

Dal News

From 'me to we' thinking

By [Marilyn Smulders](#) - March 24, 2009

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No one told them to do anything. But when David Shepherd and Travis Price heard how a Grade 9 student was treated on the first day of school for wearing a pink shirt, they sprang into action.

The then-Grade 12 students from Cambridge in the

Prof. Michael Ungar's new book is called *We Generation*. (Danny Abriel Photo)

Annapolis Valley went to a nearby discount store and bought 50 pink shirts to distribute to their friends to wear to school the next day. They emailed classmates to get on board with an anti-bullying cause they dubbed a “sea of pink.”

That wave of pink turned into a tsunami: hundreds of students showed up to Central Kings Rural High School wearing pink duds. And now pink is the official colour of a Nova Scotia-wide Stand Up Against Bullying Day, held on the second Thursday of September.

Michael Ungar, a social worker, family therapist and professor with Dalhousie's School of Social Work, calls the two teens “we thinkers.” In his new book *We Generation* (McClelland & Stewart), he says we-thinkers like David and Travis can help their parents' generation “rethink some of our own me-thinking ways.”

“They thought enough about a fellow student's feelings that they did something and they mobilized quickly,” says Dr. Ungar. His other books include *Too Safe for their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive* and *Playing at Being Bad: The Hidden Resilience of Troubled Teens*. “What they did says a lot.”

The father of two teenagers, Dr. Ungar defines the “we generation” as young people who have the capacity to make a contribution and who are connected with their communities.

“Connected” here doesn't mean “MSN-chatting, online-gaming, text-messaging and YouTube-surfing” young

people; instead it means old-fashioned, flesh-and-blood connections that help children to grow up caring and acting compassionately towards others.

Chapter by chapter, Dr. Ungar illustrates how parents can nurture we-thinking in their children, for example, by lavishing them with physical affection, by noticing the good things they do, by giving them responsibility and making them accountable for their own mistakes. Other people can help too; we-thinking is demonstrated by the teacher who lets students plan and orchestrate fundraising for their own school trip or the hockey coach who has a pat on the back and a word of encouragement for each of his (or her) players.

But if today's students are part of the we generation, who's the me generation?

"The me thinkers are my generation and discovering that was the shock," says Dr. Ungar. "I mean, are we really that self-centred?"

Yes, he concludes. "We're the ones who built the suburbs, who built our houses 45 minutes from where we work, who built 2,500 square-foot houses so our children can have their own bathrooms. We're the ones who are all over the coach who doesn't play our kids enough, or the teacher who dares to criticize," he notes.

"We're the ones who bought Hummers."

It can be hard for parents to hand over responsibility to their kids; sometimes it's easier to do everything for them. He's seen it himself.

Once during a parents meeting for his son's tier-one soccer team, he heard how important their support was for the team's success. Except, in this case, support somehow came to mean hanging up the nets, ensuring uniforms were washed and filling up water bottles before each game.

"It was like *The March of the Penguins*," he says with a laugh. "We're huddling in a circle braced against the wind, as if guarding the eggs—our kids, these elite players—at our feet ... and I thought, wait a minute here, why can't we put our children in charge? Why are we taking all the responsibilities away from our kids?"

Readers Say

Lihui Liu

March 25, 2009 11:52 AM

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Susanna Morash-Kent

March 26, 2009 8:28 AM

Thank you. My husband and I are "old fashioned parents" who think that our kids should take responsibility for their actions. We also give them the opportunity to have chores and responsibilities. We teach them that the most important thing in life is that when the chance arises, always be kind. We were so proud when our seven year old daughter told a very upset friend who broke our daughter's toy by accident, that it was okay because friends were way more important than any old toy. She won a little merit award at school for that. The school she attends has a little

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Bruce

March 31, 2009 6:12 AM

I think that we have known for a long time what Unger is saying, I hope we can turn it around in our generation too, not just the younger generation. Great work Mike!

Bernard Bomers

April 5, 2009 2:55 AM

"ME TO WE" is a monumental consciousness-shifting concept, capable of minimizing current societal cancers, if not "REVOLUTIONIZING" a way out of the currently prevailing mind traps.

STICK-IN-THE-MUD defenders of the "status-quo" conservative, "MBA" type of "achievers" should, if not just "take heed", but wake up, and have reason to be scared.

Re-examine!

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