

FROM **ALPHA DOG** TO **STOLEN BOY**

A STORYTELLER'S JOURNEY OF COMPASSION



Novelist and producer Michael Mehas hopes his book will help heal a West Hills community.

BY AMY LYONS

It's no surprise that author Michael Mehas won a gold medal in the category of Best Regional Fiction, Pacific-West, at this year's Independent Publishers Book Awards, and first place in the Public Safety Writers Association competition for best novel. While writing the award-winning *Stolen Boy*, Mehas combed police reports and interviewed countless people to chronicle with deep authenticity the angst haunting a pack of young San Fernando Valley adults whose penchant for drugs, partying and payback went fatally awry.

"The IP award was for the authentic depiction of troubled youth in Southern California," Mehas said. "The book gives a sense of the

young male, aggressive attitude of kids getting into trouble in the San Fernando Valley."

Before picking up his pen to author *Stolen Boy*, Mehas had already familiarized himself with the story of the infamous West Hills drug dealer, Jesse James Hollywood, and pumped hours of research into *Alpha Dog*, last year's film based on Hollywood and his complicit posse, for which Mehas served as associate producer. Written and directed by Nick Cassavetes, it starred Emile Hirsch, Justin Timberlake, Bruce Willis and Sharon Stone. The film tracked the events leading up to the August, 2000 kidnapping and subsequent murder of 15-year-old Nick Markowitz, a crime that landed convicted triggerman Ryan Hoyt, now 28-years old, in San Quentin State Prison, where he is on death row.

Hollywood, who allegedly orchestrated the slaying, became one of the youngest suspects ever on the FBI's most wanted list when he fled to Brazil at age 20 on the heels of the crime. He was captured in 2005 and is in Santa Barbara County jail, awaiting a trial that could land him a death sentence as well. That's where Mehas comes in. The author hopes the background information he used in his book will help forestall what he views as two more senseless deaths.

In *Stolen Boy*, Mehas thinly veils Hollywood's identity by creating Mickey Youngblood — a character Cassavetes named Johnny True-love in *Alpha Dog* — a hotheaded pot dealer enamored of money and enraged by delinquent debtors. Mickey's father, Dick Youngblood, carries a reputation for big-time pot dealing, a trade he reluctantly teaches his firstborn after failing to forcefully mold Mickey into a base-

ball star. When Mickey's enemy, Rick LeBlanc, fails to repay a drug debt, the two young men verbally spar on repeated occasions, with LeBlanc upping the ante by murdering Youngblood's dog, vandalizing his house and threatening his family. Youngblood kidnaps LeBlanc's younger brother, Bobby — modeled after Nick Markowitz in real life — convincing his fear-based buddies to hold the teen for ransom until Rick LeBlanc pays up. In a series of disastrous actions, Youngblood's gang takes Bobby to several parties where they ply their young hostage with drugs and alcohol. When Youngblood panics about the ramifications of kidnapping for ransom, he orders Bart Pray, the fictional counterpart

of Hoyt, to destroy the evidence by killing young Bobby LeBlanc.

Mehas hopes his Mickey Youngblood character comes across as a complex individual plagued by family troubles and misdirected anger, a characterization he hopes will strengthen the real-life Hollywood's case. The book reveals more backstory for each character than a two-hour film could offer, painting various pictures of kids suffering abuse, neglect and mental illness. Though Mehas acknowledges the tragedy, severity and finality of the crime committed against Nick Markowitz, he doesn't believe additional deaths will alleviate the grief or offer resolution.

If Mehas' brand of compassion seems like a hard pill to swallow, consider his background as a rebellious teenager growing up in the Hollywood Hills. Raised in the Laurel Canyon/Mullholland area, Mehas attended Campbell Hall High School with Cassavetes, son of acclaimed director John Cassavetes and actress Gena Rowlands, and the two became fast friends. Both men completed short stints at Notre Dame High School in Sherman Oaks, followed by Mehas' departure to Hollywood High School and Cassavetes' move to North Hollywood High. Basketball remained a part of their common experience throughout their teenage years when, according to Mehas, shooting hoops for the East Valley Trojans or catching up with the next party invariably trumped academics.

"Nick and I were alpha males," Mehas said. "We grew up in the Hollywood Hills in the '70s, so there were a lot of parents out working and it was easy to have house parties instead of going to school. Nick



Nick Markowitz

“I want to do what I can to make sure no other parents and kids repeat the same Greek tragedy in their lives.”

and I were both 'A' students, but high school was really a place that provided opportunities to play basketball and find people to drink beer and smoke pot with."

This kind of self-reflection gnaws at Mehas, allowing him a sympathetic jumping-off point for grasping the machinations of drug-riddled, underdeveloped minds.

"I'm looking at these guys and saying, 'That could have been me,'" Mehas said. "We are a product of our environment and most of our behavior is learned. So, let's say you're a young boy and you see your father slap your mother...what are you learning there?"

