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Iowa Homeless Youth: Alex's Story

Jaden Urbi
Iowa State University

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Iowa’s Homeless Youth: Alex’s Story

The story of a young man's journey through dysfunctional families, the foster care system and homelessness in Iowa.
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“I know I really shouldn’t brag about this, but the other night I made a pretty awesome bed out of these boxes at the corner of a gas station. I had a box pillow, walls and everything,” Alex says with an overly anxious laugh.

To a few people nearby, his comment cut through the overlying hum of the restaurant noise. Their attention immediately veered from their lunchtime conversations, or lack thereof, and straight to Alex, but their eyes quickly darted back to their half eaten, half picked-apart trays of food when they realized they were staring.

“Every time he went outside to play, he got jumped and had knives pulled on him.”

On the exterior, it would have looked like any other college kid sitting down for a casual lunch. Alex wore his worn-out blue jeans and plain white t-shirt. His thin-wired glasses fit snug to his face and his sandy blonde hair lay close to his head, barely reaching the middle of his forehead.

After lunch, Alex sat down and shared his story, where he has come from and how he got to where he is today. The following is an excerpt from Alex’s story:

Alex originally went into foster care as a 5-year-old, “Recalls Alex.

Alex went back with his parents when he was five.

“Everything started off great. It was like we were a normal family. We smiled,” Alex says.

Then his mom started to get angry, and his dad started doing drugs again. His brother Matt started to act out and he and his brother Johnny started to follow in his footsteps, that’s when they got physically abusive. His dad kept doing drugs and over time Matt and Johnny got into them too, eventually influencing Alex to start. When he was eight years old, he smoked pot for the first time.

A few years after Alex moved back in with his family, they moved to the bad part of Dubuque. Alex lived across the street from two drug dealers. Every time he went outside to play, he got jumped and had knives pulled on him.

“Eight years old and getting knives pulled on me—the hell is that? There wasn’t five minutes of my day where I wasn’t getting punched by somebody. I guess it toughened me up,” Alex concludes.

Around the time when Alex was 11 he was taken out of the house because his mother beat Johnny for the first time and Alex stood up to her.

None of his family had stood up to her before and she didn’t know how to take it. She beat Alex until he bled, and he had a scratch across his chest that was dripping blood. She called the cops on him saying that he was acting out in an aggressive manner and that he needed to be taken from the home.

The cops came and arrested him.

“Full on arrest, slammed me into the cop car. I saw my own blood smeared onto the hood of the car,” Alex says. It wasn’t until two or three months later that the cops decided that there might be some abuse going on.

From there Alex went to a foster home. The first little bit was okay, but then his foster father began to get pushy with Alex.

One day Alex was out riding his bike—he had bad asthma at the time. His foster father pulled his truck out in front of him, stopping Alex he walked up to him and pulled his back tire and flipped him off the bike. Alex smacked his chest on the handlebar and he couldn’t breathe.

“I was in the middle of the highway, just on the ground. I couldn’t breathe,” continues Alex. As he was laying in the middle of the road, his foster father put the bike in the back of his truck and drove away.

Alex walked hours to get back into Dubuque and decided he was going to run away.

“I slept outside, I mean I slept outside in the middle of a blizzard, anything, I wasn’t going back,” he says.

Eventually Alex turned himself in because he needed food, water and a roof over his head. His whole family refused to talk to him. He went back to the shelter and then to yet another abusive foster home.

One day it got so bad that he called one of his social workers and told them, “I will not go back there, I don’t feel safe. I want you to take me out.” And they did.

After that, Alex went back to the shelter.

“This time I was just really angry. Anything someone did, I’d punch them. Didn’t matter,” says Alex.

Following the shelter, he went to another foster home.

“I was always angry, but not as angry as I lead myself on to be. I was always doing drugs and stuff, I was really depressed, like super depressed and I let it all come across as anger. I ended up overdosing. I did it on purpose. I tried to kill myself,” Alex remembers.

From there he went to a psych ward, and when he came out, his foster parents said that since he was unstable, he was unfit to be around their three daughters.

“I would never cause their daughters harm. They know that I would never do anything to harm a child. Never,” says Alex.

His anger got a lot worse—and it was real. Alex’s friends were all scared of him.

