

IF YOU SEE THEM: Young, Unhoused, and Alone in America

A letter from Vicki Sokolik

Dear reader,

The day I met seventeen-year-old Shaquille, one of the youths featured in *If You See Them: Young, Unhoused, and Alone in America*, he was expelled from high school. He had also recently been arrested for armed robbery. This sort of friction was all he knew.

In *If You See Them*, I recount how I came to know of an invisible population of young people navigating life alone—unaccompanied homeless youth, like Shaquille. They are teens unhoused, not living with a parent or guardian, and not in foster care. They have escaped abusive parents, been abandoned, or never had a home to begin with. In 2008, I founded a nonprofit, Starting Right, Now (SRN), that empowers unaccompanied homeless youth in high school to cultivate brighter lives.

Shortly after meeting Shaquille, I took him on his first visit to the library, and we made a list of books we would read. I knew the power that books had to connect people. Discussing them together became our path to understanding each other. Now in his 30s, Shaquille is still an avid reader.

Book clubs are a powerful way to build compassion and gain enlightenment. I hope anyone reading *If You See Them* feels inspired by these young people, who have overcome so much. With all the obstacles they face, there is so much to talk about! I would be honored to zoom into your book club and be part of the discussion. Feel free to reach out to me at VickiSokolik.com.



Discussion Questions

- 1.** How did this book change your understanding of homeless youth? Were you already aware of the category of “unaccompanied homeless youth”—kids who are not in the foster system and have no safety net? The book’s title, *If You See Them*, suggests that we don’t always see these kids. After reading the book, are you more likely to pay attention? In what ways?
- 2.** As a guide who introduces us to the plight of unhoused youth, Vicki undergoes her own transformation as the book progresses. Did you find her story relatable? Inspiring? Frustrating? Did you feel that Vicki’s own life circumstances made her uniquely suited to engage with these kids and support them? Are there ways that each of us can use our unique strengths to play a role in making the world safer and easier to navigate? Vicki’s tenacity is her superpower. What is your superpower?
- 3.** Which of the student storylines affected you most? What about their stories, personalities, or challenges resonated with you? What surprised you?
- 4.** Vicki makes the case that many of the kids we judge as “bad”—who act out or have behavioral problems—are in fact reacting to the bad hand they have been dealt, growing up in difficult circumstances. Did the book help you reflect on or reconsider assumptions you’ve made in the past?
- 5.** Amanda is the first unaccompanied homeless youth Vicki meets, and their encounter eventually propels Vicki to found Starting Right, Now. Vicki and Amanda’s relationship, however, goes through many highs and lows; at one point, Amanda accuses Vicki of trying to be her mother. How did you feel about the way Vicki treats Amanda, and vice versa? How does Vicki’s relationship with Amanda and the other SRN students compare with her relationships with her own children, Cori and Cameron?
- 6.** Through the experiences of the children Vicki encounters, we see that youth homelessness intersects with many other sociopolitical problems—such as drug addiction, the U.S. immigration system, homophobia and anti-LGBTQ ideologies, and sexual abuse. Discuss how the book has deepened your understanding of a sociopolitical issue and/or structural inequality.

Discussion Questions

- 7.** When Shaq meets Vicki, he initially views her with suspicion: “I just thought Vicki was a White woman doing charity work.” Shaq’s adversarial behavior causes some friction—and Vicki comes to see that she can’t force her efforts or unrealistic expectations on him. What does Vicki and Shaq’s relationship reveal about the ethics and limits of helping others, especially those who come from different backgrounds? Earlier in the book, Vicki realizes that her desire to help Chalet was “self-serving,” a way for her to feel “empowered and useful.” Where is the line between helping that is self-serving and helping that is meaningful and useful? Can they be both things at once?
- 8.** Many of the students in Vicki’s program aim to go to college, but they encounter many obstacles in applying, not least the cost and bureaucracy of completing applications and financial aid forms. How did their experiences inform your understanding of the college application process today? As many of them are first-generation college students, what are some additional challenges they might face?
- 9.** We gradually learn details of Vicki’s own story—her marriage to Joel, her parents’ bankruptcy, Cori’s diagnosis with nocturnal epilepsy. How did learning about Vicki’s own life influence your response to the book? How does it inform her empathy and capacity to advocate for others?
- 10.** Starting Right, Now provides a range of initiatives to support its students: retreats, an after-school curriculum, mentoring relationships, and many more. Which of these initiatives were you most interested in? Did you find any of the exercises Vicki describes useful in your own life?
- 11.** Toward the end of the book, Shaq reveals that he has had a recent legal setback. Despite this, he is determined to remain optimistic and make a change for the better. He says, “My life doesn’t end here. The best is yet to come. Every day is a new day. There is always opportunity to begin starting right, now.” How does this resilience infuse the book, the SRN students’ experiences, and Vicki’s work? How much do you think Shaq’s attitude is due to Vicki’s unwavering commitment to Shaq and her belief in him? Can you think of a person in your own life whose belief in you was transformational?
- 12.** What were some of the biggest lessons you took away from this book? Did it inspire you to make changes in your own life?