

# MPOWRD Teens



By  
**MPOWRD**  
*The Voices of this Generation*

## Note:

Protect your privacy by not including specific names and places in your responses. You can always refer to the moment, the person or place without specific identification.

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**MPOWRD** means TO BE “empowered” which is the process of becoming mentally strong in terms of making healthy and positive decisions.

Ultimate empowerment is when a person is confident in his/her own personal well-being and is ready to reach out and support others.

## **MPOWRD**

**M**...the focus is on **Me**

**POWRD**...*I will be empowered to move forward in life*

**No E's stands for:**

No **Exceptions** to creating equal opportunity for hope and personal success

No **Exclusions** to building a peer community of unconditional support

No **Exemptions** to taking personal responsibility to build a better today for myself and others

**MPOWRD** is an organization that was created by, with, and for teens.

Its mission is to offer personal empowerment for youth by creating communities of unconditional peer support.

This booklet introduces you to several teens who both initiated and inspired the **MPOWRD** program. Names and details have been edited to protect the anonymity of these individuals.

## **MPOWRD TEENS**

As a counselor at an alternative high school, working with teens who were desperate to graduate, I found that most of my students were struggling with life in general. My agenda was centered on creating a multitude of ways to support them. However, I eventually was taught that their agenda would be far greater than mine. These teens would ultimately create a program that would offer support and empowerment to youth throughout the world.

Several students approached me to help them build a teen-centered plan of action that worked. They wanted a serious structure, questions & discussion for teens, and most importantly, a way to build a safe community of support. They were concerned about the fact that they were losing friends, that they didn't see a positive future and that the world, inclusive of educational systems, had no idea of what type of programs teens needed to simply survive.

Teens felt that the focus at schools centered on guest speakers who survived their personal trauma, ultimately centering on the problems evolving within adolescent drug use. The "experts" tried to reach youth by presenting all aspects of chemical use and the risks that were evident. What they failed to see is that teens needed to process the cause behind their decisions, how they could face their challenges, and initiate ways to find a way out. Teens insisted on developing a structured plan of action. Most importantly, they wanted to face their challenges with a group of peers whom they could trust.

What was very clear from the onset was that many of these concerned students were also suffering from depression, were in abusive relationships, had dealt with anxiety and stress, were working through anger issues, and were suffering through many losses, including a loss of self. Many agreed that they didn't expect to live to be an adult, have a career, a family or even a future.

Teens agreed that no one was listening to them. Their solution was to find a way for their voices to be heard. Their goals included bringing together a generation that was impacted by the media, social technology, broken families, lost friends, violence, and the lack of meaning in their lives. They wanted to find a reason to not simply survive but to be able to create an environment of mutual support.

The process began. Teens would meet every week and give input into what strategies were most effective, how they wanted to invest in the allotted time and the importance of control in the program. By taking these issues into their own hands, they would commit and collaborate, learning to lead as well as to follow. Their meetings would have an agenda with inspirational readings and activities. These would be followed with questions and discussion, moving from safe/general questions to introspective thoughts.

They agreed that anyone could attend meetings as long as they offered respect to the group. No person would be left out. Everyone was welcomed equally. As one teen said, "We are in this together. It's time we take care of each other. We are one culture, the teen culture."

Their concept and commitment would eventually reach other teens in other high schools and would touch the lives of thousands of youth throughout the country. After five years with over 200 teens involved in developing the program, their concept became a reality.

**MPOWRD** is now available to all teens in every school district, every neighborhood, every country, and in every culture. Teens found their answer to personal empowerment. Hundreds of thousands of times, teen voices are finally being heard. They have found a way for personal empowerment for this generation.

**Your thoughts: (no names or places)**

**When have you stood up for something that you have believed in?**

**Why do you think that teens often lose hope?**

**What do you think are the biggest issues that teens face today? Explain.**

**What do you think was the most positive part about the teens who started *MPOWRD*?**

**Why are teens willing to listen to each other?**

**If you were part of a group of teens who started *MPOWRD* on your campus, how would you begin to get teens to come to meetings?**

**As a member of *MPOWRD*, what would you do or say if someone was disrespectful to another person in the group?**

**Some schools offer the privilege of attending *MPOWRD* meetings to a student who wants his time in suspension reduced. Do you think that it would be a good idea for teens to have that choice? What rules would you put in place to ensure that everyone is committed to mutual respect in the meetings?**

**When *MPOWRD* meetings begin on campus, the *MPOWRD* Director is the adult staff member who is trained in the program and then teaches the students how to run the meetings. Eventually each teen is given an opportunity to lead the group. Describe what kind of adult would be most effective working with teens in *MPOWRD*.**

**Why does the youth in our country need to be more of a focus?**

**The following stories are based  
on the lives of real and empowered teens  
who have impacted  
those of us who knew them.**

**Details may be changed to protect their anonymity.**

# Gabriel

Meet Gabriel. 18 years old. Born into a neighborhood called the Square, rated the most criminally driven square mile in our city. His family was the core of a well-known gang in the area. Violence was part of his culture, his heritage. He witnessed his first murder at the age of seven when his uncle brought him to an execution. Apparently, someone had to pay for betraying his family.

His face displayed the scars of confrontation and survival in his life.

Teens at school respected and feared him. Gabriel insisted on privacy.

Today was different. It would be a matter of life or death. There was no choice. He had to trust someone. Gabriel checked the hallway on either side, walked into my office, closed the door behind him and sat down. Without hesitation he said, "We're bringing guns to school tomorrow."

"There are two gangs who are ready to fight it out," he began...

I could hardly process what he was saying.

A dozen plans flew through my mind; nothing seemed capable of stopping this. Time was of the essence.

"What should we do?" I asked.

He simply said, "Both groups need to talk."

He asked if I would approach the other gang leader, Ricardo, and tell him that Gabriel had told me about the guns, the plan. He explained that I needed to remind Ricardo that school is always considered neutral territory. Too many friends and family could be hurt. They had to find another way to work this out.

"Tell him," he said, "that I am offering him my respect by meeting with him and his boys. I will bring mine, too. We need to make this stop."

