

My Life With 40 Parents

*My Life With
40 Parents*

INTIMATE REFLECTIONS
OF A FOSTER CHILD

CHRISTOPHER BROOKS

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This book is dedicated to my mother. The beautiful and loving lady who carried me inside her belly for nine months, so that I could have the opportunity to explore this beautiful planet. You weren't able to raise me, but you gave me an incredible gift – Life! And for that, I'll always be grateful.

To the Pierces – Tony, Thom, Kathleen, Terry – and all the other kind and beautiful souls who accepted me, loved me, and guided me throughout this journey.

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“Note To Reader”

The story you are about to read is true. I have tried to recreate events, locales, and conversations from my memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity, I have changed the names of individuals and places.

To enhance your reading experience I've compiled pictures, court records, and news articles onto a webpage:



<https://www.40parents.com/pictures>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: First Day In Foster Care	1
Chapter 2: Living With My Dad	3
Chapter 3: First Eight Foster Homes.....	6
Chapter 4: The Pence Family	10
The Big Temple.....	11
Penny the Guinea Pig.....	13
Chex Mix for Breakfast	14
Antique Matches.....	15
Spray Paint Explosion	15
The Jar Full Of Coins	17
The Lemonade Stand.....	18
The Water Fountain	19
Getting Home from School.....	20
My First Kiss.....	22
The Electric Jolt.....	23
Chemical Plant Explosion	24
Chickenpox.....	25
The Forbidden Boyfriend.....	26
The Birthday Tree.....	27
Adoptive Home	27
Chapter 5: The Walley Home	29
Striking Out	29
Big Screen TV.....	31
Penny Passing Away.....	32
Forts in the Desert	33
The YMCA.....	34
Selling Sports Trading Cards.....	36
Stealing from Church.....	38
10th Birthday.....	39
Chapter 6: The Children’s Home (Part One)	41
The Nickel Arcade	43
Free Tapes	45
My Best Friend Jared	46

Lizard Hunting	48
The Three Brothers	49
Breaking My Arm	53
Free Lunch.....	55
Girlfriends	56
Talking To Turtle	57
Rumors Of The Facility Shutting Down.....	57
Charity Events	58
The Baritone Horn	60
Twirler Team.....	61
Chapter 7: Children's Behavioral Services	63
Chapter 8: The Children's Home (Part Two)	65
The Landscaping Job.....	66
Flag Football.....	67
Getting Arrested.....	67
Chapter 9: Juvenile Detention (Part One).....	69
Chapter 10: Emergency Youth Care Center	77
Chapter 11: Juvenile Detention (Part Two)	80
Fear of Showers.....	83
Looking Out the Window.....	84
Chapter12: Youth Correctional Center #1	85
Chapter 13: Youth Rehabilitation Center #2.....	90
Staff Changes.....	91
School.....	91
Meals.....	92
Commissary	93
Events	94
Shower and Shaving.....	94
Youth Escape	95
Braces	95
Trustee Status	96
Sad To Leave	97
Chapter 14: The Meadow Group Home	99
New School	100
Stealing Deodorant	102
Sex Offender Counseling.....	103
Fishing.....	104
Smoking Cannabis	105
Home Closing Down.....	105
Chapter15: The Wadner Family.....	107
Clothes Shopping.....	109
Sunset Park.....	111

Tug-of-War with Poodle	112
Chapter 16: Running Away	115
Chapter 17: The Ellis Home	122
New School, New Start	124
Foster Brother Quinn.....	126
Sneaking Out At Night	127
Drugs and Alcohol.....	128
Street Gang.....	128
Hot Tub Party.....	129
Ninth Grade.....	131
High School Football Team	131
Juvenile Detention (Part Three)	132
Getting Kicked Out	134
Chapter 18: The Casner Family	135
Chaos the Puppy.....	135
Kissing Mrs. Casner	136
Chapter 19: Girls and Boys Home	140
Chapter 20: Bobbit Group Home	146
Mrs. Casner	146
Knee Surgery.....	147
Girlfriend Kim (Part One).....	148
Cannabis Baggies	148
Chapter 21: Juvenile Detention (Part Three)	150
Chapter 22: Nevada Youth Homes (Group Home #1)	152
Girlfriend Kim (Part Two)	152
Summer Job.....	153
Chapter 23: Nevada Youth Homes (Corporate Office).....	154
Chapter 24: Nevada Youth Homes (Independent Living Center)	
.....	156
Butting Heads with Bernard.....	158
Falling Asleep In Spanish Class.....	162
Alternative High School #1	163
Alternative School #2	166
My Friend Nick	167
Campus Monitor with Fancy Nails.....	168
Dropping Out Of School.....	169
Telemarketing.....	170
Fish Fry Restaurant	171
Basketball Arena.....	172
Chicken Roasters.....	174
The Steakhouse.....	174
Sandwich Shop	175

My Friend Jesse.....	177
My Friend Matt	178
Crashing Billie’s Car.....	179
Room Searches.....	181
Chapter 25: Nevada Youth Homes (Group Home #2)	182
Chapter 26: Living On My Own	185
Laid Off From Work.....	186
Brad the Mentor	187
Legislative Testimony.....	188
My Nineteenth Birthday	191
National Foster Youth Advisory Council	193
Step Up Program	196
Mentor Match	197
Community College.....	199
Reconnecting With Turtle.....	201
College with Turtle	203
Finding My Family	204
Chapter 27: Next Steps	207

CHAPTER 1
FIRST DAY IN FOSTER CARE



Age: 4

Duration: one month

On October 10, 1985, an anonymous caller phoned the police department to report a woman with two small children.

The caller said she had observed the woman slapping the oldest boy on his bare leg five times, causing redness. I was that boy.

When two child abuse specialists arrived at the lobby of Social Services, they noticed my brother and I had bruises on our faces, buttocks, backs, and arms. One of the specialists asked my mother to step outside so they could chat. My mother said she had moved to town five days ago and only had \$2.00 to her name. Her parents had brought her to Las Vegas, but she had been kicked out of the motel after management discovered her kids were living there as well, which was against motel policy. She had gone to the

food bank earlier that day, and had been referred to Social Services for financial assistance.

Meanwhile, the other specialist interviewed me. I told her my mother had hit me and that her boyfriend, also living in the motel with us, had yelled at me and bruised me. When the specialist asked my mom about her boyfriend, she asked for a lawyer. My brother and I were immediately removed from our mother's care, and placed in a child protective custody facility.

The youth who lived in this facility were separated by age and sex into one of six buildings called 'cottages.' My brother was two years younger than me, so we were placed in separate cottages and only permitted to interact with each other during group 'play times.'

Once or twice a day, all the youth in the facility gathered together outside to play. I looked forward to this time of day for two reasons; first, I got to spend time with my brother, and second, there was a large clean trash can full of toys for us to play with.

CHAPTER 2
LIVING WITH MY DAD



Age: 4

Duration: one month

Shortly after I was taken away from my mother, Child Protective Services contacted my grandmother (my father's mother), and notified her that I was in their custody. They wanted to know if my father was interested in gaining custody of me.

My grandmother contacted my father, who happened to be living in Las Vegas with his new wife, and informed him of the situation.

I had not had much contact with my dad since my birth, due to my mother's transient lifestyle. But my father and his new wife were happy to have me, and picked me up from the facility. Since my brother had a different father, he was not permitted to join me, so he remained at the facility.

My dad and his wife met with a representative from the courts to determine what was needed to gain legal custody of me. They were instructed to hire an attorney and complete all the steps required by the courts. They didn't have much money and secured a \$3,000 loan from a family member to hire an attorney.

At the next court hearing, the judge was concerned that my mother did not have legal representation and appointed a public attorney to assist her with the case. After the court hearing, my father's attorney told him to expect a prolonged legal battle that could cost tens of thousands of dollars. And said his chances of winning were slim, since at the time, fathers rarely won custody battles in Las Vegas.

Unfortunately, my father and his wife didn't have the means to fund the custody battle. They dropped the case, and I returned to the Child Protective Services facility. I was happy to see my brother again.

To regain custody of my brother and me, my mother and her boyfriend agreed to attend Parental Effectiveness Training and individual counseling to address child abuse. She also needed to prove to the courts she could maintain employment and a stable living environment for three months.

During this time she was allowed supervised visitation with us. I have a brief memory about one of

My Life With 40 Parents

those visits. When I was alone with her, she took me to buy me shoes. I remember being so happy to see her.

This is the last memory I have of my mother, as it was the last time I saw her. She never completed the requirements and the courts never heard from her again.

CHAPTER 3
FIRST EIGHT FOSTER HOMES



Ages: 4 through 6
Duration: 4 days to 14 months

After four days back at this facility, Turtle (*my brother's alias, chosen by him for this book*) and I were moved to our first foster home. We lived there for about three months before we were moved to our next home. I have a few memories of that time in my life. Over the next two years, we would be shuffled through a total of eight foster homes.

There is no documentation about why these placements started or ended. It was, however, the court's wishes to keep Turtle and I living together in the same place whenever possible. At times, there were no homes available to take both of us. We would be placed in separate homes and then moved together once a home became available to take us both.

The first memory I have of those two years is of a foster dad who locked Turtle and me in a closet. Turtle

went to the bathroom in his underwear and this upset the foster dad. He made Turtle get naked and locked him in the closet.

As soon as he left, I tried to let Turtle out of the closet. Our foster dad caught me and started to yell, telling me he was going to lock me in the closet as well. When he tried, I punched and kicked him, and attempted to run outside and get some help.

Before I could make it outside, though, he grabbed me by my arms, lifted me in the air and started to carry me towards the closet. However, I started to kick him multiple times. I kicked him in his private area and he dropped me, and I hit the ground rather hard. This angered him even more! This time he grabbed me by the arm and dragged me across the floor until we reached the closet. I continued to kick and scream the entire time.

He opened the closet, threw me in with Turtle and locked it again. It was pitch black in the closet so I couldn't see Turtle, but I heard him crying. I reached around in the dark until I found him, and hugged him tightly.

A few minutes later, I started banging on the door and screamed "let us out!" After about five minutes of screaming and banging, the foster dad opened the door, turned the light on, and pointed a gun at us. He said if I didn't shut up he would kill us. I could see how mad he was by the look on his face, so I stopped.

He told Turtle to come out of the closet, but I wouldn't let him go. He grabbed Turtle and ripped him from my arms. Once he freed Turtle from my grip, he closed the door and turned the lights off again. He started to yell at Turtle to put on a pair of underwear while standing up. But Turtle was struggling, so he sat on the ground to put the underwear on. Then the foster dad said, "I bet if I put this gun to your head you'll learn how to put your underwear on standing up!" So he did. He placed the gun to Turtle's head until he learned to put the underwear on standing up. I remember Turtle crying and saying, "I can't do it," and the dad saying, "You better learn quickly."

I wanted to kick the door down so bad to help Turtle, but I didn't want to make our foster dad angrier, and for Turtle to get hurt. So I just sat there quietly until the ordeal was over.

The second memory I have of this time is of my foster mom who attempted suicide. I remember the ambulance coming to the house and seeing my foster mom being hauled away on a stretcher. If I remember correctly, this was the same house as the foster dad who locked us in the closet.

My third memory during this period is of a teenage girl who lived in one of those homes. I remember several occasions when she rubbed candy on her private parts and then had Turtle and I lick it off.

My Life With 40 Parents

I also remember my brother and me being removed from one of the homes we'd been placed in because the couple we were living with were having their own children, and no longer wanted to care for foster children.

In the next home, we lived with a married couple who took us to their church on the weekends. I didn't like church much until that experience. I remember people singing, dancing, and having food and parties after the services. I think that's where I discovered my love for soul food.

The last memory I have during that time in my life was spending a lot of time out in the desert where I built forts and caught lizards.

CHAPTER 4
THE PENCE FAMILY



Ages 6 through 9
Duration: 2 years and 10 months

Living with the Pence family was one of the few times I felt safe, stable, and loved during my entire life in foster care.

I have many fond memories of my time with the Pence family. They lived in Henderson, Nevada, in a two-story house with four bedrooms. They had a fantastic backyard. It had a hammock, fruit trees, grapevines and a small office next to the garage.

The family consisted of a middle-aged, married couple and their three daughters. Their oldest daughter had a child of her own and lived nearby. Mr. Pence was a semi-truck driver who worked long days and nights. Occasionally, he was away from the family for days at a time. His wife cared for their home and their two teenage daughters. The younger daughter was a bit prim and proper, while the older one was a bit of a rebel.

The Big Temple

Attending church was a big part of the Pence family dynamic. We went every Sunday. We also attended the opening of a large temple that had recently been built in Las Vegas. The family was really excited to go, especially the mother and father.

When we arrived, I was amazed by the design and structure of the building. The shape of the temple looked like a castle to me. But, we had to wait in line for our turn to tour the temple.

When it was time to go in, my brother and I were not allowed to enter since we were not baptized members of the church. After a bit of explaining and pleading from the parents, Turtle and I were allowed to enter the main lobby area, but could not go any further.

I remember feeling very confused about why my brother and I were treated differently. It felt like we weren't good enough. I couldn't understand why, especially since I went to church faithfully with the family every weekend.

The family split into two groups. The older daughter, Turtle, and I walked around the lobby while the rest of the family continued to tour inside.

After the tour, we all met up again and headed on our way. There was quite a bit of discussion about the temple

on the car ride home. I was curious about what baptism was and how I could do it, so I could feel whole and accepted like the rest of the family.

I was told that I wasn't allowed to be baptized since the Pence family wouldn't be my family forever, and my future adoptive parents might want to baptize me into another religion.

When I heard that, I felt more unworthy. I thought to myself, "this family will be ending just like the rest."

I was heartbroken and I remember completely shutting down emotionally. The family tried to convince me that I was loved, and that everything was going to be okay, but I just ignored them and stewed in my anger and confusion for a bit, while accepting the fact that I was a reject.

Those feelings lasted for several days. A few times when tensions escalated, I broke things out of rage. My behavior in school was impacted as well. I wasn't nice to the teachers, nor to my fellow students. I even got into a fistfight with one of the students.

When our foster father picked me up from school, he pulled me aside and said if I didn't start behaving appropriately, I would be kicked out.

That confused me even more. I didn't know how to behave differently. I was scared, sad, lonely, and confused.

When my brother tried to console me, I lashed out at him as well.

After a few days passed, I realized life wasn't over and gathered my senses. However, at that point, I also began masking my sadness and sorrow. When parents, teachers, and therapists asked me how I was doing, I lied and told them everything was fine. I didn't understand what I was feeling or how to express them.

Penny the Guinea Pig

The younger Pence daughter had a guinea pig named Penny, who was reddish-brown with white splotches. She agreed to let me play with Penny in exchange for cleaning out the cage. I was full of love and excitement whenever I was with Penny, so the family let me play with her often.

On two occasions the unthinkable happened: I lost Penny. Since her favorite food was dandelions, I took her out in the backyard to feast on them. In one of the corners of the backyard, large vines grew up the fence. And that's where I took Penny to play.

One day, I left Penny alone for a bit while I picked fruit from the trees. When I came back, she was gone. The family and I looked everywhere in the backyard with no luck. I was sad, heartbroken, ashamed of myself, and felt very guilty about my actions.

Luckily, a few days later Penny was found in the vines on the other side of the fence. I was allowed to play with her again, but only inside the house from then on. One day, the unthinkable happened again when Penny got lost in the house. A day or so later, she was found under the couch. Boy, was I relieved.

Chex Mix for Breakfast

I decided to replicate a recipe I saw in a TV ad. I needed a box of Chex cereal and a packet of seasoning. I spotted them in the pantry, opened the box, poured the packet inside and shook it up vigorously.

Then I opened the box, grabbed a handful, put it in my mouth and started to chew. It tasted terrible and I immediately spat it out.

I tried to cover my tracks by placing the box back on the shelf, hoping no one noticed. If someone did notice, I would just blame it on my brother, like I did in the past. Some time went by until it was discovered. I tried to blame it on my brother again, but this time I had left a clue. I put the box back on an upper shelf where my brother was unable to reach it. I was caught red-handed. I had to eat the creation I made for breakfast every day until it was gone (about two weeks).

Antique Matches

I found a packet of matches in an old chest – the wooden ones that strike on the side of the box. They smelled and looked old. But I was excited about having a new toy. I would sneak off to light them whenever I could. Then I started to experiment by lighting things on fire that I got out of the trash.

One day, our foster father found the pack of matches in the garage, where I hid them. He confronted me and I denied knowing anything about them. He shared that they were antiques and couldn't be replaced. He also said he was upset, but would get over it. I felt terrible and later that day I returned other items I stole from the chest that he didn't know about.

Spray Paint Explosion

One day I helped the father spray paint a metal bar. I was fascinated by the way the can jingled when he shook it. A few days later I wanted to see for myself how it worked. I went into the garage and grabbed a can of black paint, a hammer, and a screwdriver, and went to the hidden space between the back of the garage and the back wall to find out.

I placed the spray can sideways on the ground. Then I pressed the screwdriver against the side and took a swing with the hammer. After a few tries, the screwdriver pierced

the can and paint forcefully spewed out in a large fountain. I was amused for a split second, until I realized that it had covered the wall and me with paint. I grabbed it and turned it upside down until it stopped spewing out paint.

At that point, I realized what a terrible mistake I had made. I started to cover my tracks by grabbing the water hose and attempting to spray the paint off the wall. When that didn't work, I tried nail polish remover, paint thinner, and acetone. Eventually, I got most of it off the wall. Then I found a can of paint that matched the wall and covered whatever black was left on the wall.

But the grass and I were still covered in paint. So I used the rest of the chemicals to remove as much as I could. Then I prayed no one would look at the grass until I could figure out how to fix it. I promptly hid the can in the trash, and jumped in the shower where I vigorously scrubbed the paint from my body. The only paint I couldn't get off was around my knuckles and fingernails. After my shower, I secretly hid the paint and chemical-soaked clothes in the trash.

Once again, I overlooked a simple area. I didn't clean the paint off the surface of the shower. I denied that it was my fault, but my fingernails told a different story. Once I knew that I was caught, I told the truth and was forbidden from entering the garage without permission.

The Jar Full Of Coins

Instead of giving out candy for Halloween one year, we gave each trick or treater ten pennies rolled up in aluminum foil. A few days before, the whole family gathered around the dining room table for dessert. Afterwards, a very large glass jar full of change was dumped on the kitchen table.

We sorted through the change and made a hundred ‘penny wraps,’ which were actually quite fun to make. The whole family was involved, and I was amazed at the mound of change on the table. It felt like we were rich.

While wrapping the pennies together, I grabbed a handful and stuck them in my pocket when no one was looking. I then took a break and hid the change in a sock in my room. I repeated this two more times.

I spent the \$3.00 I stole on candy and popsicles the next day. After I ran out of change, I searched the parents’ room while they were gone. Although one of the daughters was babysitting, she spent most of the time in her room talking on the phone. Turtle agreed to sit at the bottom of the stairs and notify me if she started heading our way.

After a bit of searching, I found the jar on the floor of a closet. I had a big smile on my face as I reached into the jar and filled my hand with coins. My mood altered quickly though when I couldn’t get my hand full of coins

out of the jar. Eventually, I released some of the coins from my grip and was able to get my fist out.

I filled a sock up with change until it was too heavy to carry. I made sure to clean up all the change that had spilled onto the floor. I made my way down the stairs, through the kitchen, and into my bedroom, safe and sound. The next day I put the sock of change in my backpack and took it to school to buy popsicles and chips. I rarely had the money to buy those items, but not on that day. I bought snacks for myself and friends at every break between classes, until I ran out of change.

The Lemonade Stand

A few times a week, Turtle and I would venture to a convenience store up the street to pick up something our parents had asked us to get.

In return, they would give us each a quarter to spend on whatever candy we desired. However, it was never enough to buy the candy bars our hearts truly desired. So I devised a plan to make some money.

I decided to sell lemonade on the corner of the street. We had everything we needed at the house except packets of powdered lemonade.

So Turtle and I went up the street to the convenience store. I had him get the clerk's attention while I put three packets of yellow lemonade powder in my pocket and

walked out the store. A few seconds later, Turtle walked out the store and we headed home, excited to make and sell lemonade.

After we mixed everything together, we carried a table, the cooler, and cups to the end of the street and set up our lemonade stand. We drew a big “*25 cents*” sign on a piece of paper and taped it to the table. Then we waited for people to pull over.

An hour later, we sold out of lemonade. I was quite surprised by how easy it was to make money.

We brought everything home and told the parents about our accomplishment. They weren’t happy knowing we took their supplies without asking, but they let us keep the money, which came to about \$5.00.

The next day we went down to the convenience store and bought our favorite candy bars. I felt very confident about my future in that moment. If I ever needed money, I could always sell lemonade again.

The Water Fountain

Most days, my brother and I walked home from school.

We walked by a casino with a decorative water fountain at the side entrance. There were a lot of coins at

the bottom of the fountain, and I wondered why they were in there.

To me, it was a great opportunity! I sat on the bench surrounding the fountain while I positioned myself to get the best shot at grabbing quarters.

When the coast was clear, I reached in and grabbed as much change as I could in one shot. Then I waited a few minutes and did it again. I stole money out of the fountain five times before I got caught.

On my last attempt, the casino security guard saw me from a distance. He yelled something to me; I looked up, saw it was a security guard and took off running. He was quite fast, but I ran across the street dodging moving cars and eventually he stopped pursuing me.

I was full of adrenaline and feeling fantastic that I escaped the guard. My brother and I continued our way home with the \$2.00 I was able to steal that day.

Getting Home from School

If you lived more than a mile from my school, you could take the school bus. However, the house I lived in was just shy of a mile away from the school, so no bus for us.

Mrs. Pence drove all the children to school in the morning, but we were on our own to get back home.

Although some parents offered to drive us home, it wasn't allowed due to state policy.

Since my brother and I were wards of the state, the other parents would have had to undergo background checks and other inspections to be able to drive us.

So my brother and I usually walked home from school, which I didn't mind most of the time. It was a chance for us to explore.

Sometimes we went to the park and hung out there for a while before our trek home. On most days, we just walked down the main street, by the stores, looking at the buildings and watching people.

On hot days, we walked into the stores and asked for water. My favorite thing to walk by was the casinos. There was something about the lights, the noise and the size of the buildings that continuously grabbed my attention. Although we walked in a few times, we were always immediately turned away by security.

At some point, a new family moved in next door to us with a boy my age. We quickly became best friends. His mom would give us a ride home when she was available, but she would stop at the corner so Turtle and I could get out of the car without the Pences seeing us.

On a few occasions we stopped by a bar on our way home. The bar was owned by the neighbor's grandfather.

We'd stop in because we were thirsty and wanted water, which the grandfather gladly gave us. Then he'd bring us all fries and sodas. I remember feeling so excited about going there.

