

# The Courage to Be YOURSELF



True Stories by Teens About Cliques, Conflicts,  
and Overcoming Peer Pressure

*Edited by Al Desetta, M.A., with  
Educators for Social Responsibility*

*esr*

EDUCATORS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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## DEDICATION

*To the teens and staff at Youth Communication, New York, for their work in giving a voice to young people for 25 years.*

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—Al Desetta

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# Introduction:

## CONFLICT AND COURAGE

Dwan Carter, 17, is proud to be African American. But because she listens to rock music, uses big vocabulary words instead of slang, and can't dance very well, Dwan's friends—and even her family—accuse her of not being black enough. The teasing and judging hurt, but Dwan doesn't believe that being black means she has to behave in certain ways and not others. She wants to be accepted just for who she is.

Dwan's story, "Princess Oreo Speaks Out," is one of 26 true stories by teens in *The Courage to Be Yourself*. Every writer in this book has faced peer pressure, teasing, bullying, exclusion, or just feeling "different" from everyone else. Nadishia gets harassed because she doesn't wear the latest designer clothes. Rana, who is Arab American, becomes the target of hate after the September 11th terrorist attacks. Cassandra's friends make fun of her for sitting with kids from other races in the school cafeteria. Yen gets teased for being Chinese, Jeremiah for being gay, and Jamel for not wanting to smoke marijuana. One anonymous teen is so afraid of being ridiculed for liking musicals that he keeps his tastes a secret. All these writers ask themselves tough questions: Why does everyone have such a problem with me? How come people can't accept me for who I am? Is it okay to be different? Should I change myself to fit in?

*The Courage to Be Yourself* is about the conflicts that teens go through when they get labeled and judged because they seem different. Differences can be threatening. Most people trust what they're familiar with and fear the unfamiliar. These fears and conflicts are especially common in school, where cliques are all over. That's why many of these stories take place in school.

Esther, 17, author of "A Stranger in a Strange School," moved to the United States from India just in time for eighth grade. On

her first day of school in the United States, she sees a boy with blond hair and blue eyes and thinks he's "the weirdest-looking person alive." To most Americans, blond hair and blue eyes are not unusual, but Esther never saw a person like that in India. As she writes, "I thought everyone would look like me."

Esther begins to feel that everyone else is normal and she's the weird one. But the labels "normal" and "weird"—like most labels—don't tell the whole story. They don't tell us what's most important about a person. Instead, labels are an easy way of judging people without making the effort to get to know them. By the end of her story, Esther learns that important fact. "Who's to say what's normal and what's weird?" she writes.

Still, labels are hard to avoid. You make statements by the friends you choose, where you sit at lunch, where you hang out, the clothes you wear, the music you listen to, the way you talk, and even the way you walk. At the same time, people make assumptions about you because of things you don't choose or have control over, such as your race, physical appearance, where you live, or your sexual orientation. People are quick to judge by using labels because, in a sense, what else do they have to go by? We're all limited by our own points of view and the groups we belong to—our families, neighborhoods, schools, and cultural backgrounds.

It's okay, and even important, to belong to a group, because groups help people feel secure. But it's important not to let groups define individuals. When race or dress or sexual orientation—or another label—is all you know about an individual, that individual becomes less of a person. And that can lead to conflict.

Reading *The Courage to Be Yourself* will help you deal with conflict. These true stories were written by teens who were part of a youth journalism program in New York City called Youth Communication. Their stories were originally published in two magazines, *New Youth Connections* and *Represent*, so that other teens could be helped by what they wrote and realize they were not alone. A group called Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR), who are experts in teaching teens about resolving conflicts peacefully, helped choose the

stories. ESR believes that one way teens can solve conflicts with each other is by understanding and respecting the differences among themselves. And part of that process involves understanding and respecting yourself.

WHO'S TO SAY  
WHAT'S NORMAL AND  
WHAT'S WEIRD?

The importance of accepting who you are is a common theme in these stories. Being comfortable with yourself doesn't guarantee that others will accept you. But the more comfortable you are with yourself, the more likely you'll be to accept others—and to deal with people who can't accept you.

Conflict is messy and painful and can't always be avoided. But it can also present you with an opportunity to learn something new and positive about yourself. Conflict can:

- help you discover strengths you didn't know you had and open yourself to new people, experiences, and points of view
- lead you to question your assumptions about a person or group and befriend someone you never expected to be friends with, and
- teach you how to make wiser choices the next time conflict comes your way.

The teens in this book have used conflict to become stronger, better people, and you can too.

The choices and changes they made weren't easy—their stories don't always end happily, with all difficulties solved. Some writers lose friends who mean a lot to them, others continue to be teased and harassed, and many continue to struggle with difficult emotions. There are no magic solutions to the problems they write about.

