Unlocking the black box of the teenage mind . . .

About the Book

Why do some kids get into so much trouble even as their friends and siblings thrive? How can families get involved earlier, before problems escalate? What lessons can the rest of us — parents, teachers, religious leaders, lawmakers — draw from a school that offers therapy?

In search of answers to these key questions, Pulitzer Prize–winning writer David L. Marcus gained unfettered access to students, staff, and parents at the Academy at Swift River in western Massachusetts. Marcus had an ambitious goal: he wanted to offer a detailed, uncompromising look inside the secret world of American teenagers in the twenty-first century — a world that adults urgently need to understand. Known for combining rigorous academics, wilderness survival, and group therapy in an intensive fourteen-month program, the Academy at Swift River helps troubled teenagers regain their emotional health.

*WHAT IT TAKES TO PULL ME THROUGH* focuses on four remarkable kids (real kids, not composites), who run the demographic gamut:

- a southern girl whose privileges cannot save her from sinking into drug abuse and unsafe sex
- the self-destructive son of teachers who is grappling with his anger about being adopted
- a black kid from a tough New York neighborhood who is silenced by consuming depression
- a once high-achieving Florida girl broken by the death of her mother
While uncovering the circumstances that led these kids to be sent to Swift River — drug use, violence, theft, Internet addiction, eating disorders, suicide attempts, promiscuity — Marcus opens the black box of the teenage mind. He also explores the parents' stories and perspectives. Looking beyond the problems, he examines what families, teachers, and counselors did to get these kids' lives back on the right track.

The book concludes with a practical "Memo to Parents," in which Marcus identifies warning signs to watch for and discusses possible remedies and other approaches that schools and communities can use to help America's twenty-nine million adolescents. Among his suggestions:

• Listen and watch closely for kids' low self-confidence, poor social skills, dwindling enthusiasm for sports and constructive pastimes, a feeling of being an outsider in the family, constant lying, or a change in appearance.
• Know all of your kids' friends, and stay in constant touch with their parents. Don't be afraid to call them when you suspect something is amiss. Know which friends are in trouble.
• Change our national priorities by pushing to make mental health services available to all teens and parents. Rethink the way we plan communities, and design open spaces that welcome teenagers.

A revealing look inside the complex world of troubled teenagers, WHAT IT TAKES TO PULL ME THROUGH is a book that will speak to teens, teachers, parents, all of us.

About the Author

David Marcus has had an eclectic career that has taken him from dodging mortar fire in Africa to teaching Huckleberry Finn in a classroom in rural Massachusetts. Marcus shared a Pulitzer Prize, spent a year as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard, and worked as a teacher before publishing a book about American teenagers.

In two decades as a writer for the Boston Globe, the Dallas Morning News, and the Miami Herald, Marcus was a columnist, roving national reporter, and foreign correspondent. He covered the breakup of the Soviet Union, the U.S. military invasion of Panama, the Gulf War, the return of Hong Kong to China, and civil wars in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Angola, and Soviet Georgia. Returning to domestic affairs, he covered education for U.S. News & World Report.

His freelance articles have appeared in Vanity Fair, GQ, and the New York Times. He has been a guest on NPR's Morning Edition and Televisa's Spanish-language show Contrapunto (Counterpoint). For his work on a series about violence against women around the world, Marcus shared the top honor in journalism, the Pulitzer Prize for international reporting. Earlier, he was part of a team of finalists for a Pulitzer Prize in explanatory journalism, for a series called "Hidden Wars."

Marcus spent four years researching his book, which tells the story of a group of teenagers who were sent to a therapeutic program in the foothills of the Berkshires. Houghton Mifflin

While a student at Brown University, he was elected president of the senior class and graduated with honors. He then studied Latin American literature at the University of the Andes in Bogotá, Colombia. Later, as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard, he studied urban planning and immigration. He has been a writer in residence at the Tuck School of Dartmouth College, a visiting lecturer at the University of Houston, a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at the University of Redlands in California, and a visiting professor at the University of Massachusetts.

Unlike most education reporters, Marcus has worked as a teacher. He recently spent a year as a visiting fellow at Deerfield Academy, where he taught American literature and writing courses. Now a contributing editor at *U.S. News*, he is also a visiting scholar at Ithaca College's Park School of Communications.

For tour information, visit his Web site: http://www.davemarcus.com.

**Q & A with David L. Marcus**

**RESEARCHING THE BOOK**

**You've covered wars, coups, and famines around the world. What drove you to spend four years observing American teens?**

My friends claim it was appropriate because I never grew up. The truth is, this is what I love about journalism: approaching a subject with an open mind, soaking up the details, writing a narrative, and leading readers to see larger meanings. It's why I interviewed Marxist guerrillas in Peru and survivors of Pol Pot's genocide in Cambodia. In this case, though, I was writing about something we all assume we know — the twenty-nine million teenagers who live right here in our midst. I tried to approach them with the fresh eyes of a foreign correspondent.

