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Not-so-sweet 15

Notable Oregonians talk about the adults who changed their troubled lives

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It was a dark and stormy age.

"Fifteen sucks," said Portland City Commissioner Sam Adams, who struggled through his teenage years. "Added to the angst of being 15, alcohol and drug abuse in the family . . . it just amplifies the problems."

He might not have made it at all, he said, if it weren't for two caring adults.

"They paid just enough attention to make me think outside . . . to see the possibilities."

Adams and 55 other notable Oregonians contributed personal essays for a book titled "When You Were 15." The 146-page collection is the brainchild of Reclaiming Futures, a Multnomah County program that helps teens in the justice system. The stories are revealing, touching and sometimes surprising.

"Everyone has a common thread: Adults really do matter," Benjamin Chambers, Reclaiming Futures project director, said of the essays.

The purpose of the collection is to encourage adults to volunteer as mentors and to show troubled teens that they can, with a little help, change the course of their lives. The book, produced with a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, will be available at several locations at no cost.

"A lot of these kids . . . have thickened skin," Chambers said. "They act like they don't need help." The tough personas they adapt for survival make it difficult, yet vital, for adults to reach out to them.

The contributions of Adams, school superintendent Vicki Phillips and musician Art Alexakis are excerpted in italics below.

Vivian McInerny: 503-294-4076; vmcinerny@news.oregonian.com Vicki Phillips Superintendent of Portland Public Schools

Vicki Phillips grew up in poverty in Falls of Rough, Ky. Her family lived in a ramshackle farmhouse without indoor plumbing. She rode the school bus 90 minutes each way to attend a high school that was divided into students from wealthy and poor areas. Her friend Cindi saw Phillips' potential and encouraged her to take the college entrance exams. Phillips' parents didn't know about the tests -- or even what they were. She didn't tell her parents about her college ambitions until after she was accepted to Western Kentucky University on scholarship.

"I had no frame of reference for the rest of the world -- except through books. I read every book I could get my hands on. That was how I learned about places beyond Falls of Rough.

In my entire high school career, not one adult talked to me about going to college -- no teacher, no

counselor, not the principal. I had straight A's, and I graduated in the top 10 percent of my class, but they thought that because I was from Falls of Rough, I would never go to college.

My stepfather was dead-set against it. He said if I left, I should never darken their door again. I left for college with my stepfather not speaking to me and my mother in tears. . . . Don't misunderstand . . . he just didn't want me to leave. In our town, everyone gathered on weekends, brought a musical instrument and played and danced and ate homemade ice cream. Those were his values. He had heard about college life and was afraid it would change me for the worse. He had no frame of reference for college -- he never knew anyone who had gone.

Phillips eventually earned a doctorate in education, taught, worked in state government and, in 2004, became superintendent of Portland Public Schools. She remains in touch with her friend Cindi, who encouraged her. Her stepfather also realized his mistake in trying to hold Phillips back, and even encouraged his younger daughter to go to college.

Phillips now makes it a practice to nurture other young women with potential. "There are people who reach out to you, and you should be accepting of that," she said. "And other times, you must reach out." Art Alexakis Lead singer and songwriter for Everclear

Within a six-month period, Art Alexakis lost his older brother to a drug overdose and a girlfriend to suicide; his mother was diagnosed with cancer; and Alexakis was arrested for burglary, vandalism and being under the influence. He was 12.

While his mother worked, Alexakis -- who was born in Los Angeles and spent his early years there -- drank and injected heroin and cocaine. His mother sent him to Texas to live with the father he hardly knew.

Alexakis kicked hard drugs in 1984 and alcohol in 1989. But it wasn't until the breakup of his third marriage that he sought counseling for sexual addiction.

"When I was fifteen, I was living . . . in a one-bedroom apartment with my mother. I slept on a foldout couch. . . . I was told it was my job to NOT do drugs, NOT to get in trouble with the law, NOT to be sexually active, and by no means to turn out like my big brother, who I, of course, idolized and wanted to be just like. So, instead of honoring my mother's wishes, I became REALLY good at lying to her. I promptly gravitated to the same kind of friends, so this cycle of lying, drugs and self-destructive behavior continued.

"After I had been clean and sober for 10 years, I still hadn't learned how to like and love and accept myself until I met an amazing man by the name of Dennis Maclure, a therapist who had dealt with many of the same issues in his own life that I was going through in mine.

"Like it or not we are ALL role models . . . and our actions and words can break someone down, or help to make them whole."

Alexakis, who has a number of hit records to his name, briefly attended film school at UCLA; testified before Congress in support of child-support enforcement; and served as a delegate to the 2004 Democratic National Convention. While maintaining a self-deprecating attitude toward his story -- "Hey, no one's going to mistake me for Hemingway," Alexakis says -- he hopes that his story resonates with young readers. Sam Adams Portland city commissioner

Growing up, Sam Adams' home life was marked by violence and alcohol. When he was 15, his mother -- who was divorced from Adams' father and living in Portland -- helped him find his own place in Eugene. "I may have been living on my own," Adams said, "but I didn't do it on my own."

Two teachers in particular, Sue Addicott and Byron Dudley, connected with him. They encouraged him to pursue photography and run for student government. When he said he couldn't speak in front of groups, they cajoled him.

"My Dad and I had a combustible relationship. I had to get out of his house. I feared for my safety. So I moved out. I lived largely on my own at 15.

"My life could have gone bad, but Sue and Byron made the difference. I knew they were there, keeping an

eye out for me, and helping me to see beyond the problems in my family to all the possibilities in my life.

"They didn't fawn all over me. I would not have liked that. They just showed a little extra interest.

"If it hadn't been for Sue and Byron, I would have disappeared."

Not everyone in Adams' family was so lucky.

"My siblings have suffered mightily," he said. "They struggled a long time. Everyone in my family has overcome their drug and alcohol problems.

"But when I was 15, they weren't in a place to help me."

While Adams knows that problems with drugs, alcohol and domestic abuse are not peculiar to any economic group, he does think financial difficulties can exacerbate them.

"One of the reasons for getting interested in politics," he said, "is to fight the good fight for those good kids, those good people, who've had really tough challenges."

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