Dan Savage affirms that 'It Gets Better'

by Jerry Nunn, *Windy City Times*
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Journalist/editor Dan Savage can now add "activist" to his resume. The man with many hats started writing a sex-advice column entitled Savage Love that eventually led him to write several books. The Chicago native has a new book—It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living—that goes on sale March 22.

Windy City Times: Hi, Dan. It's been a while since we talked last. You have now written a book with your husband, Terry Miller. How did you get a hold of so many celebrities for the book?

Dan Savage: We put people on it. We had an assistant, Ingrid Emerick, who came on the project just to work on the book. Through my agent and talking to people's publicists we reached out to people. Everyone we asked said they would love to. It wasn't difficult to get people to jump in and help.

WCT: Most of them had videos on YouTube already, right?

Dan Savage: Yes, most of it is from people that had contributed videos. We transcribed the videos and revised them a little bit. We made them read like essays then sent them back to see if they would like to add anything or expand them. That was mostly what Ingrid did. There are spots with new material [ from people ] such as Michael Cunningham, David Sedaris and Urvashi Vaid.

WCT: Would you want to do a [ second part ] to the project with more people?

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Dan Savage: Maybe. [ Laughs ] We will see how this book does. This is the book as far as I know. There were more voices that we would have liked to include but there was a limit to how much we could fit in the book. We wanted a nice representative sample of everybody. We thought about more artists but we wanted it to be primarily average everyday people like the project has been.

WCT: You are appearing at the AIDS Foundation luncheon here in Chicago [ May 2 ] . How does the AIDS epidemic factor in with bullying? It must be a part of destroying someone's self-esteem and not wearing protection.

Dan Savage: Yes; when people are brutalized about their sexuality we know as adults there can be certain emotional repercussions and pathologies. We know that substance abuse is higher in the gay community as well as suicide rates. [ Scissor Sisters' ] Jake Shears has a great essay in the book where he talks about the rage that he still feels due to
what he was put through as a gay teenager. He has funneled all of that rage into his art. He has externalized it and directed it outwards.

Too many gay people don't direct it outwards. They direct it at themselves. They are bullied by their parents, by spiritual leaders, peers, then as adults they continue to bully themselves through self-abuse and harm. So certainly reckless sexual risk taking is part of the long lasting psychological impacts that a culture of intolerance has.

WCT: You have been working with organizations where people can go to when they need help, correct?

Dan Savage: We have primarily been working with the Trevor Project, GLSEN [ the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network ] and the ACLU [ American Civil Liberties Union ] . We have raised tens of thousands of dollars for those organizations since we have started the project. We are just maintaining the website and raising awareness so the kids that need to see these videos can find their way to them.

WCT: Your husband, Terry, has been very involved with all of this.

Dan Savage: Absolutely. He has been with the book since day one. The project wouldn't have gotten off the ground, it would have collapsed in the first week or it would not have been out as fast as it did without Terry.

WCT: After reading the book, I remembered all the times I was picked on as a gay teenager in the South.

Dan Savage: It has been interesting that a lot of us as gay adults don't even think about what we went through. What can we do about it? You can't stop what happened to you then now. So what can you do with these experiences and stories? Nothing, there is nowhere to put it. For a lot of these people making these videos were cathartic for them to talk about these experiences.

WCT: Have you noticed a change in bullying? Has it decreased?

Dan Savage: I think it depends on where you are. I have been careful when I speak at colleges. We don't want to give the impression that all LGBT kids are being brutalized or unhappy or suicidal. If you are a queer kid and your parents support you, and your friends have your back, as well as teachers that take bullying seriously, there has never been a better time to be a gay kid than right now. But if your gay kid goes to a school where bullying is encouraged and your peers are bullying you and you live in some backwoods rural shithole there has never been a worse time.

WCT: At least there is some awareness now about it. What did you think of Glee and the episodes about bullying?
Dan Savage: I thought it was good they addressed it but had some issues on how they addressed it. I am sure there are some people that have issues on how I addressed it also so it is good that they were talking about it.

WCT: With all of this are you able to still work at [ the newspaper ] The Stranger in Seattle?

Dan Savage: The paper has been very generous in letting me focus on this for a little while. I am still able to bust out my column, blog posts and work on my other book.

WCT: Oh, another book. What else are you working on?

Dan Savage: I am working on a television pilot that is up in the air and we shall see. The new book is a totally different subject.

WCT: Well, it is important that you are getting the word out about all of this and I will see you at the upcoming events.

Dan Savage: Nice talking to you again.

To purchase the book and donate towards the campaign visit http:// www.itgetsbetter.org .

Dan Savage has two upcoming appearances in Chicago. He will be at the Nettelhorst School Auditorium, 3252 N. Broadway, on Wed., March 23. Log on to www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=189181654455437 for more information.

The AIDS Foundation of Chicago presents Dan as the keynote speaker for a luncheon Monday, May 2, at the Hilton Chicago, 720 S. Michigan. Visit http:// www.aidschicago.org for tickets to the events, including a 11 a.m. VIP reception.