

TODAY'S TEENS

A LOOK INSIDE THEIR WORLD

*OBSERVATIONS FROM A CHRISTIAN YOUTH
SPEAKER WHO HAS SPOKEN WITH &
MINISTERED TO MILLIONS OF TEENAGERS*

DEAN SIKES

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In honor of Parker H. “Pete” Petit

TODAY'S TEENS

A LOOK INSIDE THEIR WORLD

Since January 1st, 1993, we've been talking with teenagers. As of the writing of this book, we've spoken at over **3,400** events and shared our YOUMATTER *message of hope* with **2.4 million** teens.

Today it's seven young people in a juvenile detention center classroom. Tomorrow it's fifteen thousand teens in an arena. Three days later, it's six hundred students in an assembly located in a packed-out, non air-conditioned gymnasium. Today we're in the Deep South. Tomorrow we're in the Midwest. And then later this week, we're in the North East sector of America.

Everywhere we go, public, private, Christian and alternative schools, everywhere, we see teens; teenagers who come from all walks of life and from every imaginable social class. Each young person is different in his or her own way, yet, simultaneously, all the same.

Each searching for purpose. All seeking validation.

Each wanting to be seen. All needing to be heard.

Before we go any further, it's important to share with you that there are multiplied millions of young people who are today progressing through life with clarity of focus, they have clear direction on their individual journeys, and they are, all-in-all, seemingly ready for "what's next." I share this with you at the beginning of our time together because as we move forward, the purpose of this book is to come alongside the hurting teenager, the young person who maybe today feels isolated or all alone; to walk along side the concerned parent or youth pastor or guidance counselor and to do so with decades of **experience** in talking with teens as our calling card. Experience that might offer someone today an infusion of hope, faith, and love. With that being said, let's go.

Every time that we walk into another event, before we ever get to the stage and begin to talk, we are first observing. We're looking and watching as students make their way into the assembly or chapel service. We're observing those who are desperately trying to *fit in*. We're watching those who walk in as though they "*own*" the building. And, we're also mindful of those who make their way to their seat with the one, singular goal of not being noticed or *picked on*.

After so many years of talking with teenagers as a whole and then listening to thousands of these young people share some of their personal life experiences with us, we've

narrowed down to three the number of primary issues that our organization is called to address. In high schools across America and in nations around the world, we see three primary enemies consistently and systematically chipping away at the heart of today's teens: PERSONAL REJECTION. UNFORGIVENESS. HOPELESSNESS.

These are three enemies that I, too, have faced, experienced, and been taught how to overcome. In fact, we believe that that which we overcome, oftentimes becomes our platform. And with that being understood, as you read on, we invite you to do so, knowing that interspersed throughout these pages will be some of our testimony and some of how we were led out of the pain and into our purpose.

More so than at any time over these decades of our being on the road, today's teenagers are honestly responding to their individual needs to be healed, spiritually as well as emotionally; healed from having been personally **rejected** by someone they love or loved; someone who, at one time, they trusted.

When sharing my personal testimony, I openly talk with high school students about what it has been like for me to live with the pain of rejection and consequently, abandonment. Pain that is both real and relatable. Here's an example -

It was at a school on the West Coast of America where we came face-to-face with a student who was bold enough to allow us into a glimpse of this pain with which she daily lived as a direct result of having been **rejected**. This one encounter so blew open the doors to better understanding how widespread teenage rejection has become that it then gave us entre into a world that, up until this point, we really had no idea even existed.

On the day that we met this high school Senior, I spoke at a chapel in her school; she sat on the front row and cried literally the entire chapel. As soon as the chapel came to an end and all of the students had returned to their classes, my wife, Lori, I sat down with this young lady and another teacher and asked her if she'd be willing to share with us some of what was going on in her heart.

This eighteen-year-old young lady then wiped her tears and began to slowly, yet very deliberately, tell me about a time in her life that seemingly was as fresh to her that day as it was when she was five (5) years old.

She explained that from birth to four (4) years of age, she had been passed from one foster home to another. At five (5) years old, she had been adopted. About a year after the adoption, she recounted how she and her adopted dad went on a trip – a trip, she recalled, that required them to ride a “fast

train” to a city she’d never before visited. She remembered walking into the hotel room with her dad, having a big dinner in the restaurant downstairs, and then quickly falling asleep.

