

Standing Strong

By Michelle Lehardt
(Based on a true story)

"Dare to do right! Dare to be true!"
(Children's Songbook, 158).

Thunk. Erik heard the lacrosse ball land in his teammate Cody's stick. He instantly turned and raced to the other team's goal. Catching Cody's eye, he raised his stick, caught the ball from Cody, and sent it sailing into the goal.

"Score!" Erik's team began cheering before the goalie even saw the ball in his goal. They had won, 5-2!

His teammates high-fived and shouted congratulations. Erik couldn't stop grinning. When he'd moved to his new school, Erik had worried he wouldn't make friends. But his lacrosse teammates had been nice to him from the start, helping him find his classes and saving him a seat at lunch.

After the game, Cody invited everyone over to his house for pizza. Still in their sweaty jerseys and grass-stained pants, the boys gathered in Cody's basement, going over the game and their best plays. The smell of pepperoni pizza filled the air, and Erik grabbed a large slice and a soda.

After a while, things quieted down, and Erik noticed a group of boys on the couch gathered around Cody's phone. "What're you looking at?" Erik asked.

Cody smiled as he pushed his phone in Erik's face. "You'll love this. Look."

Erik flinched, then turned away. It was the kind of photo he knew he shouldn't look at. *This is pornography*, Erik thought. "I don't want to see it."

"Then how about this one, or this one, or this one?" Cody said, as he scrolled through more pictures.

"I don't want to see any of them." Erik backed away.

The rest of the boys joined in with Cody. "C'mon, there aren't any adults around. Your parents will never know."

"Don't be a baby. Everybody looks at this stuff."

"Aren't you even a little curious?"

Erik was curious. But he'd been taught that looking at pictures of people without clothes on was wrong. If he was

curious, he needed to talk to his parents about it.

"Can't we do something else?" he pleaded.

The boys agreed to turn on a movie, and Erik moved to the back of the room, trying to become invisible.

Just a few minutes into the movie, Erik felt uncomfortable when more bad images filled the screen. He slowly stood up, mumbling, "I think I'll go home now."

None of the other boys seemed to notice as Erik walked up the stairs and slipped out the front door.

Squinting into the afternoon sun, Erik began walking home. He felt tired, sweaty, and lonely, but he also felt peaceful. He felt good about his decision. And when he told his parents about the afternoon, they hugged him and told him they were proud of him.

At school on Monday, Erik thought the boys would have forgotten about the weekend. But when he walked to his usual seat at the lunch table, Cody teased, "Was the movie too scary? Did you have to go home to your mama?"

"You might want to sit somewhere

else," another boy said. "What we're talking about is too mature for you."

As the days and weeks went on, the boys kept teasing Erik. They still passed the ball to him and complimented him on good plays. But they didn't invite him to post-game parties.

After the last game of the season, Cody caught up with Erik. "You could come to the party, but you'd probably have to call your mommy. See ya."

Once again, Erik rode home with his dad. "I thought things would be different by now. I thought the boys would respect me. I thought they might even change what they watch because of my example. Aren't we supposed to be blessed for doing what's right?"

Dad nodded. He was silent for a minute, then said, "We are always blessed when we follow Christ, but sometimes we aren't blessed in the way we expect. You know Mom and I pay tithing every month, but I still lost my job last year and we had trouble paying our bills.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GUY FRANCIS

