

Q&A with Author Jeffrey Zaslow



THE GIRLS FROM AMES

By Jeffrey Zaslow

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How did the idea for THE GIRLS FROM AMES come about?

I write a column for The Wall Street Journal about life transitions - those moments when life takes a turn. Back in 2003, I wrote a story on the transitions in women's friendships, and received hundreds of emails from women eager to tell me about their longtime friends. As I read all their comments, it got me thinking about my own three daughters, and the friends they'd need to carry them through life. Eventually, I decided to find one group of women and immerse myself as a reporter in the "biography" of their friendship. I called a bunch of the women who'd written to me, including Jenny Litchman. She told me about the 10 girls she grew up with in Ames, Iowa.

How did you decide that of all the emails you received, you would focus on this particular group of girls?

I found the Ames girls' story to be very moving. In some ways, their experiences are universal, and so I thought a book about them would resonate with any woman who has ever had a friend. In other ways, their story is completely one-of-a-kind - haunting and touching and exhilarating. Born at the end of the baby boom, their memories are evocative of their times. Born in the middle of the country, they now live everywhere else, but carry Ames with them.

Some of the Ames girls were hesitant at first about sharing themselves so publicly in a book. But in time, they realized that a look at their friendship might offer insights for other women.

They spoke vividly about what it was like to be girls in the sixties and seventies, young women in the eighties, and new mothers in the nineties. They showed me how close friendships can shape every aspect of women's lives.

What is it like being a man writing about female friendships and living with your wife and daughters at home?

Come live with me, you'll see! I have a wife and three daughters (ages 19, 17 and 13) and I often can't figure out their needs or emotions. I'm an outsider, living inside this sometimes secret world. So I'm on a constant quest to understand girls and women. On the friendship front: I've seen how friends can buoy the spirits of my daughters, and I've also seen the downside, when their friends are cruel or let them down. So I know the power of friendship, and the emptiness girls can feel when friends don't come through.

I live in suburban Detroit, and I pay attention to my 13-year-old as she interacts with her friends. I'll carpool them and listen as they chatter away in the backseat. I'm always thinking of the Ames girls, recalling insights they gave me about their own childhoods together. I've also learned that friendships can survive their down periods. So I'm able to tell my girls, "You and your friends will get over this. The Ames girls have been muscling through their issues for 40 years!"

My daughters roll their eyes sometimes when I bring up the Ames girls, but I think they are listening now when I try to offer insights. They figure I've done a lot of research into friendship. Maybe I've learned something.

Do you have any new insight about women from spending so much time with them?

Well, I've learned so much about how a close group of friends can keep women healthy and happier. The research, which I delve into in the book, is just astounding. And the Ames girls fit so many of the common patterns.

I learned that female friendships are completely different from male friendships. Men's friendships are based more on activities - sports, work. I play in a weekly poker game, and pretty much all we talk about are the cards. Period.

Women are connected through their emotions. They talk about their lives.

Because men relate by doing things together, their friendships are considered "side by side." Women are "face to face." (In fact, studies show women are better than men at maintaining eye contact.)

You took a break from writing *The Girls From Ames* to write *The Last Lecture* with Randy Pausch. How did coming back to the Girls after spending time with Randy change your perspective?

Randy's death last July really did make a difference in how I felt about so many things when I returned to writing "The Girls From Ames." Randy always told me that our relationships with other people are more important than anything else in our lives.

The Ames girls already understood this. And so I saw a lot of connections between "The Girls From Ames" and "The Last Lecture." Randy talked of putting himself in a bottle that would one day wash up on shore for his three kids, ages 6, 3 and 2. He wanted to offer them all the life lessons and advice he wished he could tell them in the years to come.

The Ames girls are floating through their lives in a bottle together, sharing advice and love all along the way.

How do you want this book to inspire others? What do you hope readers will gain from *The Girls from Ames*?

I know women will see themselves and their friends in this book. They'll be reminded of how they're not alone in the world, and I'm betting that the stories here will be comforting, bringing back their own memories.

I'm sure some women reading the book will think of friends they have lost touch with, and maybe it will encourage them to reconnect.

I also assume some women, who feel they never won the friend lottery, will feel a bit envious of what the Ames girls have. I hope these women will be inspired by what they read, and perhaps they will find meaningful friendships down the road.

What was the most challenging part of writing this book?

There was no roadmap when the Ames girls and I began this project. I hadn't ever heard about a man trying to immerse himself inside the friendship of 11 women. And the girls weren't used to having a journalist asking intrusive questions.

I have to be honest. There were tense moments and the girls were not always happy with me. Feelings were hurt. Uncomfortable issues were raised. Several of them gave me their diaries or letters, and so I'd learn details about the others that they hadn't intended to share. There were debates within the group when this happened.

But I was always impressed by the way the girls hashed things out, issue by issue, and then they'd rally into a united front. This book project tested their friendship. But their loyalty to each other really moved me.

I think their friendship emerged as strong as ever. I am very grateful to the girls for everything they did, individually and collectively, to see this through to a finished book. I hope others find their story as inspiring as I did.