

“Will prove to be one of the most life-changing and
culture-changing books of this generation.”

—RANDY ALCORN

A TEENAGE
REBELLION
AGAINST
LOW EXPECTATIONS

DO HARD THINGS

ALEX & BRETT
HARRIS

FOREWORD BY CHUCK NORRIS

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MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

DO HARD THINGS

PUBLISHED BY MULTNOMAH BOOKS

12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200

Colorado Springs, CO 80921

A division of Random House Inc.

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ISBN 978-1-60142-112-8

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Printed in the United States of America

2008—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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FOREWORD

BY CHUCK NORRIS

As a young man, I discovered the power of doing hard things. Abject poverty, a father's alcoholism and desertion of our family, and my own shyness were a few of the obstacles I faced and overcame growing up. My mother always told me, "God has a plan for your life." And she's right. Each of us is called to reach for greatness. There really is a hero in all of us. We've all been designed by God to be a blessing to many—a hero to some.

But there's only one way to get there—it's described by the title of this book: *Do Hard Things*.

Today we live in a culture that promotes comfort, not challenges. Everything is about finding ways to escape hardship, avoid pain, and dodge duty. In the past, young people were expected to make significant contributions to society. Today, our culture expects very little from teens—not much more than staying in school and doing a few chores. A sad consequence of such low expectations is that life-changing lessons go unlearned.

To whom can we turn to motivate a new generation of giants? I've found the answer. Alex and Brett Harris and their book, *Do Hard Things*.

FOREWORD

I know the twins personally and can vouch for their integrity and wisdom. I've seen their passion to raise up a new generation of tough-spirited young people. They are amazing young men, uniquely qualified to inspire others to reach for great things.

One of my life's principles is to develop myself to the maximum of my potential in all ways and to help others do the same. Brett and Alex come straight from the same mold, but with an even greater potential to reach young people around the world.

Their book is far more than a typical how-to book. From an insightful historical overview of the teen years to personal plans for helping teens hurdle tough obstacles, the authors sound a battle cry to raise the cultural bar on teenage potential and to challenge young people to reach for their God-given best.

Do Hard Things will help recruit, develop, and deploy a new generation of young culture warriors. With God's help, the book you're holding will usher in an era in which it can once again be said of our youth, "I write to you, *young men*, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one" (1 John 2:14).

Start reading now. Then do hard things!

—Chuck Norris
www.chucknorris.com

PART 1

**RETHINKING THE
TEEN YEARS**

MOST PEOPLE DON'T...

A different kind of teen book

Most people don't expect you to understand what we're going to tell you in this book. And even if you understand, they don't expect you to care. And even if you care, they don't expect you to do anything about it. And even if you do something about it, they don't expect it to last.

Well, we do.

This is a different kind of teen book. Check online or walk through your local bookstore. You'll find plenty of books

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written by fortysomethings who, like, totally understand what it's like being a teenager. You'll find a lot of cheap throwaway books for teens because young people today aren't supposed to care about books or see any reason to keep them around. And you'll find a wide selection of books where you never have to read anything twice—because the message is dumbed-down. Like, just for you.

What you're holding in your hands right now is a challenging book *for* teens *by* teens who believe our generation is ready for a change. Ready for something that doesn't promise a whole new life if you'll just buy the right pair of jeans or use the right kind of deodorant. We believe our generation is ready to rethink what teens are capable of doing and becoming. And we've noticed that once wrong ideas are debunked and cleared away, our generation is quick to choose a better way, even if it's also more difficult.

We're nineteen-year-old twin brothers, born and raised in Oregon, taught at home by our parents, and striving to follow Christ as best we can. We've made more than our share of mistakes. And although we don't think "average teenagers" exist, there is nothing all that extraordinary about us personally.

Still, we've had some extraordinary experiences. At age sixteen, we interned at the Alabama Supreme Court. At seventeen, we served as grass-roots directors for four statewide political campaigns. At eighteen, we authored the most popular Christian teen blog on the web. We've been able to speak

MOST PEOPLE DON'T...

to thousands of teens and their parents at conferences in the United States and internationally and to reach millions online. But if our teen years have been different than most, it's not because we're somehow better than other teens, but because we've been motivated by a simple but very big idea. It's an idea you're going to encounter for yourself in the pages ahead.