**How did you get interested in writing *What It Takes to Pull Me Through*?**

An editor at *U.S. News & World Report* asked me to write an article about kids who were sent away to schools that offer therapy. I thought it sounded inane: a bunch of brats who purloined daddy's Platinum AmEx. I reluctantly visited a therapeutic school. Then, whoa! The kids blew me away. They were charming and smart and introspective. They told me about snorting medicine that was supposed to be for attention deficit disorder, about selling Ecstasy during math class, about hacking into Web sites — activities that my high school friends and I never heard of. Thank goodness.

**Why do you believe the students were being honest with you?**

They weren't. Several later admitted lying to impress me, a magazine journalist on campus for just six hours. It wasn't till I returned for a fourteen-month intensive stay that I realized it took weeks — months, really — to get to know the kids' real stories, their real feelings.
How did you avoid attracting attention as "that journalist" or "that author who's observing us"?

I became as ubiquitous as air while observing a group of sixteen kids as they went through the program. I started by camping in the woods with them, then attended group therapy three times a week. I volunteered as a writing teacher. I shot baskets with them and listened to them play guitar at night. I joined them in Costa Rica for the final, five-week community-service expedition before graduation. At first it was a novelty having a journalist around, but after a while I blended in with the counselors, teachers, administrators, and special-ed experts. I was just another adult. Even teenagers who rebuff their parents are pining to talk to an adult who wants to listen.

What about your gut feeling at the outset? Weren't they spoiled rich brats?

They quickly broke my stereotypes. My group ranged from white kids from wealthy suburbs to a black boy whose mom grew up in a Harlem railroad flat. A couple of parents were teachers, who were hardly rich. One dad was a small-town electrician.

Why did you avoid situations where kids revealed information to you in confidence?

For the first time in twenty years as a journalist, I didn't seek exclusives. I wanted things to come out just as they would without my presence. I told the kids not to disclose secrets to me; in fact, I warned that if anyone tipped me off to a plot to run away, we'd immediately go to a counselor. And so gradually I learned that girls had been beaten by former lovers and boys had come close to attempting suicide at home. I learned all kinds of frightening information, but I found out at the same time as the kids in the group.

You used to fly in Madeleine Albright's plane and hobnob in Washington. Wasn't it boring being around kids who have just sixteen or so years of experiences?

I loved the research — playing ping-pong, hiking, having amazing talks. These kids are far more candid than politicians, and when things get too heavy they imitate The Simpsons. On Sundays I brought my son and daughter, who were six and three, for sledding and fishing.

Is the book about regular teens or the ones who are in trouble?

Both. By looking at kids dealing with heavy drug use or depression or family problems, I want to illuminate the larger story about adolescence in the twenty-first century. Most teenagers are doing great. But every kid sits in classes with someone who is struggling with depression or an eating disorder. Every kid goes to parties with someone who uses hard drugs, or considers taking a ride with someone who's been drinking.

Why did the sixteen families cooperate with you and open up?

It took a lot of guts. Quite a few of the parents felt alone: Johnny next door was heading to Yale while their son was on the brink of going to jail. I think they wanted other parents to know that they really weren't alone. They wanted strangers to learn from their traumatic experiences.
What was the most difficult part of the research?

We spent a month and a half camping and hiking in the rain forest of Costa Rica. The highlight for the kids — the low point for me — was the week-long sea kayak trip there. My back was in spasms for the next month. That was the physical part. The emotional part was hearing the horrible things that had happened to these kids, whom I'd grown to like and respect.

Why the title What It Takes to Pull Me Through?

It comes from a lyric by Drowning Pool, which was a favorite band of the kid I call D.J. Just think: I used to spend my free time listening to Earth, Wind and Fire.

PERSONAL

In What It Takes, you discuss cliques such as stoners, geeks, and wannabes. Which clique were you in as a teenager?

I was one of those clique surfers, going from the nerds to the partyers. I was sort of a '70s wannabe. I wanted to be cool, but I was too shy and too goofy to pull it off.

When you were in high school, did you hope to become a writer someday?

I dreamed of being a stand-up comedian. I'm not kidding. I worshiped Woody Allen and Eddie Murphy. I always lost my nerve before going onstage, unfortunately. I still want to be a comedian; humor is the best shield from the terrors we deal with.

How could you relate to kids who got in trouble? Weren't you one of those do-gooder, nerdy kids who studied for the SAT day and night?