"Only two counselors are allowed to be present," he continued. "No administration. No security." We agreed that each side could bring five members to the mediation. He had to guarantee that no one would carry any type of weapon.

"Of course," he said, "that's understood."

The plan was in place. I would meet both groups of boys at the front office at lunch time and take them into the conference room where Ms. Miller would be waiting. The administration and security agreed to keep their distance.



There was no doubt that we were under close watch.

Minutes dragged on until 12 o'clock arrived. The office was intense. Everyone pretended that it was a normal day. It wasn't. This was not school. This was about survival.

The boys were waiting. An invisible line was drawn between the groups. Their body language said it all. Most had arms crossed, standing tall, breathing intolerance with serious, intense expressions. No talking. No comments. No movement.

Their leaders, Gabriel and Ricardo nodded and then both groups followed me down the hall. A single line on either side. By then, all personnel were cleared out of the area.

When I opened the doors to the conference room, we were caught by surprise. The principal knew it was lunch and he knew boys. Their first priority is always food. And he was right. They were hungry. Boys are always hungry.

And for just a few moments, the boys seemed to forget that today was supposed to be about violence and revenge. Nachos, burgers and pizza, fries and chips, sodas and ice-cream bars covered the table that was centered in the room.

The tension de-escalated. I even heard someone laughing.

Fifteen minutes later the mediation began.

There were simple rules. Each group would speak for three minutes. There would be no signs, posturing, comments or looks of disrespect. Any person with attitude would need to leave the room. Both groups sat at least fifteen feet apart.

All conversations would be controlled. Voice levels would remain calm. Questions would be held until it was time for that group's turn to speak.

After they agreed to the rules, I said nothing from this point forward.

Gabriel led the way. I wondered how they would begin, but they seemed to have their own agenda ready. Both groups focused on the who, the what, the why and the how. Their initial argument surfaced and was discussed. Their conversations brought forth the members involved, the proof, the hearsay, the players, the escalation and the reality and final truth of what was really going on. Each side used their time fairly. Various members took turns speaking. Every young man demonstrated complete control and maturity. No one could have resolved this as well as the two groups did.

All of the young men finally agreed that the problem was not about one gang disrespecting another, but about a girl that two guys liked, one from each gang. Because of too much "talk" and drama, the disagreement turned into guns and violence.

Everyone seemed relieved when the mediation was over. There would be no fight, no weapons, and no stand-off. The mediation took 40 minutes, which included the time for lunch. Both groups agreed to talk to the boys involved insisting that they end this fight.

The boys exited through the doorway keeping a safe distance from each other. They weren't friendly, but the hostility had lessened. The atmosphere continued to relax as their voices echoed through the halls. Everyone headed toward their lockers and on to their next class.

Gabriel caught my eye and nodded. I was deeply impressed by his sense of responsibility and courage. There was no doubt that he had empowered both gangs to find a way out and still maintain their personal pride.

Yet, there was still a final moment that said it all.

One of the guys ran up behind a member from the opposing gang and put his hand on his shoulder. "Wait up, man. Just for a minute."

When they faced each other, he said, "Hey Miguel, remember when we were kids...we always rode bikes together...we had crazy times, right?" Miguel slowly nodded, "Yeah, man, that was when life was easy. We just didn't know how good we had it, did we?"

Gabriel's example of mediation and communication became the model for conflict resolutions long after he graduated. His legacy to keep campus a neutral territory continues to save lives today.

**Your thoughts: (no names or places)**

**Is violence a reality on most campus? Give some examples.**

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**Is violence a part of every teen's life? How?**

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**Are some teens afraid to come to school? Why?**

**How are major conflicts usually resolved at school? Give examples.**

**Thoughts about Gabriel**

**Are there leaders like Gabriel on your campus? Do you think that they would take charge of a situation like he did?**

**There are all types of leaders. Some lead through direction, others through example, still some lead through intimidation and others through their silence. What kind of leader do you respect?**

**Does a person with Gabriel's background have a way out of his life, his environment, his family's history?**

**What could the world learn from Gabriel that could make it a better place?**

**Can all teens be empowered to lead others? How?**

**Like the two teens at the end of the story, do you look back at your past and wish that you were still a little kid? What is better about being young?**

# Maria and Bobo

Her name was Maria.

His name was Bobo---short for Boris.

Maria was an emotionally challenged young girl, 16 years old, a victim of extreme abuse whose parents were now in jail. She and her little brother lived with her grandparents.

Bobo was from a supportive family who wanted him to succeed in life. However, Bobo really didn't have much of a work ethic, nor could he get into the school scene. He loved to party and play and party and play. Everyone liked him. He was always up for a good time, crazy-funny and just a super friendly guy. Bobo saw school as simply a great place where he could catch up with some of his friends.

Teachers couldn't help but like Bobo, even though he wasn't passing a single class. He was always respectful, did enough work to get by, and never seemed to cause any harm. No one would ever imagine that he was about to be the one person who would save Maria's life.

Maria, on the other hand, had no friends or sense of joy. She neither smiled nor laughed. Maria was always intense and remained as isolated as possible from any of her peers or teachers. Her face was always lined with worry, apprehension, fearful, emotionally drained. She was clearly a troubled teen due to her abusive past.

Maria was also a victim of post-traumatic stress. And, although she did well in many of her classes, she invariably had at least one emotional breakdown each day. Some unpredictable action or comment would trigger her to panic and then rage. Despite all the professional staff that supported her, no program, no therapist, no mentor could break into her cycle of pain.

One of her teachers had recommended her to an *MPOWRD* meeting and, of course, she was welcome. Once she attended her first group, she never missed a weekly session and eventually would share some of her everyday experiences with the group.

The meetings that she attended had more guys than girls. Most of the group knew Maria from class and had seen her breakdowns. They sensed that she had a lot of problems but weren't sure what they were about. The teens were guarded, careful not to make her feel uncomfortable but also unsure of what to expect.