The next morning when she woke up, her dad was not in the room with her. Can you imagine? She then told me that after a while, she decided to try and find her way back to that downstairs restaurant, thinking that her dad was there, eating breakfast. Amazingly, she did find that restaurant but as she walked from table to table, her dad was nowhere in sight.

She then shared with me how she left the restaurant and walked around the hotel lobby, eventually ending up on the sidewalk in front of the hotel – a sidewalk where she stood and slept for the next **three (3) days** as she waited for her dad to return and take her home. Neither happened.

At the conclusion of those three (3) days, this five-year-old was noticed by someone who took her to the local authorities where she once again was moved from one home to another until one day, she was adopted by a family from the United States.

After hearing her story firsthand and then returning back home, when led to do so, we began to share some of this student’s testimony in our assemblies and chapel services across America. One of the very first days I was led to talk about rejection in a public high school, there were over

sixteen hundred students in the gymnasium that day and as I began to share, God's Spirit was among those teenagers - you could have heard a pin drop.

As our time came to a close with those students that day, I was prompted to ask them to respond to what they had heard. I was then led to ask this question: *"If you feel like you have been rejected or today you sense that you are living with the effects of rejection, with no one looking around, would you raise your hand."*

At that instant, in that gymnasium, ***one thousand and seventy-four (1,074) students raised their hands.***

Following this assembly, and as we talked with more and more students, we soon saw that one of the results of living life in a state of rejection is unforgiveness. It's true that when left undealt with, the pain that comes from rejection oftentimes leads to unforgiveness.

We also know from very, very personal experience that a life of unforgiveness is ugly; it's messy; and, it's dangerous. For way too long, I, too, lived with unforgiveness in my heart and yes, life for me was ugly, messy and even dangerous.

The unforgiveness that took up residence in my heart did so as a result of a ***betrayal***. At fifteen-years-old, on a Wednesday afternoon at 4:35 pm, in a large home where one of my best friends from church lived with their family, I was

sexually abused. Those unannounced and unimaginable sixty seconds forever changed me and ultimately, they were used to change the trajectory of our life. I unknowingly allowed what happened to me to also change my heart. I became angry, bitter, and hard-hearted. For many years after that Wednesday afternoon experience, I lived life in a way that was anything but authentic. Maybe you, too, can relate.

And here's where today's teens and I have one more thing in common – At fifteen-years-old, I did not want to forgive the person who had so deeply hurt me; after all, in my hard-hearted condition, my forgiving this person would not be *fair*.

When rejection and unforgiveness take up residence in the heart of today's teen, there then becomes a volatile combination of emotional warfare that ultimately, unless otherwise addressed, lands the student in the depths of **hopelessness**.

And in the life of today's teens, HOPELESSNESS is the culture climate that is most visible.

Study after study has proven out the scope of hopelessness among today's teenager. Take, for example, everyday in America, **5,400** teenagers attempt suicide. We also know that suicide is the second-largest cause of death among teenagers. In a study published in the American

Journal of Public Health, we see that from 2000 to 2015, suicide among teenagers **rose 47%**. Think about all of those young people who tragically bought the lie that their death was a better choice than their life. Consider all of those individual *purposes* that will never be fulfilled. What did we as a society miss out on because those teenagers, many of whom today would have been adults, are no longer with us? And still in another report published by the Center for Disease Control, **1 out of every 4** teenage young ladies, age 15-19, self-harm.

And speaking of self-harm, I vividly remember meeting a 14-year-old girl named Megan at a Christian Youth Convention in Arlington, Texas. I had just finished speaking and was at our product table – a table that, through the years, has consistently been a *gathering place* at the conclusion of our assemblies or chapels for students and us to connect, to share, and to unpack life experiences.

This day was no different. Students assembled, we talked, and choices were made. Megan, however, lingered. Remember what we said at the beginning of this book? It wasn't that she necessarily wanted to talk; it was that she ***needed to be heard***. We introduced ourselves to one another and Megan asked if she could share some of her story with me. As I intently listened to every word she spoke, Megan then asked if she could show me something on her arm. I agreed and she slid her sweater a couple of inches up her

arm, revealing a sliced and diced forearm – Megan had been cutting herself.

