

## I'll Stand by You: One Woman's Mission to Heal the Children of the World

**Author:** Elissa Montanti with Jennifer Haupt

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“There are actions we can all take in our daily lives to help others that are not drastic or life-altering for us, but they will be for those we help” (Montanti & Haupt, 2012, p. 230).

*I'll Stand by You: One Woman's Mission to Heal the Children of the World* tells the inspiring story of Elissa Montanti, a woman who made the courageous decision to dedicate her life to saving the lives of children injured in war zones or natural disasters. Through the trials and tribulations of her own life, Montanti created a life and world built upon embracing change, love, and hope. *I'll Stand By You* captures moving stories where the light of one woman's heart brought hope into lives that needed it most. It shares the accounts of children injured by war and natural disasters and the soldiers, doctors, and ordinary people who helped her save them.

Montanti's desire to help others was rooted in her efforts to process the struggles and emotional trials she went through after the deaths of her mother, grandmother, and friend. Her mother's death from lymphoma-related complications was one of the biggest challenges Montanti faced. She outlines how her grief manifested, how she coped, and how she presented herself as fine on the outside while experiencing anxiety and depression. Her journey toward healing began when she invited Kenan, a young Bosnian boy who had lost both arms and one leg to a landmine, to the United States and supported his medical care. The connection she made with Kenan was profound and full of hope. She writes, “There was no way to hide his hurt... Kenan was the person who taught me that I had endless strength” (Montanti & Haupt, 2012, pp. 52, 59). She finds a profound parallel between his trauma and her own. Yet, in their similarities, she also finds key differences that allow her to recognize her privilege in being able to hide her hurt.

Montanti founded the Global Medical Relief Fund (GMRF) to save children's lives by giving them prosthetics for missing limbs. Like Kenan, the children GMRF serves have seen and lived through unimaginable times that pushed them beyond their limits. Montanti describes saving young lives in Iraq, Kuwait, Haiti, and Bosnia, painting a picture of these locations that allows readers to visualize what Montanti was seeing, feeling, and hearing. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Montanti encountered increasing political challenges in helping children in these countries.

Themes of mental health struggles, privilege and opportunity, and the power of lending a helping hand are woven throughout the text, making it a strong choice for a common reading selection. Such themes lend themselves to discussions in many settings and contexts. For example, Montanti is vulnerable in her account of her mental health struggles. She describes encounters with panic attacks, depression, and anxiety throughout her life. Later in the book, a brief mention of suicide is discussed by a child who lost his arms after a missile hit his family's home. The author's candor in explaining her mental health struggles and those of the children she encountered opens the door to rich conversations about how mental health issues present themselves differently and affect individuals in various ways. This is a strength of the book; her honesty and transparency are refreshing and would likely provide comfort to readers who have experienced similar struggles.

Resilience in the face of loss and grief is another prominent theme of the book. Descriptions of physical disability and missing limbs in children are specific kinds of loss present throughout the book. The death of a loved one, specifically a parent, is an experience that hits close to home for me (Alexis). When I lost my mother around the same age as Montanti, I felt all the same emotions that she went through during that time. Yet, Montanti shows ways of being resilient during these hardships to overcome obstacles. It is empowering to hear narratives of those who have felt the same emotions and were able to turn those struggles into passion areas.

Privilege is an important, though indirect, theme. U.S. children grow up in relative privilege compared to those like Kenan, who live in war-torn and developing countries. The destruction, devastation, and loss that ravaged the lives of children in those countries is a stark contrast to the environment in which Montanti grew up. She describes growing up in poverty and dealing with traumatic loss, but she also acknowledges the privilege of knowing she was in a safe environment. Kenan's story, among countless others, could be a powerful conversation starter about privilege. Observations about privilege may also lend themselves to talking about the development of a global mindset. The author describes an interesting conversation

about the resistance Montanti faced, especially for helping non-Americans in the wake of 9/11. Not only is this a unique opportunity to weave in themes of American history, but it is also an important one since most of today's traditional-aged college students were not born when 9/11 happened. This book allows for a discussion about charity and selflessness while emphasizing the importance and value of maintaining a global mindset. True selflessness on this nature is not often displayed, so students can learn from and embrace how Montanti chooses to live her life. For example, conversations might focus on how she runs GMRF. She doesn't take a penny for herself, saying "there are more important things to do with that money" (Montanti & Haupt, 2012, p. 106).