One day we got caught because we hung out a little too long. I wound up telling the truth about going to the bar and the Pences became extremely upset. It was perhaps the most upset I ever saw them. They weren't necessarily mad at Turtle and me. They were mad at the neighbor's mom and the grandfather for allowing us into the bar in the first place.

After that, I was forbidden from playing with the neighbor boy, and that made me really upset. I didn't understand why he was in trouble for the mistakes of grown-ups. So I disobeyed the order and we continued to play together in secrecy.

My First Kiss

At the far end of the street lived a girl who was one year older than me. Eventually, we became boyfriend and girlfriend. We hung out at her place on most days after school where we played and chatted about who knows what until it got dark and I headed home.

I still have a vivid memory of when I kissed her for the first time. We were on the side patio of her house and she was leaning on one of the posts. While we were

talking, I leaned in quickly and kissed her. We kissed several times after that and we had sex with our clothes on while moving our hips around on top of each other.

Her parents liked me until they found out I was in foster care. Once they found out, they forbid her from seeing me. I was heartbroken and yelled mean things at them when they told me to leave.

She snuck out a few times to see me afterward, but eventually just ignored me when our paths crossed.

The Electric Jolt

One warm day, the neighbor across the street set up a mini water park in his front lawn for his kids and the neighborhood children to play in.

The setup included water guns, water balloons, a wading pool, and a water slide. I was in kiddie heaven, and we played here for hours on end. There were even lights so that when it became dark, the fun could continue on.

Then I got the idea to move a light over to the water gun filling station.

As soon as I grabbed the light, I was zapped with a jolt of electricity. I remember wanting to let go, but couldn't. A few seconds later, when I was finally able to let go, I fell to the lawn in excruciating pain.

It felt like my body was on fire and a ringing noise crippled my hearing. The adults came to my aid and gave me a lecture about not touching electrical things when I had wet hands.

Lesson learned.

Chemical Plant Explosion

There was a small room on the side of the garage used as an office, storage, and my dream/play zone. Here I spent a lot of time playing with toys and daydreaming.

One day, I came home from school, grabbed my lunch, and headed to the playroom as usual. Twenty minutes later, a loud explosion shattered the windows of the office. I was shocked, frightened and intrigued all at the same time. Glass was everywhere. I felt trapped and didn't know what to do.

Luckily, a few minutes later, Mrs. Pence opened the door and whisked me away to safety. First, she cleaned up my nicks and scratches. Then she investigated what had happened. There had been an explosion at a nearby chemical processing plant and since we were only a few miles away, we were within its blast radius.

Chickenpox

A boy my age in the neighborhood had red spots all over his body. Mrs. Pence insisted I play with him, but he looked sick and I didn't want to play with him.

She still insisted I play with him and made sure we touched each other and drank from the same glass. I later learned she did that to make me sick, too. If I didn't get sick now, but rather later in life as an adult, the disease became much more serious, and potentially deadly. However, I was willing to take that risk and protested the entire time I hung out with him.

A few days later, I started getting red bumps all over my body. I panicked until I was told I didn't have to go to school for the next few days. Then these red bumps turned from a curse into a gift.

However, the next day the spots started itching. Mrs. Pence put a pink liquid on the red spots, and they stopped the itching for a bit. Eventually, my entire body itched and she had to put socks on my hands to stop me from scratching myself. Even the inside of my throat itched, and there was nothing I could do about it. I felt horrible.

After three long and grueling days, the itching stopped and the spots went away.

By that point, I was happy to go back to school.

The Forbidden Boyfriend

At one point, the older Pence daughter had a boyfriend. But, since he was black, she wasn't permitted to see him. It seemed as if the daughter and mother fought and yelled constantly over the situation.

However, the daughter continued to date him. When her parents were gone, she would try to sneak him over to the house without Turtle and me knowing about it.

When I caught them, she made me pledge to never tell on her, and if I did, she threatened me with what she deemed as "severe punishment."

But that didn't work and she wound up having to bribe me.

One day, I asked her for permission to go with my friends to the fast food restaurant on the other side of the highway. I figured she wouldn't let me do that since there were no crosswalks for a few blocks and we would have to run across the freeway.

However, since I knew her secret, I asked her anyway. When she refused (as I anticipated she would), I told her I was going to tell on her.

Though she became irritated, she eventually allowed me to go. But she had one rule: we had to ride our bikes up to the crosswalk and cross the highway that way.

The crosswalk was far beyond our two-street radius and it was quite the adventure, but we made it back home safely. I tried using that trick on her again, but it didn't work the next time.

The Birthday Tree

My best friend lived in the house to the west of us, and an old man lived in the house to the east.

He didn't talk to us much and we would sneak into his yard and steal things. Eventually, we got caught by Mr. Pence and had to return everything. The old man wasn't pleased with us.

On my eighth birthday, the old man next door did something that blew my mind. Even though I had done nothing but steal from him, he planted a large pine tree in his front yard and said it was my birthday present. I was beyond thrilled.

The family moved away from the house, but the tree still stands today. Whenever I'm in that area, I like to drive by and marvel at the size of the tree and ponder about the wonderful memories created at the Pences.

Adoptive Home

Eventually the state found a couple who were willing to adopt Turtle and me.

Outings were arranged for the four of us to spend time together. After a few more meetings we went to live with them. I don't remember being very fond of the idea, but there wasn't much I could do about it.

The Pencses and their daughter allowed me to take Penny, the guinea pig, with. They said since I took such good care of her, she loved me the most. That filled my heart with joy and eased my worries about moving in with the new family.

CHAPTER 5
THE WALLEY HOME



Age: 9

Duration: 7 Months

The Walleys were a middle-aged married couple with no children of their own and lived in a five-bedroom house with two dogs. The husband worked as an engineer in a local slot machine company and his wife taught art at a local college.

Turtle and I lived with them for a one-year probation period. At that time, in the state of Nevada, we were required to live with the potential adopter for one year before the state would grant legal custody.

Striking Out

Mr. Walley signed me up for a season of Little League and took me to all the practices and games. I remember really enjoying baseball, and caught on to the game quite quickly.

However, there was one major problem: I couldn't hit the ball. I was tall for my age so when it was my turn at bat, the coach of other teams would tell the kids in the outfield to back up. I remember thinking, "Wow! They must think I'm strong."

But whenever I got up to bat, I would strike out every time. I may have even caused our team to lose a few games. I felt embarrassed and ashamed of myself.

I was good at almost every other aspect of baseball except hitting. So, I worked extra hard to make up for my mistakes at bat.

But being the catcher was my favorite position. I loved dressing up in the pads and feeling the sting of the ball hitting my hand through the padded gloves. It was far more active than standing in the outfield waiting for a ball to come.

For some reason I also really liked hearing the umpires yell the strikes in my ear.

However, there was another boy who was much better in that position than I was, and so he played most of the time. But if he was tired or we were playing an easy team, the coach let me play the position.

At one of the practices toward the end of the season, I finally made real contact with the ball at bat.

When I heard the crack of the bat, I looked up and could see the ball soaring. If it had been a real game and not just practice, it would've been a home run.

I was beyond ecstatic to have hit the ball, and ran around the bases in celebration even though it was just practice.

Big Screen TV

Living in the Walley home was my first real introduction to sports, as Mr. Walley watched football games on the big screen TV they had in the living room.

I'd only seen a big screen TV a few times, so I was really happy we had one.

I remember watching the Super Bowl for the first time. It was Super Bowl XXV between the New York Giants and the Buffalo Bills. I don't remember much about the game, but I do remember all the yummy food and how excited everyone was throughout the game. I believe our family was rooting for the Bills (who lost by one point.)

I also remember the Halftime Show about the Gulf War, which was going on at that time. I remember being amazed by the rockets, the tanks and the stealth planes. But I also remember feeling a bit sad and confused about why these people were fighting in the first place.

However, I watched plenty of GI-Joe cartoons in which the Americans were always portrayed as the hero. So I thought the Americans were killing the bad guys, and videos of the real explosions looked a lot cooler than the ones in the cartoons. I thought the fighter pilots were so cool, and I hoped to be like them when I grew up.

Penny Passing Away

Every day I would come home from school and play with Penny. She was the love of my life. On my way home from school, I would stop to pick dandelions to feed to her when I got home. Every time I walked into my room, she would greet me at the cage door. And anytime I was feeling sad or lonely, I took her out of her cage and lied with her on the floor. She made the cutest little noises, and I can still vividly remember the sounds she made.

One day I came home from school and went to take her out of the cage as I normally did. However, this time she was cold and didn't move. I ran out of the room to get the Walley's help. They told me she passed away but I didn't want to believe them. I was sure there was something we could do. Maybe even take her to the hospital. After thirty minutes of an explanation by the Walley's, I finally accepted that she had passed away.

They retrieved a shoe box to put her in for her burial. We went out to the backyard to find a place to bury her. We found the perfect location, and Mr. Walley dug a hole

with a shovel. He placed the box in the hole and covered it with dirt. I cried the whole time and was devastated to lose my best friend.

It took me several days to regain my senses. And every time I came home for the next few weeks, I was reminded that she was gone. The Walley's wanted to take the cage out of my room, but I resisted and pleaded with them to allow the cage to stay. A few weeks later they insisted that it was time to get rid of the cage.

Forts in the Desert

I continued to spend a lot of my free time outdoors, especially with Penny gone.

The neighborhood we lived in was still being developed and there was open desert between some of the houses. It was here that my brother and I, along with some friends from the neighborhood set up forts on opposite sides of the lots.

Before each battle, we spent time re-enforcing our forts with boards, logs, pieces of scrap metal, and anything else we could find. Then we collected a pile of rocks to throw at each other. The rocks had to be light enough to throw, but heavy enough to cause damage to the fort.

Turtle was usually on my team, but he could only throw really light rocks. Although he wasn't of much assistance throwing, when the battle began he was great at

finding rocks and keeping an eye out for ones that were incoming.

Each side took turns throwing rocks at each other until one side no longer felt safe behind their structure and surrendered. The next day we would repeat the entire process.

The YMCA

When school was out for the summer, Turtle and I spent most of our days at the YMCA while the Walleys worked.

Our daily activities included sports, games, and swimming. The pool here had two diving boards – a tall one and a short one. Since I couldn't swim well, I wasn't allowed to go on either of them. Once the Walleys found out we didn't know how to swim, they signed Turtle and me up for swimming lessons.

It wasn't long before I was jumping off the small diving board and having a blast. I tried the tall diving board a few times, but found it to be too scary, so I stuck with the smaller one.

There was something about floating in the air and diving deep into the water afterward that really excited me. Plus, I loved making a big splash. I was quite impressed by the kids who could do flips off the diving boards. I tried a

few times but usually landed on my back, which was quite painful.

Then it came time for camp. All the kids were loaded onto a bus and headed to Summer Camp for an entire week. Despite my protesting, the parents put my sleeping bag and suitcase in a compartment under the bus and forced me to get on the bus.

However, once we got to our camping site, I was happy to be there. There was a lake that I was excited to go out on in one of the canoes to do some fishing.

But doing that required renting the fishing gear for \$10.00, which would have been half of the money the Walleys gave me to last the entire trip. So, I passed on that activity and saved my money instead for candy and other treats.

There were so many different activities here for us to enjoy, including horseback riding, archery, and arts and crafts.

I really hit it off with one of the girl campers my age, it wasn't long before we decided to be boyfriend and girlfriend for the remainder of the camp. We hung out at breaks and even made each other arts and crafts.

When it was time for us to go our separate ways, I was extremely sad, and cried the entire way home. One of the

counselors asked me why I was feeling sad, but I didn't know how to explain that I was heartbroken.

Selling Sports Trading Cards

For Christmas that year, the Walleys gave me a box of sports cards that contained 25 individually wrapped packets of ten cards. I was proud of my presents and brought the cards to the YMCA to show them off and trade them.

However, I would soon regret this. One of the boys tricked me by taking all my good cards and giving me ones that were absolutely worthless. I had no idea that his cards were worth nothing, and eventually, one of the other kids told me what he was up to. I confronted him, but he told me it was my fault because I made the trades.

So I went to a staff member who told his parents. The next day, his parents brought all of his cards and asked me to tell them which ones were mine.

I couldn't remember exactly which cards I had traded him, so he saw this as an opportunity to trick me again. I found one that I knew we traded, but he claimed he got it from someone or someplace else, and that I just didn't remember correctly.

In the end, I did get a few cards back, but mostly learned two lessons: I learned that certain cards have value,

and certain people will take advantage of the unsuspecting.

Though I enjoyed my cards, one weekend I decided to sell my cards to make some money. I carried a table and chair to the corner of the street and taped signs reading, “*Football Cards for Sale*” to light poles around the block.

Business was slow at first, so I put up some more sign and this time I also taped a real card to the pole to really lure them in. When some kids came by, I let them name their own price, and I sold a few dollars’ worth of cards.

Then a boy came up to me holding one of the cards I had taped against the light pole. At first, I was a bit angry because he took it down. Then he explained that the card was rare, and he would have given me \$10.00 for it. Excitedly, I asked him why he didn’t just give me the money now.

He said I ruined the card by taping it and that now it was worthless. He also looked through the rest of my cards and said they weren’t worth anything.

Out of frustration, I sold him the rest of the cards for \$5.00.

Stealing from Church

We went to church almost every Sunday. The Walleys gave me and Turtle a few dollars to put in the collection bowl that was passed around each week.

I did as I was told the first few times. But then one week, I decided to pretend like I was putting the money in the bowl, but I put it back in my pocket instead.

Since I got away with it, I continued doing it weekly until I got caught. The Walleys had bought piggy banks as gifts for me and my brother. After church, I would sneak back to my room and add the money to my piggy bank.

One day, I wanted to buy a new toy. When the Walleys told me I couldn't, I jokingly said I could use my own money. I brought my piggy bank to them that had close to \$20.00 in it, and showed I had enough money for the toy. They were quite shocked and asked how I got the money.

I couldn't tell them that I was stealing it from church, so I told them I had saved it from the time I sold my sports cards. They were quite impressed and took me to the store to buy the toy.

Eventually, the Walleys lowered the amount they gave us to put in the church bowl to \$1.00. That's when I tried a different approach. I put my \$1.00 in the bowl, but

took a \$5.00 bill back out. I got away with it a few times, and then I got caught by someone sitting next to me in the pew.

The Walleys were (understandably) very upset, and discovered that this was how I had been getting my money. They took my piggy bank away, along with all the money inside. They also took the toy away that I had bought using the stolen money.

This made me very upset, so I began slamming doors. I even knocked one of Mrs. Walley's cherished paintings off the wall, and it sustained some damage.

10th Birthday

Every day I rode my bike (that I got for Christmas) to and from school.

One day I remember in particular riding home from school. It was my birthday and I was full of excitement to eat cake and open presents.

However, when I arrived, a strange car from the state was in the driveway. I could tell it was from the state because it had the state's logo painted on the door. Every time I was in one of those cars, it meant I was going to go to a new home.

When I walked into the house, the Walleys and a person from the state were standing by the door. All of my

belongings were being packed into large white trash bags. I instantly became overwhelmed with fear and anxiety.

At that point, I got pretty angry and violent. My brother started to cry and asked me to stop, so I did as to not upset him further.

Next thing I knew, I was in the backseat of the state car, crying and traveling to a new home. I wanted to take my bike with me but it couldn't fit in the car, so I had to leave it.

The worst part? My brother didn't come with me. He stayed with the Walleys who eventually adopted him.

CHAPTER 6
THE CHILDREN'S HOME (PART ONE)



Age: 10 through 11
Duration: 13 months

In a small city outside of Las Vegas, called Boulder City, was a youth facility run by the State of Nevada. This facility housed approximately 40 youth in foster care, ages five through seventeen.

The facility consisted of seven homes in a semi-secluded area. Four homes were for boys and three were for girls. Here there was a basketball court, football field, handball court, and a few other buildings for the kids to enjoy.

When I arrived at my new “home,” everyone was seated around a large table eating dinner. They saved me a plate of food, but I wasn’t hungry. After dinner, the married couple who managed the home tried to cheer me up with a birthday cake and a few presents, but I was too sad, angry, confused, and scared to really care.

The house parents tried their best to welcome me, but all I wanted to do was be by myself. They needed to go over the rules and regulations of living there with me, but I could care less. I just wanted to go to my room and be alone.

However, I couldn't do that until they went over everything with me, and that included reading the house rule and searching all of my belongings.

One of the house parents went through my bags and wrote down everything I owned on a piece of paper. Although I wasn't allowed to have some of my things at the home (slingshot, money, etc.), I was told that they would hold onto those belongings until I moved away from the facility, or until I turned 18.

A few months later, two of the kids in the home broke into the closet where the confiscated belongings were stored and stole some of my things. This infuriated me, especially when I learned the home wouldn't replace any of the stolen items.

My only option to get my stuff back was to tell them who took it. And this I did know – it was two of the older boys in the home.

However, not surprisingly, the boys had threatened me. They said if I told anyone, they would beat me up. And I knew a beating from them would have been far worse than losing a slingshot and my other possessions.

The Nickel Arcade

Once a month, the house parents took us on a group outing.

We would load up in one of the white passenger vans and drive for about 45 minutes to our first stop, which was always a fast food restaurant. The house parents would order a meal for themselves and gave each of us a cup for soda. After we got the cup, we were allowed to have all the soda we could drink while they finished their meal.

Anyone who had their own money could buy food as well. One time, I bought some fries, and all the other kids asked me to share. Only a few of the fries wound up in my belly. Then we'd hop back in the van and drive another 45 minutes to a casino in Jean, NV.

The vans we traveled in were pretty large, with four rows of seats, not including the driver and front passenger seats.

But, I always got stuck sitting in the first row. Otherwise, I would get picked on by the kids behind me. They would pluck my ears, pull my hair, and stick their wet fingers in my ear. When I turned around to see who was doing that, they all acted like nothing happened.

So, after trying to sit closer to the back and enduring this torture, I eventually learned my lesson and just sat in

the front row. Though their messing with me didn't stop completely, it was much better here than in the back.

However, I saw it as a small price to pay for the fun I was about to have.

When we arrived at the casino, the house parents escorted us to the arcade area. And this is where the fun really began.

Every game cost a nickel, and the parents gave each of us a \$2.00 roll of nickels to play arcade games with while they gambled in the casino.

An hour later, one of the house parents would return to give each of us another half roll of nickels so we all could continue playing.

After a few times of doing this, I became pretty good at managing my nickels. I stuck to the games that I knew I played well and that lasted the longest.

By the end of the night, I usually had a few nickels to spare and would give some to the other kids who had run out. They promised to pay me back the next time. Some did, and some didn't. However, I wouldn't give them any more nickels if they didn't pay me back. I stuck to my word on that one.

Eventually, the house parents got fired, and much to my dismay, our trips to the unlimited soda fountain and arcade ended.

Free Tapes

The home was always full of magazines for us to read.

One day, I saw an advertisement in a magazine offering seven new cassette tapes for just \$1.00. I remember feeling like that was an incredible offer. So I read and followed the directions on how to order the tapes.

I tore out the page, filled in my name and address with a pen, and then selected seven of the cassettes that were listed. I asked the house parents for an envelope, a stamp, and \$1.00 of my money they were holding for me.

They asked me what I needed it for, so I told them I was going to send a letter and \$1.00 as a present to my brother. When they agreed, I put my selections and the dollar bill in the envelope and mailed it off. A few weeks later, a package showed up. It was the first package I had ever received and the excitement to see what was inside was unlike anything I had ever felt before.

When I opened it up, I found three of the cassettes that I had chosen, along with a letter stating that in order to get the other four tapes, I had to buy four *more* tapes at the price of \$7.00 each. I felt tricked. Either I had either ignored, or hadn't actually read that part of the advertisement.

Later that day, one of the house parents asked me what I received, and I showed them the three tapes. Since one of the tapes had a “Parental Advisory Warning” on it, they took it away from me.

After that, once a month for the next few months, I received a letter from the same company reminding me that I had free tapes waiting for me after I purchased the other four.

My Best Friend Jared

When I was in the fifth grade, I became friends with a boy my age named Jared. I’m not sure how we became friends, but I am lucky we did. Jared lived with his mother and grandparents in an RV park a few miles from the school, right next to the railroad tracks.

After school, we went on adventures around the RV park; hunting lizards and exploring the desert. There were a few antique train cars on the track that never seemed to move.

For some reason, I was intrigued by the train tracks and cars, and I liked to hang out around them. Although the doors to the train cars were locked, Jared and I would oftentimes climb on and around them.

Jared’s aunt managed a local laundry and dry cleaning store on the other side of the tracks. We would often stop and say hello to her; usually because she gave us a few

dollars to help her sort and iron clothes, which we would spend on root beer floats at the restaurant next door.

Jared and his family immediately accepted me as one of their own. They always invited me over to play and go out to dinner with them whenever I could.

One day, Jared and I got into a fight at school. I don't remember why, but I do remember punching him in the face during recess. When he wouldn't punch me back, I got really sad and started to cry.

I was starting to get close to Jared and his family and I tried to push these feelings away out of survival. I didn't want to get hurt again. When his grandfather pulled us together to have a chat, we made up. Thankfully Jared was willing to let bygones be bygones.

After Jared forgave me, I promised not to do it again and our friendship continued.

That is, until it was time for him to move back to Montana with his mom.

That devastated me.

I cried non-stop for three days after Jared left town and endured a great deal of teasing from the other kids in the home for doing so.

To stop myself from crying, I built a metaphorical wall around my heart to prevent myself from feeling the

pain I was feeling ever again. Although his grandparents stayed in town and invited me over, it just wasn't the same without Jared.

However, there was some good news: Jared's aunt and uncle were interested in adopting me. I visited their home on the weekends and was happy about potentially living with them.

Then I got into some legal trouble (more on that later), and they no longer wanted to adopt me.

Again, I felt my heart breaking.

Lizard Hunting

After Jared moved away, I continued to spend most of my free time wandering the desert surrounding the Children's Home.

I didn't feel loved or accepted by the house parents or the kids living in the home, so the desert was my escape. Here I would hunt for lizards and simply explore to escape from reality.

I had no clue what I was exploring, but I would do it day after day until it got dark.

The Three Brothers

After the house parents in the first home were fired, the boys who were living in the home were divided up and placed in the remaining cottages.

The entire time I lived at this facility, there were three brothers who had it out for me. I was moved into the home where the older brother and the youngest brother were living, and the middle brother lived next door.

Things were fine until the day I ratted out the older brother for stealing something of mine. From that point on, all three of them went out of their way to make my life miserable. It felt like they picked on me every chance they could.

After the older brother beat me up for telling on him, I was in constant fear. In addition to that, the brothers told other kids in the facility not to be my friend.

