

Stalking Truth

JOELLE ASARO BERMAN

After speaking with close to a million teens and sifting through thousands of their letters, Scott Fried took their stories out of his inbox and published them in his books.

Everyday, Scott Fried stands on the edge of the rest of his life, knowing that the HIV virus inside of him will eventually win out.

But not yet.

This "not yet" has landed Fried, a 42-year-old native of Long Island, in classrooms, Jewish summer camps, synagogues, and churches around the world, where he converses with teens and adults about AIDS, hardship, life, and love. These interactions with teens inspired Fried to write two books: *If I Grow Up: Talking with Teens about AIDS, Love, and Staying Alive* and *My Invisible Kingdom: Letters from the Secret Lives of Teens*.

So what's the deal with these books?

Although burdened with lengthy titles and heavy issues, the books scrap the lecturing one might expect. Instead, each book is a confession—an open

roast of weaknesses and fears. *If I Grow Up* introduces Fried and his audience and lets the reader eavesdrop on a host of conversations about body image, sex, drugs, and survival. After the release of this book, however, the conversations continued. Fried amassed a library of response letters, advice, and stories, which he later published in *My Invisible Kingdom*.

"I discovered that [the letters] were all asking the same questions," Fried writes. "Can you see me? Am I getting through to you? Will my life be remembered?"

The books travel the same road—that of the lonely, questioning individual, who is anxious to figure out what matters in life. Chapters tackle issues one by one, sharing dialogues between Fried and the teens with whom he has spoken.

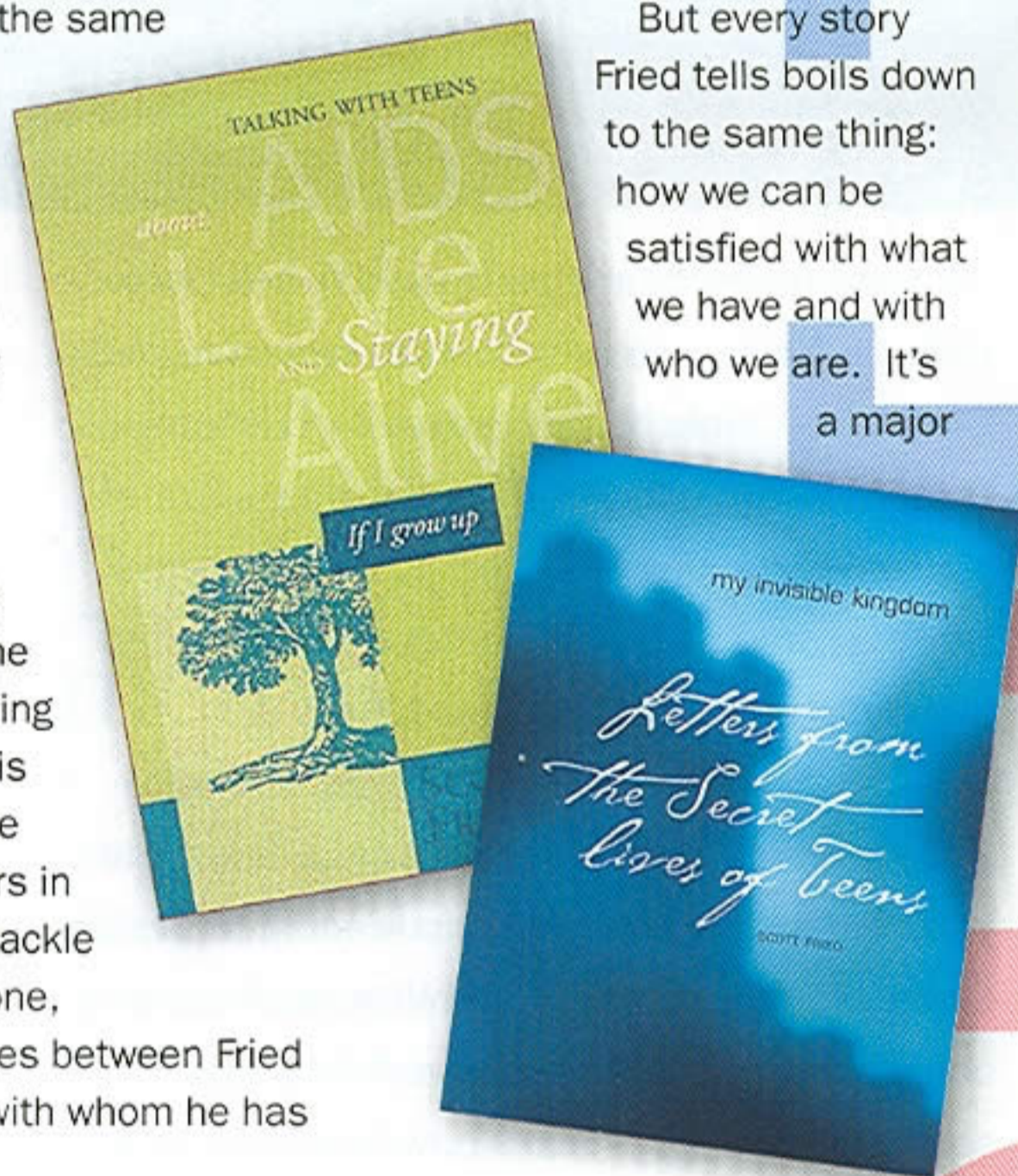
In *If I Grow Up*, a teen says to Fried, "It makes me so angry and so sad to see you up here educating us instead of sitting here and listening with all of us on how to prevent [AIDS]. Doesn't it make you mad?"

