

TEACHING GUIDE

A Stone of Hope

A Memoir



Forgotten at eleven,
arrested at fifteen,
I should've been a statistic.
I made it out for one reason:
the people who didn't
treat me like one.

Jim St. Germain

with Jon Sternfeld



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About the Book

Born into abject poverty in Haiti, young Jim St. Germain moved to Brooklyn's Crown Heights, into an overcrowded apartment with his family. He quickly adapted to street life and began stealing, dealing drugs, and growing increasingly indifferent to despair and violence. By the time Jim was arrested for dealing crack cocaine, he had been handcuffed more than a dozen times. At the age of fifteen, the walls of the system were closing around him.

But instead of prison, Jim was placed in "Boys Town," a nonsecure detention facility designed for rehabilitation. Surrounded by mentors who enforced a system based on structure and privileges rather than intimidation and punishment, Jim slowly found his way, eventually getting his GED and graduating from college. Then he made the bravest decision of his life: to live, as an adult, in the projects where he had lost himself, and to work to reform the way the criminal justice system treats at-risk youth.

A Stone of Hope is more than an incredible coming-of-age story; told with a degree of candor that requires the deepest courage, it is also a rallying cry. No one is who they are going to be—or capable of being—at sixteen. Jim is living proof of this. He contends that we must work to build a world in which we do not give up on a swath of the next generation.

About the Authors

Jim St. Germain is the co-founder of Preparing Leaders of Tomorrow, Inc. (PLOT), a nonprofit organization that provides mentoring to at-risk youth. He currently works as a Residential Care Advocate for the Office of Advocacy at the Administration for Children's Services (ACS). Jim earned an Associate Degree in Human Services from the Borough of Manhattan Community College and a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from John Jay College of Criminal Justice, where he is currently pursuing a Masters in Public and Nonprofit Management and Policy. He speaks three languages: English, French and his native language, Creole. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Jon Sternfeld is a writer and editor, formerly with Lyons Press. He most recently worked with Senators Tom Daschle and Trent Lott on their upcoming book *Crisis Point: Why We Must—and How We Can—Overcome Our Broken Politics in Washington and Across America*, published by Bloomsbury in January 2016. He lives in New York.

Discussion Questions

PART I: BROOKLYN, USA

- When Jim first arrives in Crown Heights, what he sees of his new home and of America is not at all what he thought he would find. How does the myth of America that Jim had in his mind compare to the actual surroundings in which he finds himself?
- On page 19, Jim talks about kids experiencing poverty and says, "...society makes kids pay twice for being poor." What does he mean by this phrase? Do you agree with his conclusion?
- What is Jim's relationship like with his family? Do you see his family as a support system for him and for each other?
- Later, on page 97, Jim writes, "My survival mechanism relied on other people's destruction, my community's." How do social issues—like crime, poverty, urban housing—affect Jim's relationship with his neighborhood?
- How would you describe Jim as a decision-maker? Does he hold himself accountable for the choices that he makes?

PART II: THE SYSTEM

- On page 105, Jim talks about the phrase that serves as the title for the second part of his memoir, "the system." He writes, "There's a reason it's called the system; it's a well-oiled machine that takes in troubled kids and churns out hardened men." How is Jim experiencing the system so far?
- Jim arrives at Boys Town and is quickly introduced to a new routine. How does Jim acclimate himself to life at Boys Town? Is he successful immediately or does it take some time for him to adjust?
- Throughout this section of *A Stone of Hope*, Jim talks about Joanna, Marty, Christine, Iza, and Ms. Oglio. How do these people impact Jim? What are some meaningful ways in which they help him grow and mature as a person?
- Jim talks about two books that were formative reading experiences for him: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*. What does Jim take away from these books? How do they help motivate him to change?
- In the span of only a few years, Jim went from learning about what college is to being a college student. How does Jim experience the common growing pains of adjusting to college life, like learning time management skills and handling his own personal finances?
- At the end of this section, Jim decides that he will leave Boys Town and return to his grandmother's apartment and his old neighborhood while he starts college. Why is this decision such a significant one?

PART III: OUT

- On page 220, Jim asks, "What happens when 'wrong place, wrong time' means your own community?" How has Jim's re-entry into his community gone since he left Boys Town? Has his relationship to and experience in his neighborhood changed since he has been back? If so, in what ways?
- In this final section, we learn about the death of Jim's grandmother. How does Jim's definition of family expand to go beyond blood relatives?
- Jim earns his Associate's degree and then enrolls at John Jay College for a Bachelor's degree in Political Science. How does Jim combine the life he has lived with his course of study? Do you think doing so makes him a better advocate for at-risk youth?
- Of the phrase "marginalized kids" Jim writes, "We call them marginalized kids but they're not actually on the margins at all. That perception is the problem. They are a living, breathing part of society. Their hopelessness, their poverty, their violence, their lack of education lands on all our doorsteps. They are our children, and their choices—or lack of choices—affect us, whether we want them to or not" (265-66). Why is changing our perception of so-called marginalized kids necessary to improve society as a whole, and not just for a select few?

Writing Prompts

- Throughout *A Stone of Hope*, Jim talks about the cyclical nature of systemic social issues—like poverty, violence, and gangs—and his role in making choices that make him a participant in some of those systems. In what ways is personal accountability so vital to Jim's story? Why does it matter to Jim to hold himself accountable and not just blame problems bigger than himself?
- *A Stone of Hope* can be read as many kinds of stories: an immigrant story, a story of an outsider, a story about the juvenile justice system, a story about poverty in urban communities, a story about overcoming the odds to be successful. Why are the many strands of stories within Jim's story significant? Can you relate to some of them more than others? Do ones you cannot relate to teach you something you didn't know before?
- How does Jim's experience of two Americas, what he calls, "...a stinging reminder of the gap between what I thought America was and the reality I stepped into" (9), speak to the experience of many immigrants?
- Throughout his experience, Jim has many mentors that guide him along the way, whether they are his lawyers, part of his Boys Town family, or teachers he has in school. How do these relationships help Jim? Why was it integral to his success that he had mentors?

For a conversation with Jim St. Germain about *A Stone of Hope*, [listen to our podcast episode](#).

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