I was an outcast, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Anytime I tried to tell the staff the truth, the three brothers would tell a different story. And it felt like the staff of the facility always sided with the three brothers.

At that point, I was forced to just go along with whatever the brothers said or did. I felt trapped and was willing to do whatever it took to be accepted by them and the other kids in the facility.

During the summer, we were required to spend our days at the local recreation center, the pool and at the park that surrounded it. One day, the older brother convinced me to smoke a cigarette. I told him and the other kids that I wasn't interested, but he kept calling me names. So finally I did. I took a puff and immediately started coughing.

Fortunately, he and the other kids were nice to me for a bit after that, and I finally felt accepted by the group. I was glad I smoked the cigarette, even though my chest hurt from coughing. From that moment on, they began inviting me to partake in other activities.

However, these activities were things I probably should not have been a part of.

One day, on our way home from the recreation center, the older brother and a few other older boys from the facility decided to break into a house.

I didn't want to be involved, but they told me if I left, they would beat me up. So I stayed on as the lookout. My job was to tell them if anyone was coming up the alley so they could get out safely.

No one came, and after a few minutes they returned from the house and we all went on our merry way.

A few days later, a policeman came to the house and interviewed us about the break-in. I don't recall what I

told the police officer, but I do recall ending up in handcuffs along with the older brother in the back of his police car. We sat there for what felt like the longest 10 minutes of my life, and were then released with a warning.

This was just the beginning of my misadventures with my new “friends.”

Another day the older brother convinced me to skip the first period of school with him.

I was terribly nervous, as I had never skipped class before. However, many of the other kids at school would talk about their adventures skipping class and I was intrigued to find out what it was like, and also wanted to have my own story to tell.

Our destination was a water tower on top of a hill near the school. I had heard others’ stories of the water tower, so was excited to finally experience it for myself. It took us an hour or so to walk up to the tower and when we finally got up on the top, I was thrilled.

The view was fantastic.

One side overlooked the city and the other side overlooked Lake Mead (one of the largest manmade lakes in the world). We decided to skip the rest of school that day and walk down to the lake’s marina.

It took us a few more hours to walk down to the marina through the desert, but when we got there I was

filled with a sense of accomplishment. Large schools of carp came up to the dock when popcorn or bread were thrown into the water. Hundreds of fish gathered tightly, hoping to get a bite. There were so many fish that some would end up out of water on top of the other fish. I remember that amazing me.

We watched this for an hour or so and then someone gave us a bag of popcorn to feed the fish ourselves.

I tried to spread the popcorn out so that all the fish could eat. Then the older brother threw some popcorn in one area, and when the fish came up to eat, he punched the fish. I gave it a shot but it hurt my heart. So, I stuck with my method of fish feeding, while he continued his method of punching them.

Although we had planned to return to school before the end of our classes, we lost track of time and continued to hang out at the marina until the sun began to set, and began to walk back home. We made it about halfway when we came upon a ranger station.

At that point, it was pitch black outside and we were hungry, thirsty, and exhausted. We were also scared we might get bitten by scorpions and rattlesnakes.

I picked up the phone and the ranger answered. I told him we lived at the Children's Home had skipped school and couldn't find our way home. An hour later, one of the

staff at the facility picked us up in one of the white passenger vans.

Since we were expecting a park ranger, we were a bit shocked and nervous when the van pulled up.

The staff member made sure we knew how much trouble we were in, and notified us that we would be grounded. Over the next few weeks, we had to do extra chores and had to write essays about how what we did was wrong.

I remember struggling to write the essays. I knew skipping school was against the rules, but at the same I really enjoyed the adventure, and it gave me a memory I never forgot.

Breaking My Arm

One day a friend and I were playing after lunch, and decided to play tug of war with my arm.

As my friend pulled from one end, I pulled with my body. We were playing on the stage in the lunch area; he was positioned on the stage while I was positioned on one of the steps leading up to the stage.

Within a few minutes, after the tug of war started, he released his grip and I fell to the ground, using my hand to break the fall. Many people who were eating lunch rushed over to see if I was okay. Although I told them I

was fine, they could see a bone protruding from under my skin. When I looked down, I saw what they could see.

It didn't hurt until I looked down and saw that my bone was broken. Then the pain rushed in. I was taken to the nurse's office and waited for one of the staff members to take me to the hospital.

When I arrived at the hospital, x-rays were taken, which verified the broken bone in my forearm. The doctor snapped my bone back into place and wrapped a cast around it. I got to choose the color of my cast (light blue), which I thought was pretty cool. However, I knew that everyday things were going to be a bit more difficult to do with this cast on.

I had to keep the cast and skin around it as clean as possible. I was supposed to wrap it in plastic anytime I took a shower or was near water. If it itched, I was not supposed to stick anything down my cast. I failed at all three.

I continued to play in the dirt. A few times, water got into the bags which I fitted around the cast in the shower. I continuously inserted long branches and coat hangers in the cast to stop the itching on my arm.

On one occasion, a pencil got stuck inside the cast. When the cast was finally removed, my arm was pale, skinny, and smelled awful. And I had a small indentation on my arm from the pencil that remained for a few weeks.

Once the cast was off, it was time for physical therapy. I needed to re-learn how to use my wrist. Although it was incredibly painful, after a few weeks of physical therapy I was just like new.

Free Lunch

As a youth in foster care, I received free lunches at school.

Because of that, I was restricted to eating certain items or meals. I usually had to tell the person collecting the money for lunches that I was in that special program and then they found my name on a list while the other children waited behind me.

The process was a reminder every day that I was not like the other kids.

I was ashamed and embarrassed to go through that process every single day, especially when other kids would ask me if I was poor.

Sometimes I preferred telling them I was poor, rather than tell them I was an unwanted and rejected kid with no parents to love me.

I didn't quite understand what I was going through myself, let alone how to share that news with others.

Girlfriends

I had three girlfriends while I lived in that facility.

One lived at the facility, and two others lived at home with their parents. Sonya was my age, and the youngest of three sisters who also lived at the facility. We laughed and played together and I really enjoyed her company.

Then one day, we decided to take things to the next level and become boyfriend and girlfriend. We kissed a couple of times and held hands as we hung out and played after school. When some of the other kids in the facility start teasing her about being my girlfriend, she broke up with me. I was heartbroken, especially because she wouldn't even be my friend anymore.

My next girlfriend had a horse at a boarding facility in town. I often joined her there after school so I could help care for and ride her horse. According to the state's rules, I wasn't allowed to ride the horse, but she broke the rules and allowed me to ride anyway.

I loved being around her and her horse.

I'm not sure why we stopped hanging out, but eventually we did. I probably felt myself getting close to her, so out of survival, pushed her away.

My third girlfriend, Amy, was a bit of a rebel, which I liked.

I received a Miami Dolphins jacket for Christmas that year. One of the older boys who lived in the same home also liked the Dolphins, so that's why I adopted them as my team. One day after school, it was cold, so I gave Amy my jacket to wear. Some of the older boys started making fun of me for giving her my jacket. They called her a slut and said she was using me. Following their advice, I broke up with Amy and took my jacket back.

Afterward, I felt horrible about doing that. Although I really liked Amy, I liked not being picked on even more.

Talking To Turtle

Thankfully I was allowed to continue interacting with my brother while I was living in the facility.

We talked on the phone about once a month, and on most occasions, the calls were sad and awkward. But I was happy just to hear his voice. His parents brought him out to see me a few times. I was still pretty mad at them for kicking me out, so I'm sure the interactions weren't the best for them.

Rumors Of The Facility Shutting Down

The State of Nevada had been providing the financial resources to cover the operational costs of the facility I lived in.

One year the state was having some financial issues, and were seriously contemplating shutting down this facility, along with another in northern Nevada.

We kids learned about it on the nightly news. Most of us cheered this on. We were thrilled at the possibility that we would no longer have to live in that hell hole.

We had no idea where we would go, but figured it couldn't be much worse than that place.

Boulder City was a smaller town with less than 15,000 people at the time. The kids who lived at the facility were viewed as misfits and troublemakers by the residents of the town – at least that's how I felt. We most likely rightly earned some of that reputation given the break-ins, fights, and other trouble we had caused in the town. Whenever I told town residents (such as parents, teachers, etc.) that I lived in the facility, many of them instantly changed their attitude and demeanor towards me. Some took pity, while others judged and distanced themselves from me.

If the facility shut down, I would be happy no longer being among the black sheep.

Charity Events

Several organizations coordinated events specifically for the youth in the facility.

In the summertime, one group hosted a picnic for us. During the winter, another group took us Christmas caroling, and yet another group brought us presents.

The Christmas caroling was my favorite part. We went to the hospital, retirement homes and other places to sing for the residents. Providing joy to the people we sang for felt great.

Although I enjoyed getting presents at some of these events, it also meant we had to interact with the people who gave us the presents. I hated having to be all prim and proper.

I assume the purpose of the events was to provide us with joy. However, since we weren't allowed to act like kids, it seemed like the event was more for the people who were putting it on than for us.

What I hated the most were all the questions people asked. They wanted to know why I was in the facility in the first place, and with my answers came the pity.

Eventually, I learned how to use that pity to manipulate others. If I laid out a sad enough story, or played the victim just right, people gave me things, or felt really sorry for me, which honestly, felt good.

One Christmas, all the kids boarded buses and headed towards Las Vegas. A large clothing store gave each

of us a \$100 shopping spree, then closed the store for two hours – we had it all to ourselves.

The levels of excitement reached a new high as we walked around and picked out clothes to purchase with our gift cards.

Of course we couldn't make any purchases without conferring with each other first. I walked away from the shopping spree, with two new pairs of pants, a few t-shirts, and a warm winter sweater.

The Baritone Horn

In my first year of junior high, I was put into band class.

It wasn't my choice, but due to some issues I'd had with students in one of my other classes, they moved me into band class.

Since most of the instruments were already taken by the time I arrived, I was stuck with the baritone horn.

That awful instrument weighed about twenty-five pounds with the case. And I had to carry it half a mile to and from school every day.

Since the facility was perched on a steep hill, it was quite a trek, especially during the hotter months. I had to leave home extra early everyday so I could get to school on

time. My arms, fingers, and back always seemed sore from carrying the instrument.

Although the school had a spare baritone horn which I could have left at home to use for practicing, the facility I lived in wasn't willing to pay the deposit required by the school.

A few months into the class, I got fed up lugging that big ol' thing around. After I said I was going to quit, the teacher talked to the school administrators who waived the deposit requirement. I was finally allowed to bring the extra instrument home, and keep it there. Boy, was I relieved.

Twirler Team

One day the entire school was called into the gymnasium for a show put on by a group of traveling teenage students.

The show was an acrobatic presentation, complete with lights and music. Though most of it was fabulous, my favorite part was when the students did somersaults and flips while a strobe light went off in the background. It looked like they were moving in slow motion, and floating in the air. I was mesmerized.

After the show was over, the person who managed the show told us the students had to practice for hours a day while still maintaining their grades. He shared contact

information if any of the youth in the audience were interested in joining the team.

That was the first time I felt like I knew what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to learn how to be a twirler like those teenagers, and go around the country performing for others.

A day or so later, I called the number. It was a recorded message informing me about the program and the requirements for joining the team.

One of them was that you had to be an experienced twirler. I asked my house parents how to do this and they said I would need to join a gymnastics team. There was one in town, so I visited them once to check it out.

It looked like a lot of work, but I was up for it.

There was also a fee to join and to continue participating in the gymnastics training. Since the fee was more than the facility or state was willing to pay, I sadly had to put that dream on hold.

CHAPTER 7
CHILDREN'S BEHAVIORAL
SERVICES



Age: 11

Duration: 3 months

After spending thirteen months at the Children's Home, I became very depressed, withdrawn, and started to disobey the staff.

And, two days before Thanksgiving, they placed me in a behavioral facility.

That place was the definition of a nightmare.

I was required to take drugs, and when I refused, the staff tackled me to the ground, put me in a straightjacket, injected me with something, and locked me in a padded room until I was ready to cooperate.

That happened on multiple occasions.

I was in that facility for three months until I finally caved in, obeyed the staff, and was allowed to move back to the Children's Home.

CHAPTER 8
THE CHILDREN'S HOME (PART TWO)



Age: 11 through 12
Duration: 10 Months

One day, the director of the Children's Home called me into his office to offer me a job.

The work involved building a ditch in the desert to water the large trees surrounding the property. He offered to pay me \$2.50 an hour for my work, and I gladly accepted.

For the next month, I spent my free time digging a very long trench, 12" wide by 12" deep in between twenty trees. Then I dug a similar sized trench around each tree with a standard shovel.

I documented my hours on a piece of paper and turned it in at the end of each week. Although the dirt was very hard and full of rocks, it gave me something to do.

I also liked knowing I was able to help the trees get water.

After I finished digging all the ditches, I turned on the water and watched in amazement as the water flowed to each tree. I continued to water the trees every week from that point on (for free).

The Landscaping Job

Soon after that project, I got a job doing landscaping at a nearby mobile home park.

I was at some event, talking to the manager of the park and shared that I had recently dug a bunch of trenches. She offered me a job on the weekends pulling weeds, planting flowers, and other tasks.

I was filled with joy and excitement on my first day of work. It was hard work, but at the end of the weekend, she made me lunch and gave me \$40.00.

I was beyond thrilled and was actually excited to come back and work the next weekend. I continued that job for a few weeks until all the tasks were done.

On my last day, I walked around the park and admired the work I'd done.

The park was clean and well landscaped. The manager was very happy about my work, and said she would let me know if she had more work for me in the future.

Flag Football

One of my favorite after-school activities was playing flag football in a city league.

One of the reasons I liked it so much was because I was really good at it. I was tall for my age, had great reflexes and was very competitive. I could play every position, but usually played quarterback. I looked forward to practices and attended every game. It was something I felt truly dedicated to.

I even had fun when my team lost.

Getting Arrested

One day, the older brother asked me if I wanted to join him in an activity and I said “yes”. He led me into a bedroom where two of the younger kids, who lived in the cottage, were sitting on the bed.

He closed the door, dropped his pants and one of the boys put his mouth on the older brother's private parts. Then he said it was my turn and told the other boy to put my penis in his mouth. I told him, “no,” but he said if I didn't do it he would beat me up. So I agreed, dropped my pants, and the second kid put my penis in his mouth.

A few minutes later, we pulled our pants up and we left the room. But before we did, the older brother told me and the two kids that if we told anyone he would beat

us up. Then he gave the kids toys and the other items that he had promised them.

After that incident, the older brother was nice to me. He even told the younger brothers to stop picking on me. I finally felt accepted.

A few days later, he invited me to do it again. This time it was just one of the kids and I was more open to it. I enjoyed the connection, intimacy and secrecy. Then one day I decided to do it on my own, with the same kid, but without the older brother, and one of the staff walked in.

The next day, while at school, I was called into the principal's office. A police officer was there and wanted to interview me. She asked me questions and I denied everything like the older brother had instructed me to do.

Later that night, the older brother and I were arrested at the home. We were placed in the back of a police car and taken to a juvenile detention center in Las Vegas.

Although we were told not to talk to each other, the older brother kept asking me what I told the police officer. I told him that I denied it like he instructed me to do. The police officer told us to be quiet again or there would be consequences.

So I just ignored the older brother after that..

CHAPTER 9
JUVENILE DETENTION (PART ONE)



Age: 12
Length: 1 Month

The older brother and I rode handcuffed in the back of police car for about forty five minutes to the Juvenile Detention Center.

The handcuffs were between my back and the seat. My wrists, arms, and shoulders were in incredible pain. I told the officer about the pain during the trip, but he said it was too bad, and that I shouldn't have done those horrible things I did to get arrested. Eventually, my hands and arms went numb for the rest of the trip.

When we arrived at the facility, he unlocked one of my handcuffs and locked it to the chair. I sat there for the next thirty minutes while he filled out the paperwork. The feeling started to come back to my hands and arms, and I was able to feel the pain emanating from the deep red gouge in the wrist that was free.

Other youth who were already in the jail cells were banging on the doors, and yelling obscene language. The guards yelled at them to “Shut the fuck up!” but despite their yells, the youth didn’t stop. The guards were forced to restrain one of the kids, and I could hear him screaming from where I was sitting.

The older brother sat there like it wasn’t a big deal, while I sat there and cried my eyes out.

I was so afraid, confused and felt completely helpless. What was I going to tell my new potential adoptive parents? Would they still love me, or was I going to be locked in this scary place forever?

Twenty minutes later, it was my turn to be processed.

I was taken into a bathroom with one of the guards and told to take off all my clothes. While I stood there naked, he searched through my clothing. He told me to turn my back to him, bend over, touch my toes, and cough three times. I was crying so bad that I could barely catch my breath to cough. He was checking to see if I had anything up my butt. I felt so vulnerable and humiliated.

After I put my clothes back on, I was given two thin blankets and placed in one of the ten locked rooms within that part of the facility. I was told that I would remain there until the morning and then the door was locked shut.

Luckily, I was placed in a cell by myself, due to my young age of twelve, and my crimes. The room was approximately 6'x10' and contained a single metal bench along the wall with a metal toilet and sink in the corner.

The room was sealed by a large metal door with a long, bulletproof window that measured about 6" x 2'.

When I first got into the room, I felt a bit relieved.

I placed my two blankets on the bench and simply sat there for about twenty minutes, in complete silence. I was happy about not being in the same room with any of the other youth.

After I gathered my senses and stopped crying, I used the bathroom and drank some water out of the sink. Graffiti was etched into almost all the metal in the room.

I spent the next thirty minutes scanning all the graffiti looking for clues and secret messages that could help me understand what was going to happen once morning arrived. It was mainly the names of gangs, gang members, and messages of hate.

Then I stood at the door and looked out the window at the other youth as they came in and out of the facility. At some point, I decided to lie on the bench. The bench and the room were really cold. Eventually, I dozed off.

Next thing I knew, the door was being unlocked and opened. It was morning time and a older youth wearing

an orange jumpsuit walked in, placed a tray of food on the floor, and walked out, the door locking behind him.

The meal consisted of eggs, grits, toast, and a small carton of milk. It also came with a package of butter, sugar and a plastic fork. I ate the food quickly and went back to sleep. I could escape the situation momentarily if I just went back to sleep.

Then thirty minutes later, I heard the door unlock again and another older youth in an orange jumpsuit walked in and picked the tray up off the ground. I tried to go back to sleep, but this time with no luck.

I re-read the graffiti and looked out the window again. Then a few hours later, the door was unlocked again and I was told to come out of the room.

There was a new guard who escorted me back to the main part of the facility.

The walk took about ten minutes. As we walked, he asked me what I was in for. I said, "sexual assault." When he asked me what I did, I told him. He told me not to tell that story to any of the other youth in the facility or they would beat me up. All of a sudden, all my fears returned.

He suggested that I make up another story. I told him that I was once arrested for accessory to burglary. He said I should tell other kids that I was there for that reason, and

to just stay to myself and not talk to any of the other kids in the detention center.

When I arrived in the main facility, there were twenty to thirty kids and they were all dressed the same.

They were watching TV, doing chores, and playing cards and dominoes. I was given new clothes and escorted to the bathroom to take a shower. The guard told me to take off all my clothes in front of him and wash with a special soap. I think it was lice soap.

Then he handed me my new clothes which matched everyone else's. After getting dressed, I sat at a table and was told to stay there since I would be going to court soon.

Most of the youth were much older and physically bigger than me. Many had tattoos. And I was terrified when they looked at me and spoke to me.

When the youth next to me asked why I was there, I told him my fake story. However, the paper I was given listed my real charges, so I curled it up and stuck it under my leg so no one else could see it.

Thirty minutes later, three more guards walked up to the table with chains and handcuffs. One by one, we were placed in restraints consisting of a chain wrapped around our waists with padlocks. Handcuffs were placed around our wrists. There was also a longer chain reaching down to our feet with ankle cuffs that were placed around our

ankles. After everything was restrained, I could only lift my arms a few inches from my side. And the ankle cuffs only allowed me to take one small step at a time.

It took a bit of time to get used to walking like this, and I nearly fell a number of times. If my nose itched, I had to bend my head down to my hands to scratch it.

Five youth from our building were escorted to join the others from the additional buildings; there were about twenty of us altogether. We walked in a single file line through a set of underground hallways, which were made of concrete and smelled like mildew.

I can still remember the loud sound of the doors closing behind us. It echoed and shook the hallways as we went from one hallway to another.

After we arrived in the court area, we were placed in a room that had seats along the walls and a TV playing. There were more than enough seats, so many of us had empty seats between us.

I used that time to look at the paper that had been given to me earlier. I read it, while keeping a conscious effort to make sure no one else could read it. I didn't understand most of it, so after I read it a few more times, finally gave up and put it away.

A while later, a guard entered the room and called my name. I raised my hand (as far as I could), and he told me

to come with him. I was escorted to another room where a man in a suit sat at a table with a stack of folders in front of him. He asked me to have a seat, introduced himself and said he was my public defender.

When he asked me if I understood what was going on, I said that I didn't.

He explained my charges, and that I would enter a plea of 'guilty' or 'not guilty' that day. I told him I wasn't guilty. I continued to deny everything, and blamed it all on the older brother while I cried the entire time.

I truly believed that I was not guilty of committing any crimes. I didn't intend to hurt anyone. And I continued to denying everything like the older brother and the guard instructed me to do.

I was then escorted back to the waiting room by one of the guards. A short while later, another guard came in and again, my name was called. This time I was escorted into the courtroom. It looked familiar because I had been there a few times before when I was dealing with my family issues.

However, this was the first time I had been there in handcuffs.

As soon as I entered the room, I started crying again. A few minutes later, the judge asked me how I pleaded. I said, "not guilty." He then had a conversation with some

other people in the room, which resulted in an additional court date being set, as well as a discussion about where I would stay until then.

One of the adults said I could not go back to the Children's Home because the two youth I assaulted still lived there, and they would have to find another living arrangement for me.

Three weeks later, I was released from juvenile detention. I was relieved to be free again, but scared about what home I was headed to next.

CHAPTER 10
EMERGENCY YOUTH CARE
CENTER



Age: 12
Duration: 2 months

The next facility I lived in served multiple purposes. It housed runaway youth, youth receiving drug and alcohol treatment, and also acted as an emergency shelter for youth who were wards of the state, on probation, or on parole.

Youth were separated into different sections of the facility, depending on the reason they were there. Youth commingled during the day in the common areas, and were only separated at bedtime.

However, since there was little supervision, the youth were able to sneak in and out of their rooms throughout the night. They were also able to sneak away during the day to have sex, smoke cigarettes, and use drugs.