I looked at the scars and then at her eyes. It was when our eyes connected that the dam broke and the emotions that Megan had somehow kept locked away for who knows how long, gave way and she stood there at our table and just cried.

Once she had regained some of her composure, with tears streaming down her 14-year-old face, I asked her only one question, “Why do you hurt yourself?” Her response was immediate and it was from her heart. She said, “***I hurt myself to stop the pain.***” That response is literally the same, exact response every teenager with whom I have ever asked about self-harming has said to us: “***I hurt myself to stop the pain.***”

What’s going on? Why are so many teenagers choosing to harm themselves? Why is suicide on the rise? What’s driving this hopelessness? How do we understand something we cannot see, but yet, we certainly see its results? It’s akin to not seeing the wind but seeing the results of high, damaging winds after a storm blows through your city.

Identify a teenager who is ***truly hopeless*** and you’ll quickly see a young person who is in the vicinity of trouble.

Think about this: today’s teens are oftentimes categorized as selfish and consequently, as a group, they’re known to be unafraid to whole-heartedly pursue the art of

self-consumption. Go as far as you desire in chasing down the lifestyle choices of self-consuming teens and you'll come right back to this truth: Deep within the heart of every human ever born is a seemingly empty and bottomless hole, a *vacuum*, waiting to be filled with a DIVINE PURPOSE. Absent this *purpose*, this *vision* of what one is to accomplish with his or her life, hopelessness becomes the driving force of culture. Simply stated, *without vision, people perish*.

And try as we may to fill this *vacuum*, because it is wholly reserved for a personal, meaningful and real relationship with the One, true, God, anything and everything else results in frustration.

So, where are today's teens turning? Let's see –

This generation, known as GenZ, is growing up, minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour, and day-by-day in a **digital** world. And their world is ever evolving. Anything and everything in their young lives is literally a *click* away.

Anything they want to see, anything they want to hear, and anything they want to search and/or explore, is at the end of their hand as they grasp, with fierce relentlessness, their connection to the world. Initially trumpeted as the *end-all* answer to establishing global, person-to-person *connectivity*, social media is now best known for providing its constituents with pure *isolationism*.

For example, instead of going out and interacting with others, many of today's teens **date online** - *virtually*. Instead of writing notes and dropping them in the mail, or even talking on the phone, more and more of today's teenagers have their very own style of communication - it's a text here, an instant-message there; a Snapchat video or photo on one hand while on the other, it's a Tweet.

Social Media is in no way ALL bad; to the contrary, much good comes from this revolutionary creation. But why wouldn't it? After all, every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights (all things are created by God). That said, everything that God created for our good, the enemy (the devil) tries to pervert for our harm. To this end, social media has given birth to increased pain and frustration through **cyber bullying**. It's real. No longer can today's teens escape the harshness of mean words that torpedo through cyberspace with the intensity of bombs fired from Stealth Bombers. When these words successfully accomplish their intended purpose, hitting the *centerpiece* of humanity, the human heart, damage is done, pain is released, and unforgiveness becomes the choice of the day.

And this brings us back to PERSONAL REJECTION; UNFORGIVENESS; and HOPELESSNESS.

When these forces come together in an all-out attack in the lives of today's teens, coupled with the isolation birthed from social media, the offspring of all of the above is the most evil of assignments - ***TEENAGE SUICIDE***.

After talking with multiplied hundreds of young people who have attempted to end their own lives, we now better understand that suicide is built in three deliberate phases. A teenager first THINKS about ending his life. Secondly, he typically will TALK with someone about his plan. And third, if not stopped, he will ATTEMPT.

A young person who today is *thinking* about ending his or her life is a young person who is 1/3 of the way to suicide. Identify a young person who is *talking* about ending his or her life and you'll see a teenager who's 2/3's of the way to enacting an end-of-life decision and plan.

Simply stated, **suicide is the fastest death known to culture.**

If ever you have the opportunity to sit and talk with a teenager who has contemplated taking his or her own life, or if you converse with a teen who has actually attempted suicide, if you sit with that teenager and offer a safe space for he or she to open up and honestly recount what they experienced as they contemplated suicide or went one step further and attempted it, prepare to be invited into a hell that offers no rational sense or reason.

