

Parents of struggling teens find hope in shattered dreams

by Jennie Gulian

“Church is too often a place of pretense and, therefore, a place without hope. When brokenness is disdained, where the real story is never told, the power of God is not felt. Where brokenness is invited and received with grace, the gospel comes alive with hope.” From *Shattered Dreams*, by Larry Crabb

Right from the beginning, when Doneyln Gamble and Helen Andersen met through a mutual friend, in a raspberry patch, of all places, they knew it wasn't a chance encounter. Although they had individual stories to tell, they had a lot in common. Donelyn and her husband, Mike, and Helen and her husband, Pete, were in the midst of parenting children who were struggling. In fact, Erik Andersen and Anna Gamble, their children, were in the same at Roosevelt High School.

Erik suffered from depression in his transition to high school. After a sports injury, he lost interest in school, music and his friends, all the things that used to engage him. His parents knew that something was wrong and intervened early. At first, he saw a therapist and took medication, but when he refused to talk to his parents or his therapist and refused to go to school, they decided they had to take what some would consider drastic action. They sent him to an eight-week wilderness hiking program in Utah.

When the two women met, the Gambles were in dire need of someone to talk to. Anna, who also suffered from depression, was in a “very, very black place.” She had withdrawn from her friends and family, was skipping school, running away from home, cutting herself and was in a destructive relationship with an older boy. “She was losing her soul,” says Donelyn.

“It was so frightening ... her own sense of value as a person just got sucked out of her and it got worse and worse.”

Finally, her sense of hopelessness led her to attempt suicide by taking an overdose of pills. Although she recovered, the Gambles literally feared for her life. Talking to Helen and Pete for several hours one summer evening was a lifeline for Mike and Donelyn. “It was such a sense of relief. Here's a family who has gone through a very familiar, painful, frightening experience, and they'd found something they could do to keep their child safe,” says Donelyn.

Helen and Pete knew how Mike and Donelyn felt. The Andersens had a deep sense of gratitude toward another family who had shared their story with them and supported them. “It totally reduced the anxiety we felt, because when you're in the trenches struggling with a teen, you not only have to hold onto hope for yourself but for your teen and your whole family,” says Helen.

It was through this developing relationship between the two couples and talking to Erin Walsh Griggs, who was then the pastor to junior high students in Youth Mission & Ministry (YMM), that the Support Group for Parents of Struggling Adolescents was born, more than three and a half years ago.

The group meets weekly to support parents who have an adolescent struggling with emotional, behavioral or relational issues. These struggles can show up in various forms of risky behavior including disengagement, cutting themselves, shoplifting, truancy, eating disorders, abuse of alcohol and other drugs, acting out in anger, or having unhealthy relationships

with the opposite sex.

Both couples credit Erin's openness and her willingness to find a way to help other families in crisis with the forming of the group. Erin, who now serves as a pastor at Sammamish Presbyterian Church, says, “I just felt honored to be invited in on what was going on with them. What a witness to the gospel when families like the Gambles and the Andersens are raising the red flag for what is going on in their families.”

Erin had more than a passing knowledge about what it's like to be in a family when a teen is struggling. Her sister's adolescent struggles impacted her family for years. Erin, whose mother is also a pastor, knew what it was like to “sit in silence” among a community of believers while her whole family was hurting.

As a pastor, Erin knew that statistically in a church as big as UPC, there were more than two families who were struggling with their children. As she worked in YMM, she'd see families dropping out of the youth program and think, “Where did they go?”

The group started with five families that Erin pulled together for support and prayer. At first, the group wasn't publicized, but now it invites any parent in the community to share what can be a lonely, difficult journey.

“Part of me felt from the get-go that this is our life. This is our family. We need to embrace this. God's not nervous about this. He's bigger than our kids' emotions, he's bigger than my fears. So, with the support group we try to go in at that level. This is the place to be real. We're not judging, we're not giving advice. We're trying to come alongside and hear your story — pray, encourage and support,” says Helen.

“We don't have the answers,” adds Pete. “But we promise we won't fall out of our chair when you tell us what your kid did.”

