

SAMPLE PREVIEW



Bringing
HOPE to
Hurting
Teenagers

by Scott Larson

PRAXIS

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INTRODUCTION

by Duffy Robbins

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It was Friday, Memorial Day weekend, May of 1995. The freeways of Los Angeles were choked with holiday travelers hurrying to get to their destinations. Traffic was bumper to bumper on the 405 expressway, thousands of cars zooming by in all four lanes.

It's no wonder no one noticed it there on the side of the road. From a short distance away, and especially at highway speeds, it probably looked more like a dead animal or perhaps a little rag doll that had escaped the grip of a small child in a passing car. Even the California highway patrolman who first noticed the object almost missed it as he passed by in his cruiser—his mind focused more on the turmoil on the highway than on the tiny object next to it.

But something about the object caught his attention. The trained eye of the veteran patrolman noticed it just as he was about to pass. The object was moving!

Quickly the officer veered to the side of the freeway, put on his caution lights, and ran back along the shoulder only to discover that he was staring into the face of a very young baby boy. It was not only moving, but it was very much alive. Blasted by the gusts from passing cars, the baby appeared to be unharmed, amazingly unfazed, and completely unaware that it was crawling only inches away from almost certain death.

It turns out that the child had crawled away from his baby sitter and managed to make his way from his yard adjacent to the highway the short distance to the shoulder of one of California's busiest expressways. Apparently, the child had been there for a while, crawling on the apron of Interstate 405 while driver after driver sped by, oblivious to the life-and-death drama that was playing out just feet from the path.

It's an amazing story to be sure. But what makes it even more stunning is how hauntingly familiar it sounds. And how vividly it reminds us of the young people in and out of our youth ministries who are standing on the edge of disaster. Many of us are just too busy or too focused to take notice and pull over.

That's one of the reasons I have such respect for Scott and Hanne Larson. They're no less busy than the rest of us. They have many "places to go and people to see." They are just as focused as any other youth workers I know. But they are people whose ministry is marked by a steady eye to the side of the road. They are watching

for the young people most of us in youth ministry never notice, the ones who get left along the side of the road until one day their stories take a tragic turn—violence, suicide, family crisis, school dropout, drug overdose, a criminal act—one more teenager unnoticed and unhelped by a society too driven to even pay attention.

It is difficult work. Scott and Hanne Larson are familiar with the real-life struggles of working the shoulders of society's highway. They know all too well the frustrations and risks of working with these kids—lost and lonely because they have been neglected by parents, or they have sort of been dropped out of the mainstream as if they were some sort of litter, or perhaps they have wandered into dangerous places because they did not realize their peril.

That's one of the reasons I found this book so compelling. It has to it a ring of truth and authenticity. It is not the kind of book many of us like to read in youth ministry. For one thing, the title doesn't have a number in it (*Fifty Ideas for Baptism*, *Forty Discussion Starters Using Water Balloons*, *Thirty Ways You Can Use a Pez Dispenser To Make the Gospel Come Alive*). It is not an "easy answer" primer that gives us nice, neat solutions. It is not a book of quick strategies and cute ideas we can use this Sunday night. Don't get me wrong. We need those kinds of books in youth ministry. (Heck, I've written one or two of them myself!) But we also need books that make us think, books that force us to consider attitudes and approaches, books that make us pull off the youth ministry highway long enough to take a closer look.

I have known Scott Larson for almost fifteen years, and I have watched him and his wife dig deep in a youth ministry culture that often calls us to wide and shallow. They have been doing faithful, substantial youth ministry with kids in prisons and juvenile homes in the New England area for as long as I have known them. They have been faithful at this work, not with a sense of martyrdom or anger that the rest of us seem to be passing by without help, nor with a sense of obligation and begrudged duty. Theirs is a ministry rooted in a passion for Christ and the shepherd's heart that will not rest until someone has gone out to seek for the one lost sheep.

One of my favorite memories is being in their home with some of my youth ministry students from Eastern College and watching as they shared their vision and passion with my students. Beneath the calm voices of two people talking about discipleship in the context of a prison ministry, I heard the voice of warriors, people who recognize that this is a war and who have every intention of being faithful to the fight.