Working closely with the case for the last five years afforded Mehas, who has been a family law and criminal defense attorney for 20 years, intimate glimpses into the personal lives of the real-life counterparts of his characters.

"What we are talking about here is brain maturation," Mehas said. "These kids didn't have the ability to recognize the overall circumstances and the repercussions of their actions. They were self-medicating and functioning with undeveloped minds."

Though Mehas doesn't know if *Stolen Boy* will have an impact on the justice system, he will continue telling the story in his next book, which will chronicle the arrests, confessions and trials related to the crime.

"I want to do what I can to make sure no other parents and kids repeat the same Greek tragedy in their lives," Mehas said. ♦

Amy Lyons is a freelance journalist frequently published in magazines and newspapers throughout the San Fernando Valley and greater Los Angeles.

TIPS FOR HELPING YOUR KIDS STAY ON TRACK

Though it's impossible for parents to track every move their adolescent children and teenagers make, there are certain parenting skills — not taught in high school — that may help keep kids on track. As this story makes clear, problems can happen even in a "good family,"

and high income is no guarantee of immunity.

ValleyLife spoke with executives at two youth and parent outreach organizations who helped us compile a list of warning signs that indicate children may need re-directing. They also suggested tips for keeping youngsters safe and healthy as they negotiate the rough waters of puberty and young adulthood.

Alexander Sanchez, former gang member and executive director of Homies Unidos, based in downtown Los Angeles, works with his organization to end violence and promote peace through gang intervention, promotion of humane treatment of marginalized youth, providing alternatives to gang involvement and destructive behavior, and empowering youth to change.

Deborah Davis, director of programs at Friends of the Family, a Van Nuys-based family resource center specializing in the fostering of self-sufficient, healthy children and well-informed parents, has overseen outreach programs in parent education and support in a number of areas of the San Fernando Valley and Los Angeles. Here's what they say about helping kids steer clear of drugs and violent lifestyles.

LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN

Both Sanchez and Davis said sound communication amongst parents and children is essential in the prevention of adolescent drug use and engagement in other dangerous activities.

"You might not always like what your child is telling you, but you have to listen," Sanchez said. "You have to build dialogue and let them know they can trust you no matter what."

KNOW WHERE THEY GO

When your children walk out the door, ask them where they're going and let them know what time they need to be home. It's a delicate balance between building trust and getting on their case, but information is key.

"Kids need something to do after school," Davis said. "Many of the parents we see are working two jobs and the kids are left unattended. Enroll them in an after-school program, or

make sure they are with a trusted friend. Parents have to advocate for their children in terms of funding for after school programs. More and more budget cuts eliminate places and programs for teens."

"You can't just believe what is in front of you," Sanchez said. "Your kid might be a good kid, but what is he doing when he walks out the door?"

In addition to knowing where children go, get to know the people your children have chosen for friends, Davis advised.

HELP THEM MAKE THE GRAD

According to both Sanchez and Davis, a decline in academic performance is one of the clearest signs a child might be in trouble. Be sure to check report cards and attend parent/teacher meetings, so they know you care about their grades. Don't just assume they're doing homework; check their work. "Kids need parents to expect them to succeed," Davis said.

WORRY IF THEY WITHDRAW

Though outright displays of anger often signal a child in need, withdrawal can also be a red flag.

"There are issues of misconduct in schools, issues of being disrespectful, being a bully, and those are obvious signs that something is wrong," Sanchez said. "But kids can also become isolated and anti-social if they're being influenced by a gang."

RELY ON PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES

Parents who suspect their children need help re-directing should not be afraid to consult with professional providers outside the family. Help is sometimes a phone call away and if there are mental health issues, those

are best dealt with professionally, according to both Sanchez and Davis.

The following providers work to prevent teen violence and foster healthy homes.

Communities in Schools of the San Fernando Valley

CIS is a local affiliate of the national Communities in Schools, a leading organization that helps youth to succeed in school and prepare for life. 818.891.9399, www.cisgla.org

Friends of the Family

Family resource center offering parenting programs for young mothers and fathers, as well as counseling services for elementary, middle and high school students. 818.988.4430, www.fofca.org/index.htm

Homeboy Industries

Founded by Father Gregory Boyle, Homeboy Industries assists at-risk and formerly gang-involved youth to become positive and contributing members of society through job placement, training and education. 323.526.1254, www.homeboy-industries.org/father-greg.php

Homies Unidos

This organization specializes in gang gang prevention and intervention. 213.383.7484, www.homiesunidos.org

Violence Prevention Coalition of Greater Los Angeles

A program of the LA County Department of Health Services, this organization addresses violence as a public health issue, seeking to identify social policies and processes that can reduce or prevent problems. 213.351.7888, www.vpcla.org ♦