Bobo showed up for *MPOWRD* meetings now and then, depending on if he attended school that day. He originally admitted that he came to *MPOWRD* because there was (quote) "a hot girl in the group". Later, he decided that he liked *MPOWRD* meetings when he discovered that everyone took them seriously. Bobo didn't have too many serious moments. It was definitely a new experience for him. He continued to come to *MPOWRD* even when "the hot girl in the group" moved.

Several weeks had passed when Maria decided to finally trust the group. She shyly looked up at their faces. Her hands were tightly locked together. Apparently, this was a big moment for her. She cleared her throat and then quietly shared that her father had abused her since she was a little girl. "He's gone now. I'm always afraid that somehow he will come back. I have nightmares every night. I'm even afraid of the dark."

One of the boys, Noah, went ballistic. "We don't talk about abuse," he said angrily. "That's something you should talk to some professional about."

Maria slowly sunk into her chair. She looked completely embarrassed. The group was dead silent. But Bobo didn't waste a minute. There was no way he was going to let anyone put Maria down. "Are you kidding?" he asked. "She can say whatever she wants."

Noah looked disgusted and shook his head.

"That is really cold, man," Bobo continued. "Maria has a right to tell her story and we need to listen. That's what we're about... listening and support, right? And if you don't like it, you should leave. We all want to hear what Maria has to say, right guys?"

A few people nodded. "And then when it's your turn, we'll listen to you but for now it's hers." You have no right to tell her what she should or shouldn't say."

Noah looked around the group. It was clear that they agreed. "Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry, Maria. Go 'head. Sorry."

There was a definite sense of relief from everyone in the room. However, none of us knew the impact that moment had on Maria. Her life would be changed forever.

Less than a week later, I heard some girls laughing in the office. I looked up and was surprised to see that one of them was Maria. She asked if I could see her. She sat down and with a smile I had never seen before, asked me how I was doing. What was this change all about, I thought. This was a completely new person before me.

"I've been wanting to talk to you for a while," she said. "Remember that day when Bobo defended me in the meeting? I can't even put into words what it meant to me. It was like a cloud lifted and I could finally see the sun. Someone believed in me. I didn't have to be afraid anymore. Then the rest of the group did the same. Some of the guys even stopped me after the meeting, thanking me for sharing my story. I finally knew that I wasn't alone."

Months later, Maria shared in an *MPOWRD* meeting that her life had continued to get better and it was because of the group. She said that she couldn't explain it, but she felt that her past abuse was finally behind her. She looked directly at Bobo. "You helped me to believe in myself. No one has been able to do that before. I finally feel ok about me," she said, "and ok feels pretty good."

**Your thoughts: (no names or places)**

**Why was the MPOWRD group a good place for Maria even before the confrontation?**

**Do you feel that teens in general care much about other teens on a high school campus? Explain.**

**If you could pick one quality that would help teens survive some of the emotional pressure during this time, what would you choose? (examples: self-confidence, compassion, honesty)**

**Maria suffered from physical and emotional abuse. How would you begin to help someone like Maria in an *MPOWRD* meeting?**

**Do you really think that support from a teen could possibly change a life? Why?**

**Is it your responsibility to defend someone or to find support for someone who is being bullied, harassed or “put down”?**

***MPOWRD* groups are set up to find support for self and/or others. What do you think that means?**



# Marcus

Marcus stopped me in the hall and said "So, you're the counselor?"  
"I am."

"My name is Marcus and it's great to meet you." He held out his hand. "Now I've been told that counselors are supposed to be good people who help kids, right? Ok, so here's the deal. I'm going to graduate this year and I have some big plans."

I had to smile. This guy was in charge.  
"Let's go to my office and look up your records, ok?"

Marcus had one huge grin. "Perfect, 'cause I need me a scholarship."

As I looked through his files, I saw that Marcus had no parents or siblings listed and that he had been in and out of many state systems, including Child Protective Services, foster care, juvenile detention and group homes. He was currently living with a friend's parent. He had a 1.2 grade point average, which is barely passing on our scale. I needed to find out who was on Marcus' side.

"Give me some time. Let me see what I can find out."  
"Got it", he said. "I'll be back."

And because Marcus would stop by every day thereafter, to check on my progress, I was able to find out about this interesting young man. He had had one tough life, but you would have never known. His grades weren't the best, but the fact that he had achieved any high school credits within the many foster homes and multiple institutions where he had lived was nothing short of amazing.

You see, Marcus was a survivor. He had learned to take the very best parts of life and build his world around them. The rest he left behind. He was also a gifted listener. He shared many of the values and lessons that he had learned from his mentors in the system. No matter what I shared with him, he seemed to take in every word with such respect and regard.

"I have been taught to look for the good people in this world," he said, "that the power of good will take you through the tough times."

Marcus had an indomitable spirit. There was no stopping him and he would never give up. Despite a life full of hard times, he chose to believe that there was a great opportunity ahead of him. He just needed to find good people in this world to help him make it happen.

We finally found the perfect scholarship application. I had never seen it before and was shocked, as it fit his circumstances perfectly. Marcus wasn't that impressed, he said that he knew that we'd find something. The requirements in the application included that the student reside in our state, was part of the foster system, and wanted to further his/her education. Qualified applicants would also include teens with special needs and teens who were parents.

If awarded, the student's entire tuition would be covered along with an ongoing mentorship and support system, food, clothing, provisions and funds for transportation. It couldn't have been more perfect for Marcus, but the competition would be fierce. No doubt, every applicant was worthy of support and a second chance. Only two awards would be given.

We were told that there were hundreds of applicants each year. I tried to warn him that the competition would be heavy.

Marcus replied, "No problem. This one belongs to me."

We filled out his application together. Marcus was charismatic; he was a good athlete; he had great communication skills, along with many outstanding qualities that related to life and, of course, survival. He also had a nearly failing grade point average. How would anyone see his potential on an application form?

One of the questions on the scholarship form asked, "What do you feel is your greatest talent?" He responded without hesitation. "That's easy," he said. "It's my physical strength." I asked him to explain what that meant to him.

"You see, I've been in and out of foster homes since I was little. I never really knew my parents. I grew up making stories about them, saying that they always loved me, but then were killed in a car wreck. Never happened. My mom gave me up a long time ago to social services. I really don't know who my parents are."