Like a lot of teens, I tried on several personalities to see what fit. When I was sixteen, I won an essay contest sponsored by the police department. And yet a year later my friends and I were drinking Jack Daniel's and shooting out streetlights with a BB gun. I felt a need to impress the popular crowd. Instead I ended up being summoned to the same police department that had given me an award. That shook me up. It was a blessing.

How strict were your parents?

That's the wrinkle. My folks were incredibly permissive. If I wanted to smoke pot, that was okay. That was oddly frustrating. I was one of the few kids in Westchester County in the 1970s who decided to rebel by refusing to do drugs.

LESSONS LEARNED

Okay, what about your style as a father? Soft or hard parenting?

When you've been raised in the laissez faire school of parenting, you tend to be either very strict or very permissive. I was way too permissive. Researching the book taught me,
belatedly, not to confuse being loving with being lax.

**So what don't parents know about their teenagers?**

Many parents — and I mean even caring, involved parents — don't have a clue about what the middle school or high school day is like: where the popular kids sit in the cafeteria, who is snubbing whom, the shifting sands of friendships. A surprising number of parents don't have a sense of what their kids do from 3 to 6 p.m., or who they're with.

**Hasn't it always been difficult to be a teenager?**

Teens naturally separate from their parents, often stumbling along the way. But there are so many more ways to stumble now. Anyone with some cash can find illegal drugs, even far from New York and L.A. A fourteen-year-old can get on the Internet for pointers about how to purge food. Then there's the toxic media. I'm not talking about Janet Jackson flashing flesh during the Super Bowl. I'm talking about 24/7 violence and hard porn on the Net or cable. In the '70s, it was a big deal for a twelfth-grader to snag a copy of *Playboy*. Now lots of ninth-graders find *Playboy* tame. At the same time, kids don't have the support system they used to. Parents put in long hours commuting and working in order to live in good school districts. Families are so spread out that many children grow up without daily contact with aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents.

**How did this book project change your life?**

You could say I plunged into downward mobility. Four years ago, we lived in a big house in a desirable suburb of Washington, D.C. But I couldn't stand the traffic and the scarcity of open space, the frenetic pace and the rootless feeling. Everyone is from somewhere else. We relocated to a New England town where people know their neighbors — they don't necessarily like their neighbors, but at least they know 'em. I want my kids to grow up respecting people for their values and personalities, not admiring them for their SUVs.

**Your changed careers too, right?**

I stepped away from a wonderful journalism job, a big-city salary and perks. Maybe it was a midlife crisis. I guess I needed a break from the nonstop nature of journalism and the follow-the-pack mentality of Washington reporters. I enjoyed volunteering as a teacher (while researching the book) so much that I accepted a fellowship at another high school. Now I'm teaching college, and writing. I'm still trying to find that magical balance of career and life. I'm hell-bent on finding it before my kids reach adolescence.

**Advance Praise for *What It Takes to Pull Me Through***

"*What It Takes to Pull Me Through* is fascinating. More than simply a cautionary tale, this extremely well-written book provides useful insight and a welcome dose of hope. It's the closest thing you'll find to a road map for raising adolescents — and keeping them safe." — Augusten Burroughs, author of *Running with Scissors*, *Dry*, and *Magical Thinking*
"Compelling, empathetic, and hopeful, What It Takes to Pull Me Through is for parents and teens alike. It will be of special use to families experiencing emotional trauma or fracture, offering both solace and a road map of survival that goes far beyond self-help." — Alissa Quart, author of Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers

"What Marcus uncovers is startling, heartbreaking, and finally redemptive. This book reads like a thriller. A thriller about adolescence, about how we love and how we lose each other and what it takes to help a child find her way home." — Alison Smith, author of Name All the Animals

"Here is more wisdom and guidance about child-rearing than an entire shelf of how-to self-help books combined. This is journalism at its best: unflinching, meticulous, gripping, true." — Sue Halpern, author of The Book of Hard Things

"One of the most revealing insights for parents of teens in this wonderful book is how familiar these troubled kids are to us. It shows just how thin the line is between the world of the normal adolescent and those who are fighting for their emotional health." — Daniel J. Kindlon, professor of psychology, Harvard School of Public Health, and author of Tough Times, Strong Children and coauthor of Raising Cain

"At long last a seasoned journalist confronts one of the most puzzling questions of our time: why decent kids with good prospects go bad. What It Takes to Pull Me Through will surely inspire soul-searching discussions among teens, teachers, and parents." — Madeleine Blais, author of In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle

"By combining no-limits reporting with a wide-open heart, David Marcus allows us to witness something of a miracle: a group of teenagers in the harrowing and hopeful process of finding out who they are." — George Colt, author of The Big House

"David L. Marcus does what nonfiction writers do when they're at their very best — get inside the skin of a character and feel everything. These kids breathe fire and hope, break your heart and heal it, and then show how teenagers can wander through the darkest woods toward sunlight. In all, a profoundly moving journey." — Ron Suskind, author of A Hope in the Unseen and The Price of Loyalty

"A compelling, intimate account of developmental breakdown and the road to recovery. [Marcus's] immersion in the Academy at Swift River offers invaluable insight into the complexities of coming of age." — Elizabeth Aries, Amherst College, editor of Adolescent Behavior

Facts from What It Takes to Pull Me Through

• Youth suicide rates are now three times the rates of the 1960s.
• New drugs like Ecstasy and crystal meth have lured some kids into a culture of drug use.
•The use of psychiatric medicines among children and teenagers has doubled in ten years.

