

Q&A with Vanessa Diffenbaugh LP

The Language of Flowers is the novel Vanessa Diffenbaugh always wanted to write—a story about a young woman aging out of foster care (beautifully laced with the author's love for a historical botanical language), but also it represents Diffenbaugh's dedication to making real change in America's foster care system. We caught up with Diffenbaugh on what it's like to be a foster parent, the inspiration for the novel's characters, and her new non-profit, Camellia Network.

Why did you decide to become a foster parent and why is it important to you?

My husband and I have been foster parents for about five years. It started when one of my husband's students—he was a principal at an urban high school—ran away from home. It was the kind of school where every teacher gave their students their cell phone number and told them to call if they needed anything. So when Tre'von ran away from home and ended up in a receiving home—which is like a group home for kids waiting to get placed in foster homes—he called my husband and said, "I really want to come back to school, but I need a ride!" So my husband ended up going far out of town every day to get him to school. We realized that we had the space and we had the desire to help Tre'Von, so we went to court and we became his legal guardians. He was the first of a few different students who have stayed with us.

And did you ever think that you'd write a book that had the theme of foster care?

Foster care was definitely the inspiration for the book. Sometimes I would introduce myself as a foster parent and people would be shocked and surprised. In our culture and media, foster parents are often portrayed as "in it for the money" or, in the most extreme cases, abusive. Or, there's the opposite side of the spectrum, *The Blind Side* Sandra Bullock-type with a beautiful, educated, wealthy family that swoops in and takes a child and everyone lives happily ever after. I feel like what I've experienced is the true story of imperfect people trying to learn to love each other and form a family, and I thought that was an interesting story that hadn't been told.

Though completely different from foster care, the Victorian language of flowers is something you are also passionate about.

Yes, when I was sixteen I found a language of flowers book, and it felt like discovering this long lost key to the past that no one else knew about. But I really didn't set out, necessarily, to combine foster care and flowers in a book. It was clear that I wanted to write a story about a young person in foster care aging out of the system, and the character Victoria came to me very whole. In the first scene that I wrote with her, she walks into a flower shop and a man looks at her in a way that makes her very uncomfortable, and instead of responding with words like a more well-adjusted person might do, she leaves and comes back with rhododendron which means "beware." That's really how the whole thing started. It wasn't planned, but the story unfolded from that moment.

Victoria always has her guard up, and at times makes decisions that the reader might be frustrated with. Yet, you still managed to keep readers sympathetic toward her and rooting for her.

That was absolutely the hardest thing to do, and I think it took three full drafts before I thought I got it. I knew from the very beginning that the book would succeed or fail based on that point. I wanted to be true to her character, and true to her experience, but as a reader you want to attach to the character. The flowers were actually a big part of how I tried to make that happen. I knew that in those early scenes, she wasn't going to be kind to other people; she didn't have it in her. But I wrote a lot about how she treats the plants, how gentle and loving she is with the flowers. I wanted to use that as a glimpse into what her character is capable of, even if she couldn't show it.

So many of the other characters are also really vivid and colorful. Did you have a favorite?

Not really. I would say that I have a special place in my heart for Elizabeth, Victoria's foster parent. In the first draft, I wrote her to be absolutely perfect, and then realized "Oh, I just wrote the person I want to be! And I'm not!" So I had to make her much more imperfect, but I still really like her.

What message do you hope the book sends about the foster care system in America today?

I hope that it creates an urgency in addressing the fact that what we're doing to young people aging out of the system is not okay. They often face homelessness, unemployment or even incarceration. But I also hope the book paints a picture of these young people's spirit, resilience and potential.

Can you talk about the Camellia Network and why you decided to create it?

For the book, I've done a lot of traveling in and outside the country. Everywhere I've been, people have said to me, "I didn't know this was happening! And what can I do to help?" Our system is such that if you are not able or willing to be a foster parent to a child, there's not much you can do to help.

And so I started Camellia Network to make it known that there are young people all across the country who are aging out of the system with very specific goals and needs. I believe that if we can find these young people and highlight their goals and what they need to be successful, and then give citizens all across the country a way to be involved, I think we can really make change. Technology allows us to connect people in a way that has not been possible before.

The very first person we helped was a young man named Sirrele. He had been accepted to UCLA, so the Camellia Network put everything a young person would need to go to college on something like a wedding registry. Then people all across the country could log on and buy his sheets or his towels or his computer, and then also send messages of support. We're currently building a new interactive platform. Not only will you be able to buy something off a registry for a young person and leave a note of encouragement, but you'll also be able to stay connected over time and give support as they need it.