We've seen this idea transform "average" teenagers into world-changers able to accomplish incredible things. And they started by simply being willing to break the mold of what society thinks teens are capable of.

So even though the story starts with us, this book really isn't about us, and we would never want it to be. It's about something God is doing in the hearts and minds of our generation. It's about an idea. It's about rebelling against low expectations. It's about a movement that is changing the attitudes and actions of teens around the world. And we want you to be part of it.

This book invites you to explore some radical questions:

- Is it possible that even though teens today have more freedom than any other generation in history, we're actually missing out on some of the best years of our lives?
- Is it possible that what our culture says about the purpose and potential of the teen years is a lie and that we are its victims?

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- Is it possible that our teen years give us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for huge accomplishments—as individuals and as a generation?
- And finally, what would our lives look like if we set out on a different path entirely—a path that required more effort but promised a lot more reward?

We describe that alternative path with three simple words: “do hard things.”

If you’re like most people, your first reaction to the phrase “do hard things” runs along the lines of, “Hard? Uh-oh. Guys, I just remembered that I’m supposed to be somewhere else. Like, right now.”

We understand this reaction. It reminds us of a story we like to tell about a group of monks. Yep, monks.

On the outskirts of a small town in Germany is the imaginary abbey of Dundelhoff. This small stone monastery is home to a particularly strict sect of Dundress monks, who have each vowed to live a life of continual self-denial and discomfort.

Instead of wearing comfy T-shirts and well-worn jeans like most people, these monks wear either itchy shirts made from goat hair or cold chain mail worn directly over bare skin. Instead of soft mattresses, pillows, and warm blankets, they sleep on the cold stone floors of the abbey. You might have read somewhere that monks are fabulous cooks? Well, not

MOST PEOPLE DON'T...

these monks. They eat colorless, tasteless sludge—once a day. They only drink lukewarm water.

We could go on, but you get the picture. No matter what decision they face, Dundress monks always choose the more difficult option, the one that provides the least physical comfort, holds the least appeal, offers the least fun. Why? Because they believe that the more miserable they are, the holier they are; and the holier they are, the happier God is.

So these miserable monks must be poster boys for “do hard things.” Right?

Wrong!

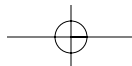
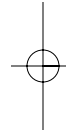
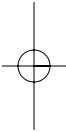
We’re not plotting to make your life miserable. We’re not recommending that you do any and every difficult thing. For example, we’re not telling you to rob a bank, jump off a cliff, climb Half Dome with your bare hands, or stand on your head for twenty-four hours straight. We are not telling you to do pointless (or stupid) hard things just because they’re hard. And if you’re a Christian, we’re certainly not telling you that if you work harder or make yourself uncomfortable on purpose, God will love you more. He will never—could never—love you any more than He does right now.

So that’s what we’re not doing. What we *are* doing is challenging you to grab hold of a more exciting option for your teen years than the one portrayed as normal in society today. This option has somehow gotten lost in our culture, and most

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people don't even know it. In the pages ahead, you're going to meet young people just like you who have rediscovered this better way—a way to reach higher, dream bigger, grow stronger, love and honor God, live with more joy—and quit wasting their lives.

In *Do Hard Things*, we not only say there is a better way to do the teen years, we show you how we and thousands of other teens are doing it right now and how you can as well.



2

THE BIRTH OF A BIG IDEA

Rumblings of a rebellion

The summer of 2005, when we were sixteen, was a tough summer—not so much because of what we did but because of what we didn't do. For several years we had been heavily involved in high-school speech and debate, spending most of our summers doing research for the next season's

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topic and writing speeches for individual events. Our parents had decided that it was time for us to move on, and while we agreed with their decision, we felt lost.

We welcomed the break, but we were looking for direction—unsure of what to do with our lives, or even of what came next. We knew that we wanted to do something that mattered, but what was it? It seemed like every time we thought we had a plan, God closed the door. We were floating. In limbo.

