Their Family to Yours
Category : February 1999
Published by Anonymous on Feb. 01, 1999

PUBLISHING

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Free Spirit Publishing brings self-help to a new level--children and teens

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How to do homework without Throwing Up. Bullies are a Pain in the Brain. How to Bring Up Parents. If these titles sound humorous to you, or even childish, then they're evoking the right response. These are books for and about children, by a spirited press in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that's made kids their mission. Incorporating humor, honesty and real-life experiences, Free Spirit Publishing has taken the concept of self-help to a kid's level. What exactly does this mean? Hinduism Today turned to Free Spirit founder Judy Galbraith for answers and insight into the world of children and their mental needs.

"As a teacher, I found many adults--sometimes myself included--didn't give youth credit for handling and exploring certain life issues," reveals Galbraith, whose career started as a sixth-grade teacher specializing in gifted and talented children. At the time (and even now), Galbraith noticed hundreds of books geared toward adults on navigating through life, but none for children or young adults. "I discovered we

expect youth to handle life with a certain amount of maturity and aplomb, but don't necessarily provide them with experiences and skills that will help them make good decisions," Galbraith shares. "It's almost as though we think through osmosis young people are going to be able to deal with life."

Many kids are essentially disconnected from mom and dad, and Asian Indian American youth are no exception. Free Spirit's books fill the void left by neglectful parents. Written mostly to youth, they impart timeless wisdom and practical advice you can carry throughout life. While the books don't focus on religion, they include many aspects found in Indian culture and philosophy, such as commitment to children, tolerance, family and good morals. As extended families rapidly deteriorate and Hindu parents often can't, or won't, pass on basic do's and don'ts, it's nice to know that time-tested advice is available and, equally important, readable.

As an educator, Galbraith was committed to helping young children academically. She noticed that with challenges at home, school and the world beyond in the form of many things (disease, death, divorce, discrimination, peer pressure, etc.), youth often have few role models and resources available. Galbraith concluded that children could best tackle academics if they had a structure or basis at home, from which they could develop confidence to face whatever challenges lay ahead. That, according to Galbraith, is where Free Spirit fits in. While it doesn't claim to replace a parent or teacher, Free Spirit promises to arm children and teens with tools they need to succeed in life. As Galbraith says, "We aim to support youth

socially, emotionally and academically, so that they can be their best."

Then and now: Galbraith tried to get her own book, The Gifted Kids' Survival Guide, published years ago, but was disheartened by her publisher's not honoring their agreement. Encountering limited material geared toward kids, and inspired with more ideas for children's self-help guides, Galbraith decided to start her own publishing company. "I was raised in a liberal Unitarian Christian family," recalls Judy. "My mother taught me to understand and appreciate common beliefs shared by major religions. I try not to judge, but be informed of a broad spectrum of walks of life, and get that knowledge across in books." Fifteen years later, Free Spirit is an innovative, award-winning publisher with more than 150 books, posters and other educational materials. It has won the hearts of children, parents, educators and educational institutions, while stimulating their minds.

"Our best measure of success is the responses," says Galbraith. Her office frequently receives spirited letters. "After reading Respecting Our Differences," writes LaRandi, 16, "I'm glad to know I'm not alone in the desire to improve the human race." And about Bringing up Parents, student Mariangelo wrote to the author, "Bringing up Parents was totally cool! I loved it! And it really worked, too. My mom and I have become more friendly, and my dad and I have set out new privileges for me. Thank you!"

It's youth like these who help determine book content. Most Free Spirit authors are educators or guidance counselors who

work with youth regularly. Through day-to-day interaction, they see and experience what issues are important to kids today. Free Spirit also surveys youth, and keeps in touch with schools and focus groups to stay on top of things. Comments from readers play a big role in determining future themes, as do trends, which Free Spirit follows closely to understand the present and future environment of young people.

Youth also play a big role in the appearance of the books. Covers are bright, bold and colorful, appealing to a younger audience. They're often scrutinized by kids before approval, because as Galbraith admits, "As an adult, I can't even pretend to know exactly what it's like to be a child in today's culture, which is very different from the one I grew up in." Youth also scrutinize potential books on sensitive topics such as depression or suicide, where the tone and voice of a book may be critical in making or breaking a life-altering decision.

So what are the issues in a young person's life today? What does Free Spirit offer to better understand them? The catalog lays out a wide mix of things, involving all members of the family, young and old. There are books on parenting, teaching, creative activities and learning differences, plus self-help titles on many topics--death, sex, stress, relationships, academics and cultural diversity, to name a few. Through witty writing, personal anecdotes, factual information, and the assumption that youth are intelligent, Free Spirit addresses these issues without intimidating or patronizing the reader.

For example, in How Rude, author Alex Packer writes in a section called Righteous Receiving, "There are only two ways

to receive a present: 1) with great pleasure, or 2) with greater pleasure. Response #1 is for gifts you don't particularly like. It involves a warm smile, a look of delight and surprise, and expressions of gratitude such as, 'Thank you so much.' For gifts you do like, use response #2. Wear an ear-to-ear grin. Let your jaw fall open and your eyes bug out. Remain speechless for a second or two as words fail you. Run around the room a few times. Do cartwheels. Say 'I can't believe it!' over and over while you try to regain control of your conscious mind. Then let loose a torrent of thanks: 'This is s-o-o-o fabulous!'" Free Spirit also has books to introduce selfless and conscience-awakening concepts like social activism for children and random acts of kindness.

Free Spirit's website (www.freespirit.com) has an ongoing question-and-answer session with authors, where you can ask pressing questions ranging from bathroom etiquette to coping with a relative's death. What's coming up? A vegetarian herself, Judy and team are considering a book catering to burgeoning teen vegetarians.

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Secrets for Bringing Up Mom and Dad

A short list of youth self-help books you'll find at Free Spirit Publishing.

Gifted Kid's Survival Guide: How to realize you're not alone.

How Rude!: A teenagers guide to good manners, proper behavior and not grossing people out.

What Are My Rights?: 95 questions and answers about teens and the law.

What Do You Stand For?: A kid's guide to personally building good character.

Bringing Up Parents: A teen's handbook to raising trusting, loving parents.

Make Someone Smile: And forty more ways to be a peaceful person.

Respecting Our Differences: A guide to getting along in a changing world.

Get Off My Brain: A survival guide for lazy students bored and sick of school.

Fighting Invisible Tigers: A stress management guide for teens.

When Nothing Matters Anymore: A

survival guide for depressed teens.

Making Every Day Count: Daily readings for youth on solving problems, setting goals and feeling good about yourself.

Making the Most of Today: Daily readings for youth on self-awareness, creativity and self-esteem.

Cliques, Phonies, & Other Baloney: All about cliques and why they exist; because everyone wants friends.