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When No Where Feels Like Home

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when NO where feels like HOME

“Truthfully, living on the streets was easier than living in society. On the streets, you know your enemies — police, etc. — and you know what you need. In society, everything is a lot more complex.”
A 14-year-old girl sits on the curb of a street in Des Moines with nothing but a small backpack, a book and two of her friends. One of the girl's friends, a thin, blond boy of 15, is nearing unconsciousness. He hasn't eaten in days and the only thing that has gone into his system is the alcohol he drank at parties. He needs food immediately, and the other two kids don't know where to get any. They wrack their brains and eventually decide on the only place they know that will surely have food — the Dumpster behind McDonald's. After scavenging up a few cartons of soggy french fries left over from the day before, they run back to their helpless friend and give him the fries, which he eats and promptly vomits back up.

The boy needs help quickly, but the kids have nowhere to turn — they're homeless.

At first glance, she looks like a normal college student — because she is a normal college student.

Her life before Iowa State, however, was anything but ordinary.

The same girl who was once rummaging through Dumpsters just to survive now sits in front of me, at a tiny table in the back of Hoover Hall, her thin, brown hair pulled back in a tight ponytail and her bright red fleece pullover complementing the rosy hue of her round face. The fluorescent can lights above cast teepee-shaped rays of light onto the brick wall on one side of us and create our wavy, funhouse-mirror reflection in the window on the other side. Then, over the low hum of the nearby soda machines, she begins to tell me her story.

Cassie McElhaney never had a "normal" life. Raised in Bondurant, a small town outside of Des Moines, she was caught in the middle of an abusive relationship. Her parents fought all the time — often physically — and divorced when she was only 10.

"I know there was emotional abuse and I feared for my mother, but she tried to hide it from me," Cassie says, matter-of-factly. "I know at the end there was
physical abuse but I'm not sure if it was just toward the end of their marriage or if it was always there.”

After her parents split, Cassie began getting into trouble at school. Her mother didn’t know how to deal with her daughter’s troublemaking, and the two fought continuously. Verbal arguments escalated to physical altercations, and Cassie and her mother were soon fist-fighting regularly.

So, when she was in eighth grade, she did what a lot of kids her age would do after arguing with their parents — she ran away from home. But she didn’t run away to a friend’s house, or her grandparent’s house, or her tree house. This was for real — Cassie was now living on the streets.

For six months Cassie lived on the streets. She slept under bridges and ate little. What meals she did have were stolen from convenience stores or given to her by families in return for doing yard work.

She carried with her only what she could fit in a small backpack given to her by a youth homeless shelter: two pairs of jeans, one of which was so big she had to wear both pairs at the same time just to make it fit; a couple of shirts she could alternate to make herself look different to the police she was frequently running from; a pair of shoes; and some food — usually soda, candy bars, gum (because it staved off hunger) burritos, bananas and candy.

“I felt closer to the world there. You lose connection with the facts living in a sheltered small town,” she says. “I learned to appreciate everything — from a blanket to having both socks. The hardest thing was being young. Many saw me as some lost kid; I had to actually prove myself to many of the people I knew.”

She began bouncing around homeless shelters in Des Moines, even staying at a shelter in Ames and one as far away as Linn County in eastern Iowa.

“Wherever they would take me is pretty much where I would go,” she says.

After moving from shelter to shelter, she was deemed by the Iowa Court System to be a CHINA — a child in need of assistance. Basically, Cassie’s mother, despite trying to do whatever she could for her daughter, said there was no way

she could take care of her any more. After this ruling, Cassie was placed in the care of the State of Iowa. She was very difficult to keep track of, though, so she was relocated to a “no-run shelter,” which meant if she attempted to run away, she would be physically restrained and forced to stay.

Cassie apparently did not believe the threats of restraint — or chose to ignore them — and attempted an escape soon after she arrived at the shelter. She broke the screen out of the window in an attempt to run, but was caught in the act. As promised, the staff of the shelter attempted to restrain her.

“I flipped out and got my first assault charge against me; I also got a criminal mischief charge for breaking the window,” she says. “So they moved me into the delinquent system, which was a whole different ball of wax compared to the juvenile system.”

She was placed in the Iowa Juvenile Home in Toledo, which, according to the Iowa Department of Human Services, is a facility that provides a structured setting to house and treat children who have been determined by the Juvenile Justice System to require special care because of disruptive behavior or extended/repeated stays in the juvenile system.

