



A Messenger of Hope

In baggy pants and skullcap, gangbanger Julio swaggers onstage with a challenge in his voice. Julio morphs into Jenn the party girl, Angela the drunk grandmother, and five more characters whom Susie Vanderlip inhabits in her theatrical one-woman show. Since 1991, “Legacy of Hope®” has reached one million people at schools and conferences in 47 states, showing teens and adults how to understand each other.

After dancer/choreographer Vanderlip lost her first husband to a drug and alcohol overdose, she expressed these addictions in a dance with monologues based on real people’s struggles. When she performed at a high school, students volunteered their own stories, and Vanderlip recognized her new mission.

Fourteen years later, she has spoken one-on-one with 25,000 teens. Suicidal Megan was on her way to the hospital when her counselor recommended the show, which inspired Megan to e-mail Vanderlip about how she cut herself. Entering college with Vanderlip’s encouragement, Megan has stayed in touch. “She was the first person, and just about the only person,” says Megan, “who listened to what I had to say and did not criticize or judge me.” Vanderlip responds to all teens who e-mail her. As “Encourager,” she sends them concrete tactics for survival, urging open communication with parents. In person, she dispenses support to tear-stained teens who surround her after assemblies, sometimes ushering them to the school counselor’s office.

Now Vanderlip’s compassionate insights are available in her book, **52 Ways to Protect Your Teen: Guiding Teens to Good Choices and Success**. Parents, here’s how to communicate effectively with your teen: Ask for a description of her state of mind in a non-threatening “Weather Report,” avoid “blaming” sentences starting with “You,” take a walk together, and keep daily Gratitude Journals where both list what you have done for each other. Don’t overlook stress management; when Vanderlip introduces meditation into teens’ clamorous lives, “nearly 100 percent . . . are awed by the indescribable sensation of a quiet mind.”

The “Heal Your Kids by Healing Yourself” section reveals teens’ fear of not being loved by their parents as well as their “greatest emotional trauma”—grief for a missing parent through divorce or death. Teens’ self-esteem is battered by emotionally distant, unavailable, or over-critical parents, explains Vanderlip. Parents can reach them by sharing feelings in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

From her experience in support groups, much of Vanderlip’s counsel is based on the philosophies of Al-Anon Family Groups: “support minus judgment, shame, or blame”; learning new behaviors; and a “spiritual component.” She cites research that shows a lower risk of substance abuse among teens who believe in a “Higher Power.” In her book and presentations, Vanderlip states, “I have found a caring, miracle-making power in my life that I choose to call God.” Yet she avoids proselytizing.

Halfway through the book, Vanderlip expresses frustration at “a nation in denial.” Since 2000, her teen audience surveys show “exceptionally high levels of emotional problems including depression, suicidal thoughts, rage/violent feelings, concern over their own [or friends’] substance abuse, . . . and self harm. . . . Their turmoil almost always has origins in family circumstances.” Families “dazzled by . . . an affluent lifestyle” have “forgotten the value of . . . being there for one another.” Vanderlip longs to shout, “Wake up, parents of

America! Wise up to the needs *inside* your kids!” When she informs middle-class parents of her young audience’s revelations, they insist that it’s “not my kids” and “not my town.”

What do teens tell Vanderlip that parents don’t know?

- In every state she has visited, “it’s impossible to attend a party where alcohol and marijuana are not present and a majority of teens are using and abusing.”
 - When asked if they know anyone who is cutting on themselves, 95 percent of students raised their hands at assemblies during 2003–04.
 - “Rarely do I find a school where teen concern over depression is less than 20 percent and suicidal concerns less than 15 percent”—but in 2003–2004, up to 40 percent of tenth graders in middle-class high schools requested support for feeling depressed.
 - High-achieving teens report severe stress because of parents’ expectations. “My parents are always on my back to do good, graduate, and be a perfect little girl. . . . [T]here is a lot of pressure on me, and usually I cry myself to sleep at night.”
 - A cleancut, “All-American boy” in the rural Midwest confided that he wanted out of the local chapter of a national gang of drug dealers; adults in town have no idea that this gang exists.
 - Picking up his daughter at a dance, a father bragged that he never worried about his “good girl”; chaperone Vanderlip had spent much of the evening interrupting this girl’s “grinding”—dancing crotch-to-crotch with older boys.
- “Every child is at risk today,” concludes Vanderlip, “from those in the most abusive family system to the high achievers.”

Her book closes with resources that offer “hope and help,” from a California Juvenile Drug Court to peer counseling programs, from intrepid teachers to underrated school counselors. Her Web site, <http://www.legacyofhope.com>, offers links, demos of her program, contacts for booking appearances and ordering her book, and more.

Vanderlip packs a wealth of information into 52 lively chapters imbued with teen voices. Although she understands parents’ difficulties and explains adult viewpoints to teens, her heart is with the teens. Youth advocates will recognize her as one of us. To bring “Legacy of Hope®” performances to public libraries, YA librarians could join community partners with teen advisory boards.

The word “Protect” in Vanderlip’s title evokes overprotective parents and book censors—if only “Support” could replace “Protect”! The book’s few flaws are manifest in self-publishing; copyediting would rectify them (the drug heroin consistently appears as heroine). Organization could be tidied; repetitions could be pruned. These small quibbles don’t affect the book’s value, not only for parents but for educators, librarians, church youth group leaders, social workers, writers, and anyone else who cares about teens.

VOYA readers will also enjoy *There’s Hope in a Book*, English educator Joan F. Kaywell’s contribution to our *How Can We Help?* series on page 311 of this issue. Kaywell transports Vanderlip’s concerns with at-risk youth into the world of young adult literature.—CDM. ■

Book reviewed:

Vanderlip, Susie. **52 Ways to Protect Your Teen: Guiding Teens to Good Choices and Success**. Intuitive Wisdom Publications (3128 E. Chapman Ave. #112, Orange, CA 92869), 2005. 303p. \$24.95. 0-9744624-9-7.