In *My Invisible Kingdom*, a college student writes: "You'd think I have it all pulled together. I have an amazing family. I am a great athlete. I have friends, good grades. People like me. I am happy with my body and my looks. You'd think I have it all pulled together. But I don't. I never will. 'Having it all pulled

together' means perfection, and no one can have perfection. I feel like no one ever looks at me and sees me."

Do these books sound like gushy self-help volumes? Maybe, but one would be hard-pressed to find sugarcoated tales here. There are stories about being uncomfortable with physical appearance, loss, feeling lost, confusion, divorce, self-esteem, sexuality. It's almost exhausting.

But every story Fried tells boils down to the same thing: how we can be satisfied with what we have and with who we are. It's a major



Thoughts from another inspirational Jewish book...

There are 6.5 billion people in the world and 13 million Jews. We make up 0.25% of the world. That's one quarter of one percent! Tiny, tiny, tiny. Yet, despite our small number, despite oppression and anti-semitism, we make up 26% of all Nobel Prize winners. Although Jews make up only 2% of the U.S. population, 39% of all American Nobel Prize winners are Jews. Up until 2004:

Eleven Jews received the Nobel Prize in literature (12% of world total, 27% of U.S. total),

Nine in World Peace (10% of world total, 11% of U.S. total),

27 in Chemistry (19% of world total, 28% of U.S. total),

21 in Economics (38% of world total, 53% of U.S. total),

52 in Medicine (29% of world total, 42% of U.S. total),

45 in Physics, including Albert Einstein in 1921 (26% of world total, 38% of U.S. total).

Excerpted from *The Blue Manifesto*, a book of intriguing ideas on what it is to be Jewish, due out this spring and sponsored by the Caplan Family Foundation in conjunction with JVibe.

challenge and one that not even Fried feels he can answer with absolute certainty. "I have always believed that it is not in the answer to a question," he says, "but in having the permission to ask it, that we learn."

Why spend time collecting crazy amounts of letters and writing the books?

ANSWER #1: FOR OTHERS.

"There is a modern Hebrew song by David Broza," says Fried, "that translated into English, goes, 'It will be fine, it will be fine,



There are plenty of raw details and confessions so real that it will put any live journal to shame. Scott writes in *If I Grow Up*:

"I remember a night a few years ago when I had so much fear of AIDS. I had just watched a horror film, and when I turned off the television I started thinking about my life and my death. I was literally on my knees facing my bed, and my hands were shaking so fast that I had to grab onto the bedspread in order to stop them from moving. Finally I got up off the floor, turned on the lights, and walked over to the mirror because I wanted to see what fear looked like on me. Somehow, looking at myself and being present through the fear helped me to transform it—I was holding it rather than resisting it."

yes. Even though at times I am broken.' As I listen to the stories of these brave teens, I attempt to help them find room inside to be at peace with being broken."

When Fried talks about safe sex, self-respect, and AIDS, he is really talking about staying alive. A lot of people come to him—teens with eating disorders, children of divorced families, even those on the brink of suicide—and ask how he manages to find a reason to live. He realizes he is still learning how to live, just like teens and adults everywhere. His advice comes from experiencing the same pain that everyone experiences, but he puts it simply:

Be comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Stay close to being broken and close to being in love with everything you see.

Give yourself the permission to not have the answer to your question.

By the time *If I Grow Up* came out, Fried was swimming in letters. He decided to publish them to prove that no one is

alone in their struggles.

"In the shared experience of witnessing how others seek faith in a time of loss and confusion," he says, "we can all perhaps begin to understand why, as one teenager writes, 'God keeps throwing stuff at me.'"

Reading these books, then, becomes a communal experience. One might read the books alone, but poring through stories is like sharing a journal. "It is my intention that in viewing each letter," Fried says, "the reader will see and hear an important piece of his or herself."

ANSWER #2: FOR HIMSELF.

Talking to others allowed Fried to pinpoint the truth in his own life. "For me, the goal of life after HIV is to stay as authentic and as vulnerable to myself, and to life, as possible," he says.

This vulnerability keeps Fried on the same shaky ground as everyone else. He admits that certain things hamper his outlook on life, including, "Gossip, drama, and more

gossip." To combat this he goes to the gym and indulges in "a few hours of silence, breathing, watching reruns of *Judging Amy*, and being listened to by someone who will not try to rescue or fix me."

Fried's experience with HIV has turned into much more than dealing with the disease. He has come to view HIV as a force

that challenges him to find meaning, go on living, and appreciate all he has.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the dedication page of *If I Grow Up*: "To Mom and Dad, for holding me on that Friday night in synagogue when the rabbi said, 'Dear God, please help us to understand why there is illness and death in our lives. And somewhere in the understanding, help us to know that there is a blessing in all of this.' ★"

