

## Book gives voice to Sulphur Springs kids



By [MICHELLE BEARDEN](#) | The Tampa Tribune  
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The pain is evident in the voices of the Sulphur Springs children growing up without their dads.

"I wasn't crying because I wanted to see you, I was crying because you broke my heart," writes one 11-year-old girl in a letter to her father.

The letters are part of a book published by Steve and Lennette Deal, who worked with young people in the community for 11 years as co-pastors of All Nations Outreach Center in Sulphur Springs.

"Daddy, If You Only Knew: The Voices of the Children" (5foldmedia Publishers, \$15) gives insight into one of our society's most regrettable failings: Fathers abandoning their families.

"What I heard the most, sometimes in a quiet whisper and other times, a blood-curling scream, were the cries of children for their missing fathers," Lennette recalls.

"We thought it was time for those voices to be heard."

The book is a series of letters written by the Sulphur Springs kids who attended the church. They weren't always able to talk about their pain, the couple learned, but they were able to write about it. They poured out their hearts to fathers they had never met; knew only briefly; or who had left them after a few years.

In some cases, separations were the result of prison sentences or drug rehabilitation programs.

Interspersed among the letters is commentary by the Deals, married 26 years and the parents of two grown kids. They offer advice and Scripture support on healing those wounds, even if parent and child never are reconciled.

"The restoration process is a difficult journey, but that first step has to be taken," Steve says. "Without it, kids grow into damaged adults, who may have a hard time building a spiritual relationship with God. So much damage is done when there's a lack of affirmation from a father."

Each of the letters – published anonymously, to protect the children's privacy -- begins the same way. "Daddy, if you only knew....."

"How I feel. I feel sad and upset because you are not here. If you were here we could go to the park and play together. We could go on vacation together to Busch Gardens. I want my other side of the family to be with me, too, like my brothers and sisters. I feel like someone is missing." -- 10-year-old girl.

"How I felt when my mom told me that you wasn't even there when she was having my 2 brothers or wasn't there when I was born. How can you even live with yourself? Why do you be telling people that you don't have kids and then come back to us and say you love us, when you don't? That night was I was crying, I wasn't crying because I wanted to see you, I was crying because you broke my heart." – 11-year-old girl.

The Deals, both St. Petersburg natives, were serving an Assembly of God church in Holland, Mich., in the late 1990s when they heard about an ailing church in an impoverished neighborhood. The church had a leaky roof and nearly empty pews, but coming back to Florida would mean the Deals could be closer to their families. On Jan. 10, 1998, they gave their inaugural sermon at the old Assembly of God church that they would eventually rename All Nations Outreach Center. Thus began their journey as inner-city pastors – and into a world where fractured families struggled with poverty, joblessness and addictions.

That doesn't mean it was a constant struggle for the Deals. There were many moments of joy and encouraging signs of progress in their congregation and the surrounding community. Kids started coming to the church, drawn to its after-school creative and performing arts program. Materials and equipment were in short supply, but the kids got plenty of encouragement and hands-on attention.

That was enough to break the cycle of desperation and dependence for some of the kids. With the Deals' influence, they stayed away from drugs and street crime and finished school. A few went on to college or into ministry.

In August 2008, the Deals felt called to begin an outreach in Costa Rica. Although it was difficult to leave, they were comfortable that the church was more stable than it had been when they arrived. They relocated to Fort Mills, S.C., to work with another missionary in preparation for the overseas move, but finances stalled their plans. Now Lennette is working part time for the U.S. Census, and Steve is the athletic director, coach and Bible teacher at the Comenius School of Creative Leadership. They still have their sights on the Costa Rica mission, but will do it "in God's time, not ours," Lennette says.

In the meantime, they are pursuing a ministry they believe began with their work in Sulphur Springs: missionaries to the fatherless. Their book should open the door to

speaking engagements and conferences to encourage men to be better dads and help break a destructive cycle. And with Father's Day coming up, the Deals say there's no better time to promote a book they call a "resource for the healing process."

"Without forgiveness, we can't move forward. When a father walks away, he leaves a lot of hurt and anger behind him," Steve says. "But chances are, he was treated the same way. This is something that we can change with God's help. The time to begin is now."

## **RESTORE MEN BACK TO FATHERHOOD**

**WHAT:** Citywide Men's Continental Breakfast

**WHERE:** Living Faith Assembly of God, 5500 E. Sligh Ave., Tampa

**WHEN:** 8 to 11 a.m. June 12

**SPEAKERS:** Steve Deal; son Jordan Deal, worship leader; Wayne Tiggett, Abe Brown Ministries; Charles Chandler, sports writer.

**COST:** Free, but call (813) 988-2030 for reservations.

Steve Deal will sign copies of his book following the breakfast from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Tampa Christian Supply, 2908 W. Hillsborough Ave., Tampa. For information, call (813) 879-6770.

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