The facility was in one of the worst parts of the city. Drug dealers, pimps, and gang members were a regular sight on the street outside of the facility, which, by the way, wasn't locked. The windows and doors were fitted with sensors to notify staff if they were opened, but it was easy to disconnect or rig the sensors, so youth came in and out as they pleased.

During the day, I attended the local middle school in the area. It was predominantly a black neighborhood, so as a white kid, I stood out when I walked to and from school.

The facility also housed young girls who were arrested for prostitution. The pimps would wait outside for the girls to sneak out to them. As I left the facility for school, the pimps walked next to me and asked me questions about who was in the facility.

The drug dealers would ask me if I wanted drugs, while others stared at me with deep unkindness in their eyes. I was terrified going to and from school. I found a pointed weapon on the street, and carried it in my pocket at all times just in case I had to defend myself.

And it didn't feel much better when I got to school. I felt like an outcast as one of just a few white kids. The other students called me a cracker and other mean names. Fortunately, a black girl befriended me and we sat together

during lunchtime and played during breaks. I was so grateful for her.

Meanwhile, the other youth in the facility found out what I was arrested for from the staff. They picked on me continuously. They said, “Hey, Fagot,” or “Child Molester,” when they wanted to get my attention. I usually ignored them and stuck to myself. I felt so lonely, scared, hopeless and lost.

My brother’s parents also told me that I couldn’t talk to Turtle anymore. When they found out I had been arrested, they told me he was no longer my brother, and to stop calling him. I didn’t listen though, and continued to call. When I did, they simply ignored my calls.

At that point in my life, I felt utterly defeated, and completely alone.

And, I was tired of being hurt. I felt like there was no one I could trust or connect with. The weakness I felt was almost unbearable.

I shut down emotionally out of a sense of survival – I had been abandoned by everyone I loved, and finally accepted that no one loved me.

In turn, I stopped loving myself and started building a wall around my heart to protect myself from the pains and struggles of interacting with the world.

CHAPTER 11
JUVENILE DETENTION (PART TWO)



Age: 12
Duration: 4 months

Prior to my trial, the older brother admitted to committing the crimes, while I pleaded my innocence.

Then the two youth took the witness stand and explained what occurred while I sat there and cried.

After a few days of overwhelming evidence, the judge found me guilty of two felony counts of sexual assault. The judge then ordered the bailiff to handcuff me, and take me to juvenile detention where I would be held until sentencing.

At this point, Jared's aunt and uncle who were planning on adopting me decided that they no longer wanted to adopt me. They had a young daughter of their own and shared they didn't feel safe with me being around their daughter. This broke my heart even more.

A week later, I went before the judge for my sentencing. At that point, I couldn't have cared less about what happened to me. I had no hope for the future and everyday was a fight for survival, both mentally and emotionally.

The prosecutor made her case; I was a menace to society and deserved the maximum punishment available. I lied to the courts, showed no remorse, and was resistant to authority. The judge sentenced me to six months in the state's toughest juvenile correctional facility and three years of parole.

At that moment, I wholeheartedly accepted that I was an unlovable menace to society and that I was doomed to a life of pain and misery.

There was a three month waiting list to get into the specific detention center where I was sentenced to. And it was where the worst kids were sent. So if I was going to survive, I needed to learn how to be mean, manipulative, and aggressive quickly.

I listened to other kids share their stories about how to become tough, and internalized those lessons and stories for later use.

I did push ups everyday to build muscle, and no longer allowed others to pick on me. When they did, I unleashed the rage that was building up inside me. I felt I had nothing to lose.

However, since I would also start crying instantly, I became known as the kid who cried when he got into an argument or fight.

I was still a scrawny, twelve year-old in a facility full of hardened teenagers, so most of the time I tried to avoid any physical altercations.

However, I learned how to take verbal abuse without it hurting me. I also learned how to manipulate the guards and other youth to get what I wanted.

It was still essential that I didn't let anyone know what I was arrested for. I continued to hone my story and rebuild my image so I could bond with the other youth in detention.

I told lies of being in gangs, committing crimes, using drugs and mistreating women. Whenever other youth didn't believe me, or found discrepancies in my stories, I changed my stories so they were more interesting and believable. I told myself the fake stories over and over again until *I* actually believed them.

I still had a cell to myself while most of the cells had two youth in them. I knew I had a cell to myself because of the seriousness of my charges, but the guards told the other youth it was because I was so young. Whenever I felt threatened, or like I was in over my head, I just acted up so I would be locked in my cell, away from the others.

There were a few saving graces for me.

The first was that we were allowed to have books in our cells. I read the Bible from start to finish twice. I didn't understand much of it, but I lost myself in the stories, trying to figure out what they meant. I also read children's books called "Choose Your Own Adventure." They allowed me to escape my pains and sorrows, albeit briefly.

The second respite was my art teacher. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we went to art class for an hour where the teacher taught us how to draw and paint.

She was such a sweet, loving person who melted both my and the other youths' hardened exteriors. She didn't see us as criminals; she just saw us as kids. I was incredibly grateful for her. Twice a week she reminded me that love, kindness, compassion, and acceptance *did* exist.

Fear of Showers

There was always quite a bit of bullying and fighting that occurred at night during shower time here.

It was one of the rare occurrences that the youth could interact with each other without the supervision of the guards. So if bullying or threatening needed to be done, that was the time to do it. Some of the youth brought weapons they had made into the showers, and it was a perfect opportunity for multiple youths to beat up on one.

I saw other youth being hit and choked while in the shower and had to keep my mouth shut to avoid being on the receiving end the next time. I felt extremely vulnerable and unsafe during that time of day, and got in and out of the showers as fast as I could.

Looking Out the Window

The roof of the cell rose up at an angle outwards until it reached about 15 feet high.

Close to the top was a 2'x 6" rectangular window that allowed light into the room. If I jumped high enough, I could see a little bit of the lawn and some buildings through the window. I would jump and grab onto the ledge of the window and pull myself up to see out. It was quite the task, but something I enjoyed doing when I felt extremely lonely and scared.

CHAPTER 12
YOUTH CORRECTIONAL
CENTER #1



Age: 12
Length: 2 weeks

Two months into my second stay at the juvenile detention center, I was informed I would soon be transferred to a Youth Correctional Center in Elko, Nevada.

I was excited and nervous at the same time. I was excited because I could finally start serving my six month sentence. I was nervous because the facility was described by the staff and other youth as a military-style boot camp that housed the worst youth criminals in the state.

In preparing for the move, vaccines and medical tests were conducted. After arriving at the nurse's office, she told me to drop my pants. When I asked her why, she told me, "So I can stick a Q-tip in your penis."

When I refused, she said that if I didn't let her do that, the guards would strap me to the table and she would be even less gentle. And after that, I would be locked in solitary confinement for a week. Given the two options, I decided to voluntarily let her stick the Q-tip in my penis. It was incredibly painful, and it hurt to pee for the next few days.

I felt so vulnerable and humiliated by the entire experience with the nurse. I'm not sure if the nurse was unkind to everyone, or just me. Every time she had to see me there was a sense of disgust in her voice and demeanor.

The night before the trip to Elko, I didn't get much sleep. I was filled with anxiety and fear additionally because it would be the first time I had been on an airplane.

The next morning I was transferred to a different part of the facility with five other youth who would be making the trip with me.

I was instructed to change into the clothes that I wore when I arrived at the detention center. It felt good to be back into normal clothing, even though they were quite wrinkled.

After a quick breakfast, all of us were shackled the same way as we were when we'd go to court. However, this time we were also chained to one another, and I was in the middle of two older heavy-set youth.

We were then escorted into a van. It was much harder to walk since I was being pulled in either direction from both sides. After a short ride, we arrived at the airport and were escorted to a seven-seat prop plane. I was in the backseat with the other two youth who I was chained to. There wasn't much room in the back and the two youth were squeezed against me.

The pilot and guard got in the plane and the doors closed.

When the engine started, it sounded like a giant lawnmower. Though I was at first very nervous, once we were in the air for a bit, the excitement began to set in.

I loved the view. Then, after a couple of hours in the air, we landed and were escorted off the plane. It was a bit of a struggle for the two youth to get in and out of the plane. And, since I was in the middle, it was a bit of a struggle for me, too. I had no balance and was at the whim of the other two youth.

We were loaded into another van and driven to the facility. When we arrived, three guards were waiting for us. They opened the door and yelled, "Get your fucking asses out of the van."

There was no consideration for the struggles the two heaviest youth were having by navigating the seats in shackles. Once we were out of the van and released from the shackles, the yelling continued.

I was pretty hardened at that point and just started smiling at the guards while they were yelling. They told me to knock the smile off my face, or they were going to smack it off of me. So I stopped.

Every youth who arrived at the facility was required to spend two weeks at the boot camp-styled cottage. After we entered the building, were told to take off our clothes in the middle of the room and stand there naked until it was our turn for a shower.

I stood there humiliated for about ten minutes until it was my turn. There was no hot water or privacy in the shower. And the guards continued to yell the entire time.

Then we were given underwear, socks, an orange jumpsuit, and shoes. The facility was designed for older youth, so everything was too big for me. When I walked, I had to hold my pants up to keep them from falling down.

We were told to hurry up and read the rules, which we were then orally quizzed on afterward. The guards still cursed, called us names, grabbed us and yelled in our faces so close that their spit hit us throughout the entire quiz. When I started to cry, they yelled, “Stop fucking crying” repeatedly, but I couldn’t.

That’s when they told me to drop to the ground and do fifty push-ups. After I did fifteen push-ups, I collapsed to the ground. They yelled at me to continue, but I couldn’t. I layed on the ground crying, wanting to die.

My Life With 40 Parents

About three days later I was woken up early one morning and told that I would be moving to another detention center closer to Las Vegas. I was handcuffed again and escorted into another van for the six-hour ride to the new detention center.

CHAPTER 13
YOUTH REHABILITATION
CENTER #2



Age: 12 through 13
Duration: 7 months

This Correctional Center was like a summer camp compared to the two previous detention centers.

While Elko only housed males, this place was co-ed. The youth were permitted to mingle at dances, movie nights and other fun events. There were six separate buildings housing twenty-five youth in each building – two of the cottages were for girls and the rest were for boys.

I had my own cell again, but this time the cell had a desk, a metal toilet, a countertop with a sink, a cabinet, and a closet for clothes. It felt and functioned more like a room. They even kept the doors unlocked at night on most occasions. The youth in my cottage were separated into two separate groups and not allowed to talk to each other, even though the two sides shared the building and

its amenities. The side of the cottage I was on was specifically for sex offenders.

Staff Changes

Every afternoon, we were escorted back to our building after school and locked into our rooms for staff change. I didn't mind that ritual. I would lie on my bed and stare at the ceiling until my mind drifted elsewhere.

Sometimes I counted the number of bricks in the ceiling. Sometimes I fell asleep. Others times, I consciously went on adventures inside my head. In that state, my woes and fears melted away, until I regained my senses and came back to reality.

Then, a new set of guards unlocked the cells and all the youth met in the middle of the cottage for roll call. After everyone was accounted for, we moved onto the next activity of the day.

School

During the weekdays, most of the youth attended the school on the campus.

This school functioned much like a regular school where we switched classes a few times throughout the day. Many of the youth in the facility were credit-deficient, so each had their own work to do in class.

The classrooms were co-ed and a lot of flirting and note passing occurred in the classroom and hallways when the guards weren't paying attention.

Before bedtime, the youth ironed their clothes so they would look sharp the next day. Most of the youth were allowed to have three pairs of pants, five shirts, two pairs of shoes, a sweater and a jacket. Those items were given to the facility by the youths' parents.

I arrived at the facility with one set of clothes and wore the same thing for a few weeks. I felt a bit embarrassed showing up to school wearing the same clothes every day, but I eventually got used to it. And after a few weeks, the state sent me a box of clothes.

Since a lot of the youth in the facility were in street gangs, there were restrictions on what type and color of clothing could be worn. No solid red, blue or green shirts could be worn. My box included two pairs of blue jeans, a pair of khaki trousers, three white shirts, two grey shirts, socks, and underwear.

I was very happy to receive the socks and underwear since I had been wearing the same ones since the day I arrived.

Meals

Most meals were eaten as a group inside the cottage. Breakfast was cold cereal on weekdays, and a hot breakfast

on the weekends. Lunch was sandwiches and dinner was a hot meal prepared by the staff, assisted by a few of the youth. The food was really good compared to the food at the previous detention centers.

Since we ate with real silverware, after each meal everything was counted to ensure it was accounted for. Once a week, a piece of silverware wound up missing. We were all sent to our rooms and the doors were locked until it was found. Most of the time it was found in the trash.

On the rare occasions when it wasn't found, we were locked in our rooms the entire day while the whole building was searched, including our individual rooms. We ate in our rooms and were only allowed out during shower time.

Commissary

There was a convenience store of sorts on campus. If any of the youth had money, they purchased snacks, books, and other items. Parents were allowed to send the youth money to purchase those things. But, since I had no parents, no one sent me money.

Once in a while, I got lucky and another youth shared their snacks with me – usually in exchange for ironing their clothes or completing their chores. Every time I ate some, it reminded me of the world outside the facility.

Events

On several occasions, there were events held in the facility for all the youth to attend. A few of the events were movie nights where one of the buildings was used as a screen to project the movie on, and large speakers were used for the sound. Each cottage sat together on blankets on the lawn. It was an event loved by all.

On another occasion, many youth left the facility to attend an event in the community. I was surprised that they allowed us to leave the facility for that.

And, there were also a handful of times that we went fishing, hiking, and horseback riding.

Shower and Shaving

This facility had private showers where I felt safe and could take my time (up to ten minutes), unlike the other two detention facilities.

Male youth in the facility who grew facial hair were required to shave. I hadn't reached puberty yet so I didn't need to shave, but for some reason, I really wanted to. I wished I was old enough to shave but instead imagined myself shaving.

The youth who shaved had to return the razors to the staff immediately after showering to prevent them from being used as weapons.

Youth Escape

The entry doors to the cottages remained unlocked most of the time. Sometimes, youth attempted to escape from the facility. But in most cases, after a few days, the youth were found by U.S. Marshals and brought back, or returned to the facility themselves. After they returned, they were put in solitary confinement for a week.

There was no way I was going to try to escape. If I did, where was I going to go? That facility seemed like it was in the middle of nowhere, and there was no way I could support myself in the wild. Plus, I actually really liked it in the facility. It was one of my favorite placements during my entire time in foster care.

Braces

The Walleys had paid to have braces put on my teeth while I lived with them. I still had them on and desperately needed to get them serviced by the orthodontist. Twice, I was handcuffed and transported from the facility by van a few hours away to Las Vegas to see the orthodontist.

I enjoyed the drive away from the facility and back to civilization. However, when I arrived at the doctor's office, I felt extremely ashamed. I had to remain in handcuffs while the doctor adjusted the braces on my teeth.

That scene must have been a first for the doctor and his assistants. They asked me questions about what I did

to get arrested. I gave them short answers and just sat there crying while they looked at me with what seemed like disgust and disappointment.

The previous times I had gone to the orthodontist, I had chosen the colors of the bands. But since I was going back to the detention center, I was only allowed to have clear bands placed around the braces.

About six months after I left the detention center, the braces were removed and I was happy to be done with them.

It took me a few days to learn how to eat and talk without them.

Trustee Status

Toward the end of their stay at the facility, the youth were given more freedom *if* they had behaved themselves up to that point.

Being on “Trustee Status” as it was referred to, granted a youth a special set of privileges. They ate meals at the staff table, which allowed them to be first in line for seconds. They were also exempt from specific chores. They didn’t have to follow the same regimented schedule as the other youth, and could roam the facility at their leisure.

About a month before it was my turn to leave the facility I was granted “Trustee Status.” It felt great to have that freedom. I remember spending quite a bit of time caring for the vegetable and flower garden at the facility. The marigold flowers were my favorite.

A married couple was in charge of the facility and they lived in a house on the campus. I always felt a lot of love and compassion emanating from them. When they spoke at events, they sounded sincere and caring. When I was on “Trustee Status”, the wife taught me how to care for the plants and flowers in the vegetable garden.

Sad To Leave

A few weeks before it was time for me to leave the facility, I became quite depressed. I felt loved, safe and accepted in that facility. There were activities I enjoyed, and I loved that I didn’t have to put up with bullying from other youth.

Since I was so sad about leaving, I started acting up and disobeying the staff. That led to them revoking my “Trustee Status” and locking me in solitary confinement for a few days.

Once I was let out of solitary confinement I was escorted to the facility manager’s office where the husband had a chat with me. He asked me why I was acting up all of a sudden. I told him I didn’t want to leave. I guess I was

subconsciously acting up so they would keep me there. Even if I wasn't on "Trustee Status," it was still somewhere I felt safe and comfortable.

Eventually, I was released from the facility and brought back to Las Vegas.

And I was terrified about what was going to happen next.

CHAPTER 14
THE MEADOW GROUP HOME



Age: 13

Duration: 8 months

The next place I lived in was the Meadow Group Home. It was a specialized home for youth on probation or parole. The home was managed by an older married couple who housed five or six youth at a time.

My first month was extra rough. Two of the youth in the home did something and I ratted them out. I don't remember what they did or why I told on them, but they weren't pleased.

There was another incident when one of the youth in the home had become sick after a night of drinking and threw up on his blanket. The two youth I told on took the blanket and placed it on me while I was sleeping. When I woke up, I had vomit all over my face, hair, and bed. I awoke to the smell of it and rubbed it off my face. At first, I thought I was the one who threw up. Then I saw the

blanket and knew what they had done. I felt disgusted and humiliated.

When I told the Meadows, the youth denied it. The Meadows believed them, and did nothing. I continued to share a room with the two youth and they continued to bully me. They made mean comments, stole my things, and bothered me while I slept.

For the next month, I was terrified to sleep, until finally the youth left the home. I'm not sure why they left, but I didn't care -- I was extremely relieved that they were gone.

New School

I had a hard time adjusting to the new school I was now attending. I struggled to connect with "normal" youth and adults since I had just spent over a year learning how to connect with youth and adults in detention centers.

I sought out kids who looked and acted like the kids in the detention center. I didn't have much luck, though. I lacked confidence, social skills and a sense of self. All I wanted was to be loved and accepted but I was struggling.

In gym class, I wasn't allowed to participate in the activities since I didn't have gym clothes – I was waiting for the state to give me the money to purchase them. Eventually, I started to fail the class because I wasn't

participating in enough activities. After the state found out, they gave me the money to purchase the gym clothes and I was finally able to participate in the class activities.

At lunchtime, since I didn't have any friends, I sat by myself to eat. I felt so depressed, lonely and ashamed that I eventually just skipped eating lunch and going to the lunch room altogether.

Other students skipped lunch as well. They went out to smoke cigarettes and/or do drugs. Since I hadn't smoked cigarettes, I decided to teach myself how. I stole packs of cigarettes from the supermarket and practiced smoking on the way to and from school. That way, at lunchtime, I could smoke cigarettes with other students and blend in. I also gave cigarettes away to others who didn't have them. This helped me socialize and feel a bit more accepted.

Somehow word got around the school that I was a sex offender. In one of my classes, a girl called me a child molester, and in retaliation I called her a bitch. She stood up, walked over to me and told me she was going to beat my ass. She was tall and bigger than I. And I was quite nervous she might succeed.

When she pushed me, I stood up, wrapped my arms around her and put her in a headlock. After a few minutes, she bit the inside of my wrist and I let her go. She took a chunk out of my arm, leaving it bleeding. The teacher

broke the fight up, and we were both escorted to the principal's office. I was suspended for a week.

Since I was on parole, that incident was a violation that could potentially put me back in detention. I explained what happened to my parole officer and she understood. She said it was my one warning and not to let it happen again. I happily agreed.

When I went back to school, I was scorned by the other students. I felt so lonely and like an outcast, even amongst the kids who smoked. So I simply did what I was good at doing: I closed myself down to the outside world, and focused on getting through the day.

During this time I became very good at avoidance.

Stealing Deodorant

One day after gym class, someone made a comment about how bad I smelled, and that I needed deodorant. I went to the store, took a stick of deodorant and walked out. As I was leaving, I was stopped by an undercover security officer and was escorted to the back of the store. I was asked to empty my pockets, which I did.

When I was asked why I was stealing, I explained that I had no money and that kids at school told me I smelled. I started crying and told them I was on parole and would be sent back to detention if I got arrested. He let me go and told me not to come back to the store, and if I did I

would be arrested. As they escorted me out of the store, I felt humbled and relieved. I continued to thank them for letting me go.

As I walked home I kept thinking about how lucky I was. Especially since I'd been stealing cigarettes from that same store for months.

Sex Offender Counseling

I was required by the court to attend sex offender counseling meetings. A group of ten youth were in my group which met every week for two hours. We started each session by going around the room and sharing who we hurt and how we hurt them. I struggled with this assignment because I truly felt like I did not hurt anyone. So I just said whatever I felt the counselors wanted to hear. Then we would talk about our week and then we would have a discussion about a certain topic related to sexual abuse. We also had homework to complete, which was in a workbook we took home and had to turn in.

To graduate from the program, we had to complete three of the workbooks, which took me about two years to complete.

The questions in the workbook asked me to describe how I felt, what I thought, or how the youth I hurt felt during those incidents. I usually wrote one or two sentences, just enough to complete the section. I was

almost always given the workbook back and told to redo the assignment. I didn't have a lot of time to complete the homework since I hid it from the other youth. I pulled it out of hiding just long enough to write something down, and I'd hide it again until the next counseling session. The less people that knew my secret, the better.

Looking back, I'm very grateful for that counseling service, even though I hated it at the time. It taught me empathy, and provided me with an avenue to discuss the challenges I was facing in life at the time.

Fishing

After school and on the weekends, I rode a bike I had stolen to a park with a lake, just a few miles from the house. It was my place of solace where I could escape my woes. I spent hours simply sitting there, watching the animals and the people. I watched people catch fish and talked to them about their experiences.

One day, I stole a fishing rod and tackle box from someone who left them there unattended. After I got home that day, I made some physical changes to the fishing pole so it was unrecognizable, and then put the fishing gear in a different container.

After that, I took the equipment to the park every day. I didn't really know how to fish, so I asked others who were fishing for tips, techniques and to show me how.

When I caught my first fish, I was filled with excitement and a sense of accomplishment. I continued to steal fishing gear from people who had left their equipment unattended. Eventually, I had two fishing rods, a wide assortment of fishing gear, and the ability to actually catch fish.

Smoking Cannabis

Most of the youth in the house smoked cannabis. They excitedly gathered together and would sneak off in the evening to partake in the daily ritual. They invited me on several occasions, but I turned them down. I'd never smoked cannabis before, and I didn't like the way it smelled.

One day though, I joined them for the adventure and decided to give it a try. When I gave it a shot, I started coughing violently. And I didn't feel anything. They said some people don't get high on the first try.