"And to be honest, I wasn't always a good kid," he grinned. "I remember when I was about 7, I climbed up on the kitchen counter in my foster home, stole some cookies and my foster mom caught me. Now she was this big ol' lady and plenty scary. I knew I was in for it. She was one mean machine."

"When she got mad, she would punish me by sitting on my chest. Now I wasn't a very big kid and I remember that I'd get really scared 'cause I couldn't breathe. Dang, she must have weighed at least a couple hundred pounds. I'd squirm and twist around and try to push her off, but pretty soon I would just black out. I thought that I had died, but later I figured out that I just fainted. I was always scared that the next time I might not wake up." He shook his head slowly.

“So, that’s when I decided that if I didn’t get strong, I mean really strong, I could die if I couldn’t escape. Who knows when the next ol’ lady is going to pin me down and sit on me, right?” Back came the grin. “And here I am. I mean, I can get away from anybody. I thank that lady for teaching me a lesson that has helped me escape from some bad dudes. The lessons we learn in life matter, right. That’s what I’ve been taught?”

I recorded his story and filled it on his application word for word.

Marcus made the semi-finals. I was elated. He had no doubts. He would now go through a personal interview. There were 20 finalists, each scheduled with a questioning session from ten adults who represented the scholarship board.

We arrived. We stood together in front of this huge building, both of us staring up into the sky trying to see just how high the 22<sup>nd</sup> floor was. I was intimidated. Marcus was undaunting.

A very gracious lady greeted us as we got off the elevator and escorted Marcus into a room where everyone waited for him. The entire office was glass. I could see about ten chairs behind a table with one in the front center. Marcus was directed to sit in that position. The interview lasted 42 minutes.

When it was apparently over, Marcus stood up and went by every board member to shake their hands. He waved good-bye to them and we were off.

I waited for him to share some part of the interview, but he said nothing, just hummed some rap music and tapped his hands on his legs.

I had to break the silence. “So, Marcus, how do you think it went? No doubt you did a great job.”

“Pretty good,” he said.

“Well, what was the last thing that they said to you? Did they tell you when you’d be notified about their decision?”

“Well,” he said, “it went like this.”

They said, “Marcus, you seem like a great young man. Now we’re all good people here and want you to do well in life and we want to help you get what you want. But you know, not everyone will get this scholarship. What will you do if you don’t receive it?”

“Well, now I thought that was an easy question ‘cause of what he just said. You know the part about them all being good people. So, I just told them that you all just said that you wanted to help me be a success in life which was really nice of you. So, if I don’t get this scholarship, I’d like to get your contact info today. Then I will call each one of you up ‘cause I have no doubt that together we can figure out another way to get me through college.”

Then he said, "The judges all looked at each other and looked kind of worried."  
I tried not to laugh.

Four weeks later, Marcus dropped by and pulled out a letter from his backpack. Marcus had won the scholarship. Marcus knew how to make his dreams come true.

**Your thoughts: (no names or places)**

**Each year thousands of children are placed in the custody of the state. What do you think would be the toughest challenges for them? Explain.**

**What did you admire the most about Marcus?**

**What is unique about his approach to life? Why?**

**Some people are always positive and can find ways to get through the tough times. Others appear to “have it all” and yet forever complain. Do you agree?**

**Do you feel that Marcus deserved the scholarship? Why?**

**What do you think about his message that “there are always good people out there”?**

**Name three qualities in a good person.**

**The power of good can be described in many ways. Some people might substitute the power of trust, respect, kindness, nature, personal strength, etc. What other examples can you think of?**

# Crissy

It seems that in every group of teens since the beginning of time, there's one girl who gets all the attention. She usually is extremely pretty, has lots of friends, gets along well with the guys and is consistently the center of conversation. They are constantly envied by other girls, while guys work hard to get their attention. This was the life of Crissy, the girl who had it all and who barely escaped with her life.

I met Crissy when she was in my Sophomore English class before I became a counselor. She not only had all the above qualities, but she was smart, intuitive and serious about her grades. What was most remarkable was that even though she frequently would miss class, she always produced excellent work getting assignments in on time.

She stopped by my counseling office during her junior year to discuss her credits. She was behind one semester due to some "health" issues but wanted to make sure that she graduated on time. Before long, Crissy became a "regular", usually stopping by every Monday where she would share small moments in her life. Initially, she was very private, but eventually she found the courage to tell a story that had to be told.

Crissy was thrown out of her home when she was twelve, abandoned at a substandard apartment unit and told by her parents to find a way to survive. She wandered around the unit for days, shivering outside at night while creating conversations with anyone who seemed to care. Eventually, the wrong guy said that she could live in his place. He was in his forties, a dealer and would eventually get Crissy hooked on cocaine while becoming his "girlfriend".

But no one was there to rescue Crissy. Her parents had simply walked away. School was her safe place, but then again, she never asked for help. She was always afraid that she would be arrested because she sold and took drugs. So, because she was smart, she played the part of the successful student with a perfect life. She had lots of clothes, tons of attention, but no real friends. And she was an abused minor living with a felon. Crissy felt like she couldn't let anyone into her life.

Because she also was in a survival mode, she kept her secrets close to her. She didn't have a social life even though everyone presumed that she did. No one really knew where she lived. Crissy would mention her older "boyfriend", but no one had met him. In fact, no one suspected that this "perfect" girl didn't have it all.

Somehow, Crissy was able to fool everyone until she overdosed in the middle of her junior year. Apparently, she "died" but was revived. Because of the circumstances, which involved her attempted suicide, she was hospitalized for several weeks in the mental care unit. Subsequently, she missed a good part of her classes and was at risk

to graduate. Since she was ranked first in her class, she was devastated that she would lose her class ranking and her chance to go to the university. Crissy knew that it was her only way out.

Crissy had just turned 18 when she was released from the hospital unit and returned to school. She knew that she would have to find some type of support if she wanted to graduate and save her ranking. She finally confessed her entire story, including her parents' abandonment, the pedophile who abused her, and her addiction to cocaine. She left her "boyfriend" and found a cousin that would let her stay at her place. Crissy would need to complete all credits by attending classes both during the day and attend full time at our night school.

