



♥♥♥ YOU are ♥♥♥
JACOB'S HOPE

*"It is a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals. They seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart."
- Elie Wiesel, July 27, 1958*

THE NATIONAL RUNAWAY SUICIDEHOTLINE NOW IS JUST A PHONE CALL AWAY.
1800-RUNAWAY

ALISON FEIGH '00 HAS BEEN TACKLING
THE PROBLEM OF MISSING AND EXPLOITED
CHILDREN FOR MORE THAN A DECADE.

theADVOCATE

BY J. TROUT LOWEN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY VINCE MUZIK

SOMETIMES LIVES ARE FOREVER CHANGED BY A SINGLE EVENT: A HOUSE FIRE, A natural disaster, the death of a loved one or a violent crime, one pivotal moment that alters who we are or who we will become. For a generation of Americans, the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were arguably such life-shaping events. Alison Feigh knows her parents remember exactly where they were when Kennedy was shot.

Feigh's life has been shaped by the tragic events of a different day: October 22, 1989. That's the day her eleven-year-old classmate, Jacob Wetterling, was abducted at gunpoint by an unknown assailant from the end of the gravel driveway that led to the safety of his home in St. Joseph, Minnesota. Jacob, whose smiling face stared out at us for years from milk carton panels, has never been found, his abductor never captured.

"I always hear people my age saying 'I remember where I was when I found out that Jacob was missing,'" Feigh says. Feigh remembers, too. She was thousands of miles away on a family trip to Australia when her dad broke the news: "My dad explained what had happened," Feigh recalls. "I was just completely shell shocked."

When she returned home to central Minnesota a few weeks later, the life she'd left behind had changed forever. Parents were scared. Jacob, his brother Trevor, and his friend Aaron had ridden their bicycles to a local video store to pick up a movie and a snack. On their way home they were confronted by a masked gunman. Suddenly, kids accustomed to the freedoms of small town life were watched and worried over obsessively. "[You could] taste fear," Feigh says. "My

response was, 'I need to learn absolutely everything I can so this doesn't happen to me.'" Feigh adds, "I was a very empowered child and a very strong-willed child, and then I left and I came back, and I felt that some of that power had been taken away."

Feigh has been working to reclaim that power for herself and for other children ever since. "I grew up in a family where my dad's phrase was 'if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.'"

Feigh wanted to be part of the solution.

For the past seven years, Feigh has worked as the youth safety specialist with the Jacob Wetterling Resource Center, formerly the Jacob Wetterling Foundation, in St. Paul, educating children, parents, and others about the dangers children face and teaching people ways to keep kids safe. She also has authored two picture books through Free Spirit Publishing, *I Can Play It Safe*, to help parents talk to young children about safety issues, and *Those Runaway Days*, to teach kids ways to cope with their problems when they feel like running away.

"Kids have a right to be kids. They have a right to a childhood. They have a right to play beyond their driveway, and that's what I'm going to fight for," Feigh says.

“Alison is an amazing young woman. She took this situation that she lived and she became very determined not to let it happen again. It was really important for me that she was doing this work. I hold her very close to me.” — PATTY WETTERLING

TAKING CONTROL

FOR HIS CLASSMATES, JACOB WAS ALWAYS PRESENT even in his absence. The media returned with each milestone: the anniversary of the abduction, their high school prom, and graduation. Feigh says she and her classmates knew they bore a responsibility to speak up for the one among them who had been silenced. “We learned at a very young age the importance of speaking up for people who don’t have a voice because of that.”

It was in high school during an annual event to publicize Jacob’s disappearance that Feigh first met Jacob’s mom, Patty Wetterling. They met again later and hit it off when Feigh was an intern at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Washington, D.C., where Wetterling is a board member.

“Alison is an amazing young woman,” says Wetterling. “She just took this situation that she lived — and it was hard on his classmates — and she became very determined not to let it happen again. It was really important for me that she was doing this work. I hold her very close to me.”

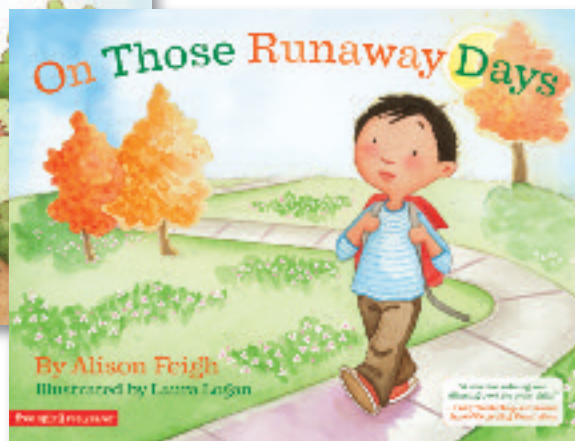
Feigh took her determination to speak up for others with her to college. A confessed “Type A,” she visited nearly two dozen colleges before settling on St. Olaf. It wasn’t on her list, but her father convinced her to stop there after an interview at Carleton College.

“I had a little notebook with columns rating each thing,” she recalls. “Even though I had all the charts and all the numbers, I walked on campus, and for the first time it felt like this was where I needed to be.”