I tried it again and felt different. However, I got super paranoid and felt really weird. So I passed on future offers.

Home Closing Down

One day, the Meadows informed us that they would be selling the house, and all the youth would be moving at the end of the month.

I was so used to moving at that point, it didn't affect me much. I was still closed down to the world emotionally at this time, and had never really felt close to the Meadows anyhow. I never felt like they stuck up for me when the other youth were bullying me. I also still felt very isolated and rejected at school. So I was quite happy to leave.

A few months later I learned they lost their license to care for youth and that's why the house closed down.

CHAPTER 15
THE WADNER FAMILY



Age: 14

Duration: 3 months

The Wadners were a married couple who had a young daughter of their own. As soon as I got to their home, they made a point of telling me that I was never allowed to be alone with their daughter, due to my status as a sex offender.

The husband was loving, kind, and compassionate towards me. However, it seemed like his wife went out of her way to demean and demoralize me whenever she could. She watched and judged my every move. Whenever we went out in public, she made sure I was always by her side. She introduced me as her foster kid, like I was a puppy dog. She told them I was a criminal and a sex offender. If we went somewhere where there were young children, she told the other adults that I was a sex offender and to make sure they kept their children away from me.

I felt so lonely, humiliated, rejected and upset every time that occurred. I didn't know how to express my frustration, except to defy the orders she gave me. When I did, she responded with more consequences and deeper isolation.

She told another youth who lived at the house, as well as the rest of the family not to talk to me. One night, she made a nice dinner for the family and told me I wasn't allowed to eat it with them. She made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for me and told me to eat it in the living room. And that I would continue to eat alone until I was ready to respect her and become part of the family again. I refused the sandwich and sat in the living room by myself until dinner was over.

When I refused, she told me that I couldn't eat anything else until I ate that sandwich. So I hid it in my pocket and later flushed it down the toilet, telling her that I ate it. Then she made me apologize for disrespecting her.

On another occasion, she gave me extra chores to do because I refused to look at her while she was lecturing me. But of course I refused to do the chores. So, she took the family out for ice cream and made me sit in the back of the van, watching them eat the ice cream as punishment.

When things like that didn't change my behavior, she threatened to call my parole officer and have me thrown back in jail. My parole officer told me that if I got kicked

out of the house, I would be locked up in Elko until I was 18 years old.

Her husband tried to intervene on a few occasions so that she lightened up on me. When he did that, she lashed out at him, so he stopped.

I felt so trapped and isolated.

Clothes Shopping

Once a year, the state sent me a check for about \$100.00 to buy new clothes. My clothing options were pretty slim, so I was excited to get new clothes. Once I received the check and cashed it, Mrs. Wadner took me to a clothing store.

Initially she let me pick out my own clothes. Baggy clothes were one of the top trends at the time, so I picked out two pairs of baggy pants and a few baggy shirts so I could fit in with the kids at school. When I brought them to her, she had me try them on. When I walked out of the dressing room, she was appalled and said she would never take me out in public in those clothes.

Then she told me to sit down while she picked out my clothes. When I told her that it was my money and I wouldn't allow that, she said fine. She grabbed her purse and we immediately left the store.

On the ride home she told me to give her the money. I said no, and then she pulled the minivan over to the side of the road and stopped. She said that we were going to sit there until I gave her the money. And if ten minutes went by, she was going to call my parole officer. Nine minutes later I handed over the money.

The next day she went shopping without me and bought a pair of jeans, khaki pants, and some button-up shirts. They were very tight and not stylish. Out of defiance, I took the clothes she had purchased and threw them in the trash. That infuriated her, so she called my parole officer. After a few minutes, she said that she had told my parole officer about what I had done at the store.

The officer asked me why I was acting up when I knew I would go back to Elko if I was kicked out. I told her that I didn't care, and would rather go back to Elko then continue to live with the Wadners. She asked me why I felt that way. I told her about the way Mrs. Wadner was treating me.

She apologized and said that she had no idea that Mrs. Wadner was treating me that way. She promised to come to the home for a visit in a few days, and a huge wave of relief washed over me.

When she visited, Mrs. Wadner denied everything and bribed the other youth in the home to tell my parole

officer that I was lying. The officer sided with Mrs. Wadner and told me this was my last warning.

After the visit by my parole officer, the wife lectured and scolded me about making up lies about her. She said that she opened her home up to me when no one else wanted me and that I should be grateful for everything she did for me. She was disgusted with me and planned to have me thrown out if I disrespected her one more time.

I was angry, trapped and helpless.

Sunset Park

On the weekends, the wife took me and the other kid in the house to the park. She sat in the van and watched us play the first few times. Eventually, she felt comfortable enough to drop us off in the morning and pick us up at night.

On one occasion, we walked up to a man named Carlos and started talking to him. We saw him catch a big fish, and were excited to look at it and hopefully touch it. He put a string into the fish's mouth and put it back in the water. The fish was still alive and could only swim a few feet before it reached the limit of the string. We laid on the ledge of the pond and watched the fish swim around for about twenty minutes.

Then Carlos started asking us questions about our life. We told him we lived in a foster home with a mean

mother. We saw Carlos a few more times and would stop to chat with him every time we saw him at the park.

One day, he asked us if we were hungry. After talking a bit, we got into his car and he took us to the convenience store around the corner to purchase soda and potato chips.

When we got back to the park, he gave us his phone number, some quarters and told us to call him anytime we wanted to hangout. So the next time we went to the park, we did. He showed up with his fishing equipment and let us use it to go fishing.

Tug-of-War with Poodle

The Wadners had a small white poodle. During those moments when I was feeling bullied and isolated by Mrs. Wadner, I retreated to the unconditional love of their dog.

One evening, the wife isolated me from the family again by trying to get the dog away from me. But I wouldn't let it go. When I hugged the dog tightly, she grabbed him by the back legs as I held onto the front legs.

We pulled on the dog from opposite ends until the dog started yapping and bit me. When I let it go, she started yelling that she had enough of me, and wanted me out of her home.

She immediately called the 'after hours' number for my parole officer. She told the person who answered the

phone that I abused her dog and she wanted me out of her home. The person told her that they would send someone over in the morning, and if anything else happened to call 911.

When she came back into my room, she said they were going to pick me up in the morning and take me back to jail. I wasn't allowed to leave the room and no one was allowed to talk or interact with me.

I laid on my bed, closed my eyes, and tried to contemplate the situation I was in. At a minimum, I would be going back to juvenile detention in the morning. Most likely, I would end up in Elko until I was eighteen.

Then Carlos popped into my head. I remembered I had his phone number in my wallet, and realized I could call him with the few quarters I had left. I wondered if he would let me stay with him. There was only one way to find out.

I emptied the books out my backpack and started to fill it with clothes. When Mrs. Wadner asked me what I was doing, I said I was running away. She stood in the doorway of the bedroom and said she wasn't going to let me run away, because I deserved to be in jail.

I just ignored her and continued stuffing as many clothes as I could in the backpack. She was a rather big woman and blocked the door quite well. However, I just pushed my way through on one side of her.

As I was pushing through, she grabbed my arm very hard and dug her nails into it. It hurt really badly, and I punched her in the arm so she would let me go. She immediately started to yell and cry. As I went into the bathroom to get my toothbrush and other things, she called 911 and told them I assaulted her.

I quickly gathered my belongings from the bathroom, put the backpack on my shoulders and headed for the front door. She told me that she had the police on the phone and that she wasn't allowing me to leave until they got there.

I told her to get out of the way. When she said she wouldn't, I asked her to get out of the way again. She still refused. So I grabbed her with all the strength I had and pushed her to the side.

After I walked out the door, I immediately started running down the street. A few minutes later, Mrs. Wadner pulled up in her minivan and continued yelling that I was going to jail for assaulting her. I ran across the street, dodging traffic and continued to run down different streets until she could no longer find me.

When I felt that she was no longer chasing me, I sighed with relief. I felt a calmness coming over me. A sense of freedom surged through my body, and I felt both nervous and excited at the same time.

CHAPTER 16
RUNNING AWAY



Age: 14

Duration: 5 days

Since Mrs. Wadner had called the police and my parole officer, I was sure they were both looking for me. And if they found me, I knew I would be arrested immediately. Thus, I needed to stay low key and avoid any interaction with the police at all costs.

I went to the payphone at a supermarket and gave Carlos a call. There was no answer. I left a message letting him know what happened; that I needed help and gave him the number of the payphone to call me back. I sat on the ledge next to the payphone and waited for him to call me, while staying vigilant about keeping my eye out for the police and the Wadner's minivan.

Twenty minutes later, the phone rang. I picked it up. It was Carlos. He asked me what happened. I gave him a full description of the day's events and asked if I could stay

with him. He said I might be able to, but he would need to check with his roommate first.

He instructed me to call him back later in the evening after his roommate got home from work. I told him Mrs. Wadner was still looking for me and I wasn't sure if I could make it until then. He suggested I hide out at the park where we met, and call him later from there.

After I agreed, I walked down the back streets and alleyways to avoid the police until I reached the park. Whenever I saw a police car, my heart started racing and I quickly hid behind a building or bush until it passed. My body was full of adrenaline, but I was more excited than I was scared. My life was finally under my control.

I hid in areas of the park where I had a great view of foot and vehicle traffic until it was time to call Carlos back. I saw the Wadner's van driving around the park a few times, but I was hidden quite well. I kept my eye on the minivan each time until it left.

Around 6:00 PM, I gave Carlos a call. His roommate said I could stay there for the night. After agreeing to a meeting place, Carlos came to pick me up and I quickly got into his car. I had an instant feeling of being safe from the police and Mrs. Wadner. After we arrived to his house, he fed me dinner, then I chatted with Carlos and his roommate about my life and what happened that day.

Carlos asked his roommate if I could stay for a week. He said I could spend the night that night, and the next day we would discuss how long I could stay.

When they went to bed, I layed on the couch in the living room, filled with gratitude for them letting me stay the night. I replayed the day's events in my head and thought about how relieved I was to be out of the Wadner's home, and thankful that I didn't have to sleep on the street.

The next day, I hung out with Carlos. Our first stop was lunch at his mother's apartment across the street. His mom didn't speak much English, so I had a conversation with her through Carlos' translation. She was super nice and the food she made tasted incredible.

After lunch, it was time to leave. Carlos had forgotten his car keys, and asked me to go back to his apartment to get them. When I did, I noticed a picture of Carlos and his roommate hanging on the wall. Carlos was standing in the front and the roommate was standing behind him with his arms wrapped around him.

As I looked for the keys, I noticed a VHS tape that showed a picture of two men having sex with each other on the cover. I looked at the picture again and thought to myself in a curious manner, "Are they gay?" I had only met one gay person before. He was the brother of a

previous foster mom, who was really nice and fun. A few minutes later, I went back to Carlos's mom's apartment.

We said our thanks, and goodbyes, and headed out the door. After a few minutes in the car, I turned to Carlos and asked him if he was gay. He said, "Yes. You didn't know that?"

I said I didn't. When I asked if he and his roommate were a couple, he said they were. He wanted to know why I asked him that, so I told him the picture of them on the wall sparked my curiosity. The conversation ended there and we continued on with our day.

Later that night, the roommate said that, after talking to his brother, he wasn't comfortable with me staying much longer. His brother said the two were breaking the law by allowing me to stay with them. In the state of Nevada at the time, it was a criminal offense to assist a runaway minor.

The next day was quite similar to the previous one. We had lunch across the street and went on errands afterward. Carlos said he was going to a nightclub that night and asked if I wanted to go. He said he was friends with the doormen and could get me in. I excitedly said yes.

Carlos said I needed to wear some clothes that made me look a bit older, so he searched through his wardrobe and had me try a few things on. I remember how nice the

clothes felt and looked, and how excited I was to be going to a nightclub.

On the way to the nightclub, Carlos stopped at the store to purchase some alcohol. He asked me if I ever drank before. I said I tried it once but didn't like it. I had tried some beer at a foster home one time and it made me throw up.

We arrived at the nightclub, parked the car and walked towards the door. Carlos talked to the doorman for a few minutes and then we walked in. The amount of people and the music was overwhelming at first. I followed Carlos around as he talked and introduced me to people. Many of them were surprised when they learned I was only thirteen years old.

Most of the night, I just stood there quietly and observed the people and the environment. An hour or so later, Carlos, a friend of his, and I left the club and sat in his car in the parking lot. Carlos sat in the driver seat, his friend sat in the passenger seat and I sat in the back. Carlos and his friend chatted and laughed. Since they were speaking Spanish, I didn't understand a word of it. I felt the joy and excitement in their voices and had a smile on my face.

I had just experienced my first night club.

Carlos's friend was a guy who dressed and looked like a girl. I sat in the back a bit confused and intrigued by his

friend. After a few minutes in the car, Carlos brought out the alcohol he had bought from the store earlier and handed me one. I refused at first and then he encouraged me to give it a try. It tasted weird but was a lot better than the beer I tried before.

The two guys started asking me questions about sex. Then Carlos started rubbing his hand on my leg. After a few seconds, he started rubbing my penis. It made me uncomfortable, so I pushed his hand off my leg. When he did it again, I pushed his hand again. That time, he told me to stop pushing his hand away and to drink more liquor. As I drank some more, his friend started to rub on my leg as well.

Then his friend asked, "Will you let me suck your dick and then fuck me?" I was a bit confused by that and looked at Carlos. Then Carlos and his friend talked a bit more in Spanish. I heard Carlos say \$50.00, and his friend acted shocked. Carlos then told me his friend would pay me \$50.00 if I agreed to do what he asked.

I told him I wouldn't. Then Carlos reminded me that I was going to need the money for food and other things, and that he couldn't keep giving me food and a place forever. So I agreed to it.

As they continued talking, they rubbed my leg and penis through my jeans. A few minutes later, I started to

feel sick and threw up in the back seat of the car. His friend got out and Carlos drove us back to his apartment.

The next morning Carlos and his roommate got into an argument. The roommate was upset at Carlos for giving me alcohol. He said that they were already breaking the law by having me stay there. He told Carlos that I needed to leave.

At this point I no longer felt safe with Carlos or welcome in his house. I called my parole officer to turn myself in. She asked me where I was, and what happened at the Wadner's.

I told her everything (*except the events from the previous night*). She thanked me for calling her and was glad I was safe. She understood why I ran away and wasn't upset, and promised she wouldn't send me back to jail. She would need time to find a new place for me to stay, and asked me to call her back in a few hours.

When I called her back, she had found me a new home, and I was to meet up with my new foster family that night. Later that evening, Carlos drove me to a community center across town. When we arrived, I thanked him for letting me stay with him, for giving me a ride, and we never spoke again.

CHAPTER 17
THE ELLIS HOME



Age: 13 through 14
Duration: 1 year and 2 months

When I arrived at the community center, a party of nearly 100 people was in progress for youth in foster care and the adults who cared for them. My new family, The Ellises were in there, but I had no idea what they looked like or where they were seated.

So I asked around until someone directed me to them. Mrs. Ellis sat at a table talking with Justin, a fellow foster kid living at the home and his friend.

I walked up to them and asked if they were the Ellises. They said “yes,” and introductions followed. After we talked for a few minutes, I set my backpack down and went to play with some other youth I had recognized that were at the event.

After the party ended, we got into an old brown station wagon and headed to the supermarket. Mrs. Ellis

was extremely overweight and it was hard for her to walk. She used a motorized cart provided by the store to get around. Justin pushed a shopping cart behind her, and his friend and I walked behind him. Justin and his friend were very warm and welcoming. They asked me questions about my life, and shared stories about the small town called Pahrump, Nevada I would be moving to.

I felt a bit embarrassed to be walking around the store following Mrs. Ellis in her cart, but Justin and his friend were having fun and didn't seem embarrassed by it, so I went along with it.

Mrs. Ellis asked me about my favorite foods and instructed me to pick out two boxes of cereal to eat for breakfast. We paid for the groceries, packed them safely in the station wagon and headed to my new home. Justin's friend and I chatted in the back seat during the forty five minute ride. Eventually, she laid her head on my shoulder and fell asleep. I had a really good feeling about the new place.

When we arrived at the house, I was greeted by the family dogs and shown to my room. Afterwards Mrs. Ellis went over the rules of the house, along with other information I needed to know.

So far, I felt pretty good about the place and people. I was glad that I had decided to run away from the Wadners.

New School, New Start

A few days later, Mrs. Ellis drove us to the junior high school to register for classes. The town I now lived in had only one junior high and one high school.

Mrs. Ellis parked the station wagon in a handicapped spot near the front entrance of the school. We got out and slowly walked into the school. I felt embarrassed to be seen with her and the car as I entered the school. So I just kept my eyes down as students walked by, hoping she would walk faster.

The school was not able to enroll me. They first needed all of my transcripts from the six middle schools I had previously attended. So, I had to wait a few weeks for those to show up, and finally, when they did, I was allowed to attend school.

My first few weeks went quite well. Many of the students came up and talked to me, and invited me to hang out with them at lunch and during breaks. They asked me about my life in Las Vegas. I told them all the stories of crime and rebelliousness that I had gathered over the past few years. They seemed impressed, and for the first time in a long time, I was feeling loved and accepted.

One day a girl walked up to me and asked me if I was attracted to her friend. Her friend and I made eye contact and we smiled at each other during lunch and breaks. I was definitely attracted to her. I never had a girl ask me

out before and wasn't sure how to respond. So I tried to play it cool and told her friend that I wasn't interested – just like the older boys in the detention centers taught me to do.

A few days later, another girl came up and confronted me about why I said no to her friend. This girl was quite aggressive and started calling me gay and other names in front of other students. I really liked the girl and was upset at myself for lying and screwing it up. The only thing I knew to do in that moment was to be aggressive back.

So I started to raise my voice and a screaming match pursued. A few minutes later, a teacher intervened, and we were both sent to the principal's office. As we sat in chairs across from each other, she continued to call me names and I just sat there with my head down as tears ran down my face. The school had a zero-tolerance policy, which meant that any disturbance at the school resulted in suspension.

A week later I went back to school and I returned to my days of being an outcast. The other kids called me names, and solo lunches became the norm again. On the bus ride to and from school, I had to sit in the first few seats to keep the kids from bullying me. My feelings of being loved and accepted quickly had vanished; I was feeling lonely and rejected again.

At that point, I did the only thing I knew how to do. I closed down to everyone emotionally, and isolated myself.

During school, I kept to myself and ignored the bullying from the other kids. Some of the boys would trip me and push me around. I wanted to fight back, but there were too many of them so I allowed it happen. And if I got into any more trouble, my parole officer said she would lock me up.

At both school and home I spend most of my time alone. That is, until Quinn moved in.

Foster Brother Quinn

Quinn was a grandson of the Ellises, who had recently been in some legal trouble himself. The judge allowed him to stay with his grandmother instead of going to a juvenile correctional center. We shared a room and bonded quite fast. Since he was a year older than me, he attended the high school, while I attended the junior high school.

We rode the bus to and from school together, and it didn't take me long to become impressed by his confidence and social skills. A few weeks after riding the bus together, I no longer needed to sit up in the front. After school and on the weekends, I hung out with Quinn and his friends. I was no longer feeling like an outcast, and was extremely thankful to have Quinn in the house with

me. I studied the way he interacted with people and also how he composed himself like an eager student.

Sneaking Out At Night

The Ellises provided me with an allowance in exchange for doing chores around the house. I usually spent that money on the taxi rides, cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol for Quinn and I.

After the Ellises went to sleep, they rarely came out of their bedroom. During this time, Quinn and I would sneak out the bedroom window and go out on adventures. We stuffed our beds to make it look like we were under the sheets, then we walked or caught a taxi to whoever's house we were going to visit. Most of the time, it was either to meet up with friends or a girl Quinn was dating.

However, one time we got caught. When we arrived back at the house, we looked in the bedroom window and noticed someone had checked our beds to see if we there. We also noticed the lights on in the living room. We knew we were busted. So we decided to walk in through the front door and grab the situation by the horns.

Quinn had received bad news that day, so we decided to use it as an excuse for sneaking out. We told Mrs. Ellis that he was extremely upset and that we went out for a long walk to blow off steam. She asked if we were out

drinking and doing drugs, and though we were, we of course told her no. However, she didn't believe us.

She then asked us to walk over to the couch where she was sitting so she could smell our breath. She didn't smell anything, thanks to the breath mints we had eaten ten minutes prior on the taxi ride home. She gave us the benefit of the doubt, and off to bed we went. I was relieved we had gotten away with sneaking out, and felt quite proud of my ability to lie and manipulate.

Drugs and Alcohol

There wasn't much for the youth to do in this town. The kids usually hung out at each other's houses, or met up in remote parts of the town to drink, do drugs, and have sex. My social skills were still limited, and I didn't have the courage to ask any of the girls out. So I didn't engage in the sex part, but I actively engaged in drugs and alcohol.

Street Gang

One night, I convinced Quinn to start our own street gang. I had learned a lot about gangs while I was locked up, and thought it seemed like a good idea. Gangs provided a sense of connection, belonging, purpose and loyalty – all things that I desperately craved. We came up with the name “*Small Town Hustlers (STH)*,” and we recruited two of our other friends to join us.

The first thing we needed to do was jump each other in. This meant each one of us had to stand in the middle of a circle and allow the others to punch and kick us for sixty seconds. I learned this from interacting with the gang members in the detention centers. We went to the store, got some alcohol and proceeded to create our gang.

There were two rules to the initiation: No punching in the face, and if someone fell to the ground, the clock stopped and they had to get back up and continue. I volunteered to go first, and then we all took our turns. We were so intoxicated at the time that it didn't hurt that much. Following the fighting, I felt extremely connected and bonded to Quinn and the other two friends. However, the next day all of us were pretty sore.

No one really took being in the gang as seriously as I did. I started to do graffiti, and gave myself a tattoo on my hand by using a sewing needle and pen ink.

Hot Tub Party

The Ellis' youngest son, Jacey, lived on his own and would occasionally stop by. Quinn and I really liked him because he was in his twenties and bought cigarettes for us. He also drank liquor and smoked cannabis with us.

One night, he had some friends over to use the hot tub in the Ellis' garage, and Quinn and I hung out with them. We drank, smoked, laughed and had a good ol'

time. It was a school night, so Mrs. Ellis insisted that Quinn and I head to our room at 9:00 PM.

So we did, while the party in the garage continued. The window in our room was near the garage door, so we could still see and hear the festivities for the next few hours. We got ready for bed and turned the lights off as directed. Jacey knocked on our window occasionally and gave us shots of liquor and hits of cannabis. Towards the end of the night, one of his lady friends joined him for the trip to our window.

When he knocked, she took her top off and exposed her breasts. Quinn and I quickly opened the window. After a few minutes of chatting, we helped her sneak into the room through the window.