She signed up to work each day at the counseling office as an aide. Here, she had support from several staff members who eventually became her extended family. We saw her go through withdrawal multiple times including, sweats, shaking, seemingly incoherent, but she hung in there every day and never gave up.

By the end of the year, Crissy had made all A's in both schools and maintained her position as first in her class. The scholarship that was presented to her gave her a full ride in tuition, included the option of staying in a dorm and even provided her with a part-time job. She was on her way.

Crissy eventually received her degree in clinical psychology and worked with young women who were suffering from abuse, chemical dependency, and mental health issues. Today she is happily married and committed to her three children. She still suffers from extreme anxiety from her past drug use and abuse. Crissy is committed to staying healthy within a tough exercise program, ongoing therapy and a nutritious diet, while trying to be the supportive mom whom she never had.

Crissy also invests her time and support to help her recently discovered parents as they face their own aging and financial issues. They continue to challenge her and are in complete denial about abandoning their daughter claiming that she simply ran away. Somehow, she has found a way to forgive them.

**Your thoughts: (no names or places)**

**Have you even known someone who played the part of a certain person but was actually lived a very different life?**

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**What do you think was unique about Crissy?**

**At one point, Crissy is described as a “survivor”. What does that term mean in relationship to her life?**

**In *MPOWRD* groups, teens often get the chance to tell their stories. Why is it important to have a safe place to share some of our tough times with a group?**

**If Crissy were a friend of yours, and she shared some of her problems, what would you say to her? Could you have possibly helped her to find help?**



# Zach

Zach was scared to death of coming to high school. Middle school was bad enough. He had been bullied for as long as he remembered. Physically, he had been the smallest boy in his class since kindergarten, all the way through eighth grade. He was convinced that being in a bigger school would undoubtedly bring a few guys around who were smaller than he was. No luck so far.

He made his way through the halls trying to melt in with the crowds. Zach was skilled at drawing attention away from himself in case some bully was ready to pounce on him. He hated school. He hated life. He hated his family due to a younger brother, Chase, who was twice his size and loved to punch Zach around whenever he felt like it. His dad really favored Chase who was the strong, talented, and athletic son that he had always wanted. Zach connected to no one in his family.

Zach sunk deep down into his seat at the back of the classroom, smiling as he drew a stick man hanging from a noose in the air with blood dripping out of his mouth as he was choking to death. Drawing was Zach's fantasy world. It was a means for revenge since he really wasn't a violent kid. He just wanted to escape the life he was living.

His math teacher noted Zach consumed with his work and wandered over to his desk to see what was so amusing, obviously it wasn't his class. When he checked out the drawing, he decided that it was pretty graphic and possibly a sign that Zach had bigger problems. Zach was sent to the office. Since he had never been in trouble at school before, the administration decided to bring in a counselor. That would be me.

Zach was embarrassed. He hated the attention. He said that he wished that he could just leave school and never return. At the time, it wasn't an option so I asked Zach if he would mind telling me more about the drawing.

Zach took the safe route and explained that he just really liked sketching, that he was into the artistry of stick men figures. He even told me to check out JS Lowry and his artwork. He obviously avoided the content and the meaning behind the drawing.

He took a long route to getting there, but eventually came forth with moments of truth. After having a coke and talking about his love of animation, the movie, "Nightmare before Christmas" and his ambition to work in graphic design, Zach stated that his parents really didn't "get him". His stated that his dad thought he was a wimp and his mother always cried when he came home from school, looking pretty sad after being beaten up by some random kid. He had no support system. He was pretty much on his own. His days were spent figuring out ways to be invisible. He was a victim.

Survival included a fixed route on how to get to and from school so that he wouldn't run into gangs, bullies, and the like. At lunch he would eat alone, away from anyone who

might pick on him. He planned ahead to be “sick” on speech days and tried to avoid being picked last in PE classes by complaining about a chronic knee injury that didn’t exist so he wouldn’t have to participate. He hid from the school nurse, who always wanted to check up on him and sometimes give him a big hug. He said that, by far, was the worst.

Zach appeared to be at no risk of hurting anyone. It just wasn’t in his nature. Above all, he didn’t want any attention from the adult world as he knew that the bullying would only get worse if anyone sympathized with him. We agreed to talk again whenever he wanted to hide or just hang out. In the meantime, teachers were notified to watch over him. Somehow, the torment had to be stopped.

Zach would eventually stop by my office now and then more to discuss his art than to talk about life. Sometimes they were the same thing. Right before summer break, I saw some confidence building in him as he began to grow both physically and mentally.

Then the next year passed by and Zach had moved on, at least I didn’t see him in school. The reality was that I just didn’t recognize him. I was standing in the hall during break when the two students in front of me nudged each other as everyone was walking to class.

“There he is,” said one of them. I looked up in the direction where they pointed.

A tall, skinny kid with an intense expression pushed through the crowded halls. His black hair was greased down flat and pulled back into a short ponytail. His face was chalk-white with gray streaks looking like walking death. Maroon and black make-up shaded underneath his eyes making them look hollow while bloody streaks dripped down the sides of his mouth.

He wore a white ruffled shirt tucked around his neck and a long dark trench coat that just met his military boots. Black fishnet material hung on his arms. But the most interesting part of this picture were the two sharpened fangs that hung over either side of his mouth. Our school believed in self-expression.

The message was clear, “Don’t even come close” as his eyes pierced the crowd daring anyone to make eye contact. No one did. One of the students near me said, “That guy is one weird dude. He gives me the creeps.”

Then, for just a second, the Dracula “wannabe” caught my eye and I finally recognized who it was. Of course, it was Zach. He had grown at least ten inches in height and possibly lost another couple in width. I didn’t say his name but nodded my head for him to come over.

He followed me into my office, and I closed the door. “Hey, Zach, what is this, my friend?” Then we both started laughing.

He plopped down in a chair. I could finally see the Zach I knew. The smile gave him away.

