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Growing up in America



It has happened again, this time in Southern California. An angry boy, a burst of gunfire, more children dead in a high school corridor.

So soon after the arrest of two Vermont teenagers on charges

of killing two Dartmouth College professors, the shootings at Santana High School in suburban San Diego have a nation of bewildered parents asking yet again, "What's gone wrong with our children?"

The airwaves already are awash in easy answers: The suspected shooter was a skinny kid, a target of bullies, an outsider from Maryland, new to the town of Santee. No doubt 15-year-old Andy Williams was all of those things. Whether any of it contributed to the high school freshman's alleged decision to raid his father's gun case and open fire on his classmates on Monday with a .22-caliber revolver is another matter.

When Carter Norton awoke in her Connecticut home yesterday to the latest front-page account of murderous adolescent rage, she thought, "Not again. When are we going to start listening to our kids?" The mother of five children, ages 4

to 15, Norton said she suspects the pathology at work in these tragedies is grounded as much in the culture as it is in the personal psychology of the young defendants.

"It is a real struggle to grow up in a society that is as fast-paced and commercially driven as this one. Is it any wonder," she asked, "that our children are feeling as alone and as isolated as they are?"

Norton experienced the culture shock herself a few years ago when she and her family returned to the United States after years of living abroad. It wasn't just the offensive rock lyrics, the violent movie themes, or the brutal video games. It was the acceleration in America of childhood itself.

"When I was little, I had a pony," Norton recalled. "I grew up mucking stalls and looking for the evening star every night. I worry that kids no longer experience life at that more natural pace."

She was struck, too, after years in Europe and Japan, by "the age compression that is going on in the United States. Music, videos, and movies full of violence, hate, and sex are all being marketed to kids from 8 to 13, as if there is no difference among them. It's the entertainment industry putting profits ahead of our children."

In 1999, she and her husband, Chris, decided to offer an alternative view of the journey from childhood to adolescence, and the nonprofit Magical Music for Life Foundation was born. Next week, "The Adventures of Zak," their first original theatrical production, comes to Boston for a three-day run at the Copley Theatre in the Back Bay.

The musical tells the story of an alien facing the daunting task of persuading a human child in this cynical age to believe in himself. Proceeds from the production, touring nationally, are donated to pediatric charities. In Boston, ticket sales will benefit the National Kidney Foundation of Massachusetts.

The songs, written by Norton and performed by a professional troupe and local children, acknowledge the angst of adolescence, but reassure young audiences that they are neither alone nor without hope as they make their way in an increasingly frenetic world:

What happened to the world?

This isn't meant to be.

You're all cut off by technology.

Despite new forms of communication, You're moving towards living in isolation.

Straining to reach the farthest star,

You don't even know who your neighbors are.

Carter Norton is not naive. She does not think that Andy Williams might have left that gun at home on Monday if only he'd seen "The Adventures of Zak." What she does know, though, is that "like every other mother in America I see these children on the TV news, and I wonder why we aren't doing more to save them."

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