We were ecstatic to have her in our room. She was a bit loud, so we had to keep quieting her down. I let Quinn take over the talking, and in a few minutes, she had her hand down our pants while we rubbed her breasts. After a few minutes, she left the room and said she would be back to get us. We waited a few hours for her to return. Eventually, we got tired and went to sleep.

Then, we awoke to a knock on the window. It was Jacey and his friend. We got dressed quickly, snuck out the window, got in Jacey's car and drove towards his house. Jacey's friend sat in the backseat between Quinn and me. Once again, I remained quiet and let Quinn do

the talking. Within a few minutes she was naked and had her hands down our pants. I was excited, yet filled with anxiety because this would be my first time with a woman.

After we arrived at Jacey's house, we had more drinks and smoked more cannabis. The lady told us she was married and not to tell anyone. We agreed and proceeded to have sex with her. During the sex, I was so nervous. Afterwards, though, I felt like a new man. The next day, we told our friends about the adventure, and I was glad to finally have a cool story of my own to share with others.

Ninth Grade

The summer between eighth and ninth grade was now over, and I was really looking forward to attending school. I'd finally made it to high school, and thanks to Quinn, I had developed a group of friends to hang out with there. Although he was in the tenth grade, we met up at lunch and during the breaks. No longer was I friendless or bullied by the other students.

High School Football Team

Quinn and I tried out for the high school football team that summer. The tryouts consisted of two weeks of intense physical activity and training where the coaches pushed us to our physical limits every day.

At the end of the two weeks, we both made the team and continued to practice all the way up to the first game. On that day, the coach called us into his office. He told us that we had been cut from the team for failing classes the previous year. Though I was upset that I couldn't play football, I was happy that I had at least made the team.

Juvenile Detention (Part Three)

One day I got into an argument with a student in my class – a guy who had bullied me the previous year. He made a snide comment about me, and I immediately got out of my seat, walked up to him and told him to say it to my face. When he stood up, the teacher intervened and we were sent to the principal's office. The town had a zero-tolerance policy at school, and youth causing a disturbance could be criminally charged.

Two officers responded to our fight. One of them was the uncle of the other student. After hearing the report from the teacher, the officer said I was at fault since I got out of my seat and walked up to the youth and started to harass him. I told him that was bullshit. He started lecturing me about cursing, so I told him to fuck off. He didn't like that very much and told me to turn around so he could arrest me. I stood up, he handcuffed me and said something like, "You're not such a tough guy now are you?" to which I replied, "Take these cuffs off and let's go outside and we can determine who the tough guy really

is.” After a few more exchanges, it was time for him to escort me to his police car. On the way out of the building, we passed through a few doorways that he made sure to slam my right shoulder into. It hurt, and he smiled as he did it. At that point, I started unleashing all kinds of insults at him.

He drove me to the police station and waited for a call back from my parole officer on what to do. During that time, we continued to trade insults. Eventually, my parole officer was on the phone talking to me. She asked me if I had done the things the officer said I did. I said yes. She told me that it was unacceptable, and that I would be locked up.

When she asked me to pass the phone back to the officer, she told him to send me to juvenile detention for a month and that made him quite happy. Since there wasn't a juvenile detention in that town I had to be transported to one about an hour away. I had stuck up to bullying from him and the other student, so I was feeling quite proud of myself in that moment, even though I was going back to juvenile detention.

Thirty days later, Mr. Ellis came to pick me up and gave me a stern lecture. Both of the Ellises were retired from the police department and had very little tolerance for my actions. They stated that if anything like that happened again, I was out of the house. I agreed to behave.

Getting Kicked Out

Justin, the other youth who lived in the house, was pretty much a straight-edged kid. He got good grades, participated in school events, and hung out at his friend's away from the house most of the time. He was quite the opposite of Quinn and I, so we didn't interact that much.

However, one day he kicked the cat that lived with us, and I started punching him for it. That was the last straw for the Ellises. I was immediately kicked out of the house and moved over to the Casners.

CHAPTER 18
THE CASNER FAMILY



Age: 14 through 15

Duration: 3 months

The Casners were a married couple and had a son a few years younger than me. Mrs. Casner worked as a nurse and Mr. Casner worked as a semi-truck driver. He was often gone and only home a few days out of the week. I had my own room here, and the Casners were the first feeling I had of being in a normal family in a long time.

Chaos the Puppy

For Christmas that year, they let me bring home a chow puppy from the animal shelter. He was full of energy and loved to play, so I called him Chaos. I built him a fenced in play area in my room after he peed on the bed during the night. However, when I put him in the play area at night, he whined very loudly.

At first, I gave in and let him sleep on the bed again, but then he peed and pooped in the bed again. So the next

night I put him in the play area and ignored his cries as long as I could.

They got louder and louder, until the whole house could hear them. Mr. Casner became upset because he had to be up early the next morning and couldn't sleep. I too was frustrated.

It broke my heart to listen to Chaos cry, and I didn't want to anger Mr. Casner, so I grabbed my pillow and blanket and slept with him on the floor. He was so happy and seeing that made me happy.

About a month later, I came home from school to find Chaos had gone missing from the backyard. And he was never seen again. At first, I was incredibly sad, but I soon got over it and didn't mind having fewer responsibilities.

Kissing Mrs. Casner

One evening, Mrs. Casner and I were in the kitchen doing dishes after dinner. Mr. Casner had gone to bed because he had to be up early for work. She was washing and I was rinsing. We had some music playing and were having fun with the chore.

At one point, we turned our heads toward each other and kissed. We pulled our heads back after a few seconds, looked at each other and kissed again. She was a bit shorter

than me, so I picked her up and sat her down on the kitchen counter and we continued to kiss passionately.

Eventually we stopped, and when we did, we both had big smiles on our faces. Then we went our separate ways to bed. Mr. and Mrs. Casner each had their own bedroom because he got up early and he because also snored. The next morning Mrs. Casner came into my room and woke me up. She said that Mr. Casner was gone and proceeded to kiss me. I was a bit worried that my breath didn't smell good, but she continued anyway. Things got heated, our clothes came off and we ended up having sex. She asked me not to tell anyone and I agreed.

On the bus ride to school that day, I remember being filled with joy. When I saw Quinn at break time, I told him all about it. He was quite impressed. Later that night, she came into my bedroom and we had sex again.

The next day, Mr. Casner returned home. Dinner was very interesting because Mrs. Casner and I had a secret to hide. We looked at each other occasionally and smiled.

The next time we had sex in the car on the way home from Las Vegas. It felt really great to be intimate with someone, and the sneakiness of it was quite thrilling as well. My whole demeanor and outlook on life improved.

Then Mr. Casner started to realize what was going on. He never caught us in the act, and Mrs. Casner insisted that she didn't tell him, but one evening during

dinner, Mr. Casner had enough. He confronted Mrs. Casner in her bedroom and asked her if she was having sex with me. Their son and I could hear them scream at each other from the dining room table.

Then Mr. Casner came out and confronted me. I had a grin on my face, and was a bit confrontational as he questioned me. He started to get physically aggressive and I told him that I would knock him out if he placed one finger on me. That was the last straw. He called Child Protective Services and told them that he wanted me out of their house.

Mr. Ellis came and picked me up, and took me back to his house. He made sure I knew that he wasn't happy about it, and was only doing it because there was no other place for me to stay. I slept on their living room couch that night, and Quinn was instructed not to talk to me.

The next morning, someone from the state came over to the Ellises to drive me back to Las Vegas. First, we stopped at the Casner's to collect my belongings. Mr. Casner was irate and Mrs. Casner was crying.

As I packed my belongings, Mr. Casner came into the room and said he was taking back the Christmas gifts they had bought me – a nice stereo and a few other things. I protested, and stood in front of the stereo as he went to grab it.

We were almost in a stand-off and he motioned like he wanted to punch me. I raised my fists and told him to bring it on, and that I would knock his ass out. He yelled to the state worker that he wanted me out of his house right now and that he bought those gifts with his money so they were his.

After a few more minutes, my things were packed up in the car (minus the Christmas presents), and we were on our way. During the ride, the worker questioned me about the affair. I denied everything. She didn't believe me, and probed some more.

After twenty minutes, she stopped asking me questions. We sat silently listening to the radio for the rest of the ride. I remember feeling a sense of confidence, power, and control that I never felt before. And I liked it.

CHAPTER 19
GIRLS AND BOYS HOME



Age: 15

Duration: 2 weeks

We arrived at a large facility that was right next to a police station. I immediately started to panic because I realized I had brought my stash of cannabis with me. Thinking quickly, I pleaded with the state worker to let me smoke a cigarette before we went inside. When she agreed, I walked around the side of the building, hid my bag of cannabis in a bush, and proceeded to smoke a cigarette.

Afterwards, we walked into the building where there were children doing chores, reading, and talking to the staff. I was escorted into a private room by the state worker and a staff member from the facility. After a few minutes of conversation and paperwork, the state worker went on her way, and the staff member explained the rules of the place. They were quite different from any other place I had previously been.

This facility was a short-term shelter for youth with behavioral issues. They used a point system to attempt to alter the youths' behavior. If you did something they liked, you received positive points. If you did something they didn't like, you received negative points.

Each youth carried a point card around at all times to record points. If you lost the card, you earned negative points. Each youth was required to earn a certain number of points a day to gain basic privileges like TV and free time. To earn those points, you did chores and demonstrated acceptable positive behavior.

However, if you said a curse word, rolled your eyes at staff instructions, or anything along those lines, you received negative points, and were required to write them on the card. This meant extra chores or assignments to offset them. If you became uncooperative altogether, the staff gave you 50,000 negative points that you had to work off, and you were not allowed to interact with the other youth during that time.

While I was in the room with the staff member as he explained these rules, he asked me to empty my pockets and place everything on the table. When I refused, he said it was required of all youth as a safety precaution. After a few more minutes of discussion, I emptied my pockets on the table. At that moment I was relieved that I hid the bag of cannabis in the bushes.

He told me the cigarettes and lighter were not allowed in the facility and took them off the table. I became a bit upset, but he attempted to calm me down and said that I wouldn't be allowed to smoke at the facility anyhow. When I let it go, he said he was going to give me 5,000 positive points for remaining calm.

He instructed me to write "5,000 Positive Points - Remaining Calm" on the card and he signed it. Then we walked out of the office and he led me to my room to unpack my belongings and instructed me to find him when I was done unpacking. When I returned, he gave me an additional 5,000 positive points to write down on my card.

A few days later, I was instructed by my parole officer to pay a visit to her. I hadn't talked to her since everything that had transpired at the Casner's.

The facility didn't have enough staff to transport me to see my parole officer, so I was given bus tokens and shown how to take the city bus.

As I left the facility, I retrieved the cannabis I had hid in the bush, and re-hid it at a park down the street. When I made it to my parole officer's office, she questioned me about what took place with Mrs. Casner. I denied that anything occurred. She instructed me to not have any further contact with Mrs. Casner. I agreed and the topic changed to my next placement.

She had found a group home I could move to in a few weeks. After we discussed some other issues, my appointment was up and I headed back to the facility. But before I went back, I stopped at the park, smoked some cannabis, and called Mrs. Casner to let her know how I was doing. She told me that she was sorry for everything and that she loved me. After that, I headed back to the facility. They searched me again and instructed me to write some more positive points on my card.

A few days later I was allowed to have phone privileges. However, per facility rules, the people on my call list had to be approved by my guardian first. In my case, my guardian was my parole officer, and she only approved me to call Quinn.

When it was my turn to use the phone, a staff member would call the approved number and wait for someone to answer. They then asked for the approved person by name. Once the staff member believed it was the approved person, they would transfer the call to another phone, which didn't allow outgoing calls. I would talk to Quinn for a bit, and then had him three-way call Mrs. Casner, so she and I could chat.

One day they found out what I was doing. I'm not sure if they overheard me, or were listening to the call, but they confronted me about it. I of course denied it. The staff instructed me to pull out my card so they could give

me negative points. I pulled it out and proceeded to rip it up and throw it on the ground.

A few minutes later, I was at negative 50,000 points and ‘uncooperative,’ as they put it. In that situation, the staff no longer issued any negative points and just focused on getting the youth to follow their commands and become cooperative again.

When a youth is uncooperative, the other youth are instructed not to interact with him or her, and a staff member remains at the uncooperative youth’s side at all times, even while sleeping and in the bathroom. I had that status for about two days. I basically did whatever I wanted, as long as I didn’t interact with the other youth. I watched TV, went to the kitchen and made whatever I wanted to eat, and left the dishes in the sink without cleaning them. It was my form of payback for them isolating me and not letting me eat with the other youth.

However, there were a few youth I liked talking to, so I decided to cooperate again. The next couple of days were consumed with chores and activities to make up for all the points I’d lost. Finally, I got my points back and was able to interact with my new friends again. My parole officer instructed them to allow me to leave the facility for a few hours a day. I usually went to the park down the street, and came to really cherish that time because I could smoke cigarettes, cannabis, and call Mrs. Casner.

One day, after returning from the park, one of the staff members smelled the cannabis on me and started to question me about it. I denied it, and the staff member started issuing me negative points. So, I became uncooperative again. I flipped over and broke a small table. At that point, they called the police, so I went outside to smoke a cigarette. When I tried to come back in, the doors were locked.

I headed over to the park and called Mrs. Casner and asked her to come for me. She said she couldn't; that she would get in trouble if she did. I felt upset and hung the phone up on her.

I hung out at the park until sunset and eventually walked back to the facility and tested the doors. They were still locked, so I just sat outside the back of the facility. Later in the evening, one of the staff came out and talked to me. I agreed to cooperate again, and remained that way for the rest of my stay at the facility.

CHAPTER 20
BOBBIT GROUP HOME



Age: 15

Duration: 4 months

The next group home housed five to ten kids and was managed by a married couple who lived in the facility. Other staff members were around to help supervise the youth. During nights and weekends, the couple were off duty and spent the evening in their studio apartment which was attached to the building.

Mrs. Casner

Mrs. Casner came up to see me while I was living in that home. I would meet her at the convenience store. She still wanted to be my mother, yet I still wanted to have sex with her. She wasn't comfortable with that so I lost the desire to have her in my life. I told her that and she cried. She still attempted to contact me following that conversation, but I usually ignored her.

Knee Surgery

One day I was in gym class playing basketball. I went up for a shot and hit my kneecap on another youth's body and immediately fell to the floor. When I stood up, I felt my knee lock in place. I fell back to the floor in pain, and was wheelchaired to the nurse's office.

A staff member from the home picked me up and drove me to the hospital. The doctors took x-rays and informed me that pieces of bone had slivered away from my knee cap and were lodged between muscles and tendons inside my knee. Surgery would be required to remove the slivers of bone.

A week later, I was in surgery. When I woke awake post-surgery, the doctor explained they had removed as much as they could, but there were still some slivers that had traveled to the back of my knee that they were unable to remove. I was instructed to wear a brace on my knee and use crutches to walk for the next few weeks, and of course avoid physical activity. I was quite embarrassed to be walking around school in such a vulnerable condition. And it was next to impossible to carry a tray of food with crutches, so I skipped lunch altogether.

After a month, I was permitted to walk without the crutches, and a month after that, I was allowed to ditch the knee brace altogether. On occasion, I would feel my knee lock up so I would wear the brace again. For a while

after that, I was hesitant to participate in sports and other physical activities.

Girlfriend Kim (Part One)

One of the staff members at the home had a niece my age named Kim. Kim's mom was unable to care for her, so Kim lived with her aunt who worked at the home. She joined us for a few outings and we immediately hit it off. I would catch the city bus for a few hours each way to visit with Kim. On a few occasions, we hung out at her aunt's house without her aunt knowing.

One day Kim's aunt found out that I was going to her house and she was not happy about it. She confronted me, and told me to stay away from her house *and* her niece. I stopped going to her house, but Kim and I stayed in touch almost every day.

Cannabis Baggies

One of the students at school gave me a few bags of cannabis to sell to other students. If I sold three bags, I got to keep one for free. One day, all the youth at the home went out for an event and one of the baggies fell out of my pocket onto the floor.

No one saw it fall out of *my* pocket, but one staff member noticed the bag lying on the floor and picked it up. Everyone denied it was theirs, and so we were

promptly brought back to the home. All the youth were placed on restriction until someone confessed to owning the baggie. There was no way they could prove that it was me, so I remained silent.

One of the other youth had planned to hang out with some friends that evening, but he wasn't allowed to since the entire house was on restriction. He was quite sad and seeing him like that made me feel terrible that he had to suffer for my actions. I went to the bathroom and flushed the other baggie of cannabis in my pocket down the toilet. I then told the staff that it was mine. My parole officer was called and she sent an officer to arrest me and transport me to juvenile detention.

CHAPTER 21
JUVENILE DETENTION (PART THREE)



Age: 15

Duration: 2 weeks

Juvenile detention was a bit different that time. I was older, physically bigger and more knowledgeable about how to navigate the written and unwritten rules of that environment. Several of the same guards still worked at the detention facility, and they sarcastically welcomed me back. This time, however, I was in for a crime which I could talk about with the other youths, unlike before. Since I had already been to the main correctional facilities, youth who were on their way to one of these facilities asked me questions about what it was like.

One of the youth convinced me to change up my story when I saw the judge. I told him that it was not my cannabis, and that I only said it was mine to keep the other kids from being punished. He said since it was not found on me, and I no longer admitted to it, that he was required by law to release me.

My Life With 40 Parents

Although he ordered the courts to set me free, there was one hold up – they needed to find a new place for me to stay. A few weeks later, I was released and off to the next home.

CHAPTER 22
NEVADA YOUTH HOMES
(GROUP HOME #1)



Age: 15
Duration: 4 months

The next home was different than all the previous homes – this facility was managed by shift workers. One or two staff members worked an eight-hour shift, and then left after new staff came on to take their shift. However, I didn't spend a lot of time at the home other than to eat, shower, and sleep.

Girlfriend Kim (Part Two)

My girlfriend Kim moved back in with her mom and I spent a lot of time at her house. She was my first real girlfriend. We exchanged love letters and talked via phone multiple times a day.

One day, her mom's boyfriend was verbally abusive to Kim and her mom, so I stepped in and told him to back

off. Although he backed off, I was no longer allowed to come back to the house or see Kim again.

Summer Job

I landed a summer job through a youth workforce program helping clean and prepare a middle school for the upcoming school year. Three other youth and I reported to the school janitor and did various tasks that he requested of us. Everything from painting, to scraping gum off the sidewalks.

I really enjoyed the job. The youth working with me were cool, and the janitor was laid back. He gave us tasks and told us to report back to him when we were done. Some tasks took hours, and others took days. I was happy making money and being away from the home.

Quinn was also back in Las Vegas, so we reconnected and hung out on the weekends. Overall, life was good. Then I got news from my caseworker that she wanted to move me to a place where I could start learning to live independently and prepare to be on my own.

CHAPTER 23
NEVADA YOUTH HOMES
(CORPORATE OFFICE)



Age: 15
Duration: 3 months

The next home was managed by the same corporation as the last one, and was located behind their corporate office. The front of the building had three offices, and the back of the building was being remodeled to house the youth.

Five other youth lived there with me, and were supervised by a staff member for a few hours after the office closed. Once a week, the refrigerator and cupboards were stocked with food. We were in charge of preparing our own meals and cleaning up after ourselves.

It sounds okay, but that building was in one of the worst parts of town. I always looked over my shoulder as I came and went. Police sirens could be heard throughout the night as we slept. The place was an absolute dump, and the neighborhood was scary.

My Life With 40 Parents

A few months later, all the youth in the building were moved. I'm not sure why, but I heard a rumor that the company didn't have the proper licensing or approval for youth to live in the back of the office.

CHAPTER 24
NEVADA YOUTH HOMES
(INDEPENDENT LIVING CENTER)



Age: 15 through 17
Duration: 1 year and 8 months

This next facility was a two-story apartment complex (owned by the same corporation) that served as an Independent Living Facility and housed ten youth at a time. Each apartment had a small living room, a full kitchen, two small bedrooms, and one bathroom. Three of the apartments were used for youth, and the fourth apartment was used as an office and sleeping area for the staff.

There was a bit of a hierarchy as to which apartment each youth lived in. Room seniority was based on merits, such as working and going to school, as well as on a first-come, first-serve basis. I slowly moved my way up the hierarchy and eventually lived in every apartment.

The bottom left apartment was the staff office, and the bottom right apartment was where the youth lived

when they first arrived. Four to six youth shared that apartment at any given time. The top right apartment was for the youth who had been at the facility a bit longer. Two youth shared a room in that apartment. The crown jewel was the top left apartment. Each youth had their own room and received other perks that came with living in that apartment such as no curfew.

However, again, the complex was in one of the worst neighborhoods in the city. The street where we lived was called “Crack Alley.” Gangsters, drug dealers, and prostitutes roamed the streets continuously, and shootings, robberies, and other events occurred here on a daily basis. We were forbidden to walk or go anywhere in the neighborhood unless we were leaving our complex and heading east to the main street, where we could catch the city bus.

But of course we didn’t listen. We explored the area to the west, and bought drugs and alcohol. A few of the neighborhood convenience stores sold us alcohol without checking our identification. Anytime I walked around the neighborhood, I had my hand on a knife inside my pocket the entire time. It was against the facility’s policy to have weapons, and they would have kicked me out if they had found that I had it. But I felt that taking the chance at getting kicked out was better than death.

Butting Heads with Bernard

Bernard was in charge of overseeing the facility. He was kind and loving. He was also very passionate about structure and protocol. If the youth followed the rules, i.e., went to school (if enrolled), and worked (or were looking for work), he let the youth come and go as they pleased. I really enjoyed the freedom of the place and met the criteria most of the time.

There were times, however, when Bernard and I butted heads. One time he suspected me of smoking cannabis and confronted me. His assumption was correct, but I denied it. One of the facility's rules was that you had to submit to random drug tests.

Since it was Friday evening, and the testing facilities were closing, Bernard told me that early Monday morning, we would go for a drug test. If a youth failed a drug test, they were usually kicked out of the facility. Although I was nervous, I continued to play innocent.

That weekend, I drank as much water as I could to flush out my system. One of the other youth suggested I drink a lot of cranberry juice as well. Since he said it worked for him, I gave it a shot. I drank so much fluid that weekend that I was exhausted from going to the bathroom so much.

The following Monday, Bernard and I drove to the drug test facility, which was twenty minutes away. There

was a bit of tension during the car ride. He said he knew I was going to fail the test because he could smell the cannabis on me that day. I continued to deny his accusations, and prayed that my weekend flush worked. If not, I would be kicked out of the facility and sent back to Elko. When we arrived at the testing facility, I was instructed to pee in a cup and give it back to the lab technician. But first I had to empty my pockets. I would not be permitted to take anything with me into the bathroom, except the clothes I was wearing. Initially, Bernard insisted that he be allowed to watch me pee in the cup. I told him I was not comfortable with that and would refuse to take the test if that were the case.

