



EVERYDAY YOUTH MINISTRY



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Everybody's Urban

Understanding the Survival Mindset of the Next Generation

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EVERYBODY'S URBAN

Understanding the Survival Mindset
of the Next Generation



BY LENEITA FIX AND JEFFREY WALLACE

AN **EVERYDAY YOUTH MINISTRY**
RESOURCE FROM SIMPLY YOUTH MINISTRY

:: *THE VOICE OF THE IN-THE-TRENCHES YOUTH WORKER*

DEDICATION

Leneita:

This book has been a labor of love. I believe it has been almost 15 years in the making as it has stirred in my heart. I am thankful to so many for walking with me in life and in this book; that is why it is my honor to dedicate it to you.

- My Lord Jesus, who allows me to be called his child. I am grateful at his sense of humor in calling a girl from rural Massachusetts to go into urban ministry.
- My husband, John: I told him I would only marry him if we could be in ministry together. Little did he know when he agreed that would mean moving into the “hood,” allowing our hearts to break for the “least of these,” and seeing the families here with dignity and hope that few others do.
- My four children, who live under the umbrella of a calling that is rarely easy and still choose press in to know their Savior.
- My Group family: Rick, Matty, Nadim (and Kami), thank you for being the pioneers in this area, for

believing in me, and for pushing me to excel in ways I never thought I could.

- Jeff: You have become family, and I look forward to years of ministry with you. You always point me back to the Lord, and I appreciate that more than you know.
- To anyone I could have forgotten. For the youth pastors who are friends and speak into my soul and are the true authors of this book in many ways. Countless conversations “proved” the need for this resource. You know if you were an inspiration to me. ☺

Jeff:

I want to dedicate this book to some amazing people who inspired me to be more than I could have ever thought I could be. First and foremost, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I’m so humbled that you would use me the way you have. My mom (Vivian Wallace) and my late father (Gregory Wallace): Thank you for being two of the greatest examples of what real parenting is all about. To my crew, my wife, Quovadis, and my babies, Jay, CJ, and Cam: You guys are

beyond amazing! I love you guys more than you will ever know. Pastor Tyrone Barnette: Thank you for always being there for me and teaching me so much. Rick, Matty, Nadim, and my Group family: I love you guys so much! Words will never be enough to express my extreme gratitude for taking the risk others weren't willing to take and being REAL friends to me. Leneita Fix: WOW!! It has been amazing working with you on this project. Never doubt the fact that your voice matters! You are the best!!

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CHAPTER 1:

URBAN =

SURVIVOR?

Alexus comes to the youth program every week with her brother Larry. When we saw her the other day, she arrived with the same look on her face she always does. There is no smile. It is a scowl, wrapped in a sadness that hangs behind the eyes. No one is going to pull one over on Alexis; she's too busy carrying the weight of the world with her everywhere she goes. Larry is the same way. If he thinks you're getting too close, he will push you away, literally and emotionally. They are rough—really rough.

The other day, Alexis seemed to just spiral out of control. She was sitting next to a friend and laughing about a movie they had both seen, when someone accidentally stepped on her foot. Immediately, Alexis was 2 inches from the student's nose wanting to know "what his problem was." The student stammered about it being an accident as Alexis pulled her arm back to slap him. Out of nowhere Larry was at her side, fists clenched, ready to defend his sister. Thankfully, one of our team leaders was on the scene, putting an arm around Alexis and quickly diffusing the situation.

When you hear this story, where does your mind wander? Do you have an Alexis and a Larry in your group? They're the students that are hard to handle,

as they say. Life seems to have hardened them at a young age. Maybe it doesn't manifest itself in quite the same way, but they are the ones who live as if their dreams have been snatched, never to be replaced. Tripping through life, they hope to survive the day. Did you begin to formulate what the home situation might be like?

One more thought: Did the word *urban* cross your lips? If so, what does that mean? What do they look like? Where do they hail from? Would it shock you to find that Alexis is white growing up in rural Pennsylvania? Would it not shock you to find that they are African-American growing up in the inner city?

As you consider "Alexis" and "Larry," a better question might be who in your own group fits these characteristics:

- Hurting
- Hopeless
- Can't seem to grasp what it means to truly belong to Christ
- Exists to survive another day

- Can't understand there is a plan and future for them that has boundless limits
- Well, the answer just might surprise you. What about the authors of this book? Would you define them as having the "street cred" to write a book like this? Would it shock you that the blond-haired, blue-eyed girl lives in a turbulent neighborhood with gang members across the street, while the African-American guy lives in a nicer area surrounded by white picket fences, so to speak?