The mistaken idea that “good par-

ents” produce “good kids” makes it difficult for families to seek help. “You’re very, very vulnerable where your kids are concerned,” says Donelyn. “It hits at the heart of your own identity. There’s nobody pointing a finger of blame but you also know that there is probably something within the dynamic of your home that is going to have to change.”

Donelyn now looks at Anna as a catalyst that God used to redeem areas of their family life “that were nowhere near up to par in terms of holding things together” when a crisis struck. Through therapy, “we had to start taking things apart and that was very painful. We had to put them together differently. I’m not the same person I was. I don’t think any of us are, that went through this process with Anna, really. “

Both the Gambles and the Andersens used an educational consultant, a professional who was familiar with educational and treatment options nationwide, when it came time to make crucial decisions about their children. They believe that hiring a professional who had knowledge about their children, the options available and even about individual therapists was instrumental in their children getting the help they needed.

After completing his wilderness program, Erik attended an emotional growth boarding school for a year and a half. He came back to Roosevelt in the middle of his junior year and graduated with his class, winning an academic scholarship to a college in California. Anna also attended an outdoor wilderness program and graduated from high school through the residential treatment program she attended for 19 months. After graduating, she lived in a foster home, and now has her own apartment in Orem, Utah, where she works full time.

Sending their children to live outside of their families was a wrenching decision for both couples. “Pete and I both lost our parents young,” says Helen, “so the fact that we were both alive and par-



photo by Larry Fogdall

From left: Pete and Helen Andersen and Donelyn and Mike Gamble facilitate the Support Group for Parents of Struggling Adolescents. They are attempting to live into the call to be real and authentic with other parents who are struggling with teens.

enting teens we both felt was so great. To have Erik go into a program and not live with our family was huge. But the way we saw it was that we were scared we would lose our relationship. We loved him so much that we knew this was the only option we could see that would restore our relationship.”

From her home in Utah, Anna, who is now 20, says it is still painful to look back at the decision her parents made to have two strangers come in the middle of the night and take her to wilderness camp. But she admits, “I would not be alive if they hadn’t chosen that.”

When she looks back at that period of depression now, she says it is like she was a different person. “I regret it at times, but most of the time. . . I’m grateful. Contented. Sure, I guess I wish I had the fairy tale life that every girl dreams about, but most of the time it’s resting there. It belongs in the past. “

Unfortunately, in the church, where redemption is often the topic of the day, it is there that parents feel least like they can let their troubles show. “We’re all broken,” says Pete. “This is the place we ought to be able to say, ‘You know what, we’re hurting.’”

And the church does have something to contribute, he adds. “We have values ... we do think your marriage should stay intact ... we think family is important.”

The Support Group for Parents of Struggling Adolescents meets every Wednesday from 7-8:30 p.m. in UPC’s Knox Parlor for learning, sharing and prayer. The group will continue to meet throughout the summer.

The support group welcomes parents from throughout the community. For further information, contact Donelyn and Mike Gamble at 206/789-0668 or mikeanddonelyn@hotmail.com, or Helen and Pete Andersen at 206/729-1706 or phandersen@juno.com.

A prayer group for parents of struggling adolescents meets the first and third Tuesdays of each month at Rebecca Robertson’s home, 1102 N.W. 75th St., Seattle. For more information, call Rebecca at 206/781-3200 or Theresa at 425/697-3024.

Suggested Books

Shattered Dreams: God’s Unexpected Pathway to Joy, by Larry Crabb

When God Interrupts: Finding New Life Through Unwanted Change, by M. Craig Barnes

Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming, by Henri J. M. Nouwen

One of the benefits of being in a support group, according to Mike, is being able to develop “tools to communicate with your kid before [you’re in] crisis mode. You start to have a better idea of when you’re reaching a line that could be more harmful. You also start to get that gut feeling of when you’re no longer in control and you can’t protect them.”

If you have a child that is struggling, the Gambles and the Andersens have one message: don’t give up.

“Parenting teens is like playing football,” says Helen. “Parents don’t have the option of leaving the huddle when the game’s still going. You’ve got to figure out new strategies and bring in more resources and there’s no shame in that.”