Then Dad took charge.

“I’m putting you two on an intense reading program this summer,” he announced one morning, placing a large stack of books on the kitchen counter.

We eyed one another warily. We love to read, but something about the way dad said the word *intense* caught our attention—that and the thickness of the books he was pointing to. The stack included books on a huge range of topics: history, philosophy, theology, sociology, science, business, journalism, and globalization.

For the next few months we didn’t do much besides read. We digested books like *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* by Edmund Morris, *Total Truth* by Nancy Pearcey, *The Fabric of the Cosmos* by Brian Greene, *Blog* by Hugh Hewitt, and *The World Is Flat* by Thomas Friedman, to name a few. The more we read, the more our minds were filled with exciting—and at the same

time troubling—thoughts about our rapidly changing world and our generation’s place in it.

We began to realize that even though the books we were reading were all written for adults, teens were the ones who most needed to wake up to what the books were saying. After all, aren’t teens the ones who will grow up to live in the world those books describe? And aren’t teens the ones who will be called on to lead it? If so, we were convinced that there had to be more to the teen years than pop culture suggests.

We decided to start a blog as a place to share our thoughts with friends and any others who might stumble across it. We knew we needed to let our ideas out, and the Internet was clearly the way to go. After some back-and-forth, we finally settled on a name for our blog: The Rebelution.

The word *rebelution* is probably new to you. To be honest, we made it up. We combined *rebellion* and *revolution* to form an entirely new word for an entirely new concept: rebelling against rebellion. More precisely, we define *rebelution* as “a teenage rebellion against low expectations.”

In this chapter we want to show you the personal side of the Rebelution because that’s how it started—as two teens waking up to a big idea, and the first rumblings of a historic shift in the thinking of teens across the country and around the world. This chapter is our story. In the chapters that follow, we lay out in more detail why we think the Rebelution is necessary, what it stands for, and how you can be part of it.

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STRIKING THE RIGHT CHORD

If you had told us then that our humble Google-hosted blog sporting a generic design template would go on to become the most popular Christian teen blog on the web, we would've laughed. But our ideas about what God can do through teens like us have come a long way since then.

One of the first series of articles we posted was called *The Myth of Adolescence*, calling into question the modern notion of the teen years as a time to goof off. Almost immediately other teens started to comment on our posts. To our surprise we found that teens didn't just think that the teen years *could* have deeper meaning, they felt strongly that the teen years *should* have deeper meaning. "What you're saying is what I'm missing at my church," wrote one teen. "Don't stop!"

When we asked on the blog why teens weren't rising up against our culture's low expectations, the response overwhelmed us. "Everyone I know at school is shackled by low expectations," commented sixteen-year-old Lauren from Colorado. Nate, a high-school senior from Florida, wrote, "Man, did you ever say exactly what I've been feeling, well, ever since I became a teenager!"

As the conversation heated up, we kept wondering who exactly these other teens were. Some of them we knew, but most of them we didn't. Were they all overachieving, Type A,

head-of-their-class types? When we asked, we discovered that wasn't the case. Most described themselves as normal, everyday teens. Some were public schooled, some private, some homeschooled. Most lived in the United States; others wrote from Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Brazil, and the Philippines. How they found us we don't really know. But most of them were restless. Our questions had struck a chord.

Word spread. New questions sparked more discussion and inspired new blog posts—sometimes two or more a day. We didn't have all the answers, and not many who wrote in thought they did either. But all the asking and arguing, pushing and probing, helped sharpen our rough ideas. Something big was starting to unfold.

A lot bigger than we realized. Just three weeks after the blog was launched, the *New York Daily News*, the sixth-largest daily newspaper in the United States, wrote a feature column about the blog. "Think Big! HS Twins Tell Peers" read the headline. The column opened with the words, "Most high schoolers' blogs are the online equivalent of perfumed diaries or locker-room walls—outlets for teens to gossip, confess and network with their pals. But a pair of 16-year-old homeschooled twins from Oregon...are out to change that."

