THE KEEP KIDS SAFE STORY

By: Michele Gaddis

I was a single parent with two teenagers, teaching 6th grade **at Iao Intermediate School in Wailuku, Maui, Hawai'i. The school year had just started, I had spent the summer getting my classroom ready by painting, running off papers, and preparing lessons. I was happy and excited to begin a new school year.**

A few weeks later, I had a life-altering experience. One of my children made a life choice that taught me I was missing some important skills and tools to be helpful to those I love and care for. I learned I needed help. I learned I was going to become a grandmother while struggling to feel successful as a single-parent.

With a broken heart, humbled with pain, I went to school realizing I was filled with despair, confusion and self-doubt. How could I teach other people's children, when my own were not making decisions to be safe?

I had many questions for which I wanted honest answers. I knew the people who could give me what I needed were the children in my classes. They would tell me the truth.

So I faced all six periods of my classes with 25 to 30 students in each period. This is what I said: "I have a

situation in my life that I am not dealing with very well, I can tell that even though I have good intentions I am more a part of the problem than I am the solution."

"I'm making things worse, not better, I need to change and don't know how. Please help me understand why, if some children have caring parents and relatives, dedicated teachers, school counselors, coaches and respected church leaders in their lives are so many young people getting into trouble with gangs, drugs, suicide and teen pregnancies?"

"As an adult who wants to learn what I can do differently, will you please talk with me?"

My students said: "We will talk with you. You need to promise to listen, ask more questions and let us ask you questions. You need to pay attention."

I did. For three days we put all our workbooks and assignments on hold, we talked. We shared ideas and feelings. These three days contained the most important moments of my twenty plus years in the classroom as a teacher. At the end of the three days we had many pages of notes.

I asked students how they felt about the information we covered and what they wanted to do with it.

They replied. "Let's make a record of it, turn it into a book that we can share with family and friends."

I said. "Great ideas." Then I wrote down everything that we'd covered on the black boards.

One child said, "yeah, but Ms. Gaddis, you have bad handwriting that is hard to read."

Another child said, "yeah, but I've been practicing reading her handwriting and I copied down everything she wrote on the board."

Another child said, "If you wrote down what she wrote, give it to me. I'll take it home and type it on my typewriter."

Another child said, "If you type it up, meet me tomorrow morning in front at the computer room and I will put it on a disc."

In six weeks, we went from 6 to 60 kids writing, editing, researching, interviewing other kids - all working together. We worked before and after school, and during recess and lunch.

These kids were learning from each other. There were special education kids who could not read, but whose opinions were valued. There were gang kids whose life experiences gave us understanding. There were honor roll students who knew how to organize and harness our resources. When we were done, we had a black and white regular size notebook filled with 36 one page "how-to"

lessons for kids who want to be emotionally and physically safe.

Our principal noticed the flurry of activity. There were numbers of kids waiting before school to get into my classroom. Kids were missing during recess on the playground. Their parents and school buses were waiting after school while the kids were choosing to remain after the school day had ended. She asked what we were doing. I explained to her what was being accomplished. She asked if the kids and I would put on a presentation to the PTSA explaining our results.

The kids were enthusiastic. Some wrote short scripts to go with the lessons. Others practiced acting out the scripts. Some kids found old rock 'n roll songs and changed a few words to fit the lessons.

When it was over, our principal asked me what I wanted to do with the booklet. She said parents who were at the meeting were asking how to purchase the information that we had produced. I told her I was going to ask for money to buy lots of Xerox paper to make enough copies for my students' next school year.

She said, "I have a better idea." Let's work on this during the summer and get it ready to take to a printer. A 6th grader, our principal and I worked together to get this done.

When school started the following September, we had 1000 black and white copies of volume one of "Keep Kids Safe".

This first volume of books is a result of more than 160 eleven and twelve year olds and one teacher in crisis, talking for three days. These young people taught me to pay attention to the reality of their lives. Here are some of the things they shared with me.

"In this school, we are one of *25* to 30 kids in a classroom. We're one of 600 plus kids in a whole school, some of us have had so many changes in our lives - changes we had no control over. Parents divorce, re-marry, move away and some lose their jobs. We have parents and siblings who have problems with drugs and alcohol. We live in homes where we are physically, sexually and emotionally abused. Some of us are homeless, some of us do not have room on the inside to care about what teachers want or expect from us on the outside. We're just trying to survive.