Urban is a word that no one really seems to know how to define. Sure, some people say it's about ethnicity or a demographic location. It could mean a life riddled with exposure to violence, addiction, and abuse. Some would say it is about the hip-hop culture, wearing certain clothes, listening to particular music, and watching BET more than others. In an informal Facebook® survey, 200 youth pastors were asked this question: "When we say the term 'urban youth,' what comes to mind?" The answers included these kinds of statements:

- *Inner city.*
- *Lives in a densely populated area, primarily. May face a particular set of challenges—including being an ethnic minority, economic circumstances, non-traditional family structure, education, violence—but urban, it seems to me, is now largely a cultural construct surrounding hip-hop culture.*
- *Not a definition, but stereotypical characteristics: Poor, one-parent households, dangerous neighborhoods, and little hope. That at least is the environment they grow up in. In my experience with urban youth, though, what intrigued me was how very similar they are to rural and suburban kids (although they had most in common with the rural kids).*
- *The polar opposite of rural youth ministry. Diversity.*
- *Troubled kids.*

In this book we seek to take a stab at broadening the definition. Instead of making assumptions of the life background of an “Alexus” and a “Larry,” we want to

define the condition of the heart. Let's look at a couple of examples of why this needs to happen.

In the last decade the poverty rate in the suburbs grew by 66 percent, while that in the cities was only 47 percent.¹ "Rural teens are at significantly greater risk of using cigarettes, chewing tobacco, crack/cocaine, and steroids than both suburban and urban teens."² Finally, did you know that almost 6 million children every year are involved in a report of abuse? Abuse happens at every socioeconomic level, among every ethnicity, and in every religious group.³ In other words, the statistics that seemed to once show a myopic idea of "urban" no longer exists. Our "other side of the tracks" are being erased daily.

Just yesterday while talking to a local youth pastor, we pondered this idea together. "There was a time when because I had kids who grew up in the church, I could make assumptions about their upbringing and lifestyle," he said. "Now it just isn't true. I have no idea who is coming through my door or what they are going through. This is true as much for the ones who have been here forever as the ones that were invited by a friend." His group is made up of mostly upper-middle-class families. "I have families in my church that were

once wealthy, and now they are out of work. They still live in a large house to keep up appearances, but I know that they are barely keeping their heads above water.”

On the other hand, there are still families that live in the crime-ridden neighborhoods that are grappling to put food on the table. A mom from an area like this said, “This area is just so rough. I don’t know what to do. My son keeps making the wrong choices, and I am afraid that the streets will eat him alive.”

This is the very reason why we wrote this book. In our definition, both of these groups would be defined as “urban.” Sometimes we have even heard these students called “unchurched.” They are the ones that come with no foundational idea of worship. Other times we hear the term “dechurched”—perhaps they were a family that once attended and were hurt or disillusioned in some way, and now this is not a part of their lifestyle. Recently the term “nonchurched” surfaced to define someone attending church but not allowing the gospel to transform the soul.

Huh? Scratching your head wondering what we mean? Perhaps you are a youth pastor serving a group of

middle class kids, or you might be at the other end of the spectrum with a group of future gang members, or maybe you live in rural America with some students who have never seen the outside of their town limits. You think you have nothing in common with one another. We would contend that your issues are the same at a gut level. No matter the cause, we are finding more and more teenagers who are “stuck” in a place of survival. They have no idea how to see beyond today. Their dreams were snatched from open hands, and they have given up on getting them back.

May we make a bold statement? There is not one youth worker who doesn't need this book. Some may have one student who fits the criteria, others might have an entire group. However, it is time that we stand up and take responsibility for who is in the room and how to spur them on to Christ.

We believe too much time has been spent not knowing where to place these students or how to understand them. *Urban* has a new definition. It is any student, from any race, background, culture, religion, or style who merely exists to survive the day. As you journey through the pages of this book, we want you to be open to the possibility that the culture, community, and

environment that you've grown up in or have been accustomed to are rapidly changing. Because you have a heart for God's people, you want to effectively minister to the students who live in your community and who are coming to your church or program. It's our prayer, hope, and desire that through this resource, we can help you be proactive and strategic when deciding how you approach engaging this rapidly growing culture of the urban survivor.