“I just finally started growing,” he said, “like an inch a month. I couldn’t put on any weight, and actually started looking like my stick drawings. Then it just came to me. I needed to look like a freak and scare people away. I just wanted to be anyone, but Zach and it worked. It’s like I’m hiding out in my own skin.”

Zach found a way to survive. He didn’t let the world push him around anymore. He became empowered to take a stand and to protect himself.

Zach eventually used his new “self” to support and befriend other victims on campus who looked like they were hiding out to survive, the kids who just didn’t fit in. He decided that they would be his cause. Because he was considered such an icon at school, teens felt that it was an honor when he gave them attention. A group of kids even told Zach that he was considered their hero. He had a group of fans follow him around before and after school, usually kids just wanting to be accepted.

Eventually he found out that he didn’t have to hide behind any kind of disguise. People genuinely liked Zach, which was no surprise. He just needed confidence and friends who believed in him. It was good to see him move past the loneliness and fear as he prepared for graduation. He was finally able to return to being Zach and get rid of the fangs.

### **Your thoughts: (no names or places)**

**Many people suffer from bullying throughout their lives. What did you think of Zach’s method to keep people away?**

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**Is it ever ok to treat anyone with disrespect? Why does it happen so frequently?**

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**How does art or music help people to escape from their pain?**

**Bullying can progress throughout life. Where do you see bullying in the adult world?**

**Do you think that some people are bullies and don't even know it? For example, someone could be really tough on a brother or sister, extremely disrespectful to a parent or grandparent, harass a teacher, intimidate a neighbor, or just plain be rude to the point of bullying?**

**Imagine that you are a school administrator, and a young man comes into your office because he has been accused of bullying. What would you say to him?**

# Jessica and William

Jessica was fourteen. William was sixteen. They had decided to run away together. Both wanted to escape their families. They had no doubt that they could make it work. They would get a job, find a place to live, and create their own rules.

Since they were minors, they were reported to the police, but no one could track them down. They were easily lost within the thousands of people who live on the streets.

They found that surviving in the inner city wasn't just tough, it was impossible. The money that they had saved was gone within a few weeks and no doors were open to them. They wondered what they had been thinking. Their days were spent scrounging for food and finding a safe place to sleep.

At first, they had enjoyed the freedom, the independence away from school, parents, and responsibilities. But they soon discovered that they weren't going to make it happen. There were no jobs, no friendly faces, no opportunities except selling drugs or stealing. They were frightened, always watching their backs.

The runaways lasted for a total of ten weeks. Then Jessica discovered she was pregnant. It was time to go home. They were actually lucky to make it back.

Jessica's parents were furious with her. They asked her how she could ever hope to have a baby when she couldn't take care of herself? William's parents were already struggling to support their family and had no intention of supporting one more child.

I met both of them for the first time when they arrived for an appointment to register for school. Jessica's mom attended and was visibly stressed to the max, pacing back and forth in my office, shouting their story with a string of emotions. The teens didn't say a word. Both looked exhausted. They simply kept their heads down willing to allow her to take charge and lead the way. There was no choice.

When mom left, I asked them both what their plans were. They said that Jessica would be having the baby and staying at her mom's house. Both wanted to finish school and be together when William got a job. They were overwhelmed, completely unsure how to make this all work. Life was just beginning to get tough for them.

Even with the fatigue and nausea that come with being pregnant, Jessica did extremely well in school. She was proud of her achievements and stopped by my office to share her test scores, her ongoing projects, frequently asking questions about college, her baby's health and their future. Although, she had just turned fifteen, she was ready to take on her responsibilities as a mother with a mission.

William's attendance was poor. He had no support system at home and already had two little brothers who depended on him for everything. Both of his parents were

alcoholics. No food in the house, no clean clothes for the kids, no one caring about if and how the boys made it to school, made William's life tough and his education impossible. He was simply trying to support his brothers.

The day arrived. Jessica and William called from the hospital to say that they had a healthy little boy. They were so excited about their new son and agreed that they couldn't fit school into their lives right now. Both would not return until the following year. Their little family would stay in William's room. That way he could stay close to his brothers and make sure to watch over them as well. In the meantime, he had to find a job to bring in money to take care of his brothers, his child and Jessica.

Jessica, however, returned to my office much sooner than she planned. The baby was now three months old.

She sat sideways in the chair across from me with her hair hanging across one part of her face. It was clear that she was trying to hide the bruises where she had been beaten. "It's not about me," she said. "I can take of myself. But the baby, little Joseph. William shakes him like crazy when he cries. He's going to kill him. I can't stay with him anymore."

"I just don't know how to make this work," she said. "Don't bother calling the police. I'll deny it all. I love William. It's not his fault. His parents beat on him all the time. He doesn't know how to deal with all of this. We're both so tired. He still hasn't found work. I don't know how he pays for food and diapers. I don't even want to know."

Child protective services would eventually be contacted and eventually Jessica moved back with her mom.

Despite the best efforts of her parents, Jessica would go back to William as happens in many cases of abuse. He begged for her forgiveness. He stayed away from hurting the baby and took it out on her instead. She forgave him, again and again.

Eventually, Jessica and William disappeared from school completely. William was involved in street crimes where the risks became greater. He joined a local gang and was known around the neighborhood for moving drugs. At one point, he was shot in a drive-by but survived. The situation looked hopeless. I didn't hear from either of them for the next two years.

While talking to the principal in the front office about a teen's attendance, I felt someone approach from behind and tap me on my shoulder. I turned around and there was Jessica, looking like a completely different person. She was a young woman now with a great smile and a newfound maturity. Holding her hand and clinging to her leg stood little Joseph, dark curly hair and big brown eyes, looking healthy and safe.

"I left him," she said. "This time for good. He was in the middle of so much violence and danger. I just couldn't risk Joseph getting hurt. And, if something happened to me,

who would take care of my son? I didn't give William a choice this time. He cried when we left but I had to do it. I really love him still but we can't live his life."

Jessica returned to school for her senior year. Once again, she did an excellent job as a student and as a mother. She eventually found MPOWRD meetings where she could share parts of her story with the group, admitting the challenges of raising a child as a teenager and teaching other teens the importance of respecting themselves and never giving up.