Eventually, he allowed me to pee in private, and then we left the testing facility. Bernard asked me questions about what I was going to do after I got kicked out, but I continued to claim innocence and ignored him as much as I could.

Then, 24 hours later, he got the results back. I had passed. When he shared the results with me, I was filled with joy. He said he wasn't sure how I passed, but he was quite sure I was high that day. I asked him for an apology after accusing me, and he said he was sorry. Then I lectured him for not trusting me.

Bernard and I butted heads again after I got into a fight with Nacho, one of the staff members. Nacho worked the late night shift at the facility, and was new on

the job. That shift was a hard one to fill and Bernard really liked him.

Around 9:00 PM on a school night, Nacho came into my room, demanding I turn the lights out. I told him I was working on my homework, so he allowed me fifteen more minutes and then it was, "lights out!"

Twenty minutes later, when he came in and saw me still doing my homework, he wasn't happy. I had been so engaged in my homework at that point, that I didn't even realize that twenty minutes had passed.

He instructed me in a harsh tone to put everything away and get into bed immediately. He said he was going to stand in my room until I was in bed with the lights out. This struck a nerve with me, so I told him to chill out, in a rude tone of my own. That struck a nerve with him, so he commented on how ungrateful I was, and that he would never allow me to stay up past bedtime again. I responded by telling him to fuck off.

Nacho then approached me in a very aggressive manner. He started yelling at me and pushed me back onto the bed. When I immediately got back up, he tried to punch me in the face, but I dodged it. This caused him to lose his balance and fall onto the bed. Then he got up and started to cock his arm back to throw another punch. That time I beat him to it and punched him in the jaw with all the strength I had. He immediately fell to the

ground. While he was on the floor, I offered a truce to stop the fighting. He got up and stormed out of the apartment and into the office.

The other boys in the apartment had gathered in the room and saw a good portion of the interaction. After Nacho left, the boys praised me and gave me high fives. I felt proud and scared at the same time.

Ten minutes later, Nacho came back into the apartment, walked into my room and handed me the phone. Bernard was on the other line and was very upset with me. Nacho told him I had attacked him. Bernard told me he was tired of my shit, and would be calling the police shortly to have me arrested and removed from the facility for good.

I tried to tell him my side of the story, but he didn't believe me, and he called the police. When the police came, they interviewed both of us. Nacho was being a bit of a hot head, while I remained calm and collected. The police also interviewed the other youth in the apartment, who corroborated my side of the story.

When they told Nacho that, he started yelling at the police who then handcuffed him. All the youth laughed at him while they escorted him to the police car. I felt extremely grateful and thanked the police officers for believing me. They apologized that I had to go through

that experience, and would file a complaint with Child Protective Services in the morning and left.

Thirty minutes later, Bernard arrived and called me into his office and was very upset with me – far more upset than I'd ever seen him. He said he no longer wanted me in his facility, that I was causing too many problems, and that he would be driving me to a new home that night.

I packed up my belongings in trash bags, got into a van with him and headed to the Emergency Youth Care Center (from chapter 10).

Two weeks later, Child Protective Services concluded their investigation, and I was moved back to the Independent Living Center.

And Bernard was not happy that he had to accept me back.

Falling Asleep In Spanish Class

On school nights, I'd get home from work around midnight. I then woke up at 4:00 AM to ride the city bus for two hours so I could make it to school on time. I was able to keep myself awake in most of my classes, except Spanish.

I really enjoyed Spanish. I was engaged in learning it, practicing on the bus, and doing the homework (most of the time). There was always more homework than I felt I

could do, so I focused on the easy parts of each class. I turned in whatever I could complete, and hoped for the best. One day, the Spanish teacher asked me to stay after class. She asked me if I liked Spanish, and I told her yes. Then she asked me why I was always sleeping in her class. I told her that I wasn't getting much sleep because of my hectic schedule. She asked me, in a sarcastic tone, to explain my schedule.

I told her after school was out, I rode the city bus for an hour to work. I then worked a six-hour shift, and caught the city bus for another hour ride to arrive home around midnight. I'd wake up at 4:00 AM to ride the city bus for two hours to make it to school on time.

After that day, she no longer woke me when I fell asleep in her class. A month later, school was let out. When I got my report card, she had given me a 'C,' even though I didn't earn it.

Alternative High School #1

During the school break, Bernard came to the realization that riding the city bus to and from school each day was too hard for me, and that I needed to go to a closer school.

The commute *was* very draining on me, but I was tired of moving schools. He told me I didn't have enough credits to earn my diploma in a typical four-year school

anyway, so I would need to go to an alternative high school, which was designed to help students like me graduate. Eventually, I agreed and switched schools.

This school was also across town, but a bus picked me up and dropped me off just a few blocks away from the facility. The bus ride was only forty five minutes each way, compared to the two hours it took me previously.

The school bus was never more than half full, so many of us were able to take an entire row of seats for just for ourselves. For some reason, I loved it when the bus drove on the freeway. I was amazed that the bus driver drove at such high speeds. I loved looking out the window and down on the cars. Sometimes people waved at us and sometimes we would initiate the wave. Either way, it brought big smiles to our faces, and I was glad Bernard made me switch schools.

This school was filled with misfits like myself, so I fit right in. Many students at the school smoked cigarettes in an empty dirt lot next to the school during breaks. And the school actually allowed us to smoke as long as we didn't smoke on campus. A staff member patrolled the area on the lookout for cannabis, as well as other "bad" behaviors and actions. To skirt around that, students would empty out cigarettes and small cigars, and then fill them with cannabis, so it looked like they were smoking regular tobacco products.

One day, the history teacher mentioned to the class he couldn't smell anything, so students smoked cannabis at the back of the class in a bit of an ingenious way. When the teacher was writing on the board, one of the students would duck his head under the desk and take a hit of cannabis from a pipe.

The key was to minimize the smoke. So the student immediately put out the fire and blew the smoke very softly into a towel until it was all absorbed. Then the towel, pipe, and lighter were passed to the next person.

This worked well, until the principal of the school walked into the room unannounced one day. She took a few steps into the room and commented that the room smelled like cannabis. The teacher said he didn't smell anything, but not to depend on his opinion since his nose didn't work.

The principal turned to the class and asked us if we smelled the cannabis in the room. Some of the kids responded "yes." And then a student who was a known cannabis user made a joke that he needed to do his laundry. Many of the students laughed and the principal exited the classroom.

I only spent a month at this school. There was a similar type of school closer to my house, but the home address in my school file was outdated and they had zoned me for the wrong school.

Alternative School #2

The next school was quite similar to the previous one, but with an added benefit - the bus ride only took half as long. Also, the school offered additional classes that could be taken at the end of the day to earn extra credits via the vocational high school next door.

The vocational school had classes in several areas, including the culinary arts. Students from the alternative school were permitted to take classes at the vocational school, as long as there was room. So I enrolled in one of the culinary classes.

On the first day, I was shocked to see Quinn in the class as well. He was going to a regular high school nearby, but he was also taking the class to make up lost credits. We were thrilled to be taking the classes together.

The other students in the class were members of the vocational school who were quite serious about taking the class and learning skills from the chef instructor. Quinn and I didn't take the class as seriously, and goofed off a bit as we completed our assignments. One day after class, the instructor pulled us aside and gave us a choice of either taking the class seriously, or being stuck on dish duty for the remainder of the semester. We did take the class seriously and did all the assignments as instructed. We just laughed and had fun while we did them.

We apologized and told him we would behave. However, on the next assignment we goofed off again so, the next day we were assigned to dish duty. After five days of doing dishes, Quinn and I decided to quit the class.

My Friend Nick

During breaks, I hung out in the smoking section behind the alternative school. Smoking allowed me to have something in common with other kids and provided opportunities to connect with them. Such as asking for a lighter or giving away cigarettes. One day at lunch, Nick (a fellow student) asked me if I wanted to go have a hamburger with him for lunch. I told him I didn't have any money. He said he would pay for it, so I said yes.

The restaurant was a five minute walk from the school, and was a trek many students made every day. I thought we were going to walk, but he said he had a truck with airbags on the suspension that lifted the vehicle up and down like an amusement ride, and a stereo system with ten giant speakers.

When we got in the truck, he hit a switch that lifted the body off the ground to clear speed bumps and such. As soon as we left the school grounds, he hit the switch again and the truck fell back towards the ground. Then he turned the stereo up and the bass was so intense, it hurt my ears. I was embarrassed, but had to ask him after a few

minutes to turn it down a bit. He turned it down, called me a pussy in a playful tone, and we laughed.

We ordered our food and drove to the airport where we ate and watched planes take off and land. We had a great conversation and ended up getting back to class a bit late. Nick lived near me and offered to drive me home after school. I had extra classes and got out later, so I had to pass on his offer.

However, I asked if he was willing to pick me up in the mornings and he said yes. We became good friends for a few years after that.

Campus Monitor with Fancy Nails

One of the campus monitors had extremely long, natural fingernails. They were so long that they made me wonder how she wiped her butt. I thought it was ridiculous, but she loved them, and they were always painted nicely. She was a kind, but firm, campus monitor whom most of the kids liked and respected.

One day, she was called to break up a fight between a few students. In the process, she broke one of her nails and boy, was she livid. I wasn't there to see it first-hand, but news of it traveled around the school fast.

Looking back on it, I think the reason we adored that lady was her pride in expressing her uniqueness, no matter

how weird or fascinating people found it. That gave us permission to express our own uniqueness.

Dropping Out Of School

One day during class, a visitor came in the classroom and handed the teacher a piece of paper. She read it and said, “Chris, you’re wanted in the office.” I was a bit stunned and looked at the teacher and said, “Me?” She said, “Yes, you” and smiled.

As we walked to the office, I thought about all the rules I might have broken recently.

Ten minutes after I arrived, the principal came out to see me. The warm introduction and smile on his face took me by surprise. We walked back to his office and sat down facing each other.

He told me I was more than a year behind in credits, and that I was not a good fit for the school. I was shocked and confused. I had only failed a couple of classes, and thought that’s why I was going to that school, believing I could make up the lost credits and earn my diploma.

He told me I wasn’t in many of the previous classes long enough to get credit for them, and that’s why I was credit deficient. He said he was also bringing it up because I was taking up a spot at the school that another youth could use to graduate on time.

In a kind and compassionate way, he shared with me my options, and the best one was to get my General Education Diploma (G.E.D.). If I took a test and passed it, I wouldn't have to go to school anymore. The conversation came to a close, and I excitedly caught the city bus home.

When I arrived home, I told Bernard about the conversation I had with the principal. He said he couldn't take my word for it and would talk to the principal the next day. The next morning, Bernard and I drove to the principal's office and the two of them had a lengthy discussion.

Eventually, Bernard told the principal that he understood his reasoning and withdrew me from the school. I walked back to Bernard's car filled with bewilderment. I couldn't believe that I was being allowed to dropout of school, especially since Bernard, my parole officer, and the other adults who cared for me were so adamant that I attend school.

Telemarketing

Since I was no longer going to school, I was required to get a job. I worked over six different jobs while living at that facility.

My first job was as a telemarketer, selling long distance phone service. First, I had to go through two

weeks of intense training. The workplace had a strict dress code, but I did not have the clothes for the job when I accepted the position.

When I told Bernard, he said he didn't have the money to buy those items for me, but that he would request money from the state. The night before my first training day, I had to barter with one of the other youth so I could borrow some of his dress clothes.

Three days later, Bernard received a check from the state and took me shopping for dress clothes. I went to work the next day feeling handsome and much more confident.

I worked at that job for about a month before I quit. I didn't like the feeling of bothering people and being hung up on all day. I made almost \$1,000 from my short time there, so at least I had that. I also had some nice clothes that I could wear to future interviews.

Fish Fry Restaurant

My next job was at a fast food restaurant that served fried fish, fried chicken, and other items. I really enjoyed that job and was making good money. My job was to operate the three large deep fryers and it was pretty easy, except for the cleanup. Every night I ended up getting burnt somehow, some way. Usually, it was from the hot oil splashing on my hands, arms, or face.

The manager and staff really liked me. I was friendly, worked hard, and was dependable. One of the cashiers and I would flirt, even though she had a boyfriend. One day, while taking out the trash together, we kissed. I enjoyed kissing her, but we were right next to the dumpster which smelled awful. The odor was so intense we stopped and went back inside the restaurant.

One night, she invited me to her parents' apartment where she was staying to have sex. I said "yes" and very much enjoyed our time together that night. The next day, she told her boyfriend and that was the end of that. We remained friends at work and still flirted occasionally.

While at work one day, I received a call about one of my good friends, who had just been killed. I went to my boss and told her I needed to leave immediately. It was dinner time and the restaurant was busy, so she said I couldn't leave at that time. She needed me, and that if I left, I would be fired. I went to the bathroom, changed my clothes, clocked out, handed her the uniform, and ran to the bus stop.

Basketball Arena

My next job was in a large arena used for basketball games, concerts and other events. Quinn worked there and was able to get me an interview. It was a bit tricky though – you had to be sixteen years old to work there, and I was a few months shy. The interviewers liked me

and made an exception to the rule, and told me not to tell anyone.

I loved my new job. I worked side by side with my best friend and I was able to see concerts and other events for free. Even though I worked part-time, I earned just as much as when I was working full-time at the fish fry restaurant.

I was part of a three-person team that cooked food in the back of a food stand in the main concourse of the arena. Quinn was the lead cook and made the hamburgers. I was second in command and oversaw the fryers that cooked the chicken fingers and fries. The low man was the server in between us who put the hot food in paper trays. Every event, they rotated someone different to do the server role until our friend Matt got the job. Then it was the three amigos in the cooking section. It felt great.

Our stand closed about an hour before the events were over, so if we cleaned up fast, we were able to watch the end of all types of concerts, sports games, and events. At the end of the night, the tips received were evenly distributed amongst all those who worked in the stand. Many nights we each left with \$30-\$100 in tips. That is, until someone made a big fuss that they weren't paid the right amount of tips. Then the arena management stopped allowing tip jars in the stands.

I wasn't making as much money once the tip jars were removed. So Bernard told me I needed to get an additional job, so that's what I did. I continued to work at the arena in my spare time when I could. But the morale of the staff in the arena was never the same after the tip incident, and eventually all three amigos quit working there.

Chicken Roasters

My next job was at a fast food restaurant that served chicken cooked in a rotisserie oven. It was a bit boring and I was only working part-time. When I told Quinn about the job, he said that he might be able to get me an interview at the new restaurant he was working at. I went in for the interview, got the job, and didn't bother to show up for my shift at the chicken restaurant the next day.

The Steakhouse

When I arrived to work on my first day, I was instructed to wash dishes. I wasn't thrilled about that, but I smiled, said "yes," and did the dishes as instructed until my shift was over.

I used a large, industrial strength dishwasher, which cleaned and dried a lot of dishes in a matter of minutes. Dishes from the customers and kitchen were placed on a long metal counter next to me, and my job was to rinse the food from the dishes with a powerful spray faucet and put them in the dishwasher for a thorough cleaning.

Every time I cleared the pile of dishes, it filled up again. At some points during my shift, the pile overflowed and someone else had to stop what they were doing to help me get caught up.

After four days of doing dishes, I was finally assigned to cook food. I was a bit slow, so they put me back on dishes. I was pretty upset, but my manager said if I didn't like it, I could leave. The next day, I decided to quit. I never called, or showed up at work again.

Quinn was quite upset with me. He said that he had put his name on the line by getting me the job and now I made him look bad. I apologized and shared that I went there to be a cook, not a dishwasher. He was so upset that we didn't talk for months after that.

Sandwich Shop

My next job was at a sandwich shop. I wasn't thrilled to be working there, but it was only a five minute walk from my house, and it got Bernard off my back.

The job was pretty easy. Customers came into the shop, told me what they wanted on their sandwich and I made it. I usually worked the evening shift, so my job also included cleaning the store and preparing food for the next day.

I only had one main challenge with that job: one of my co-workers. She would make sexual comments and

innuendos throughout the shifts. This made me quite uncomfortable, but I didn't know how to express it, so most of the time I just ignored her.

One evening, while I was walking home from work, five men followed me home. I opened up my pocket knife and held it close to my side out of their view. When I got close to my apartment, I started running and tried to open my door. As I was about to open it, they caught up with me and beat me up.

The next thing I remember was waking up in my apartment covered in blood. Then I heard a loud knock on the door. For a few seconds, I thought it might be the same group coming back. I ignored the knocks until I heard "Police! Open up!" I went into the kitchen, grabbed the biggest knife I could find and opened the main door with the screen door locked. It was two police officers. They asked me to put the knife down and let them in.

After that, the next thing I remember was waking up in the hospital. I carried a piece of paper in my wallet with important names and phone numbers. Billie, the guy in charge of supervising me at the time (more on this later), was called and he showed up at the hospital to pick me up.

Later on, I found out who beat me up and why. My friend Nick and another guy liked the same girl. One evening, Nick asked me to go with him to this guy's house

to confront him. When we got there, Nick threw a brick through the guy's window.

That guy found out where I lived, so he and a group of his friends got their revenge on me. After I learned that it was retaliation for those actions, I felt like I kind of deserved it and let it go.

My Friend Jesse

Quinn and Jesse lived in the same apartment complex and the three of us would hang out at Jesse's house or roam the Las Vegas Strip. Most of our hangout sessions included consuming alcohol, cannabis, and other drugs.

The apartment complex where they lived was full of drug dealers, so we had no problem acquiring those substances. I usually spent the night at Quinn's apartment. His mom loved me and always made sure I had food to eat. But Quinn's mom and stepdad argued a lot, and since Quinn and his stepdad didn't get along very well, we spent as little time there as possible.

One day, while I was at work at the fish fry restaurant, I received a "911" message on my pager and immediately called the number displayed.

The person on the other line was crying and told me Jesse was dead. According to the police report, Jesse and some people he recently met were playing Russian roulette. That game involved putting one bullet inside a

revolver pistol, spinning the revolver, and taking turns putting the pistol to your head and pulling the trigger.

When Jesse pulled the trigger, the pistol blew his brains out. That night I visited the garage where it occurred and saw the blood and brain matter on the walls. When Quinn and I questioned the other people Jesse was with that night, their stories didn't match up. Jesse was left-handed but he was shot on the right side of his head. I was devastated by losing my friend.

Quinn and I wanted to avenge our friend's death but we didn't know what to do. Everyone said he killed himself. We felt differently but couldn't prove it, which was probably a good thing since we were ready and prepared to do serious harm to whoever had killed him.

A few weeks later, Quinn and I started reflecting on our friends and the lifestyle we were living. We came to the conclusion that if we continued the path we were on, we would end up in jail or dead before long.

My Friend Matt

Matt (Jesse's cousin) and I started hanging out regularly after that, and I often stayed the night at his parent's house. As a ward of the state, any time you wanted to spend the night at someone's house, anyone over eighteen who lived in the house had to submit to a federal background check.

I was usually too embarrassed to tell my friends that when they asked me to stay the night. I just told them I was on restriction and would make up a story why. In this case, Matt was a bit persistent, so I finally told him why I couldn't spend the night. He then told his parents and they offered to do the background check so I could spend the night.

Matt's parents really liked me and I liked them. They let us drink and smoke cannabis at the house as long as we didn't go anywhere. We'd cook dinner, watch TV and play video games most of the time.

Then we started hanging out at my place more often. Matt liked watching the drug dealers and prostitutes conduct business from the safety of my living room window. It fascinated him.

The day Matt's pregnant mom gave birth, I received a "911" message on my pager. I called back immediately. Matt told me his mother died while giving birth. I dropped everything and literally ran as fast as I could, two miles down the street to the hospital he was calling from. He was never the same after that.

Crashing Billie's Car

The owner of the facility lost his license to house youth at the complex. I'm not sure why, but all the youth (except me for some reason) were moved to another

facility across town. I was excited to be able to stay at the facility all by myself with less supervision. A month later they moved an adult into the apartment, Billie.

Billie was given free rent in the apartment in exchange for supervising me. However, he had a regular job, and he was also a boxer, so he was really only home to shower and sleep. We liked each other, but only interacted a few minutes each day.

On one occasion, I asked him to teach me how to drive. I had just received my driver's permit, which was quite the task. At that time in Nevada, you were allowed to get your driver's permit if you were sixteen years old, had parental permission, and passed the driver's exam. I was older than sixteen and knew I would pass the test. However, the state wouldn't sign off on it for any youth. So I had to pay an adult to pretend he was my guardian to sign the paperwork at the DMV. It worked and I got my driver's permit.

Although I knew the laws for driving, I had very little experience in actually driving, so I asked Billie if he would teach me. He agreed. But, on my second lesson, I crashed his car. I was getting onto the freeway too fast and crashed into the sidewall. He was furious, especially since he didn't have any insurance. I felt extremely bad, but was a bit confused about why he would allow me to drive if he didn't have insurance. I had about \$500 in my bank account and gave it all to him to get a new car.

Room Searches

Bernard came once a week to take me food shopping, and to inspect the apartment for cleanliness and illegal contraband. He gave me \$25.00 a week to spend on food. I usually bought the same thing every week - cereal for breakfast, makings for sandwiches for lunch, and spaghetti for dinner.

He sometimes showed up randomly to check on me. He rarely came after business hours, or on weekends. I had a pet hamster who I let roam around my room at night and on the weekends, but it was against the facility's policy to have a pet. So, during the day, I hid the hamster and other illegal contraband, anticipating an unexpected visit from Bernard. He didn't search very hard so it was quite easy to hide those things. The last day I lived at that facility was the day I was beaten up while coming home from work at the sandwich shop.

CHAPTER 25
NEVADA YOUTH HOMES
(GROUP HOME #2)



Age: 17 through 18
Duration: 3 months

Billie drove me from the hospital to a group home across the valley which Bernard was managing. I asked about my belongings and was told they would be picked up and delivered for me. I started to panic because they would find all my forbidden belongings. Two days later, my belongings arrived in black trash bags and cardboard boxes. Bernard found my hamster and cannabis paraphernalia. He was not happy, and put me on permanent restriction. I was only allowed to leave the house to look for work and for school (*studying for my GED*), and had to return home immediately afterward.

I also had to take weekly drug tests. I was bothered by those restrictions at first, but I quickly saw the silver lining. Almost any job paying more than minimum wage required the applicant to pass a drug test.

I was about to turn eighteen, which meant I would be on my own, so I needed a higher paying job to support myself. I stopped smoking cannabis and started looking for jobs in the casino industry.