"The teen years are not a vacation from responsibility," we had told the columnist. "They are the training ground of future leaders who dare to be responsible now."

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The article drew more readers to the blog. Most were just curious that a group of teens was actually *looking* for responsibility, but a lot of people stuck around, and the heavy traffic didn't interrupt the real discussion that was going on among the growing ranks of "rebelutionaries."

"Assume we teens get this," wrote Jake, a junior from Oklahoma, responding to a new post on low expectations in media. "What do we really need to do? What's next?"

God must have been following our online discussion—and smiling. Because what He brought us next blew our old expectations for the teen years into tiny pieces.

GUINEA PIGS FOR OUR OWN IDEAS

In October 2005, we were invited to apply for an internship at the Alabama Supreme Court. Say that again? Never in a million years could we have predicted anything like that. Those positions were generally reserved for law school students and exceptional college undergraduates. We'd been successful in speech and debate competition, yes, but we hadn't even graduated from high school. We were still sixteen years old.

Our first thought was that they must not have known how old we were. But they did. It turned out that the staff attorney in charge of the intern program in Justice Tom Parker's office had been reading The Rebelution blog and decided he

was willing to take us up on our premise that teens have—and waste—enormous untapped potential. At the staff attorney's request, Justice Parker agreed to waive the usual age requirement for interns and look solely at whether we could do the job. The door was open. The ball was in our court.

We chose to apply for the internship, but honestly, we didn't know what to fear more—getting rejected or getting accepted. An agonizing month went by. Finally word came. We had been accepted for a two-month internship in the chambers of a supreme court justice. Our primary responsibilities would be to research and proof judicial opinions for Justice Parker. Our start date would fall two weeks before we turned seventeen.

As excited as we were to be accepted, we also felt enormous pressure. We would be the youngest interns in the history of the Alabama Supreme Court—possibly of any supreme court. It's not that we didn't bring some skills to the table. We had worked hard to become proficient researchers, debaters, and writers. But that was junior high and high school. This was a whole new level. God seemed to be making us the guinea pigs for our own ideas. Only fair, we see now, but at the time we were terrified.

We were leaving home for the first time, and we had less than a month to get ready. We would be wearing a suit and tie every day, which meant several hectic shopping trips downtown. We also had to make living arrangements, and

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of course we had to let our blog readers know what was going on.

They were excited. Everybody understood that this was a chance for the two of us to try out the ideas our web community had been discussing so intently. It was time to live the message of our little movement—not just read and write about it.

Upon our arrival in Montgomery, we learned that we'd be expected to contribute in a variety of ways, and training would be entirely on-the-job. Though Justice Parker and his staff were gracious and inclusive, we wouldn't be receiving any special treatment. They had ignored our age when they considered us for the internship, and they would ignore it now when it came to evaluating our performance. We would have to earn trust, and we would not be allowed to compromise the efficiency of the court.

This meant that we started with the basics—picking up the mail, making photocopies, and organizing papers. We also drafted press releases and handled certain e-mail correspondence. Soon we were invited to help edit Justice Parker's opinions and circulate them to other justices. Every time one job went well, Justice Parker trusted us with more. In fact, his expectation that we could do more was a constant motivation to learn and improve.

By the end of two months, we had gone from running errands to accompanying Justice Parker to prestigious events.

We had gone from editing opinions for punctuation and spelling to actually contributing paragraphs of final wording, even occasionally drafting internal memorandums to the other justices. By the time our internship was up, even Justice Parker was surprised by what we had accomplished—and we were elated.

Right away another door opened: we were invited back to Alabama to serve as grass-roots directors for four simultaneous statewide campaigns for the Alabama Supreme Court—including Justice Parker’s run for chief justice.

The guinea pigs had survived! More important, both of us had experienced our own personal rebellion. And that was just the beginning.

RACING ACROSS THE STATE

Our internships tested two young men, but the statewide campaigns would test a whole team of teens. Hundreds of them, in fact. As grass-roots directors we’d be working with and recruiting young people and their families to head up efforts around the state. And we would operate under the same guideline that had gotten us the job: ability, not age, would determine who was recruited.