Cassie did not immediately take to the treatment from the Iowa Juvenile Home. Although by this time she had missed an entire year of school, she racked up an impressive report card of criminal charges — including two more assault charges — during her nearly two-year stay in Toledo. But the treatment and structure of the program eventually began to rub off on her when she began receiving psychiatric help — help that included isolation and other techniques described by Cassie as “pretty hardcore stuff” — and she showed signs of improvement.

Because of this improvement, shortly after her 16th birthday, Cassie was released from the Iowa Juvenile Home.

A slamming door upstairs brings me back to reality; it’s easy to get caught up in Cassie’s story. The ease with which she tells her tale of hardship and the way she says everything so matter-of-factly, withholding no details, has lulled me into a reverie, thinking of how difficult it must have been for her, an eighth-grader, being bounced around so much — first on the streets and then from shelter to shelter and delinquent facility to delinquent facility.

My daydream is quickly cut short by the slamming door, which creates an ominous bang that echoes through the bowels of the deserted building — a startling feeling Cassie must have experienced a million times while on the streets and at the Iowa Juvenile Home.

It is at this moment that I notice how nervous she acts at times. Although she tells me her story without hesitation, she seems bothered by the slightest sound, always checking over her shoulder to see who or what is there. She says she picked up this behavior during the time she spent living on the streets and has never outgrown it.

Although some habits still linger from those days, as though they are ingrained in her psyche, there are few things about Old Cassie that remain in New Cassie.

Cassie was now free. But where would she go? She had sworn to herself that, after all that had transpired in the past few years, she would never go home to her mother, even though her mother had called, visited and supported her through everything. She couldn’t go back to living on the streets or shuffling from shelter to shelter again.

Instead of returning to the life she had desperately tried to escape, Cassie decided to get a free education and take control of her new life by attending Job
Corps, in Denison.

At Job Corps, she wanted to enter the information technology program; when she entered the corps, however, it was in a transitional period and the information technology program wasn't available. So, like so many times before this, Cassie was forced to improvise. She decided to enter the business clerical program and breezed through the nine-month program in a mere three months. Also in those three months, Cassie was able to finish her high school program and get her diploma.

By the time she was 17, Cassie had her high school diploma and certification in business clerical. This wasn't the end of her rapid advancement through school, though. After she was denied enrollment at Iowa State because she had not attended a normal high school and had not taken some required courses, Cassie decided to go to Des Moines Area Community College. After two years at DMACC, Cassie was granted enrollment at Iowa State.

Cassie is now a 21-year-old senior with a double major in computer engineering and computer science and a minor in Latin. She is taking this semester off from Iowa State to work as the business manager for the Maharishi Enlightenment Center in Ames and to train for the business venture she hopes to soon set into motion — a discounted computer-repair shop for students — and will be returning to school in the fall. An impressive resume for a girl who was designated by the Iowa Juvenile Home as a hopeless case of someone who would spend the rest of her life in state facilities.

Despite surpassing everyone’s expectations, what lies ahead for Cassie is anything but clear. She still suffers from intense anxiety, as well as a borderline personality disorder that makes it very difficult for her to control the strength of her mood, both of which stemmed from her stay in the Iowa Juvenile Home. The structure of the home made it impossible for her to make any choices on her own and has left her feeling anxious and unsure when dealing with people outside of the rigidity of the system.

Although her life was, and continues to be, very trying, Cassie isn’t bitter. She isn’t envious of other students who have had a "normal" life. And she certainly isn’t angry about what she has gone through. She says the experiences she has had have molded her into the person she is today. Without them, she would not have the appreciation she has for the simple things — the freedom to read what she wants, the freedom to eat when she wants and especially the freedom to voice her opinion were not privileges granted to her when she was in the juvenile system.

And, after spending months sleeping on concrete and under bridges, just having a bed and a blanket is something she cherishes. But her transition back into society hasn’t been easy.

“Truthfully, living on the streets was easier than living in society,” she says. “On the streets, you know your enemies — police, etc. — and you know what you need. In society, everything is a lot more complex.”

After we wrap up our conversation, Cassie quietly packs her notebook into her backpack and, carefully examining her surroundings, quickly strolls through the double doors and out onto the now-dark ISU campus, leaving me to ponder our discourse.

As I sit there replaying our dialogue, one thing sticks out in my mind. After Cassie poured her heart out to me for nearly an hour, I’m left with the same, albeit more informed, impression I had when I first introduced myself to her: You would never think she was anything but ordinary.