

snapshot.

a glimpse of Life!



March 2010

Reaching our Walking Wounded



"Is Bob there?" The voice was young and female, a little shaky.

It was a Wednesday morning in July, the first day of Lifest, the five-day festival put on by Life Promotions. Bob Lenz, LP's founder and main speaker, was already down at the festival grounds, along with all my co-workers. I was in the office to field all those frantic "I lost my ticket!" calls before shutting things down and joining them.

"He's not here," I said. "Is there something I can do for you?" The silence lasted so long that I thought maybe she had hung up. Then, very quietly, she said, "Sometimes ... I feel ... like I want to die."

Had she been calling about a lost ticket, I would have known how to help her. But I have no training in crisis management, and there was no one there to guide me. Still, I had one coherent thought, which was that if one of my children had made such a call, I would have wanted the person on the other end of the line to take it very, very seriously.

So I told her that I would try to reach Bob, but in the meantime, I was going to get her some help. I started pawing through the telephone directory by my desk, looking for the number of a local suicide hotline. And then an ominous thought occurred: *Bob speaks to kids all over the country.*

"Where are you calling from?" I asked.

"Pennsylvania."

Oh, God, now what? I did the only thing I could think of: I called 911, told them the situation, and asked if they could get me the emergency number for the town in Pennsylvania where the girl had said she was living. And soon — remarkably soon — I was talking to a young EMT named Corey in Pennsylvania.

By this time, the voice had a name — Ashley — and she had given me her phone number, but she wouldn't tell me her last name or her address. And there was another problem. The phone number she had given me had an Ohio area code.

Corey needed me to check with Ashley that she was really calling from Pennsylvania. (They were both very patient with me as I alternated putting one on hold to talk to the other.) Ashley had lived for a time in Ohio, but was in fact living in Pennsylvania. When I told this to Corey, I thought it would be a simple matter of tracking Ashley through her cell phone. Oddly, it turns out that this is not nearly as easy as they make it seem on TV.

The only way to resolve this was to get Ashley and Corey speaking directly. I asked Ashley if she would promise to call Corey if I promised to keep trying to reach Bob.

And we both kept our word, because Ashley called me the next day, a little bewildered that the police had shown up at her door.

Bob has kept in touch with her, as has another Life Promotions speaker, Tiffany Thompson. The last I heard, she was doing well and had started college.

So what makes a sad teenager in Pennsylvania reach out to a shaggy-haired youth speaker half a continent away?

Bob's message is not unique, but apparently his ability to communicate it is. He is genuine and gentle. He's not slick, or polished, or flashy. He wears jeans and sneakers and untucked shirts. He is completely, utterly unpretentious. He radiates kindness. The person that kids see on their school auditorium stages is exactly the same person that I see whenever he's in the office, which is rarely, because he's usually on a school auditorium stage. He went to Alaska. In February. On purpose.

Life Promotions is a faith-based organization, but Bob's public-school talks are about things like respect and the value of each person, and no constitutional amendments are harmed in the making of them. Kids respond because the message is delivered with humor and humility, and because it's true.

It's the same basic truth that author Michael Connelly uses as the philosophy of his fictional detective, Harry Bosch: Everyone counts, or no one counts.

And since I have you all here, I'm going to do something I rarely do and climb up on a soapbox. (I feel taller already.) Many people think that all is well in our institutions if the test scores are decent and the teams are winning.

But every day, in every school in this country, there are kids who are being subjected to physical, emotional and verbal abuse that wouldn't be tolerated for a minute in the adult workplace. If you were coming to work every day knowing that you would be the target of mocking, bullying and/or physical intimidation, you would make sure that something was done about it. But for some reason, vulnerable, insecure teenagers, many with less-than-ideal home lives, are supposed to just suck it up and deal.

Our halls are full of the walking wounded, and some of them may not survive. Please, please pay attention to them. And please, let's stand together to tackle it head on.

Everyone counts, or no one counts.

This edition of Snapshots was written by a Life Promotions staff member.

For the Kingdom,

Bob Lenz
International Speaker

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