The spring of 2006 found us back in Alabama, ready to take the Rebellion movement to the next level. We were stationed at campaign headquarters in Montgomery, but over

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the next three months we visited almost every county in the state. All of the core members of the campaign staff were on the younger side. Our campaign manager was by far the oldest, in his midthirties; our field director was twenty-three; and we, the grass-roots directors, were seventeen. That was just the start. One of the first people we recruited was Jake Smith—the same Jake who had written in with the question “What do we really need to do? What’s next?”

We recruited teenagers at almost every level of the campaign and encouraged them to take on high-level responsibility. Teens designed the campaign website. Teens coordinated housing and meals for out-of-state volunteers. Teens used advanced mapping software to create driving routes for literature drops. They planned events and coordinated television coverage. They provided graphic design, campaign photography, and videography. By the time the campaign was over, teens had not only worked thousands of hours on the campaign, but had also put together the largest grass-roots operation in any Alabama race that season.

But with big dreams come big challenges. You wouldn’t believe some of the problems we had to solve, usually with no warning. For example:

- How do you recruit and remotivate volunteers who had showed up only because they were mistakenly told they’d be working for a *different* candidate?

- How do you distribute 120,000 newspapers at a NASCAR race at Talladega Superspeedway in thirty-six hours (without getting run over or arrested)?
- Where do you house volunteers who drive in from four states away and arrive tired, broke, and *way too early*?
- What do you say to older recruits—mostly college kids, as it turned out—who loudly proclaim that teenagers are clueless punks and not to be trusted, and then find out that *you* (that is, “clueless punks”) are the ones in charge?

But with every challenge, our entire team discovered new opportunities to learn, laugh, and sometimes start over. We also made discoveries about ourselves as individuals. A campaign—like any movement or revolution—isn’t really a faceless mass. It’s a collection of individuals who join together on the same cause for a reason. It’s ordinary people who decide to step out and be part of something big.

That’s when they become extraordinary.

SHY GIRL IN CHARGE

We wish you could meet Heidi Bentley, our coordinator for Mobile County. We had met Heidi and her family briefly at the campaign kickoff meeting. In the following weeks, all our communications with her were by phone or e-mail—she was in southern Alabama and we were in the capitol. We gave

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Heidi all sorts of big assignments—everything from handing out campaign materials at large festivals to booking facilities and making hundreds of phone calls—and she did an incredible job. We’d often say to one another, “If all of our county coordinators were like Heidi, we’d be in great shape!”

But Heidi was not who we thought she was. We had gotten her mixed up with her older sister, whom we’d also met at the kickoff. The whole time we thought Heidi was twenty-four. The real Heidi was seventeen.

Our first reaction was, *Oh man, I can’t believe we asked so much of her!* Then we caught ourselves. Wait a second! We thought she was twenty-four, so we had expected her to be responsible as if she were twenty-four, and she rose to meet those expectations and acted like she was twenty-four. Heidi was a one-person testimonial for the Reblution we’d been blogging about.

Our second reaction was, *Duh! We’re seventeen too, and we’re the grass-roots directors, for crying out loud!*

But it was only toward the end of the campaign that we learned something else about Heidi. She had always been extremely introverted. She hated talking on the phone, her family told us, even with people she knew. Yet we had put her on the phone with strangers almost constantly. Throughout the entire campaign, her family watched in amazement as Heidi jumped way outside of her comfort zone and did things that would have seemed impossible before.

BETTER THAN SUCCESS

When we tell the story of the Alabama campaigns, people always ask whether we won. The answer is no. Despite the competence and hard work of so many people like Heidi, our candidates lost at the polls. Ironically, the very day we sat down to write this story, the *Huntsville Times* published an editorial titled “Judicial-Race Excesses.” It chided the campaigns for their “out-of-control” spending. The 2006 Alabama judicial races, the paper reported, had set the all-time national high of fifteen million dollars. Out of that amount, our four candidates combined spent less than half a million dollars. We like to think that the unprecedented level of teenage involvement had something to do with the unprecedented level of spending it took to beat us!