One of Montanti's core beliefs is that the children she rescues are living, breathing miracles and proof that God exists. Throughout all the lived moments of these individuals, from what they have witnessed and felt in their near-death encounters, there is a reference to faith in God. While Montanti claims that she is not a religious person, she is spiritual and believes in God. Her perspective is unique and one that is not often talked about—that is, holding religious or spiritual beliefs without buying in to the concept of organized religion. Students in both secular and religiously affiliated institutions could benefit from discussions that allow them to explore their own spirituality.

Lastly, the power of human connection is displayed throughout the book, which directly translates into the friendships and relationships students are encouraged to build with each other. Using this book as a common read can help institutions inspire a community mindset among their students and empower them to build meaningful and lasting relationships.

The children Montanti serves come from war zones in different areas throughout the world. The descriptions of their experiences and the prominent themes in this book (e.g., mental health issues, trauma, death of loved ones) may be difficult for some students. Careful facilitation and the creation of brave spaces allow all students to discuss sensitive topics with greater depth. One individual's story may be another's moment to listen, learn, reflect, or empathize.

There are many different avenues a professional can take to include *I'll Stand by You* into new student programming. Facilitating conversations among incoming students or incorporating activities to strategically showcase learning will help students gain new insights that can positively impact the rest of their college experience. For example, events and themes from Montanti's memoir could form the basis of "Cross the Line" or "Challenge By Choice" activities, allowing students to see and hear the different lived experiences of their peers. While these activities can be noted as high

risk in sensitivity, with the right facilitation, questions, and brave space provided, students can take a moment to recognize privilege in different areas of life. This book also focuses on people with different physical and mental abilities. Partnering with the office of accessibility services or the counseling center can showcase the importance of ADA compliance and the mental health of students on campus. Academic departments such as psychology and social work could collaborate with counseling centers to continue to break the stigma around seeking mental health services. Through case studies and research, and with the collaborative efforts of other offices, students would be empowered to reach out for help, talk about what they are truly experiencing, and learn ways to support friends and family members. Becoming resilient in the face of life's curveballs is a conversation that professionals need to get comfortable having during this ever-changing time of a student's life.

Other ways that *I'll Stand by You* could be incorporated into new student programming is by partnering with offices of civic engagement and service-learning to host service programs and alternative breaks. These events help students experience the selflessness that goes into assisting others and giving back to the community. Service experiences can also support students in understanding their individual roles in a global society. Offices of international students and study abroad programs can also help students develop a global identity by providing scholarships for them to have experiences outside their local perspective. Whether students are interested in getting a different sense and pace of the world or are looking to stay closer to home, study away opportunities help them experience a universal human language that transcends race, ethnicity, class, and background. Montanti identifies the universal language as the smile: one may be having the worst possible day, but a simple smile from another individual can add a bit of light to the world. Finally, deans of students and offices of student life are charged with making sure all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, and background, are supported and have a fulfilling time at the institution. Programs that bring people from all walks of life together build a sense of community on a campus, which, in turn, plays an essential role in student retention.

*I'll Stand By You* captures the sense of going above and beyond for others to give them the best possible (life) experience. As student affairs educators and practitioners, we dedicate ourselves to students whom we may only know for a few months or years to ensure they develop and have a fulfilling experience during their time in college. Elissa Montanti's passion for transforming the lives of children who have lost so much can be good professional inspiration. Life, the world, and the distractions of society can pull us from what we are passionate about, but at the end of the day, we will do what it takes for our students to be successful. "Instead of

quietly thinking I can't, you'll find yourself shouting: 'How could I not?'" (Montanti & Haupt, 2012, p. 230). How could we not make a strange place a home for our new students, as Montanti did for families fleeing war and disaster? Finding new avenues to bring out all the special qualities we all carry around with us has the potential to change the game of higher education for years to come.