



## THE TROUBLE WITH STEVEN C.

Who said growing up is easy?

Certainly not Steven C.

At age seven, when most kids are busy mastering a two-wheeler, going to summer camp or kicking a soccer ball around the field, Steven had other things on his mind.

A middle child in a family of six boys, Steven was angry at the world. Far from spending his time engaged in typical childhood adventures – and misadventures – Steven was instead plagued with an unhappiness and anger that touched everyone around him. Not understanding and unable to handle his own emotions, Steven was spiraling downward in an uncontrollable rage.

His mother, in the midst of a difficult divorce, was of little to help him, as she herself was struggling daily to raise half-a-dozen active boys while trying to make ends meet. With no coping skills, she was at a loss as to how to deal with young Steven.

The trouble with Steven, his mother said, was that he was agitated all the time and nothing would calm him down. The trouble with Steven, she said, was that he would fly into a rage at the slightest annoyance. The trouble with Steven, worried his mom, was that some day he was going to do something crazy that would land him in jail – or worse.

When she finally turned to the Boys & Girls Club of the West Valley the entire family was in turmoil. The children had little to no adult supervision outside school hours and all of them – especially Steven – needed a safe and nurturing place to go. In Steven's West Valley neighborhood, a boy spending idle hours in the streets is a recipe for trouble, and his inappropriate behavior was already escalating.

Fortunately, the staff at the Boys & Girls Club of the West Valley is experienced in dealing with youngsters like Steven. Though his temperament was extreme by most standards, they'd seen children like him before: angry at the world, destructive and disrespectful, unhealthy, negative attitude...all in all, a kid who was highly likely to land in a gang or in prison – or both.

The West Valley is home to two of the oldest and largest gangs in the San Fernando Valley. Kids like Steven, very young with little adult supervision and living in impoverished neighborhoods, make the best recruits for these violent gangs.

It's not just scare tactics. On January 30, 2007, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that, "Three members of (the West Valley's) Blythe Street gang...may become

the first required to serve their full jail sentences under a new proposal aimed at cracking down on street gangs in Los Angeles...City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo announced the sentences a week after he launched a new crackdown on street gangs: 'It's a crisis in Los Angeles. Gangs are wreaking havoc on our neighborhoods.'"

When he first came to the Club, Steven was determined to get kicked out. He used the Club as his stage, acting out his anger and frustration on everyone within range.

Club staff member Ruben Rodriguez began working quietly, patiently, and consistently with Steven. Day after day, Steven broke the rules. Day after day, Ruben and other Club staff members maintained their standards, reminding Steven of the Club's rules and guidelines, holding him accountable for his behavior.

It wasn't always fun – for the staff or for Steven. "I knew he was in a lot of pain – that's often why kids act this way," says one longtime staff member. "But that didn't make it any easier to put up with some of his behavior. He was determined to break us down."

Working with youngsters like Steven requires lots of time, plenty of endurance, and near-endless patience. Children don't change their behavior overnight; it's a long process, but each small step in the right direction is a victory to be savored. Steven's progress was slow but steady – no matter his behavior, the staff was there each time Steven walked through the door – a consistency he had never before experienced.

As he began to spend more hours at the Club and off the street, subtle changes in Steven's behavior started to become apparent. His anger, once so volatile that the slightest annoyance would set him off, began to give way to restraint; everyday annoyances that used to cause him to lash out in frustration were becoming less aggravating for him.

In all, as time passed, so, too, did Steven's anger with the world.

By the time Steven and his family moved from the area, it was he who was giving of his time and patience at the Club, helping the newer kids learn how to cope. Steven was now there for the angry, frustrated kids who reluctantly – but also hopefully – came through the door each day.

It's true, growing up is anything but easy. But the Boys & Girls Club of the West Valley gives kids like Steven a fighting chance.

So what's the trouble with Steven these days? Nothing he can't handle.

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