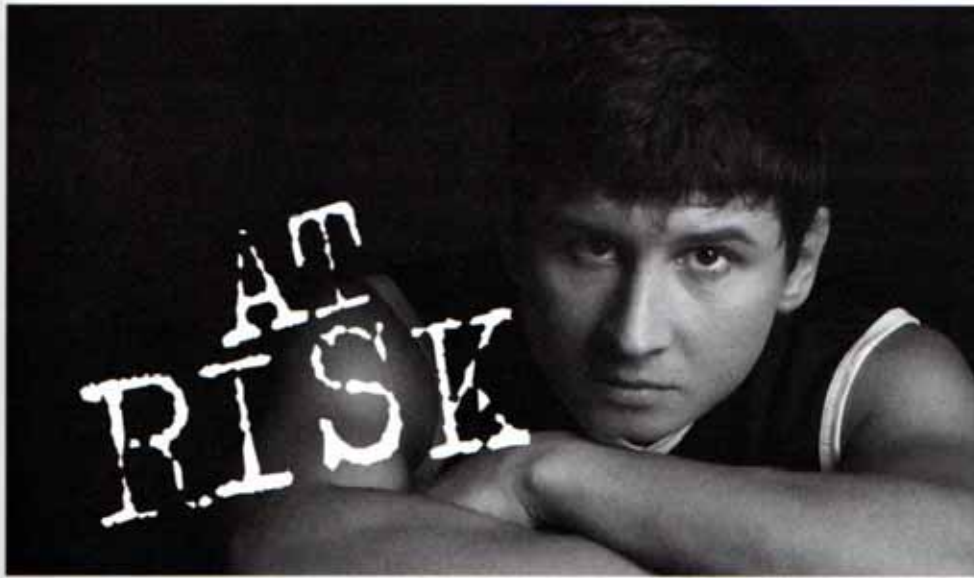
I love exposing my students to people like that. I love being exposed to people like that. I'm thrilled that by reading this book, you will allow yourself to be exposed to that kind of vision and passion. Maybe the fact that you're reading this book means that you are someone like that. I hope so.

6 ^{Am} **RISK** —BRINGING HOPE TO HURTING TEENAGERS

If you are, what you will find in this book is a very readable, practical, thoughtful guide to doing ministry with “at-risk youth.” In the pages of this book, Scott introduces us to Kevin, Tina, Reggie, Cal-Dawg, JayBird, Daryle, and many others (including the fairly well-known Onesimus)—young people Scott and Hanne have come across in more than two decades of ministry and kids whose lives have been changed because Scott and Hanne pulled over long enough to share with them about the cross that changed history.

My prayer is that as you read this book it will give you both the heart and the help you need to better minister to the Kevin and the Onesimus in your own youth ministry, or perhaps at least the vision to see that every day we drive by wonderful opportunities and dire needs—sometimes without even slowing down. If nothing else, maybe this book will remind us all that we need to keep a trained eye and a bowed knee for those young people along the sides of the road.

Thanks, Scott and Hanne, for sharing your life, faith, struggles, and ministry with all of us.



The
BIG
Picture

CHAPTER 1:

Kevin



Hungry, frightened, and clothed in only his underwear, fourteen-year-old Kevin curled up in a corner of a police-station cell and tried to keep warm. Fear gripped his heart, and thoughts of suicide plagued his mind.

A million questions were swirling around in his head. How did all this happen? Is it just a bad dream? Will I ever see the light of day again?

As he faced the possibility of spending the rest of his life in prison, sleep didn't come to Kevin that first night in a jail cell. Instead his mind wandered through the past, trying to understand just how he had gotten to this point.

FAMILY MATTERS

As far as a father was concerned, Kevin had never really had one. Sure, there was a man involved—someone had fathered him. But that was altogether different from having a father. And while his dad might read about this incident in tomorrow's newspaper, he would have no idea it was his son who was involved.

What would happen to his mother? He kept seeing her anguished face in his mind. He couldn't rid his ears of the sounds of her loud wailing at the police station. He knew she would blame herself. So once again, Kevin would be the strong one, saying, "It's OK, Mom. It's OK. Everything's going to be all right."

Kevin knew that his mother's whole life had been plagued with problems. One more thing like this just might send her over the edge, he worried as he began to ponder her own difficult past.