Shortly after the campaigns ended, Heidi wrote to us to share what she felt God had been doing in her life:

During this whole campaign, God has been doing amazing things. I think I have grown more in these past few months than the whole year before!

I laughed when I first read the phrase “do hard things.” That’s exactly what God began to teach me with the beginning of the campaign, and it hasn’t stopped with primaries. He has taken my perspective

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of my own capabilities and stretched it three times around a new and bigger perspective.

I think I have thoroughly shocked my family by doing things that they (and I) never imagined I'd be doing. It's amazing what we can do if we will trust God enough to step out of our comfort zones!

We look back with gratitude, realizing that we gained so much: learning to trust God, for example, or finding that stepping outside of our comfort zones helped us grow, or realizing that together young people can accomplish much more than our culture gives us credit for. Working on the campaigns taught us that never trying is a lot worse than losing. And we experienced firsthand that all effort—even failed effort—produces muscle. In fact, because of our work in Alabama, the agenda for the Reblution that we'd been talking about back home snapped into sharper focus—particularly what we began to call the three pillars of the Reblution: character, competence, and collaboration (but more about them later).

The first two stages of our personal rebelution—the internship and the campaigns—had moved us from the personal experience of two teens to the community experience of many.

The next stage launched us into the virtual experience of millions.

REBELUTION RISING

When we arrived home from Alabama, we were excited about refocusing on the online community that had continued to form. Quickly we decided that we needed to take the blog to the next level—launching a full website that would offer additional resources and ways for rebelutionaries to interact with one another.

Actually, we'd never planned to have a full-blown website of our own. But the community was already there, so it seemed only natural that the website follow. We hired a friend to do the coding for us while we designed everything and figured out where it should go. To go along with a completely new look and feel, the website would feature discussion forums, links to hundreds of other articles by great authors (past and present), and a conference section outlining our plan to hold four regional events during 2007. Weeks of planning and several all-nighters later, the website launched on August 28, 2006—the one-year anniversary of The Rebelution blog.

It was our first time creating a website, but we were able to pull in other guys from around the country (and even outside the country) to help us get the project done on time. Alex King, a sixteen-year-old from Maine; Alex Poythress, a seventeen-year-old from Alabama; and David Boskovic, a seventeen-year-old from Canada, stayed up late and got up early to put

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the finishing touches on the website so it could be launched at 6:00 a.m.

Then we waited to see what would happen.

The response was instantaneous and overwhelming. Despite the fact that we did next to nothing to promote the launch, our traffic jumped from around 2,200 hits the previous day to 12,800 hits on launch day—a 480 percent increase in traffic overnight. It wasn't a generic-looking blog anymore. It was an entire online community.

REBELLING AGAINST REBELLION

It's been over two years since our dad dropped that big stack of books on the kitchen counter and brought our aimless summer to a screeching halt. Since then, our website has received over fifteen million hits from several million unique visitors around the world. We've hosted Rebelution conferences across the United States—and internationally, in Japan. At our last 2007 conference in Indianapolis, over twenty-one hundred people showed up—some driving as many as sixteen hours to be there.

What God has done since the summer of 2005 has been incredible. We're just blessed to be along for the ride. Sure, we came up with a name for it, but the Rebelution is something God is doing in the hearts of our generation, not something we engineered. That's why the purpose of this book is not to

brag about anything we've done, but to talk about something huge that God is doing in the lives of young people around the world—something He wants to do in your life as well.

If you look back over history, you'll find other movements that were started (or fueled) by young people. The problem is, most of these movements were actually revolts against God-established authority (like parents, church, or government), and many were ultimately crushed or twisted toward another end.

All those failed revolutionary attempts are a discouraging record as far as teen efforts go, but not for rebelutionaries. We're not rebelling against institutions or even against people. Our uprising is against a cultural mind-set that twists the purpose and potential of the teen years and threatens to cripple our generation. Our uprising won't be marked by mass riots and violence, but by millions of individual teens quietly choosing to turn the low expectations of our culture upside down.

That is our invitation to you—to join with us and other teenagers who are serious about changing the world's ideas about the teen years.

In the upcoming chapters, we'll show you how.