A conversation with former editor-in-chief of Parents Magazine and editor of On Four Walls

Fran Fearnley and Ray Chodzinski

Wrote on All Four Walls: Teens Speak Out on Violence edited by Fran Fearnley is a disturbing yet truthful account of how teens, abused and bullied, somehow survive the brutality of their existence and manage to find meaning in their lives despite everything that happens to them. The book sponsored by the Toronto Public Library system is the first in a series of publications that seeks to give voice to the stories, thoughts and poems of teens living in the city of Toronto. Josephine Bryant, City Librarian, Toronto public Library writes, “here are the powerful stories of youth who agreed to share their experiences and their stories. It is an attempt to bring a positive approach to the issue of street youth.” Fran Fearnley says Adam, Allan, Caitlin, Claire, Debbie, Don, Janice, Kevin and Sue told us about their encounters with violence in one on one taped interviews. Their very own words transcribed from those interviews, are what you will read. They are authentic oral testimonies as told to an empathetic listener. Dr. Fred Mathews a social worker with Central Toronto Youth Services concludes the book with advice to children and teens about what to do if they or others are or know of someone in need. He reminds young people “they must learn to trust teachers and educators and tell a teacher, principal, school worker, or other adult. If they do not listen, tell a police officer, a nurse, parents, a friend but tell someone. Don’t let previous negative experiences with some adults in power affect your decision, keep trying until you find someone who will believe you and take action. The important thing is do not stand by and let others be harmed. Violence is fueled by silence and stops when we all take a stand.” (page 143)

I met Ms. Fearnley while we were taping a segment for the syndicated television show FINEPRINT hosted by Carolyn Weaver. The show features shared views about violence and bullying behaviours experienced by children and teens. Fran’s book, I Wrote on All Four Walls and my book, Bullying a Crisis in our Schools and our Communities were featured.

Since this issue focuses on child and teen safety, health and wellness it seemed appropriate to ask Fran to share some insights about her important contribution.

Chodzinski: Your career in teaching and publishing is extremely interesting. You have been influential in publications that are helpful to parents and educators throughout the world. What prompted your interest in this sensitive publishing project?

Fearnley: What really appealed to me about this project was that we were going to present the voices of youth in their most authentic form. While I have always appreciated the role of informed, empathetic adults (parents, professionals and others) in interpreting the experiences of children and youth, the journalist in me believes that to truly understand emotionally nuanced situations you should, if possible, go to the source.

Chodzinski: The focus of this issue of Teaching and Learning is health, safety and wellness of children in schools. The stories printed in your book demonstrate an uncanny will to survive and speak to many important life coping skills. What struck you most about the stories and how did editing this book make a difference to you?

Fearnley: I deliberately selected stories that did reflect the resilience and will to overcome the terrible situation these teens were living. We wanted the book to give its readers a sense of empowerment, should they find themselves victims of violence, or tempted to be violent themselves. Sadly, we also heard from many youth (whose stories we did not publish) who have not been able to turn things around, and who are still involved in self-destructive behaviours and unable to come to terms with what they have experienced.

What struck me most is how exposed and vulnerable many young people feel, even when they have a caring family to turn to. The need to appear strong and able to cope, or to hide the brutality experienced at home or in school, is part of the pressure youth feel from peers and from
society as a whole.

Violence is hard to talk about—
for anyone of any age—but editing
this book really brought home
how much more difficult that is for
young men. It is not surprising that
suicide rates for male teens are
much higher than their female
counterparts. It is important for
them to be seen as tough and una-
fraid— even boastful about how
they have handled aggression and
violence.

Chodzinski: Many of these stories
graphically represent a very violent
world in which students live. What
do you envision readers will feel and
think about the reflections printed in
the book?

Fearnley: First and foremost, I
think they will respond to the au-
thenticity of these stories. They
will believe them and that is very
important. Many of our teen read-
ers will also, I hope, see how there
is no such thing as being neutral
when it comes to violence. We all
have a role to play in reducing or
preventing violence.

What I think they will also un-
derstand from these accounts, is
the complexity of the dynamic
between the bully and the victim.
Debbie’s story about an abusive
boyfriend (who, ironically and
sadly, works with at-risk youth)
is an excellent example. Debbie is
an attractive, bright young uni-
versity student with a loving fam-
ily who finds herself in a confus-
ing relationship with her live-in
boyfriend. He never physically
abuses her, so it’s hard for her to
figure out what she can accept as
the normal ups and downs of an
intimate relationship and what is
unacceptable and destructive.

Debbie tells us how, with the
benefit of hindsight, she was able
to see how the abuse started, how
and why she stayed in denial for
some time, and the importance of
having a loving, supportive fam-
ily to turn to and give her the
strength to leave him. It was that
love and support that helped her
write a letter to her boyfriend, also
a victim of a violent childhood,
explaining why she needed to
leave him and start a new life.

I hope by reading these accounts,
and the excellent closing chapter by
Dr. Fred Mathews, readers will
come away with a visceral under-
standing of how violence happens
and how vital it is for victims and
bullies to find help.

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Chodzinski: The stories speak about
life in Canadian schools, on the street
and in the home, and how they, the
authors, were abused, ignored and
abandoned by friends, parents, teach-
ers and the community at large. In
your opinion, what can teachers learn
from these stories and perhaps, even
more important, how might they and
school boards in general use this book
to foster a better understanding of
students in crisis?

Fearnley: One very simple way
would be to use the book to open
dialogue with the students. Could
these events have happened in
their school? If so, why? What in
the school’s culture allows vio-
ence to flourish? I think there is
too much happening that teach-
ers would rather not know about,
and so they turn a blind eye.
Moreover, there is too much that
the students want to keep hidden.
That is an unhealthy combination.

It is very important for schools
to foster an environment where
victims and bullies can break the
cycle. Too often, the aggressor’s
behaviour is a cry for help, so if
the school’s response does not in-
clude going to the root cause then
nothing will be solved.

Chodzinski: Anyone who reads this
book will find the stories true to the
voices of those speaking. The accounts
are edgy, violent, and graphic and yet
portray a sensitivity and caring side
despite the violence. One desperate
grade eleven voice sums up much of
the tone of the book,” I just suddenly
broke down. My body broke down. I
had no reason to live. I had no family
here— except my brother— any friends;
I hated life so much that I decided to
suicide. I went to one of the worst
areas of the city. I decided to go there
to get myself killed. I was there for
hours. No one seemed to want to hurt
me. [...] I met a drug dealer and the
next morning I woke up, he raped
me... I look at problems as a game. I
believe God gives you problems to
prepare you for life; to prepare you to
grow up; to help you build strong self-
esteeem; to be a person to fight this
world. That’s how I got through it.

Fran’s book I Wrote on all Four
Walls Fran Fearnley, Editor, is avail-
able through Annick Press, To-
ronto, distributed by Firefly Books,
66 Leek Crescent, Richmond Hill.
Iranian by birth she has traveled extensively through out Africa and Europe and has written about those experiences. Ms. Fearnley is widely known as the former editor-in-chief for Today’s Parent Group and for her ten-year contribution as editor of the very successful Today’s Parent Magazine and her work as project manager for Kids have Stress Too, sponsored by the Psychology Foundation of Canada. She is actively involved in interests that promote global education and understanding.

If we are to reach real peace in the world, If we are to declare war on war, We must start with the children.

Mahatma Gandhi