Raised in an alcoholic home, Kevin's mother had been sexually abused by both her father and her grandfather as a young teenager. Distrust and abandonment had marked young Sally's life early on, and so it was no surprise that by age fourteen, she was drinking heavily, and by eighteen she had moved out of the house, never to return.

She was married within a few months, and her life went from bad to worse. Her new husband, Sam, turned out to be even more detestable than her father. The honeymoon was short-lived. Alcohol, cursing, beatings, and rape became

the norm in their newly established home. There were frequent calls to the police, both from frightened neighbors and from Sally herself.

Surprisingly, the marriage lasted five years. And in the end it was Sam who eventually left Sally. She was so hurt and devastated that she determined never to marry again, a vow she never broke.

That's why everyone was so shocked when Sally fell for Jack only a few years later. He had just moved to town, and he began frequenting the Lamp-lighter Bar, where Sally worked. Having just experienced the breakup of his third marriage, Jack was also feeling devastated.

As Sally and Jack began to spend time together, they soon discovered how much they had in common. Sally couldn't remember ever having felt so understood by anyone, and the relationship appeared to hold great promise. He was gentle and a good listener, rare qualities in the men she had encountered. It seemed as if they were meant for each other.

Shortly after they moved in together, though, the newness started to wear off. Old patterns began to surface—his inclination toward abuse and her knack for finding it.

Things got much worse when they learned Sally was pregnant with Kevin. The beatings became more frequent and more severe. On one occasion, Jack choked Sally to the point that she blacked out. Soon after, she left him.

Though Kevin was Sally's only child, he was Jack's tenth. He seemed to display a twinge of guilt that he wouldn't be around for this one either. But even though Jack made an attempt to reconcile the relationship after Kevin was born, it soon became clear that it just wasn't going to work. After five weeks, he left for good.

Who needed him anyway? For Sally, not having a man around was more of a relief than anything. Besides, now she had this precious little boy, someone she could shower all her love on and someone who, for the first time, could reciprocate that love. They were inseparable, and for a while her drinking became more manageable. This period of time was the closest thing to a "normal life" that Sally and Kevin would experience together. She worked full time, hiring girls in the neighborhood to baby-sit.

Then out of the blue, Sally's first husband, Sam, started calling again. At first she rejected every attempt he made to meet, but Sam remembered how to kindle the spark in Sally. "Maybe he really has changed," she reasoned. "And it would be good for Kevin to have a man around." Besides, she was growing weary of working all the time and struggling just to keep food on the table.

Sam moved back in when Kevin was five years old, allowing Sally to quit her job. But it didn't take Sam long to discover that he wasn't fond of having a whiny little kid around the house. That tension precipitated many fights. And

while Sam was around only for a short time, the impact of his stay would linger much longer.

Kevin recalled the aftermath of those days: "She told me that he used to rape her a lot. One time she got pregnant, and he said she had to get an abortion because we couldn't afford having another kid around. Like lots of the stuff she'd tell me, I was just too young to understand. I only remember that things really started going downhill after that."

Sally's drinking escalated dramatically. She was unable to find another job, and they were soon evicted from the apartment. With nowhere to turn, Sally had to swallow her pride and do something she had sworn she never would. With Kevin in arm, she made her way to the welfare office. While she was able to qualify for assistance, it would require their moving into the subsidized housing projects.

Feeling like a failure and having lost what little self-respect she had, Sally began drinking in binges. She would shut herself up in the house, sometimes for a week or more at a time, consuming scarcely anything but rum and Cokes.

Meanwhile five-year-old Kevin was scrounging up bottles and cans, exchanging them for soup pouches and cupcakes at the corner store. He would search the house for food stamps so he could buy milk and bread. Though he would often make sandwiches for his mom, begging her to eat, she existed largely on a diet of coffee, cigarettes, and booze.

He remembered the afternoon he came home to the sound of loud wailing in the bedroom. Running into the house, he found Sally under the bed. As he struggled to pull her out, she kept sobbing, "Just come and hold me, Kevin. Just hold me." At age six, he began fearing the day when he might come home and find that his mother had drunk herself to death.

To Sally's credit, she never physically abused Kevin. She truly loved him. That's why she felt so guilty for neglecting him every time she would sober up. Trying to make up for it, she would often say, "You don't have to go to school today, Kev. Let's just the two of us go shopping."