"We're all in the same classes together; we have the same teachers who give us the same information with the same homework and expectations for tests and grades. Some of us are making it but some of us aren't.

"We need help. We need useful information; we need to learn things we can use on the playground and at home."

I agreed with them, many children have a range of needs. I also explained to them that just by looking at them on the outside, there was no way for a teacher to know what they needed or how they lived. I said, "there's no way to tell just by looking at your faces who is homeless, who lives with drugs and alcohol, whose parents are jobless, divorced or absent."

I asked them to be specific about what they wanted and needed to learn. They said, "We want to know how to ask for help for things we're uncomfortable talking about. We want to understand why some people abuse and or neglect kids. Why do some kids misbehave? What do you do when adults in your life argue, fight and break up? We want to learn things that we can use to help us to solve our problems, instead of doing things that make our life harder."

We spent the first three weeks talking about the first lesson, "How to Ask for Help." We talked about what it takes for kids to feel safe to learn, we talked about things I could do or say that would be helpful.

As their comfort level increased, the kids began to be specific about what they needed help with.

Some kids said they were afraid to go home after school because of what could happen to them if their parents had been drinking. Some said they had thought about suicide, or they worried because one of their parents talked about suicide a lot. There were kids who

said they were angry because they could not stop the sexual abuse in their homes. A few kids didn't even know where their parents were. They said their parents either moved away or went on vacation and didn't leave a note.

I asked these kids, why, if there were such big problems in their lives, they didn't ask for help from adults sooner.

They said, "Ms. Gaddis, when was the last time you asked a big person for help? Adults talk too long, they use big words we don't understand, and they give us answers to problems to match their lives, not ours."

As always, I appreciated their honesty, I learned from it. I could easily see that there were not enough adults at home or school who had the skills to deal with the severity of some of their problems.

I felt overwhelmed, challenged to be helpful and supportive. I knew from all the things kids were telling me that Volume I was not enough.

I went back to talk with my principal. I sat down in her office and shared the challenges I was having, both personally and professionally. I said I needed to take some time off and do more research, Volume I of KEEP KIDS SAFE is just a beginning of an important project that is large in scope."

I stopped teaching and gathered 20 years of notes, old journals, saved letters from kids and some of their

homework assignments that gave pertinent information to

this book project.

I spread out this mass of collected papers and proceeded to formulate the ideas that took me to developing Volumes II and III.

I was excited, I went back to some of my former students and showed them what had been added. They looked at me with minimal enthusiasm and said, "This is okay, but you forgot what we told you."

"What's that? I asked."

"You need to write something for the adults to read because lots of grownups are trying to help us with our problems without taking care of their own problems. We need adults to help us who know how to care for themselves first."

Their comments took me back to the drawing board and after prayerful pondering, Volume IV on self care for adults was born. I was in Canada at the time talking and meeting with other parents and educators, discovering first hand issues and concerns for our youth today are global.

As I organized these materials, I realized the books were a visible tool that illustrated the learning process in my classroom.

Volume III is about service and relationships, Volume II is about skills for self-awareness, Volume I is about physical and emotional safety.

Each book contains 30 or more one page how to lessons related to its title.

In the classrooms, there were always a group of students who surfaced early on, who were ready to be helpful leaders. Most of them were self-aware. All of them felt safe to share their skills and talents.

These kids would receive coaching and practice using a common language to help other kids feel safe with them. These kids created a community amongst themselves with safe adults to guide and, coach to help identify kids who were at Volume I level and needed physical and emotional safety. Usually these at risk kids were either in too much pain, or too scared to ask for help. Most at risk kids would not read or trust others to help them with their problems.

When the kids who had been coached reached out to kids who wanted to be safe, there was an opportunity there for kids to become friends and help each other out. As at risk kids found appropriate solutions to their difficulties they were ready for the information in Volume II about skills for self-awareness. Now there were two communities of children ready to be available to the next group of at risk kids.

These books are about teaching for duplication. I see how it works and I am in awe of how it is my joy and privilege to share with you a story that does, and will continue to help many others. It started from a place of personal shame and self blame. With the help and love of children who were willing to share with me, they are now tools for intervention that were made for kids, with the help of kids. Anyone who used to be a kid can appreciate them.

For the last 4 years these same 4 books are used as the model for creating a curriculum for Kids at Risk. This curriculum is being developed with the help of the inmates at the nearby correctional facility. The learning continues. The labor is one of love and healing for students, and especially their teacher.