But that is also the value of *The Courage to Be Yourself*. Because these stories don't provide easy answers (or come from adults), you

can trust them. These teens have experienced real problems—and faced them and dealt with them—showing ways you can do the same. All the writers in this book have displayed great courage and strength in confronting teasing, bullying, and peer pressure, and in coming to terms with their own stereotypes and preconceptions.

You don't have much control over how others view you. But you do have control over how you view yourself, how you view and treat others, and how you react to the way they view and treat you. We all have positive choices to make, even at the most difficult times. These stories prove it.

## THINKING ABOUT THE STORIES

At the end of each story, you'll find two or three questions under the heading "Think About It." These are to help you think about what you've just read and to relate the writer's experience to your own life. Take a few moments to reflect on the questions.

And if you feel like it, jot down some thoughts in reaction to the questions. You don't have to write a lot—a few sentences can help you clarify your reactions to what you read.

Maybe you've had the experience of keeping a diary or journal, or writing letters. If so, you know that writing helps you learn things about yourself and gives you a good way to deal with difficult emotions. Putting feelings on paper can help you gain more control over them.

Just thinking about the questions is enough. But if you feel the urge to do so, writing responses to the questions may deepen your enjoyment and understanding of the book.

**NOTE:** Some stories in this book include slang or unfamiliar words. The glossary on page 125 provides definitions of some of these words.

Each story ends with information about the author. In some cases, Youth Communication has lost contact with the writers. When possible, however, we've briefly described where the author is now and what he or she is doing.

# THE STORIES

# IN DEFENSE OF MISFITS

By Andrea Uva

I grew up in a rich, white suburb. Whenever I heard about kids going into their high schools and shooting other kids, I felt I understood the anger of the killers. Their towns reminded me of my town. Their high schools reminded me of my high school.

Fathers in my town are mostly successful businessmen and commute to the city to work. The wives do not have many responsibilities. They don't have jobs and the housework is done by paid help. They fill their days with volunteering and school-related clubs like the Parent-Teacher Committee. They are the typical "soccer moms" of America.

Adults here are constantly talking about and comparing their children. At an early age, children learn that they are being watched not only by their own parents, but also by their friends' parents. There's a lot of pressure on kids to excel both in class and on the playing field.

The smartest, most beautiful, and most athletic kids are considered the best. Literally, the blonder the hair, the leaner the figure, the better. Parents pass their belief in these stereotypes on to their children early, and those stereotypes become part of their children's minds.

Most kids fit the ideal description, so they hung out together in one big clique (called "the preps"). The kids in the clique excluded the kids they labeled "strange" because of their appearance or manner.

As far back as middle school I was considered one of the strange kids, mostly because I wasn't athletic and was thought unattractive. My friends didn't fit in either.

There was one big group of friends who always hung out together at school, and I was out of it even though I tried to fit in. At lunch one day in the cafeteria, I saw a girl who was in some of my classes and who I thought liked me. I said hello to her and sat down next to her.

Without saying a word, but with a smile on her face, she picked up her lunch bag and moved one seat away from me. I was humiliated, but I didn't move to another table.

When I read about school shootings, I understood why some kids started their rampages in the cafeteria. That is where kids who don't fit in are treated the worst. It's a place without adult supervision, where kids can pick whom they hang out with and whom they ignore.

In my high school, the large cafeteria (called the Lounge) was split in half. The South Lounge was always packed and almost everyone sat there. The North Lounge was almost empty. It was where the "dorks" and "losers" ate.

It frustrated me that during lunch, my friends would sit in the "Loser Lounge." They seemed to accept that they were not cool enough.

My freshman year, I still felt desperate to be liked. I had friends, but what I really wanted was to be part of "the group." I didn't think I was that different from anybody else. I didn't understand why I wasn't chosen to be part of the big clique.

One day, I convinced two friends to come sit with me in the South Lounge with everyone else. We managed to find three empty seats in the crowded, noisy cafeteria and sat down. My friends and I tried to relax, but I could read in their eyes that they felt foolish and uncomfortable. No one spoke to us.

At one point I saw one girl nearby mouth to the girl next to me, "Why are they here?" The girl next to me shrugged her shoulders and rolled her eyes, and the first girl started laughing.

This really upset me because both of these girls had been good friends of mine when we were young. I had never done anything to make them stop liking me.

After that, I gave up trying to join the group.

Eventually, I was able to ignore the preppies, and my friends and I made our own space separate from them. I guess I realized that if they didn't need me, I didn't need them. I didn't even like a lot of them that much. I had my own friends.

By sophomore year, my group had expanded to include about 30 people from all grades, known as the “pitters.” A pitter was someone who hung out in “the pit,” an area by the parking lot behind the school, next to some trees.

It was called the pit because it was the lowest point on the school grounds. But it was also a reference to our status in the school.

The pit was a place to get away from all the preps and others who thought we were no good. It was the only place where we felt in control. The preps took over the lounge, the parking lots, and the school in general. But no preppies came out to the pit.