At St. Olaf, Feigh chose a theatre-communications major. She’d grown up acting in children’s theater productions. She also designed a second major in the Paracollege program, “Responding to Missing Children in the United States.” In her junior year, Feigh co-chaired the campus Sexual Assault Resource Network, a job that involved visiting every first-year residence hall to talk about sexual assault. She joined Harambe, the umbrella diversity organization, and traveled to Memphis for the twenty-fifth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. And when budget cuts forced the elimination of several majors at St. Olaf in 1999, including Feigh’s communications major and the Paracollege, she put on her activist hat and was elected student representative to the Faculty Review and Planning Committee.

Feigh also found a way to reconnect with her North Middle School classmates using her Paracollege final project to develop an array of public service spots for radio and television commemorating the tenth anniversary of Jacob’s disappearance.

“The fact is, we [Jacob’s classmates] spent ten years looking over our shoulders wondering [what happened]. When you’re eleven, there is nothing you can do about it except pray and hope and wish,” Feigh said at the time. “But when you’re twenty-one, it’s more of a sense of ‘I’ve prayed, I’ve hoped, I’ve wished, and I’ll keep doing that. But now it’s time to act.’”



Alison Feigh has written two books, *I Can Play It Safe* and *On Those Runaway Days*, to help children and parents with safety issues and coping skills for dealing with problems that seem overwhelming to kids.



Feigh regularly meets with groups of adolescents to talk about Internet safety. PHOTO BY PAUL MIDDLESTAEDT, ST. CLOUD TIMES

in my line of work, and it's often on the same day. The same day that you're working with a case that's just devastating, you are also working with law enforcement officers and with the local advocate who is working to support the family. Any time there's something that's really tough to process, you're never doing it alone."

Feigh also draws support from the families themselves. Each year since she graduated from St. Olaf, she has been a part of the Resource Center's annual gathering for the families of missing and murdered children. It is way to help support families through the difficult time between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

"I go into Thanksgiving and Christmas every year being beyond grateful and beyond thankful for the opportunities that I've been given and the fact that these families can come together and lean on each other and share stories and still have the ability to laugh about certain things," she says. "When you're there, you see that strength and that power and you see how they're processing; you take those stories as well."

Most of Feigh's job has focused on prevention education for schools, parent groups, and faith communities on issues such as cyber bullying, Internet safety, and "sexting," the transmission of sexually explicit images by cell phone. She also works to combat the "stranger-danger" message that many of us grew up with. Parents shouldn't teach their kids not to talk to strangers, she suggests, but *how* to talk to them. That's because strangers, statistics show, aren't the biggest threat children face, Feigh explains, pointing out that of 2,200 reports of missing children in the United States each day, only about 115 a year are stranger abductions, and that number is declining. The rest are kids who have run away, been kicked out, injured, or have been taken by family members or adults known to the child.

For most kids, sexual abuse is the bigger threat, she adds. Statistics indicate that one in four girls and one in eight or ten boys will be sexually abused by age eighteen. "What we need to do is look at child safety from this big perspective," she adds. "Because, sadly, the issue of child sexual abuse is something that [your child] or your child's friend will at some point need to face, [and you] need to have these skills."

Hoping to strengthen her expertise in child and youth safety, Feigh currently is considering a master's program in criminal justice with a special emphasis in the prevention of child sexual abuse. She finds hope in education and in the strength of the families of missing children. "We always talk about if we can stop child sexual abuse every time, then we stop abductions, because it's escalating behavior."

As her way of honoring Jacob, Feigh has no plans to stop talking anytime soon. 🐾

That summer, while interning with the Jacob Wetterling Foundation, she showed her colleagues her storyboards. They liked Feigh's ideas and asked her to produce them. She enlisted the help of seven former classmates to create a thirty-second public service announcement, which aired on dozens of network and cable television stations and was directed at Jacob's abductor. The message: We've grown up, we're not afraid of you, and we'll keep looking for Jacob.

"Sexual assault is all about power and control. It's all about who has the power," Feigh says. "I just felt like we had the right to reclaim the power that was taken from us."

ENDING ABUSE

MUCH LIKE HER PERSONALITY, FEIGH'S OFFICE AT the Jacob Wetterling Resource Center is a bright and colorful contrast to the sometimes depressing work she does. The walls are covered with photos of the smiling children, God-children, family members, friends' kids, and the teens she works with at summer camps, church programs, and the Great River Educational Arts Theatre in St. Cloud. Given the nature of her work, she says, it's important to keep things cheerful.

"It's a very good thing for me to be around 'normal' children," she says, adding the caveat that "normal is no more than one cycle in the wash. It helps me keep it in perspective that not every child I work with is a high-risk teen."

In her role as youth safety specialist, Feigh has worked with dozens of families and law enforcement tracking the center's open cases of missing and exploited children. This is often the toughest part of the job.

"I've never lost hope, but there are bad days," Feigh acknowledges. "I meet the best people and the worst people

J. TROUT LOWEN is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer and a frequent contributor to *St. Olaf Magazine*.