

Actor Motivates Youth To Make Wise Choices

Joe Manno is packing out secular venues with his live show encouraging kids to avoid drugs and gangs.



[] A Christian entertainer is teaching youth how to make wise choices through live stage shows that target elementary- and middle-school-age children.

Through his A Fighting Chance events, Joe Manno teaches 8- to 13-year-olds of the dangers of drug use, gangs and bullying and reminds them that they have a purpose. Filling 70 minutes with what Manno calls “senseless comedy,” the Broadway-styled, motivational concerts stress the importance of having good character, getting an education and respecting parents, teachers and other authority figures.

“Our kids today have an identity problem,” Manno said. “They need a father figure to take responsibility and train them in the way they should go. When that’s not there, they turn to the media, to the culture, but there’s no one there to tell them that they’re valuable, unique and fearfully and wonderfully made.”

After each show, Manno gives participants the first title in his four-part A Fighting Chance book series, which follows the exploits of an

undercover

detective disguised as a wacky teacher who solves crimes and teaches kids about teamwork, respect and having a positive attitude.

Manno's nonprofit organization, Reaching the Children, which he leads with producer Anthony DeRosa, also provides curriculum that helps educators reinforce those messages throughout the year. In 2004, Manno released the Emmy-winning DVD All in 1, which continues his motivational theme.

Although the shows are not overtly evangelistic, Manno said they communicate God's love and affirm biblical truth. "Because of our faith, we have a passion to give, to love and to help these kids develop positive, productive and happy lives," he said.

A native of St. Louis, Manno knows firsthand how tough it can be to do the right thing. He says his grandfather was a well-connected mob boss who expected Manno to take over the family business.

Instead, Manno moved to Hollywood in the early 1980s, hoping to make it big.

Within his first week, he'd met Dick Van Dyke Show star Rose Marie, who helped him find his first manager. Soon he had bit parts on Cagney and Lacey and Trapper John M.D. In less than three years, he'd landed his first leading role in a feature film.

But the character he played didn't provide a good example for

young

audiences. "I made a promise to myself and to God that I would never do anything like it again," Manno said. "I realized I would have to face the Lord one day, so I knew I'd better get it right [now]."

Rather than being a part of the media problem, Manno resolved to use his talents to bring a solution. His approach seems to be working. Youth often send him letters saying that the Fighting Chance shows and books have impacted their lives.

"Most people that come and tell us about drugs are boring so nobody really even listens, but you made it fun," wrote a Florida middle-school student named Lena. "Keep up the whole saving lives thing. I know you made a difference in mine."

Local businesses and corporations underwrite the shows, enabling Manno to pursue what he believes is his calling. "Our mission in life is to reach the children," Manno said. "We tell them: 'There's nobody like you. ... You're one of a kind; you're here for a reason, and you make a difference.'"

"I say to the kids: 'I'm not telling you not to do bad things. I'm just telling you what happens when you do them. The decision is yours, and the consequences are yours.' We've found that when you put information into the

kids' hands and let them choose [a path on their own], chances are better that they'll choose the right one."

—Amado Bobadilla

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