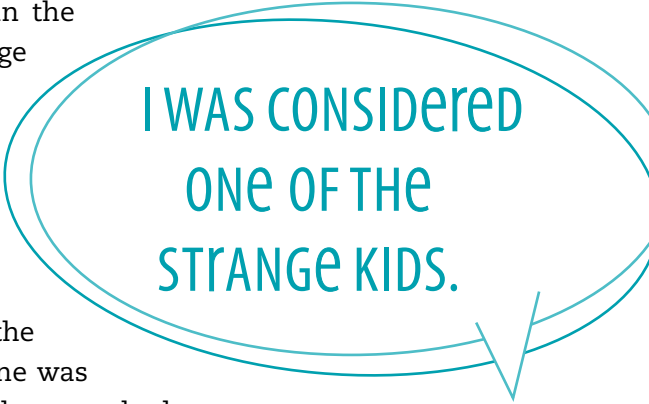
The fact that the pit kids began smoking a lot earlier than the preppies gave us an image as the “bad kids.” This label wasn’t true, but it stuck to us all through high school.

Though we resented being labeled, we also liked our image. We liked the power of knowing someone was scared of us. We felt that the preps had been stepping on us for so long; it was time for them to feel small by being scared of us for a change.

I hung out with the “bad kids” in the pit, but I didn’t smoke. I was an honors student and I was respected by my teachers. I was proud to be a pitter, though, and I think my presence there helped to reverse some of the stereotypes that pitters are the kind of people who don’t get anywhere in life.

And the preps weren’t so perfect, either. Many cheated on tests and started smoking. Junior year, rumors began to fly about their wild parties. They would drink heavily and get high on the weekends, and their parties were hook-up fests.

The strange thing was, they seemed proud of that, because they’d talk loudly in class about their sexual exploits. I heard banter



I WAS CONSIDERED  
ONE OF THE  
STRANGE KIDS.



like, “Hey Doug, do you remember when we slept together sophomore year to get experience?” Or the head cheerleader saying to her friend in the middle of class, “Yeah, it was Alex’s first time, so the sex was kind of lame, you know?” I guess having sex was a status symbol to them.

But they were still seen by everyone in town and in school as the good kids, the golden children, the kids who could do no wrong, even though they did.

The parents of kids who’ve done school shootings get a lot of criticism because they didn’t know their kids were so troubled. But in my town, too, all the parents turned a blind eye to their kids’ behavior.

So did the teachers and the police, who would smile proudly at the good kids while the pitters were considered lowlives.

I’m not trying to say that all the preppies were bad people. But the preps’ behavior was offensive to me because they were always seen as perfect students, athletes, and kids—when they were not. And we were seen as the bad kids, the outcasts.

In truth, we formed our own clique only because we were rejected by everyone else. The preppies pushed us aside. This hypocrisy still makes me angry.



THE LABEL WASN'T  
TRUE, BUT IT STUCK  
TO US.

I think school shootings could happen at any high school. But I don’t believe the trouble is with groups like mine. I don’t think it’s the outcasts who are to blame. We should be thinking about the attitudes of the mainstream kids—the “jocks” or the “preps” or whomever—the popular groups in school who make other students feel rejected, angry, and depressed about themselves.

My group wasn’t dangerous at all. We were just kids pushed aside who stopped trying to fit in.

The potentially dangerous kids are ones who withdraw from everyone, who seem hostile toward everyone. My high school had a group like this. A few boys didn't fit in anywhere. They wore dark clothes (really—it's not a stereotype) and sat in the back of their classes.

They weren't interested in school and didn't talk much to other people, but when they did they were rude to pretty much everybody. They loved computers, guns, and video games.

I can easily see how someone from that group could commit hate crimes. I can also see how it would be just like a video game for them.

Those boys didn't handle their feelings of alienation in a healthy way. The scary thing is that it's hard to tell the innocent, quiet, withdrawn kids from the hateful, planning, withdrawn kids.

The kids who do school shootings are not the only people to blame. I am not trying to justify violence in any way and school shootings are a horrible thing. But a lot of the kids who do shootings had been treated terribly. Even so, they will always be seen as the bad guys, the monsters. But isn't there another side to the story?

People need to understand how cruel the popular cliques can be to outsiders. The popular kids (and their parents) believe they're so perfect that they can't see their own faults.

Instead of pulling schools and communities together, cliques drive people apart. The popular kids become scared of the people they cast out, we all become more separated, and the alienation grows.

**Andrea Uva** *was 18 when she wrote this story. She later attended Occidental College.*

## THiNK ABOUT IT

- ▶▶ Does Andrea's description of her school remind you of how students relate to each other in your school? In what ways?
- ▶▶ Why do you think students form cliques and separate themselves from each other? What could be done to prevent that?