**Your thoughts: (no names or places)**

**Why do you think that many teens have such a hard time following rules in their homes?**

**If you were the parent of a twelve-year-old son or daughter or both, what kinds of rules would you have in place as they approach their teen years?**

**What were Jessica's and William's chances of finding any success once they left their homes?**

**What advantages did Jessica have over William to find personal success?**

**Why do you think that William was so violent with both Jessica and his son?**

**Do you feel that there was any hope ahead for William?**



**What would William need to do to find personal power and a positive future?**

**What acts of courage empowered Jessica to create a better life for her and Joseph?**

**We all make mistakes. Life is its own proving grounds. Sometimes our decisions are worse than others. If we learn from them, hopefully, we won't repeat them again. What advice do you think William and Jessica will try to pass on to their son Joseph as he gets older?**

# Beth

Beth was an outstanding sprinter in track and held several school records. She was a good student and was well-liked by many different groups on campus. One afternoon, she stopped by to check in and invite me to her next track competition. In the middle of the information, she suddenly stopped, closed the door and said, "I might as well get this over with." She plopped down in a chair and unzipped her backpack.

Beth held up her water bottle. "It's gin," she said.

"I've been drinking since fourth grade." She shrugged. "It's a 'norm' in my home. My family is kind of a mess. I mean, they act like everything is perfect. My dad makes lots of money and if you saw my mom, you'd think that she was my sister. The problem is that she has never grown up. I guess neither of them have."

"My dad is always the life of any party. My uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, you name it, all drink a lot on every occasion. No one cares who's getting drunk because they all are. In fact, drinking is considered 'a rite of passage' even when you're underage. As soon as you want to join in, you're welcome. The family's motto is 'better to drink at home than at a friend's house'. They say it's part of their heritage. Whatever."

"My dad used to brag how I would watch MMA with him and put down a few beers. I was in fourth grade! He would brag to his friends about how he bonded with his daughter. To be honest, I didn't even know that other kids didn't drink with their families until I was in high school. Everyone thinks that it's so cool to go to parties and get wasted. It means nothing to me. It's like being at home."

"Being the only child in my family means that my parents think of me as one of their friends, not their daughter. I know that they're good people, but I don't want two best friends. Sometimes, I feel like I'm the parent in the house, worried about whether they're going to make it home alive. Both have several DUI's. Their only regrets are the fines that they have to pay and the humiliation of spending time in jail. I find them both totally embarrassing. Yet, here I am with gin in my water bottle. Obviously, they're not the only ones who have a problem." She continued.

"My friends love to hang out at our house because there aren't any rules. They think that my parents are so cool. One time my mom spilled her glass of wine on the pool table when she joined our game. Everyone cracked up, except for me. For the most part, I really try to avoid having anyone over if they're home. And, by the way, you need to know that my parents are completely against drugs. What a joke."

"We are alcoholics in my family which means we have serious problems in our house, but everyone pretends that there is nothing wrong. They party; they argue and fight and

then they pretend like none of it happened. 'Every day is a new day' is their motto, complete with a hangover. I need to find a way out of this. I drink to forget what a mess my family is. I don't want to end up like them even though they consider themselves functional drinkers whatever that is."

I asked her if we should talk to her parents together.

"I've tried to talk to them about their drinking, but they don't take me seriously. They actually feel bad for me. How many times have they told me that I'm such a good kid but I need to lighten up. Really? I bet there's not another teen on this planet who feels like they are the real parent in the house. Does that even make sense? I don't know, maybe there are a lot of us. It's just that I don't share my family's problems with anyone, so I guess I'll never know."

So, I'm here to say that I just needed to talk to someone, and I don't know where to go from here. Don't bother calling them in. They'll deny everything and then they'll discuss this issue over a few drinks when they get home, unless they choose to stop for a drink somewhere on the way."

"But something tells me that I need to stop drinking now before I can't stop. I don't seem to have any choice. I thought maybe I should sign up for *MPOWRD*. My friend in track goes to the group meetings. He says that they just make you feel better about life. I think that would be a good start. I need to begin somewhere."

Beth didn't share any of her family's issues in group. It wasn't important. She really just liked connecting with other teens whose lives weren't perfect either. She focused on her own challenges and worked hard to find personal empowerment for change. Her drinking stopped, her stats actually improved in track and she created time away from family social events.

What she didn't expect was how her family reacted to her commitment toward sobriety.

At first, her parents assumed it was some phase Beth was going through. But when she persisted to remain sober, her parents agreed to be open to discussions with her. They finally began to acknowledge their problem. It was a first for both of them. Their daughter was actually setting the boundaries instead of her parents.

At the end of the semester, Beth admitted that things were better at home. Her mom agreed that she had been looking for a way to change for a long time. She told Beth that she really admired her daughter and felt that it was time for her to get some help.

**When any teen chooses to make better life-decisions, it impacts the world that surrounds them. *MPOWRD* meetings create the opportunity to process personal challenges, discuss decision-making with peers and admit our mistakes. Friends, families and teachers take note of the positive changes and the sense of**

confidence in *MPOWRD* teens. They become leaders and advocates for their peers. Teens supporting teens create a better world.

**Your thoughts: (no names or places)**

**Do you feel that most people accept drinking as an acceptable part of growing up for teens and their friends?**

**Do you believe that a teen could really impact his/her family and/or friends by making a positive change in life? Give an example.**

**Perfect families aren't really perfect at all. All families must face challenges on a daily basis. One teen in an *MPOWRD* meeting described his family as being simply "average". Another teen said that average was good enough. What do you think he meant?**

**Why did Beth's choice to change her drinking habit create a far greater impact on her family?**

**Statistics report that binge drinking (3 or more drinks at a time) is the second leading cause of death for teens. Do you find that statistic believable? Why?**

**One of the seniors in *MPOWRD* decided to have a drug and alcohol-free Halloween party in his backyard. He got one of the pizza parlors to donate food for the crowd and found a local radio station DJ to offer his time and sound equipment. Other teens stood at the gate entrance so they could monitor the crowd.**

**The crowd respected the “rules of the party” and it was a definite success, described by one teen as “the best party I’ve been to”. Teens can often solve their own issues when given the chance.**

**Teens often complain that they are not given a voice when it comes to high school management and discipline codes. Select an issue that occurs in high schools that you believe teens could solve if given the authority.**

# Jayden

You never really know who will take over the leadership in the *MPOWRD* meetings. Everyone has a chance to volunteer to lead the group. Then other members help with the readings and the question sessions. Teens asked for a structured format so that there wouldn't be any time wasted. Each person is encouraged to participate in the discussion. No one writes anything down.