The teen who attempted to end their life may very well tell you of an overwhelming sense of darkness that began to slowly and methodically creep into the deepest recesses of their thoughts and as it did, cloud and then ultimately overtake their mind, as if their ability to reason had been stolen from their very being. They will oftentimes share that they fully believed that if they were gone, no one would miss them.

This lie, that *no one would miss them if they were gone*, brings me to Tom, a 17-year-old young man we met in a gymnasium in Mississippi. It was a Thursday afternoon and our assembly was taking place during the last period of the school day. Once our assembly came to a close, students harnessed book bags around their backs and began to either make their way to our table or to exit the gymnasium.

Because there were over a thousand students in our assembly that day, and over one hundred of these young people were stopping at our table, our leaving the gymnasium was delayed. As the gym began to empty of students and custodial workers began their routine of pushing bleachers back against the wall, I was about to meet Tom. He was sitting on a portion of the bleachers that had not yet been pushed back into place. He waved at me and motioned for me to come over and sit down. And so I did. He asked if we could talk and then before we even got past our initial “hello”

and my learning his name, Tom said, “I really wanted to die. No one cared and **no one would have missed me**. In fact, I tried to end my life. In fact, I tried three times in one night.” Tom had my full attention and I invited him to share anything and everything that was on his heart. He then said, “I had a shotgun that I loaded with two shells. I positioned the gun and pulled the trigger three times – the shotgun failed to fire. I then got a pistol and put five rounds in the chamber. I aimed the gun and pulled the trigger six times. The pistol failed to fire. I then overdosed on pills and was rushed to the hospital where they pumped my stomach and I obviously survived. Do you think God has a plan for my life?”

My response, with a smile on my face was, “Absolutely, He has a plan for your life.” And you know what? He has a plan for your life, too.

(If you or someone you know is in a crisis or suicide is a real option, please reach out to an adult in your life or call **911** or call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline @ **1-800-273-8255**. There is help because *where there is life, there is hope*.)

Almost without fail, teenagers who have attempted suicide will share that in the moments leading up to their attempt, they seemingly had no hope left in a brighter and more promising tomorrow - they were **HOPELESS**. And

in that hopelessness, with each beat, their heart races faster and faster and isolation is intensified. Some hear voices and still others hear nothing at all. And then, as the moment of death is rapidly approaching, teens have shared that they feel as though they were being propelled into a decision by an unseen, but yet very real and tangible force of **evil**. In this moment, they had relinquished control and believed that they were no longer capable of controlling, much less stopping, that which had been put into motion.

When young people bravely share these testimonies with me, almost without fail, I'm led to share the following two truths with them. **1)** God is the giver of life. He had no need of your assistance getting you into this thing called life and He has no need of your help in getting you out of it. **2)** If you are standing at "Point A" and I am standing at "Point B" and there is a real enemy lurking there, looking at both of us; if you at "Point A" are a **threat** to that enemy and I at "Point B" am not, the enemy is not going after me; he is instead going after you. This being understood, two questions must then be answered – **1)** "What does that enemy know about you, your potential and your future that he is petrified that you are going to use your giftings and live life in such a way that his plan is to take you out before your future ever arrives? And **2)** "What does he see in you that maybe, just maybe, you do not yet see in yourself?" The answers to those two

questions can become a defining point in beginning to *push back* against hopelessness. You see, **hopelessness is wrapped in a lie** while true, eternal, motivating **hope is found in the TRUTH.**

So, what can be done? How do we attack that which is viciously and indiscriminately attacking today's teens?

The answer is not technology. The answer is not social media. The answer can't be found on the New York Times Bestsellers list. All of this, technology, social media, books, all have their place, but they, in and of themselves, are not the answer.

In a society obsessed with outsourcing systems, ideas, and responsibility, we can't outsource what it means to have personal relationships, personal, intimate, one-on-one connectivity ... *connectivity at the level of the heart.*

We can't outsource eye-to-eye contact. We can't just tell someone **THEY MATTER** in a 3.5" screen and expect him or her to experience, embrace and understand, in totality, the full measure of two words that have become a MOVEMENT - a movement that, through our ministry, is reaching today's teenagers on a global basis.