•Nearly 25 percent of eighth-graders have used illegal drugs. About 31 percent of all high school students (five million kids) binge-drink at least once a month.

•The Internet has provided many kids with access to more information, but much of what they see on-line is unfiltered and simply incorrect. Parents often have no idea how much sexual imagery their children see or how many predators contact kids, even on computers with filters.

•Kids from all walks of life, not just inner-city kids, can take a wrong turn. Millions of suburban teenagers — sons and daughters of lawyers, doctors, business executives, and professors — get into trouble with drugs, alcohol, running away, self-mutilation, depression, and declining grades.

•To understand the parents' perspective, Marcus spent time with mothers and fathers as they tried to repair damaged relations with their adolescent sons and daughters. He attended family therapy with the parents and the kids.

•Parents have no idea how their teenage sons and daughters spend their days. Many don't recall the daily slights of middle school or the humiliations of high school. They don't understand the pressures that kids face from adults and from peers. They are oblivious to newer threats, such as raves, Ecstasy parties, and Internet addiction.

•From personal experience, Marcus knows about kids who soar in high school and those who stir up trouble. When he was seventeen, he attracted attention by writing a humorous first-person story for the *New York Times* about applying to college. That same year, though, he and his friends were arrested for drinking whiskey and shooting out streetlights with a BB gun.

•Marcus relocated his family from suburban Washington, D.C., to a small town in New England to research the book. He thought the move would be temporary. But the lessons he learned about the perils of raising teenagers in the suburbs convinced him to sell his suburban house and put down roots in a town where shopkeepers know their customers by name.

•Hearing so many teens complain about parents who devoted too much time to work and socializing prompted Marcus to abandon his life as a high-paid, frequent-flying Washington journalist. He took a drastic pay cut to become a teacher in order to have more time with his own children.

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**Academy at Swift River, Group 23 Admissions Summaries**

Name: **Bianca Suarez Bittman**  
Hometown: West Palm Beach, Florida  
Presenting problems: Lying, sneaking out with boyfriend, cutting classes, disrespect to father.
Mother: Teresa, nurse (deceased)
Father: Alan, network administrator at a college
Remarks: Bianca hasn't dealt with mother's death from cancer
Siblings: Twin brother and older sister; both are doing well

Name: Mary Alice Chambliss
Hometown: Dallas, Texas
Presenting problems: Eating disorder, drug use, smoking, promiscuity, refuses to be with family
Mother: Lillian, dermatologist, on leave from her practice (currently full-time mother)
Father: Burns, business executive
Remarks: Mary Alice is a "mystery kid"; no obvious cause of problems; family appears to have it all
Siblings: Three younger siblings

Name: Tyrone Harriston
Hometown: Queens, New York
Presenting problems: Refuses to attend school, plays video games till 3 a.m., suicidal thoughts
Mother: Natalie, phone company technician
Father: Lerone, various jobs
Remarks: Bitter divorce, dad forced to leave house
Siblings: Older sister (unmarried, with toddler)

Name: D.J. Pandowski
Hometown: Suburban New Jersey
Presenting problems: Plays with fire, ran away, impulsive, poor grades
Mother: Janice, teacher
Father: Teodor, teacher
Remarks: D.J. is adopted, has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
Siblings: None

Notes on some other members of the group:

Andy: Drinks and drives, defiant with parents
Ashley: Lives on Park Avenue in Manhattan, has problems with boys, possible drug use, upset about adoption
Trevor: Used Ecstasy, cocaine, and other drugs with his friends at home, almost died from drug use
Phil "the philosopher": Lived around the world, used heroin at age fifteen, expelled from four schools
Tanner ("Teddy Bear"): Drinks, hangs out with a gang, bought a gun
Eva "the everything kid": Anorexia, bulimia, rape, alcohol, suicide attempt
Willow: Cocaine, heroin, abusive boyfriend

Counselor: Tanya Beecher, earned master's in social work from Smith College
Teacher liaison: **Gennarose Pope**, studied English literature at Columbia University

Note: These summaries are based on information provided to the admissions office when the families applied. The names of students and their families have been changed, as has one hometown.