But Kevin liked school. He'd grown accustomed to getting himself ready and going on his own since he was in the first grade. But even school didn't come easy for Kevin. In the first grade, he was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder and a moderate speech impediment. He was put on Ritalin and given special education services. Yet he was so determined that by the eighth grade he had received numerous academic awards. He even graduated from middle school with honors.

Recalling those days, Kevin thought of all the positive memories he had of his middle school principal, Mr. Denson. "He knew my mom and my situation,

but he never condemned me. Instead he would just keep tabs on me, and any time I would skip school, he'd call me into his office and talk with me—just like a dad.”

But at the same time, Kevin was developing a warped sense of identity. Seeing himself as the “man of the house,” he felt the responsibility of being both a provider and protector for his mother.

“I always knew I had to protect mom, not only from herself, but also from the teachers and social workers who would ask me questions and send things home for her to sign. I'd sign her name and make up excuses for why she could never attend the parent meetings. I knew that if people saw how things really were, they'd probably take me away and put me in a foster home.”

By age nine, he was doing pretty much whatever he wanted. The kids he hung around with at school were pretty positive, but in the projects he was drawn to an entirely different crowd. Because most kids his own age had curfews, Kevin started staying out late with older kids. At first he wasn't doing anything wrong, just watching and learning. He remembered how good it felt just to be included by the older kids.

But as they say, bad company corrupts good character. When he was ten, Kevin started breaking windows in the neighborhood. By eleven he was stealing car stereos and selling them for fifty to seventy-five dollars, justifying that it was a way to generate much-needed money for himself and his mom. At twelve, he became a lookout for a couple of drug dealers in the projects. He could earn an easy hundred dollars just for keeping watch for a couple hours.

At age twelve, Kevin was finally arrested. The charge was shoplifting. Then a couple of weeks later he was arrested again, this time for damaging property. Sally became concerned. She called her sister to see if they could move in with her for a little while. “He just needs to get out of the projects and get some new positive friends,” she reasoned.

The opposite actually happened. Because he didn't know anybody in the new neighborhood or school, Kevin started hanging out with his cousin's fourteen-year-old boyfriend. Two years older, Jimmy became like a big brother to Kevin. He also was a member of a local teenage gang called the SSPs (South Side Posse).

A SUBSTITUTE FAMILY

Eager to prove himself, twelve-year-old Kevin started stealing cars and dealing drugs, turning all the money over to the gang. His loyalty quickly gained him acceptance from the leaders, who at first had been wary of him as an outsider.

Kevin remembered those early days in the gang: “The SSPs had four main leaders. One of them became like a father to me, even though he was only eighteen. He was respected and feared in the neighborhood. I would go to him for advice a lot. He was the one who got me my first gun.”

During that winter, tensions were mounting between the South Side Posse and their primary rival, the Overland Street Boys. They threatened each other constantly. The issue had always been turf—specifically, who controlled one particular block that separated the two gang territories. But now that one of the SSP members had been jumped and badly beaten, tempers were raging and the issue had switched to revenge.

On the afternoon of March 12, Kevin remembered how surprised he was to see Hector, one of the leaders of the SSPs, waiting for him outside the school. Because Hector never attended or even hung around school, Kevin knew something was up. Hector had come to ask him to be one of three who would accompany him as he followed home the kid who had jumped their friend. Feeling both honored to be chosen and a bit nervous about what might happen, Kevin reluctantly agreed.

In an empty parking lot, what began as a mere verbal confrontation soon escalated into much more. Not satisfied with his adversary’s response to the questions he asked, Hector felt this kid needed to be taught a lesson. A fistfight between the two was all he intended it to be.

About five minutes later, another SSP member, trying to make a name for himself, unexpectedly jumped in, kicked the other kid from behind, and knocked him to the ground. He then surprised everybody by pulling a small pistol from his pocket and firing a shot into the side of the boy who was already on the ground.

Stunned by both the shot and the screaming, Kevin and the others started running across the parking lot. About five seconds later, they heard a second shot. Looking back, Kevin saw the body of the boy lying motionless on the pavement. He kept running.

By the time Kevin got home, he was so frightened and hysterical that his cousin could barely understand him. When the leaders of the SSPs figured out what had happened, they started calling associated gang members who lived in other major cities in an attempt to find a place for the boys to go while the heat was on. Kevin, it was decided, would fly to Dallas first thing in the morning and hang low there until things back home had settled down.