He went to a different shelter and it was a lot worse. There were constantly cops on duty and he started riots when he was there. There was a fight every day.

“One day there was a fight so bad, that the staff actually locked themselves in a room.
with shatterproof glass windows and the cops were called and I loved it. I just loved the chaos," he says.

Alex went to another foster home. "My foster mother was really nice to me, she was kind, she was caring, everything that I didn’t want because that meant that I had no reason to hate her. I kind of needed help, you know? I was on drugs, I was angry, drinking a lot. I tried to get her to call the cops on me," he recalls.

He punched walls and yelled and told her to call the cops, but she said no. He destroyed everything he could, but she still said no. He went inside and started punching the walls again, and then his foster brother started talking down to him, saying something about how he takes after his mother. Alex told him that he would kill him, and meant it. That’s when she called the cops.

"I got her to the point where she had no choice. Cops got there and I was standing there with a smile on my face, looking just as cocky as could be. She didn’t deserve any of that."

They took Alex back to the shelter with the cops.

"The more I thought about it, the more I hated myself for the things I did. I could have gone about it in a different way and she still didn’t give up on me," he says with remorse.

The foster mother that he had pushed to the edge kept coming to visit him, she kept coming to see him, kept bringing him food. He didn’t get calls from any of his family—he hadn’t talked to them in four years.

"She was always kind to me and I fucked her over terribly and there’s not a day that I will forgive myself for that. When I was in treatment I really started to focus on myself and do what I needed to do. I got my life together," Alex says.

After that, he went to treatment. The first visit that he got while in treatment was from her. The first phone call, first letter, it was her.

"She was always kind to me and I fucked her over terribly and there’s not a day that I will forgive myself for that. When I was in treatment I really started to focus on myself and do what I needed to do. I got my life together," Alex says.

Alex was going to be a college football player—he even had Division 1 schools looking at him. His junior year in high school he snapped his collarbone. He walked out of the weight room crying and started doing drugs again. This is when he decided that he was going to kill himself.

"I went to AMP (Achieving Maximum Potential) Camp, an annual camp put on for
“This time I’m going to get my life together and it’s not going to go down again. I won’t let it. Not again.”

foster youth in the AMP programs across Iowa. I met a lot of great people. They saved my life,” says Alex.

After AMP Camp he went back to the drugs. Since then he’s been doing drugs fairly steadily.

“I’ve had guns pulled on me, I’ve had knives pulled on me. Each time nothing changed. I just survived like I always did. I was a survivor. I would push through it, I would get my way out,” says Alex.

Just recently, Alex’s friends were robbed by a tweaker.

“My buddies were looking for him and he knew that, so he wanted to send a message to my friends through me. He pulled a gun at me, pointed it at my chest. I stopped, thought through my entire life, everyone I had fucked over, everyone I had hurt, everyone I continued to hurt. I told him to pull the trigger because I just wanted to die. That was about a week ago,” says Alex.

Now, he’s staying in a homeless shelter, trying to get a license and doing everything to get his life back together.

“I should be getting ready to start my second year of college. I shouldn’t have gone back to drugs. It isn’t easy at all. I’ve wanted to give up like a thousand times already and it’s only been six days,” confesses Alex.

Every time Alex wants to give up he thinks about all the people that he’s hurt.

“I can’t give up because the people that I’ve hurt have still been there for me. The people that I’ve hurt have pushed through their own issues and they still try to help me and I don’t deserve it. I don’t know, it’s just a lot of shit that I put myself through, and I know that,” he says.

Alex is using all of the bad things that he’s done to force himself to stay on the right path. He thinks about all the people who he’ll lose, one a lot more than others, and thinks it’s just not worth it at all. That’s why he’s pushing himself to be sober.

“I’ve been sober for a fucking week. I’ve been looking for jobs. Trying to keep myself in check. Keep myself calm when I’m in the shelter. This time I’m going to get my life together and it’s not going to go down again. I won’t let it. Not again. Not over something stupid. Not because something bad happens to me, there’s no reason. I’m going to get my life together and I’m going to keep it together, no matter what it takes,” assures Alex.

AMP is a youth-driven statewide group that seeks to unleash the full potential for personal growth among foster and adoptive children in Iowa. For more information on AMP, please visit ampiowa.org