So what is the answer to today's teens overcoming PERSONAL REJECTION, UNFORGIVENESS and

HOPELESSNESS? For us, we believe the answer is, first and foremost, found in a personal relationship with God through His Son, Jesus, followed by our having an ongoing, honest, consistent, and disciplined conversation with today's teens; a conversation with which we have been engaged since January of 1993.

You having a relationship with Jesus, not a *religion* but a *relationship*, begins with you confessing and believing a verse in the Bible found in John 3:16 – **“For God so LOVED the world (you and me) that He GAVE His only begotten Son (Jesus), that whoever (you and I are a ‘whosoever’) believes in Him (Jesus) should not perish but have everlasting life.”** My friend, that's why we call it GOOD NEWS. With that verse as our foundation, let's now do something that can forever change your life; let's invite Jesus to be Lord of your life. Would you pray this prayer to God with me?

Father, I believe that Jesus lived on this earth. I believe He died for me and he went to hell so I wouldn't have to. I believe that You raised Jesus from the dead and today, He is seated at your right hand, talking with You about me. Jesus, I invite You to come live in my heart; be both my Lord and My Savior. I'm Yours; You're mine. Let's just hang out and do life together, in Jesus' name.

If you just prayed that prayer, this is not the end, it's a brand new beginning. Your life really is brand new.

Now, about that ongoing, honest, consistent, and disciplined conversation with today's teens; a conversation with which we have been engaged since January of 1993. Our assignment is a journey that ultimately has as its origin, as we have said in the previous pages of this book, our very own teenage years. We invest our lives into daily reaching and ministering to teenagers because as a teenager, we were bullied; we were sexually abused; we were insecure; we were indifferent to our culture. We lived with unforgiveness. We were rejected. And yes, we were hopeless.

Why then is our mission geared to reaching teenagers? Because we **RELATE**.

And in our relating, everyday that we are on the road or on television or on social media, through our YOUMATTER. Outreach, we speak **words of hope** to today's teens. These hope-filled words, in turn, are **eradicating hopelessness**. With hopelessness being eradicated in the hearts and minds of students, tens of thousands of teenagers who are hearing and then embracing the TRUTH we share are turning from suicide and are instead choosing life.

When a student anywhere in the world chooses to live his or her life, we believe this is a ***big deal*** and as such, we invite these students to do something that ***settles*** their decision; we ask them to sign their name to our ***I MATTER PLEDGE CARD***. The centerpiece of our **YOUMATTER** ministry and campaign is our Pledge. Our Pledge offers teenagers around the world the opportunity to sign their name to a confession of faith that boldly declares:

I **choose** life because:

1. I was created an original.
2. I was created for relationship.
3. I was created to fulfill a purpose.

As we often share with teenagers, as you get older, when you sign your name to something, oftentimes you are taking ownership of that which you just signed. It's no different with our ***I MATTER PLEDGE*** – when you sign your name, you are taking ownership of the gift you have been given called life.

And while so many tens of thousands of students have thus far signed our ***PLEDGE***, know this: today's teens are savvy; they are street smart; and they are searching for real and honest transparency. Today's teens demand more than a Speaker walking onto a stage, saying some *feel-good*

sentences, and then offering a cliché solution to challenges that are anything but a cliché.

To effectively reach today's teens our audiences must feel and they must know in their heart that as a Speaker, I'm wholly and completely present in the room, as a husband, a father, and a human.

We're not there portraying our self as a superhero, and certainly not perfect. We're not there because we're doing a job; we are there in their lives because **we truly care**. We see as a large part of our assignment the gift of listening. We were created with *two eyes*, *two ears* and *one mouth*. Pretty obvious, isn't it? When we *listen* and *watch* twice as much as we talk, lives can be forever impacted for no other reason than, **we cared enough to listen**.

As we travel from city to city and speak in school after school, we do so immensely believing and knowing from the deepest place in our hearts, that if no one tells today's teens in their lifetime that they matter, we'll be the one to tell them that yes, because you are alive and were created on purpose, with purpose and for purpose, in this moment and forever, get this, **YOU MATTER**.

So maybe you find yourself wondering how can these two words, **YOU MATTER**, change the trajectory of today's teens? Consider the **power of words**. Words are a force to

be reckoned with. Words create. Words tear down and words build up. Words bring joy and they bring despair. WORDS MATTER.