Two months later, I registered for a labor union. I went to the main office every morning by 6:00 AM and waited for my name to be called along with a group of other job seekers. Those jobs were on a first-come, first-serve basis. But there was also seniority, so those who were union members the longest and had the most experience were selected first.

After two weeks, my name was finally called. I was given the job of an on-call bus person and dishwasher inside of a casino. At first, I only worked a few days a week. Most of the time, I'd receive a call a few hours before they needed me. When someone called in sick or didn't show up for work, that's when they called me. Since I lived across town from the casino, it usually took me an hour or more to get to work taking the city bus. It was quite a hassle, but I just kept telling myself that it would be worth the hassle someday.

Then one day, they needed someone to help with room service, so I volunteered. My job was assisting the room service workers to prepare orders and collect the dishes from the rooms. After that shift was over, I went back to my other position.

Two weeks later, I was offered a position to help with room service one day per week. That was added to my three days helping in the other restaurants. A month later, they offered me a job working strictly in room service four days a week. I happily accepted the job. The room service manager told me that technically she wasn't allowed to hire me due to seniority, but since she liked the way I worked, she bent the rules and made an exception.

I wasn't doing anything but working and going home, so I was able to save my money and had \$1,000 in the bank. I almost had enough to buy a car, so I hired a driving company to teach me how to drive and to have a car to use for my driving test.

A few weeks later, I turned eighteen and went to court. The judge was impressed that I was working so hard and staying out of trouble. He offered to give me the \$500 per month that they were paying the foster parents until I was nineteen years old, as long as I continued to work and work on getting my G.E.D. Later that day, I headed to the DMV, signed up to take my driver's test, and received my driver's license on the first try.

A few weeks later, I put all my belongings in Quinn's car, said goodbye to Bernard, and headed off on my own. That was the first time in my life in which I felt I was completely in control of my destiny. I was excited, scared, and humbled all at the same time.

CHAPTER 26
LIVING ON MY OWN



Age: 18

An unfurnished, 8' x 10' room with no windows was vacant in the four-bedroom house where Quinn was renting a room. When I arrived to check it out, I was shocked. The place was filthy. The kitchen sink and countertops were filled with dirty dishes, the floors were coated with dirt, and the tub was coated with a black layer of grime. It wasn't exactly what I had imagined, but the rent was only \$250, so I said yes.

I was finally a free adult. I no longer had to report to anyone, and I could come and go as I pleased. I spent all my free time over the next few days smoking cannabis and cleaning the house. I figured that if I wanted to live in a clean house, I was going to have to take the responsibility of cleaning it. I felt that it was a small price to pay for my newfound freedom.

Since the state would be covering my rent for a while, I could use my savings to purchase a car. I had my mind

set on a particular kind of car – I was a big fan of lowriders at the time, and has visions of building my own.

I gathered all the classifieds from the area and continued searching until a month later I found the specific type of car I wanted. A used car dealership had one for \$3,500, so I put \$1,500 down, financed the rest, and drove off the lot with my first car.

Normally, it took me an hour to get to work on the city bus, but with my new car, it took less than twenty minutes. When I went to work that night, I was feeling fabulous. I had a job, my own place, and now my own car.

These were the three ingredients I thought were essential to becoming a successful adult.

Laid Off From Work

A few months later, I was laid off from the casino. It was the slow season in Las Vegas, and the newest hires were laid off first. I was shocked, angry, and stunned by fear. What was I going to do? Then I remembered that my rent would be paid by the state, so at least I had a place to stay. I also still had about \$750 saved up, so I could make my car payment and other bills for a few months.

One of my roommates had two jobs. He was a valet attendant in the evening and delivered newspapers in the early morning, and said he might be able to get me a job delivering newspapers.

The next day, I went to his boss' office at the newspaper, applied and got the job. During my first few days, I drove with someone and learned the route. The job took about five hours each night, and was fairly easy.

The first few hours were spent rolling up hundreds of newspapers and putting them in individual plastic bags. I filled my car with as many newspapers as I could fit. Then I drove slowly down the streets on my route and tossed the papers out of the window to the houses that were supposed to receive them. It took me two carloads to complete my route. I felt extra grateful that I bought the car.

Two months later, I got a part-time job as a cook in a local mall and I worked both jobs for a while. A month or so later, I got a full-time job working as a photographer at an airport.

Brad the Mentor

The state had a few requirements I had to maintain to continue to receive the monthly checks. One of the requirements was to meet with a mentor at least once a month. I didn't really know what a mentor was, nor did I care. If meeting with that person meant receiving a check every month, then I would do it and so, I treated it like a job. During the first few months we spoke, I made sure my mentor, Brad, knew that I was only speaking to him because I had to. He continued to call anyway. Then, one

day, he asked me to help with a study he was conducting and said he could pay me for helping. I was all ears.

He was preparing to conduct a study on what happens to foster youth in Nevada after they leave foster care. He would be sending out questionnaires to former foster youth, and wanted to test the questionnaire on me. He said it would take about an hour and offered to pay me \$50.00 to help.

After I completed the questionnaire, he offered me a part-time job helping him with the study. He needed someone to stuff the questionnaires in the envelopes, seal them, and attach the mailing address. He offered \$10.00 an hour and said it would take about twenty hours.

A week later, I called him and told him I was finished. It only took me about ten hours, but I told him it took twenty instead. We met up for dinner, I gave him the envelopes, and he gave me the \$200.

Legislative Testimony

One day, Brad called and invited me to dinner. He had received the results of the study he conducted. They weren't good. He planned to share them with certain people and wanted to know if I was willing to share my story with a few legislators. I remember thinking, "What are legislators, and why would they care about my story?"

He said he was hoping to convince the legislators to continue supporting foster youth financially up to the age of twenty-one, and he felt that my story would help. I thought about it for a few moments, especially the part where I would continue receiving a check from the state until I was twenty-one years old. I looked at him, smiled, and said I was in.

We met for dinner a few more times over the next month. Brad helped me write my story down on paper so I could read it out loud at the legislative hearing. Early one morning, I put on the clothes I used for job interviews and headed to the hearing across town.

I arrived at the government building, went through the metal detectors, and headed to the room where I was instructed to meet Brad.

When I arrived, there were a handful of people in the room. Some were sitting and others were standing. Everyone seemed so serious, and I immediately got nervous. But when I saw Brad sitting in one of the rows, I felt relieved and went to sit with him.

Ten minutes later, the room had filled with people and the legislators sat down in fancy chairs positioned above us. It was similar to the way the judge sat above people in court.

Presenters took turns talking to the legislators, each for forty five minutes. Then it was my turn and I was

called up, along with a girl my age who also grew up in foster care. When I went to the stand, I nervously began reading aloud what I had written down on paper. The legislators asked me a few questions, and then it was the girl's turn to share her story.

Afterwards, we were questioned more about our experiences growing up in foster care. I don't remember the questions, but I do remember one of my responses. I asked how many of those people had kids who were over eighteen years old. A few of them raised their hands. Then I asked how many of their kids were ready to be on their own at the age of eighteen.

They looked at each other and paused for a few moments. Then, one of them said he had a 23-year old daughter who had just moved back home. Then another man said he had a 20-year old son who hadn't even left the house yet.

So I said, "Exactly. Your kids aren't ready to be on their own, and you are good parents. How can you expect teens who have grown up in foster care to be ready to be on our own at eighteen?"

They looked at each other, and thanked us for sharing our stories. After a few more presenters, the hearing came to a close.

After the hearing, someone from the newspaper approached me and asked me some questions. Then a few

of the legislators came up to me and congratulated me on a job well done. One even asked me if I had ever thought about being a politician. I didn't know what that meant, so I just laughed it off.

I left the building feeling confident and like finally, my voice had been heard. As Brad walked me to my car, I asked him when he would find out if they would continue supporting us financially. He said very candidly that he had no clue and was not positive they would say "yes."

My Nineteenth Birthday

On October 4th, 2000, I went before the judge for the last time. The state still had not passed any legislation that would allow foster youth to stay in care once they turned nineteen.

So, it was time for them to release custody of me. The judge, my caseworker, and other state officials wished me the best and I was on my way. It was a bittersweet moment. I was happy to be free from the state's care, but I was struggling with the loss of the \$500 per month that helped to help cover bills.

Now I was really on my own, and it felt scary.

A few weeks after being a free adult, I called my old caseworker and asked if I could see the files they had collected on me since I was a kid. I was interested in

finding my biological family, and the files may hold clues that could help me.

She put in a request, and a week later called to let me know two of the three files were missing, but that there was one remaining. She left this one with her receptionist for me to come and take a look at.

When I arrived, the receptionist escorted me to a private room and placed the heavy file on a table in the room. She said I could use the copier if I wanted to make copies of anything. As she left the room, she told me to bring the file back to her when I was done.

Though I was upset that they had lost two of the files, I was happy they had at least one. The one they had contained the court reports from the day I entered foster care, along with an old picture of my mom. It was the first time I ever saw what she looked like. I started reading a few pages and became overwhelmed with sadness and anger. I had to stop reading.

Since I was scheduled to be at work soon, I decided to just take the file and walk out the door – partly because I felt they no longer had a use for it, and partly because I didn't trust them to keep the file safe.

My caseworker called me the next day to ask if I got everything I needed from the file, and I said yes. She asked me where I left it, and I told her I stole the file. Though

she wasn't happy about it, I knew she understood why I took it.

She wished me well and asked me to call her occasionally to let her know how I was doing.

National Foster Youth Advisory Council

Once I was released from state custody, I wanted nothing to do with anyone from the state, including Brad. But he kept trying (thankfully), so eventually I called him back. He said he had a great opportunity for me and wanted to know if I would meet him for dinner. He wanted me to apply for a position on the National Foster Youth Advisory Council, and brought along the application. The Council was comprised of about 30 foster youth from around the country who were involved in Child Welfare Reform, and Brad thought I would make a great addition. So he helped me fill out the application.

A few weeks later, I received a call from the organizer of the group. After a lengthy phone interview, she informed me that I had been selected to join the group. I was thrilled, especially since they paid the youth to attend the gatherings. The Council met twice a year, once in Washington D.C. and once in another city chosen by the group.

Fast forward three months, it was time for me to attend my first meeting. I packed my suitcase and boarded

a plane to Washington D.C. I was excited and nervous at the same time. This was my first time on a big plane, traveling by myself, and my first time in Washington D.C.

The group provided us with money beforehand to take a taxi to the hotel. But I wanted to save money, so I took the subway instead. I got off at the wrong stop and ended up walking two miles in the rain until I arrived at the hotel and thought to myself, “The next time, I’m taking the taxi. Screw the money!”

Unfortunately, I had arrived too early and my room wouldn’t be ready for a few more hours. I was frustrated and had nowhere else to go. The woman at the front desk suggested that I go into the bathroom, change my clothes, and that I could wait in the hotel lobby until my room was ready. I did that and an hour or so later, she informed me that my room was ready.

When I entered the room, I was shocked by how beautiful it was. There was artwork on the walls and the bed was the most comfortable bed I had laid on in my life. There were multiple faucets in the shower, including one on the ceiling that mimicked rain. I was filled with joy as I took a shower, and totally forgot the challenges I had faced that day.

Then it was time for dinner. The restaurants in the hotel were too expensive, so I wandered the neighborhood

looking for fast food. I found a restaurant, got my food, and headed back to the hotel.

The next day, I met the group. I was thrilled to interact with other foster youth from across the country and listen to their stories. Most of the youth already knew each other and only a few of us were new to the group.

The purpose of this particular gathering was to identify solutions that would make living in foster care better and to share these solutions with policymakers. Once we identified our solutions, we compiled them on a two-page handout that would be given to policymakers the next day.

A Public Relations expert spent the rest of the day coaching us on how to speak to the media, elected officials, policymakers, etc. We each took turns speaking in front of the group until we felt comfortable. I was extremely nervous in the beginning. However, the exercise became easier and easier the more I did it.

The next day, the entire group dressed up in fancy clothes and headed to Capitol Hill to meet with congressional staff members. I remember feeling quite nervous at times, but was so grateful for the public speaking training the previous day.

I met with the group three more times over the next two years. We developed instructional guides for foster youth, including how to find and obtain housing as well

as a travel guide informing youth about the intricacies of traveling.

We shared our stories and policy recommendations with politicians, high-level government employees, and the media.

But best of all, I developed a bond with those youth like I'd never felt before. I left feeling inspired and filled with joy each time I attended the council.

Step Up Program

A few years after I testified before the state legislator, they passed a new law known as AB94 which would add an additional \$1.00 in taxes to business licenses filed in the State of Nevada. That money would be used to support youth in foster care after they exited the foster care system.

Although I was too old to receive any of that money, a group was formed to decide how to spend it. Brad notified me about the group, and said they were looking for a former foster youth to be in the group and recommended that I apply. I applied and got the position.

We met once a month and discussed the best ways to distribute the money to the youth. There was over a million dollars in the fund, and we were told that we had to start distributing it or the money would be taken away and used elsewhere. We provided each youth who had

applied for the program up to \$7,500 a year to be used for paying their rent, job training, food, transportation, etc.

A year into the program, a few of us on the committee became concerned about setting those youth up for failure. Many of these youth were still unemployed or homeless. After they had used up their funds, we decided to hire a mentor to assist the youth in finding jobs, housing, etc. However, almost all the money in that fund went directly to the youth and it couldn't be used to hire mentors.

Thankfully an outside agency offered to fund one mentor for a year and to observe progress. We wanted to hire someone who was a former foster youth, but were struggling to find the right person. Though I was working as a telemarketer at the time and making good money, I hated my job.

So I applied for the mentor position, and I got it.

Mentor Match

Many youth leaving foster care didn't have basic identification such as birth certificates, government identification and/or social security cards. Potential employers couldn't hire these youth since they weren't able to provide them with those documents. And obviously, that causes a number of problems.

The youth that were faced with this issue were assigned to me. My job included helping them apply for those documents, locate housing, find a job, and enroll in school. I had 20 youth on my caseload at a time. It was challenging, but I loved it.

At the end of the year, the results were outstanding. Almost all the youth I had helped were working, going to school and had stable living arrangements. I shared the results with the funder who was blown away, and eventually funded the position for another four years.

What became to be known as the Mentor Match program was so successful that it served as a national model. I trained other organizations across the nation how to mentor and support former foster youth. Newspapers, magazines, and television shows interviewed me on a regular basis. I was also invited to testify before the United States Congress to share my personal recommendations on how to improve the foster care system. However, I couldn't afford the plane ticket and hotel rooms, so they had me submit written testimony instead.

I also helped develop an Independent Living Program for foster and homeless teens. We purchased several apartments and a large facility for the youth to engage in activities and classes, and were able to help over 3,000 youths per year. For the first time in my life, I woke up every day feeling thrilled to go to work.

Five years later, I resigned to attend college with my brother. Though it was a sad goodbye, I was ready for the next adventure.

Community College

The idea of college was planted in my head when I was at dinner with Brad. He asked if I had plans for college. I told him no, but that I always liked the thought of having an MBA. Much to my surprise, Brad offered to pay for my tuition and the textbooks for my first college class. I wasted no time with this offer. The next day, I stopped by the local community college and picked up a class catalog, and paged through it to see if any of the classes were of interest to me. One class jumped out at me in particular – a photograph developing class. I enjoyed taking pictures in my free time. I thought taking that class would be useful to me in both areas. When I called Brad, he gave me the money, and I enrolled.

I showed up to the first day of class very excited. I was thrilled to learn basic photography skills, and use them for our homework, which included taking specific types of photos such as side profiles, action, and close-up shots.

A month later, worry consumed me because I didn't have the time or desire to take the photos as the professor instructed. And I obviously couldn't do the developing without taking the photos.

On the last day before the deadline for the photos, I took a bunch of random pictures so I could still participate in the development portion of the class. As we were developing the photos, the professor saw that my photos had nothing to do with the ones he had assigned.

He asked me if I understood the assignment. When I said that I did, he asked me why I chose to take those photos instead, so I was honest – I said I took them so I had something to develop in class that day. I decided to be even more honest, and told him that I didn't care about the grade since I was taking the class for fun. He looked at me, stunned for a few seconds. Then he smiled and said, "Fair enough," and walked away.

I attended the class a few more times and quit once the development portion was over. Brad wasn't thrilled about it, he thought I should have at least finished the class. The next semester, Brad offered to pay for a class again – as long as I finished it. If I passed it, he would pay for the next one as well. I agreed to his terms and took Sociology 101. I really liked the class, although the professor was a bit of a nut. However, that's what made it fun. And the girls in the class didn't hurt, either. However, I was too scared to say anything other than "hello" or "goodbye."

I read the textbook and did the homework when I could, and got a B in the class. Brad was proud of me and offered to pay for *two* classes next time. If I took just two

classes a semester, I could have my bachelor's degree in ten years. At first, it seemed like a lot of time, but then I realized that ten years was going by one way or another. I might as well hit the end of those ten years with a degree in hand.

The next semester, I took Communications 101 and Political Science 101. During the Political Science class, the professor said he was arranging a trip to Washington D.C. for the semester break, and any student who passed the class and could afford it, was welcome to come. I passed the class and my employer at the time provided the funds so I could attend.

The trip was incredible, and the professor was an amazing tour guide. We toured museums, monuments, the Capitol Building, the White House and sat in on a case being argued at the Supreme Court.

I continued to take two classes a semester until I transferred my credits to an online university so I could earn my degree faster.

Reconnecting With Turtle

I reconnected with my brother Turtle, when I was 20 years old. We met up once, but he never returned my messages afterwards. Although I was sad he wasn't interested in me, I still followed him on social media.

One evening (several years later), my boss and I went to a bar for dinner and to plan an upcoming fundraising event. As we were leaving, a man's tattoo caught my attention – it was strikingly similar to one my brother had.

An overwhelming feeling rushed through my body thinking the man at the bar was my brother. However, I just ignored the feeling and walked out of the bar.

As we stepped outside, I couldn't shake the feeling. I told my boss I thought my brother was sitting at the bar, and she suggested I go back find out. I knew I would regret it if I didn't.

So I walked back inside the bar, tapped the man on the shoulder and asked him if his name was Turtle. When he said it was his name, he seemed to be perplexed. Then I asked him if his last name was Walley. When he said "yes" again, I got very excited. When I told him my name was Chris, he just said, "hi," turned around, and continued watching the football game.

I was a bit shocked. For some reason, I expected him to know who I was and for him to be thrilled to see me again, as much as I was to see him. Then I said, "It's Chris, your brother," and asked if I could sit and watch the game with him. When he said that I could, I took a seat.

At first, the conversation was a bit awkward, but eventually, it smoothed out and we wound up hanging out for the rest of the night.

College with Turtle

Turtle and I continued to spend time together and one day, were looking at college websites together. I was thinking about taking my education further and getting my master's degree, while Turtle was looking to finish up his bachelor's degree.

We found a school we both liked. They only served organic, vegetarian food in the dining hall, and the students and professors meditated before and after class.

A few weeks later, Turtle told me he wanted to attend the next semester, which was due to start in a few months. I told him it was a great idea but that I still had a year to go before I could attend. I thought I could call my college counselor to see if there was anything I could do.

When I told my counselor I wanted to finish quickly so I could move on to graduate school, he shared with me something called "credit by exam." If I took a course's final test and passed, I would get credit for the course. The course fees were \$80.00, while the courses the school offered were about \$500 each. He said that I could take up to seven classes (21 credits) that way. After we hung up, I spent the rest of the day researching that option.

I was already in college full-time and would need to pass a test once every two weeks. But if I did that, I could finish an entire year of college classes in three months. Then I could head off to school with my brother, and

rebuild our relationship. I took Turtle out to lunch the next day and shared the news. He was on-board, and encouraged me to do my best at the credit by exam option.

I studied for almost fifteen hours every single day and at the end of three months, I received my Bachelor's Degree in Marketing.

A few weeks later, Turtle and I packed up our things, and headed off to college together.

In the beginning, things were awkward and we struggled to connect. But eventually, we figured things out and had a blast together.

A year later, I graduated with a Master's Degree in Sustainable Business Management and we parted ways. Though we don't see each other often, we talk to each other all the time.

Finding My Family

When I was 20 years old, my girlfriend asked me if I would be interested in finding my parents. I told her I was interested in finding my dad, but not my mom. I was still upset at her for abandoning me.

She took it upon herself to lead the effort, and paid an organization to conduct an online search. She provided them with my dad's name, social security number, and any other relevant information I had about him. I wasn't aware

that she was doing that, but when she told me, I was both thrilled and extremely nervous.

What if he was a terrible person, or worse, wanted nothing to do with me?

The organization conducted a search and provided my girlfriend with three addresses in California where he might be living. I wrote a letter and sent it off to the three addresses. A few weeks later, my girlfriend showed up at my work to tell me that my dad's wife had called her.

Later that night, I spoke with my dad on the phone for the first time since I was a kid. I don't recall what we talked about, but I remember being filled with both joy and anxiety.

A month later, we took a trip to Los Angeles to meet him. Our visit just happened to fall on Father's Day that year. I was nervous during the entire ride to Los Angeles.

The night we arrived, I pulled him aside and asked him to share his side of the story. He started by telling me that he had tried to get custody of me, but that he couldn't afford the legal fees. He also said that on my 18th birthday, he called the state to see if I needed help with college. The state official told him they had no idea who I was or who he was. He thought I was living with my mother the entire time.

The next day, we went to dinner with my grandmother, aunts, and cousins. It was a bit weird to interact with these people at first. They were familiar with me, but I wasn't familiar with them. I was happy that I had my girlfriend to turn to when things got a bit uncomfortable.

When we headed back to Las Vegas, I felt so excited to finally have a family of my own.

Because reconnecting with my father had made me feel better about my past, I decided to keep searching for other family members.

After I received my master's degree, I spent the next few years building relationships with the rest of my family. I even moved out to Los Angeles, California to build relationships with my aunts and cousins. There was some head-butting at times, but it felt amazing to finally have a family of my own.

My dad and his family eventually relocated to Arizona, and I followed to continue to build a relationship with my dad, stepmom, and siblings.

I still live in Arizona today, and have to say – it feels fantastic to spend birthdays and holidays with family.

CHAPTER 27
NEXT STEPS

Now that I've gone to college, found my family, finished this book, and healed my spirit, it's time for me to get back to work.

Over the next few years, I'll be traveling around the country counseling and mentoring youth in foster care. My goal is to help them to understand why foster care happens and what they can learn from it. Because there is purpose and value in everything. And when we're not running from it, then we're learning from it. Many of these youth don't have access to anyone who's experienced foster care before, from whom to ask questions and gain personal insights from.

To learn more about this program, visit:
www.40Parents.com/NextSteps

I would love to hear about your experience and learn about the insights and perspectives you've gained from reading this book.

Christopher Brooks

Please email any feedback, questions or comments you may have to *Christopher@40parents.com*

