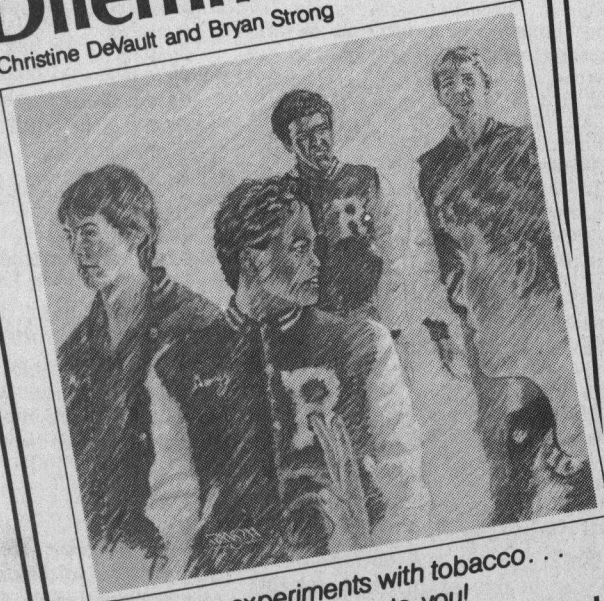


Authors

IT'S YOUR CHOICE!

Danny's Dilemma

Christine DeVault and Bryan Strong



A teenager experiments with tobacco... What will he do? It's up to you!

IT'S YOUR CHOICE!

Christy's Chance

Christine DeVault and Bryan Strong

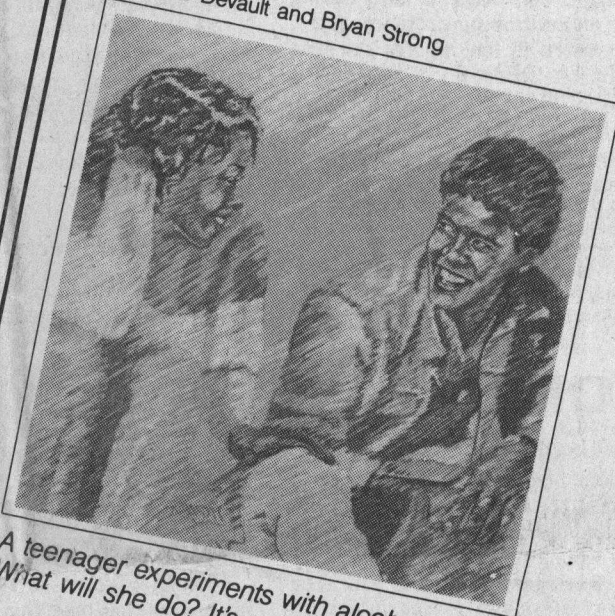


A teenager experiments with marijuana... What will she do? It's up to you!

IT'S YOUR CHOICE!

Serena's Secret

Christine DeVault and Bryan Strong



A teenager experiments with alcohol... What will she do? It's up to you!

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Giving young readers a choice

By TOM LONG
Sentinel staff writer

SEE DICK. See Jane. See Dick share a marijuana cigarette with Jane.

See Jane become a dope dealer almost immediately and then get busted.

See Terri. See Alice. See Terri offer Alice a beer at a party. See Alice drinking margaritas at the next party she goes to. See Alice being thrown in the drunk tank at the tender age of 16.

But wait! What if Alice hadn't taken that beer? Or what if Jane had refused to carry dope for Dick? What if...?

'What if?' is the key to a new group of books written by local authors Christine DeVault and Bryan Strong. Intended for kids between the ages of 10 and 14, the books describe the plights of older teens who have to decide whether to experiment with marijuana, alcohol and tobacco.

The difference in the 'It's Your Choice!' series is that the reader gets to decide what Dick or Jane decide to do. If the reader thinks Jane would pass on the marijuana, they turn to a certain page to continue the story. If they think she would elect to imbibe, they turn to another page.

As the stories develop, a variety of choices is offered to the reader.

"This format of making choices is probably the hottest thing in juvenile literature right now," says Strong. But it is being used mostly in fantasy books. "These books are the first things to take the choice approach and apply it to moral issues."

"What it's supposed to do is get kids thinking about what their values are and help them understand that it's OK to care about yourself and your health and your own well-being," says DeVault. "It's OK to value those things more than the opinions of others and really think before you act."

A married couple with three kids of their own, DeVault and Strong have previously collaborated on two college textbooks on marriage and family and another on human sexuality. Strong teaches psychology at UCSC; DeVault is on sabbatical from teaching at the Santa Cruz Adult School and Learning Center.

The three "It's Your Choice!" books — "Christy's Chance" (to

smoke marijuana), "Danny's Dilemma" (tobacco or not tobacco) and "Serena's Secret" (a fling with alcohol) — have just been released by Network Publications. The authors feel that the books have a place both in the home and in the classroom.

"The publisher has developed a substantial curriculum around these books, along with some other books that offer facts and classroom exercises," DeVault says. "But we see them as a good tool for parents to bring up the subjects so they can be discussed."

The books are far from "reefer madness" type pamphlets, according to Strong. True, kids who make all the dangerous choices end up in trouble pretty quick. But the people who lead them astray aren't pictured as raving heroin addicts or Lucifers in teen clothing. Instead, they are drawn as teens who've made some wrong choices themselves.

"We have to use a little literary license here because we've got to tell the story in an amount of time that will keep the kids' interest," DeVault says.

"The reason people do these things is not because you like dope or alcohol — although you could when you started. It's because of the people you want to please," DeVault says. "It's not so much that a character's smoking marijuana leads her to make the dope deal, it's that she really likes the guy who wants her to make the delivery."

"Most kids are introduced to drugs by friends," says DeVault. "You have to make things realistic — most people who do these things are not bad people."

Indeed, the books are surprisingly non-judgmental. "They don't break things up into good and bad," says Strong. "We don't try and put things in a right or wrong category. That's one of the problems — saying all dope is bad, or all alcohol is bad."

At the same time, "I think there is an underlying message that it isn't appropriate for children to use these substances," DeVault says. "It's not a moral issue, it's a health issue."

And it's an issue that the authors have found most kids quite open to exploring. "We sort of test-marketed our books on our kids and their friends," says Strong. "Then the publisher did extensive testing before the final



Bryan Strong and Christine DeVault hook kids with 'What ifs.'

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

drafts were written, and afterward.

"Most of the kids tend to follow the books the way they actually would make the choices," says DeVault. "Most of them, the first time through, go seriously. And then they go through and try all the different choices to see what happens."

"It opens up the possibility for kids to talk to each other and compare," says Strong. "To talk about 'How come you did this on that choice?'"

The books are on sale at local bookstores, although Strong recommends patrons ask clerks where they might be shelved

since they don't fit into any neat category.

But one question lingers — what kinds of choices did the authors make when they first went through the books?

"I broke almost every rule until it got to the big one and then I started being cautious," Strong remembers with a laugh.