Ever seen the look that comes across the face of a person when the good news they've been waiting for, hoping for, and maybe even praying for, is delivered into their world? Maybe it's a look of relief or could be one of pure joy. Either way, the spoken word yearns for a response and oftentimes the response is one of impact.

Let's keep going. When any of us hear words that answer a challenge, create validation, or provide the solution we so desperately need, our response to what we hear is a responsive impact that originates in our mind, travels immediately to our heart, and then that news is converted into an emotional response that oftentimes comes with expression on our face, expressions that are undeniable.

And it's in this journey of speaking and ministering *words of hope* that all of our faith is focused on the words we speak connecting to and ultimately capturing the heart of a teenager. Albeit for a thirty or forty minute assembly or chapel, as we walk up and down the aisles of a theater, climb onto bleachers in a gym, or find a comfortable perch on a wooden stage, everyday that we get to speak to today's teens, we are keenly aware that sitting in that audience on that day

are young people who are traversing this journey we know as life; and as they are, many of them, are in deep, shark-infested, uncharted waters.

And while we are grateful for the opportunity to speak with millions of today's teens, each time we speak to an audience, we know that we are going after the ONE. The one teenager who desperately needs to know that his or her life has value. The one teenager who may have had a fight with his or her mom or dad before coming to school and the result of that fight were words fueled by anger being hurled into the heart of an impressionable teenager. Or, maybe it's the one teenager who, from the outside-in, appears to have it all together, but from the inside-out, their life is falling apart. Maybe you can relate to hurtful words, maybe you've delivered them or for that matter, maybe you've received them. If so, there is a time-tested "repair work" method to help us progress in the healing process – people need to know that ***we delight in them*** and that ***they are loved***. Irrespective of your age, never, ever underestimate the power of your words of love and affirmation. Remember what we shared earlier – **WORDS MATTER**.

As we begin to bring to a close our time together, I was led to answer a question that we have been asked by so many people, a question that maybe, just maybe, you, too, have wondered about. People routinely ask us, "Why do you speak

with teenagers? Why not a different demographic?” Our response is always the same ... ***We reach teenagers because this is our assignment; it’s our cause.***

Ever considered the power of a **CAUSE**? In the best selling book of all times (The Bible), we see in 1 Samuel 17:29, a shepherd boy named David who was visiting his brothers who were part of a national army. This young boy heard the enemy mocking and ridiculing the army of which his brothers were a part. Hearing this enemy, and in response to a question his older brother asked him, David boldly asked this question, “*Is there not a CAUSE?*”

Let’s go one step further. In this same book, the Bible, over in John 18:37, we come face to face with the **CAUSE** of Jesus when we see, in His own words, why He came to the earth: “*Jesus answered, ‘You say rightly that I am a king. For this CAUSE I was born, and for this CAUSE I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.’*”

As one called by God to speak *words of hope* to teenagers, since January of 1993, we have known and have fully embraced our **cause**, our assignment. As we move forward into the future, we do so with unshakable focus and to this end, each time we get to talk with and to an assembled group of students, our purpose, vision and mission are clear:

We exist to end suicide among teenagers and young adults by inspiring them with the truth that God loves them, has an INDIVIDUAL plan for each of them, and in HIM, EACH PERSON MATTERS.

We expect to see each new generation of youth embrace the truth that in Him, YOU MATTER; a truth which will lead us to see the eradication of hopelessness and suicide among teenagers and young adults.

And everyday of our life, we are ministering faith-based *words of hope*, including my personal testimony, to teenagers and young adults; daily delivering Biblical, hope-filled messages, using youth-relevant media and meetings, to remind each one that in Him, **YOU MATTER**.

Rejection is overcome by acceptance, forgiveness is a choice, and hope overcomes hopelessness.

God bless you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since January of 1993, Dean Sikes has ministered to millions of students in assemblies and chapels across the United States and internationally. To date, he's spoken at over three thousand four-hundred events.

In addition to our outreach on the road, our ***YOU MATTER TELEVISION*** *broadcast* is seen in America and internationally multiple times each week on Christian television and social media outlets.

As part of our follow up, Dean has written twenty-eight books for students and their families and together with his wife, Lori, and their three adult children, the Sikes family makes their home in Tennessee.