Kevin remembers just going into his bedroom. He felt numb. He had never seen anyone die before. He had never even really hurt anyone before. What had his life come to? What would happen to him now?

Later that evening the police came and arrested him. They handcuffed him to a door at the station while they went back to get Sally. The detective took his clothes to examine as evidence and put him in a cold cell with nothing but his underwear. That night Kevin confessed to the whole thing. The next morning in court, Kevin and his three friends were charged with murder.

Where Are the Kevins in Your Community?

If you minister to teenagers in a local church, you certainly have encountered Kevins. They have attended your youth ministry functions. There have been Sallys who have gotten to know some of the people in your church. She even may have visited your church. If you minister in the context of a parachurch organization, there's no doubt you've met a few Kevins in your day. Some days it may feel like they're all Kevins.

It doesn't matter whether you minister in an urban, suburban, or rural context. The issues that defined Kevin's life (an absent father, an alcoholic mother, abuse and neglect, negative peers, gang involvement, and the lack of effective outside intervention) have become commonplace for an increasing number of young people. As a result, scores of kids like Kevin have come to be termed "at risk." But just how many at-risk young people are there?

Dean Borgman, professor of youth ministries, says, "In my observations of communities across America, teenagers comprise about 10 percent of the population in most cities. Of the total number of teenagers in any given community, about 20 percent are generally fairly well-adjusted—taking active leadership roles and likely to make it fine without outside intervention; 60 percent are experiencing the typical ups and downs of adolescence, perhaps needing help at times; 15 percent are struggling severely with life-controlling problems and are in need of special outside intervention if they are to develop healthily; and the other 5 percent could be considered very dangerous—either homicidal or suicidal. This group will almost certainly inflict damage to either themselves or others unless appropriate intervention is applied."¹

According to Borgman, 20 percent of the teenagers in your community—or one out of every five—are at risk and in need of serious intervention in their lives. The National Research Council's Panel on High-Risk Youth paints an even dimmer picture. They say that at least seven million young Americans—roughly 25 percent of young people between the ages of ten and seventeen—are at risk of failing to achieve productive adult lives!²

Just what determines whether a young person is at risk? There is no scientific formula, but the list on page 16 outlines some external, circumstantial factors that affect kids as well as some internal, personal factors.

SAMPLE PREVIEW

DETERMINING IF A YOUNG PERSON IS AT RISK

Environmental Factors	Personal Factors
<p>HOME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alcoholism and/or illegal drug use • Physical or sexual abuse • Harsh or unpredictable behavior patterns • Extreme neglect: receiving little instruction, love, and discipline as a child • A young mother • Either no contact or negative contact with father or mother • Parent or sibling who has been incarcerated • Parents with severe marital problems <p>COMMUNITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poorly functioning school system with high truancy and dropout rates • Violence or strong bullying/stealing on school grounds • Shootings and drug trade in the immediate community • High levels of poverty • Few jobs available in community • Few or no youth in the neighborhood who attend church or church programs <p>PEERS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong pressure to join gangs in the neighborhood • Peers who have been pronounced delinquent • Absence of positive peer relationships • Lack of a positive adult role model • Membership in a gang or a small group that discusses and plans antisocial behavior 	<p>CHILDHOOD</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hyperactivity and attention problems • Persistent lying • Difficult temperament <p>ADOLESCENCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smoking and/or drinking before age twelve, using marijuana before age fifteen • Struggles with depression • Persistent lying • Lack of guilt for negative actions • Lack of empathy for others • Persistent problems with authority • Binge drinking or drug abuse • Sexual activity (more than a couple of experiences) before age thirteen • Sexual abuse (as a victim or an abuser) • Deep hurt that has led to self-inflicted damage or talk of suicide • Inner rage that has led to violent acts • Preoccupation with violence and with playing violent video games • Obsession with fantasy games and/or the occult, death, and/or the satanic <p>Any three factors from the "environmental" list plus three from the "personal" list indicate that a young person is "at risk" of hurting self or others. Five or more from each list indicate "high risk." It should be noted, however, that young people with little going against them can destroy themselves or others. Likewise, youth in terrible internal and external danger can make it by the grace of God and/or the resilience of the human spirit.³</p>