

Girl reflects on homeless past, but looks to the future with hope

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She walks with her head held high, letting the world know that she is ready for whatever challenge it decides to throw at her. After all -- she's faced one of America's darkest downfalls: Homelessness.

To most people, homelessness is considered "sleeping on the streets." This definition is only a small fraction of the growing problem. This definition does not consider those nomadic families living within cars, squatting in empty houses, or taking residency in the living rooms and garages of friends.

This definition does not consider the fear and stress of being without a place to call one's own. This misrepresentative, indefinite, blanket definition does not include her.

The hardships began when Sara was 13.

"I was 13 years old and it was the first time I'd ever seen my dad cry," she said. "One night, I wasn't even supposed to be up. I came by his room and I heard him crying and it just broke me... I asked him what he was crying about and -- he was in tears by then -- he said he was afraid that we wouldn't be able to pay the rent this month. He didn't know what we were going to do."

This was the beginning of her fleeting time as a teenager. This was the time that this girl was supposed to be going to football games, trying on makeup, worrying about boys or girls and never once panicking about where her next meal was coming from.

However, not everyone is given the same leisure. Instead of football games, she faced games of "garage-roulette," praying that maybe that night the garage she and her family slept

in would have heaters or air-conditioning.

For makeup, she wore constant creases of worry, mind filled with thoughts of her family's predicament. As for boys and girls, who could consider such trivial things as dating when you're worrying over whether or not you'll have a future?

"I felt homeless. I felt absolutely homeless," she said. "It was so... depressing."

"It was the day when I turned 17. I just realized I was one year away from being on my own, out in the world with absolutely nothing," she said. "I don't think I would've finished school if this hadn't happened... I cried myself to sleep. That was the worst day of my life."

The girl and her family didn't start out homeless. There is a long, winding story of ups and downs -- an exposition to the climactic downfall.

"I'm from here. But my parents aren't. My father's from Nigeria and my mom's from Wisconsin... my father, he had come here on scholarship," said Sara, who is now a senior, "but he didn't get his papers signed so he never officially graduated."

Both her parents served time in military service to the United States. Her mother was later employed as a nurse in an optometrist's office. When this girl's father retired from the Navy, he entered the workforce as an electrician and engineer. One day, he was working with welders and happened to be standing in the wrong spot.

"When they were scraping metal some of the flecks got in his eye. There were no optometrists in Charleston who could deal with that, so he had to go to Columbia, where my mom was," she said with a laugh.

This union -- the Nigerian engineer and Wisconsin nurse -- would later bring four children into the world.

"My younger brother is 16, and my younger sister is 13," she explains.

These two would also face the homelessness that dogged her family for almost two years. Her oldest sister had already left to college before the family fell into vagrancy.

"My brother became really enclosed," she said, talking about her sibling's reaction to living out of a car. "He kinda drew in on himself more... he just didn't care. My little sister... she kind of put it aside... she said she lives day to day. Whatever makes her happy in that moment makes her happy. Whatever makes her sad makes her sad."

Luckily, her life started to change. After she turned 17, an organization for homeless veterans in Mount Pleasant helped her family by providing an apartment and paying rent for them. This was her senior year -- her final year as a teenager.

Her face broke into an ecstatic smile as she remembered her rescue from the cyclical search for some place to live.

"Things got better. Things got better," she smiled.

Nowadays, this girl looks to the future as a new adventure. Having seen dark days, she believes that God has brought her and her family into the light. She hunts for a spot at one of America's top colleges: Yale. She believes her story not to be a burden, but a gift. From having nothing to call her own, she now can consider open-ended possibilities. She is no longer tied down by fear of rejection or fear of dropping out -- the future is bright for her despite a turbulent upbringing.

"I've never complained. That's not

something I do. There's always someone out there who's going through worse," she said, a reminiscent sparkle to her determinate expression. "Nowadays, I live by this philosophy, and I've lived by it for a very long time: what happens happens, and what doesn't, doesn't."

**Name withheld by request*

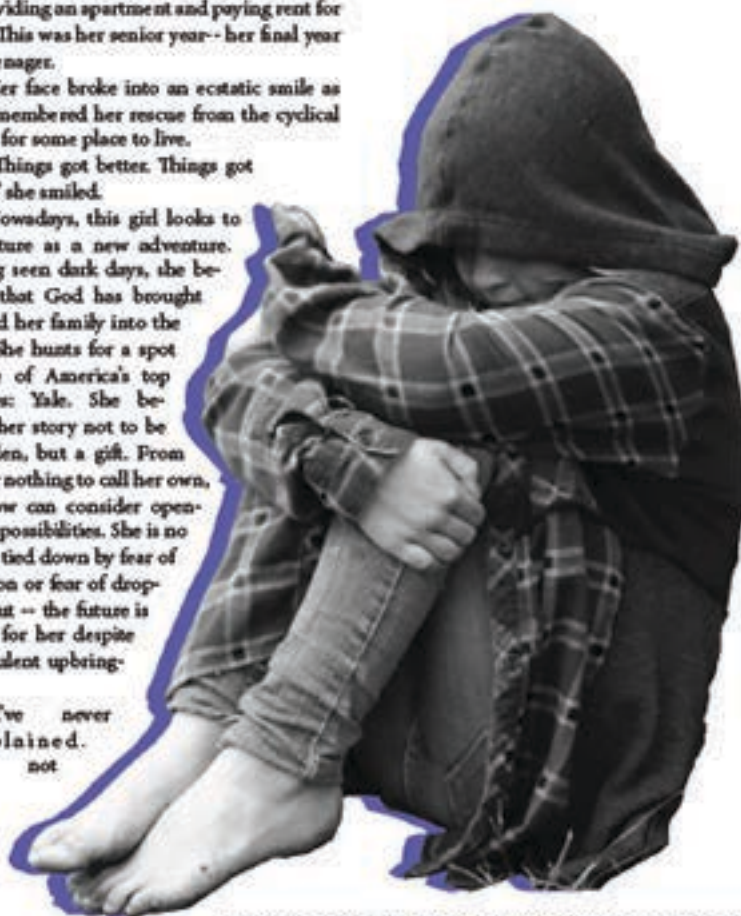


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