The leader makes sure that each person is encouraged to participate and that the other members are actively listening with unconditional support. Teens are given a copy of the scripted guide each week so that they will be comfortable with the format.

In this particular group, Jayden was the group's favorite leader. The teens always encouraged him to take charge. He was respected and kept the meetings interesting. Jayden had a way of making each person feel valued. He had great eye contact, was friendly to everyone, and thanked each member every time they contributed their thoughts, opinions, or experiences to the group. He was a natural leader.

Jayden was from a well-liked family in the area who owned the local Italian restaurant in the mall. It was a great place to hang out and was known for its outstanding pizzas. He had one brother and two sisters who were older and were either in college or working at the restaurant. The family was well-liked and supported by the community. It seemed like the family had everything going for it.

In fact, they only had one major problem, and his name was Jayden.

Jayden was in the 7-year plan to get out of high school as he was way behind in credits for graduation. The problem was that Jayden didn't stay in school consistently throughout the year because during his "off" time, he was in juvenile detention. It was a revolving door because Jayden couldn't stay out of trouble.

Jayden was neither an angry teen nor was he a rebellious kid, he just continued to make bad decisions that would get him into constant trouble. You could call it immaturity, or you could say that he was addicted to risk-taking. He always hung out with the wrong crowd, was in the wrong place, doing the wrong things. And, he just couldn't say "no".

It had started with a group he hooked up with in middle school, which turned into his first arrest at the age of fourteen. He had been in and out of institutions for the past three years. His biggest fear was the fact that he was close to turning 18, which meant that soon he would be tried as an adult. That meant no second chances.

No matter how much his parents punished him and his siblings begged him to get his act together, Jayden just didn't seem to be able to find his way. He began to believe that he was destined to live a life in prison.

Jason was a great kid, and he was a criminal.

Now, the *MPOWRD* group didn't realize that Jayden was in as much trouble as he was. In fact, no one realized that he would be leaving the group until he made an announcement at the meeting. He didn't give a lot of details but simply said, "I'm going to miss you guys, but I'll be gone for a while. See you in the spring. I'm back in juvie for another four months. It's a bummer." The group was really disappointed.

But the next week Jayden walked through the door during the meeting. "Sorry, I'm late," he said with a big grin. The kids were surprised to see him.

One of the guys smiled and said, "Jayden, what's up? I thought you'd be gone for a while. Didn't the judge show or did you escape?" Everyone gathered around him.

Jayden just shook his head, kind of smiled and looked at the group. "You won't believe this, but I passed the tests, stayed clean and didn't get busted after all. This is the first time in three years that I wasn't in trouble. Do you believe it? My family thought the judge had made a mistake. I could hardly believe it myself. I even asked the court if they were sure. It's crazy. I really didn't think my life would change, but I guess it did."

Everyone laughed with him. Then he said, "But I need to tell you the whole story. It's important. It's about you."

"So, I'm standing in front of Judge McGinns who reminds me of a hungry bear ready to attack something for dinner. She loves yelling and usually just chews me out the whole time, complaining about all my bad decisions and irresponsibility, you know, the usual. She calls my parents the true angels in this world having to put up with such a disappointment like me. I always feel like some major loser. Well, I guess I am."

"This time, as she read through my reports, she almost had a smile. Almost. Then she looked up and me and said, "So Jayden, I must admit that I am in total shock. Every one of your reports has come in with perfect behavior. No crime? No use? No complaints? Is this a mistake or did I miss something? Tell me. What is going on here? What is different in your life? Why the change?"

I just stood there, definitely shocked, I was as surprised as she was. I mean it had been a while since I messed up, but I guess I had forgotten how long it had been. I honestly could think of no reason why my life was different. She said, "Think, Jayden, there has to be some reason. I know you too well. What is going on?"

And then it came to me. "Your honor," I said, "I've got it. It's because I go to these *MPOWRD* meetings." I told her that we have these groups in school where everyone has a chance to talk about life and stuff and kids support each other. Sometimes, the group is looking out for me and then other times I look out for them. We just have each other's backs. We really want each other to succeed. And, the truth is, it happens.

I mean, people work through some of their tough stuff and find a way out. I guess I've been changing more than I realized."

Then Jayden looked at each person and said, "I need to thank you, and you and you and you. You see, if it weren't for each one of you, I wouldn't be here. This day would have never come. You saved my life. You showed me that I could believe in me and now I have a chance."

The teens started to clap. Then they each gave him five, patted him on the back and congratulated him. They felt his victory. They had saved a life. His victory became their victory. They owned this moment with Jayden.

**Your thoughts: (no names or places)**

**Everyone gets in trouble at some time or other. Often when we think we are going to get caught doing something, no one notices. Then the next time, we think no one is paying attention and it becomes a disaster.**

**Jayden was part of the juvenile system for three years and couldn't break his cycle of getting into trouble. Why do some of us make the same bad choices over and over?**

**What qualities did you think were positive about Jayden?**



**What qualities were positive about his *MPOWRD* group?**

**How can teens have far greater impact on the life of another teen as opposed to the “system”, the school, the administration and sometimes, even our families?**

**Why is it important for teens to feel empowered at this point in their lives?**

**Think of a teen who has been empowered to either change his/her life or has impacted someone else. Once again, don't use real names or places.**

YOUR VOICE IS IMPORTANT  
YOUR CHOICES CREATES YOUR FUTURE

Check out:  
[www.mpowrd.org](http://www.mpowrd.org)

Find out if *MPOWRD* groups are offered on your  
high school campus.