miss school, or having to call parents to leave work to drive them.

"Not one bus came by on that route and I was really upset, because Cameron is on that route and I pay busing fees just like everyone else," explained Lindon. But, by then, she was already working her second job as a school assistant at Hawkwood School. Her husband, Mark, a mechanic, had to drive his children and a few of their friends to school, making him late for work.

The next day, Lindon's bus wouldn't start again. She called dispatch and was told a replacement bus was on its way but, considering what happened the day before, who could blame her for doubting that? She was worried for the junior high kids, many of whom have been in Cameron's class since kindergarten, which is also when she started driving the school bus.

"Junior high kids often don't dress appropriately for the weather, so I was concerned," admits the 34-year-old Lindon. "They care more about how they look than whether they'll lose some fingers or toes if they're outside too long," she adds with a chuckle.

As a result, Lindon drove her 2005 Cadillac Escalade to where another bus driver starts his route and asked him to pick up her stops three, four and five, and she would go to her stops one and two to pick up her son,



Kendra Lindon, seen with her sons Cameron, left, and Cody, holds a termination notification from First Student Canada. The veteran school bus driver says she was fired for using her own vehicle to pick up children after her bus broke down during a February cold snap.

Stuart Gradon/Calgary Herald

whom she couldn't reach on his cellphone.

On Monday, Lindon and I drove the route she took.

"There was only one child at this stop," she says, rattling off the boy's name as well as the names of the parents of this child. He was shivering in the cold and she invited him into her car. He gratefully jumped in, put on his seatbelt and she headed up the road to Hawkeye Crescent, where she picked up two more teens, both of whom she names. They, too, strapped in.

On Hawkwood Drive there were two more teen boys. Both got in her vehicle, though one did not have a seatbelt.

Lindon decided to proceed to her next usual stop — a total of 0.4 km from the previous stop.

Virtually no cars drive by the whole time we are on the road. The roads are still so rutted with ice that it's impossible — even today and in her SUV — to travel at more than 25 km/h.

A boy she has long known is standing there. He's on crutches with no hat, no gloves and wearing runners.

"I just couldn't leave him out there. It wouldn't be right, so I just made a decision," she says.

To make room for the injured boy, two of the other boys jumped into the back of her SUV, where there are no seatbelts.

She drove slowly another 0.3 kms to where she would ordinarily

pick up her son, Cameron. She parked and a bunch of other kids piled in to warm up to await the school rescue bus's arrival — which was 15 minutes from the vantage point inside a crowded and warm SUV, but could have felt like an eternity in what Environment Canada confirms was -26 C wind chill.

The boys, however, noticed that the mother of one of their classmates was following Lindon's vehicle.

"I was surprised, actually, that she didn't offer to help to pick up these children, who are her neighbours," said Lindon.

Eventually, the replacement school bus arrived, the kids piled out and thanked her profusely. Lindon then drove back to her school bus, and found a mechanic just getting started. She picked up her elementary school kids — including her son Cody — and went to her job at Hawkwood School.

While at the school, Lindon received a call from the school bus company and was told to come with her bus to the headquarters "as soon as possible," and to not drive her routes that afternoon.

So Lindon drove her bus to the terminal near Edmonton Trail and was unceremoniously fired.

She was told that it was against company policy to pick up children in a personal vehicle.

"But that's never been told to us, not in a safety meeting, not in

a startup meeting and not in their manual. Never," Lindon points out.

"First of all, I was not acting as a bus driver at that point, but as a concerned parent. I couldn't reach Cameron on his phone and I wanted to make sure my son was OK. On the way to get him, I saw these kids I've known since they were five. I was acting as a parent and a concerned neighbour and friend. I couldn't just drive past them and leave them to freeze."

Mike Stiles, assistant location and safety manager for First Student, said he couldn't comment on a personnel matter and directed me to call head office in Cincinnati, Ohio. Nobody from the head office returned my call.

However, in the termination letter Stiles wrote to Lindon, he said Lindon was involved in "an unsafe act where you picked up students in you (sic) personal vehicle and drove them to the rescue bus. This is an unacceptable act."

He also wrote that "we conducted an investigation including interviews and found this to be consistent with the person who called with concerns of student safety into our office."

But more than one dozen letters of support were received by Lindon and sent to First Student offices. And none of the parents of the kids Lindon picked up in her vehicle were contacted.

Linda Sakatch is one such parent. Her 14-year-old son, Ty, was one of the kids picked up by Lindon.

"I'm extremely grateful to Kendra," Sakatch said Monday night. "I think how she's been treated is disgusting. She should have been patted on the back, not fired. She did what any caring friend would do for their neighbours' children."

As for Ty, he says he's confused by what's happened.

"I always thought that if you did the right thing, you would be rewarded, not fired. I'm glad she picked me up," said the Grade 9 student.

As for Lindon, she says she's devastated by her firing.

"I love my job, I love those kids. I care for them like they are my own. Many of them hang out at our house. I feel protective toward them and I can't believe this has happened to me."

Nor can other reasonable, common-sense people.

Lindon wonders why she wasn't informed of the policy and reprimanded, or suspended without pay for three days.

It's a good question. Another good question is how long does this company have to operate in Alberta to figure out how to keep its buses running in the cold?

LICIA CORBELLA IS A COLUMNIST.
LCORBELLA@CALGARYHERALD.COM