

Finding Nikki

Surviving and Thriving after Childhood Homelessness



Nikki Johnson-Huston

by Nikki Johnson-Huston

Standing in line hoping to get a bed in a night shelter is a harrowing experience with two potential outcomes, neither of them ideal. With luck you get a place indoors to sleep, but if you're not

in line early enough, or if there are fewer available beds than expected, you're left facing the night on the street—which, for me, my mother, and my brother, Michael, meant sleeping on a park bench.

This was the reality I knew as a nine-year-old who lived for several months on the streets and in shelters in San Diego. I spent many of my days hungry, scared, and not knowing where my next meal would come from or where we might be living on a particular day. When the things that you should take for granted, like food and shelter, are no longer guaranteed, it's incredibly scary. It is hard for a child to fully explain what those circumstances do to you. In retrospect I know that the experience takes away your sense of trust and stability; it made me someone I would not have otherwise been. I went from being curious and precocious to being quiet and watchful, suspicious of all of the new people in my life, not knowing if they were friend or foe.

It felt sometimes like the world had forgotten about us. But then we would meet someone who treated us with respect. Such people included those at the homeless shelter who would give us an extra blanket or pillow, or workers at the San Diego Rescue Mission—where we would get two meals a day—who gave

us extra cookies and colored marshmallows to get through the days and nights. A person who gave me a snack and asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up nourished not just my mind but my spirit. For a few moments that person gave me a sense of being normal and, most importantly, helped me to believe that I had a future, complete with the luxury to decide what I wanted to accomplish.

What I remember most about being in the shelter were the sounds. We all know from experience that at night, when most of the world is at rest, sounds travel. This is especially true in the realm of shelters, where strangers, broken from the struggles of lives gone wrong, come together to share the night.

Imagine sharing a space with those suffering from various stages of mental illness, with men and women shaking with the effects of addiction or untreated medical conditions; imagine hearing the cries of mothers losing the dreams they once held dear for themselves and their children, mixed with the sounds of your own hungry stomach. You are hearing the song of catastrophic poverty that is still played throughout the shelter system in the United States on a nightly basis. For the majority of Americans, this song is played far enough out of earshot to keep us from forcing our leaders to solve this epidemic.

My mother had drug and alcohol issues that played a significant role in our being homeless, but I also believe that she suffered from the effects of her upbringing in poverty. My mother was like many people I knew growing up, who wanted better lives for themselves but gave up because of the hurt and disappointment of unfulfilled dreams and the belief that there was nothing they could do to change their circumstances. But during those nights

in the shelter I held on to my dreams of having a better life. These were dreams of being a successful lawyer who had a house and plenty of food and never had to worry about being without again. Those dreams seemed far from becoming real when I didn't know where my next meal would come from, but they were all I had—the one thing that nobody could take away from me.

After several months on the streets, my mother decided that she could not keep us together as a family. She sent me to live with my disabled grandmother, who was living in senior citizen Section 8 housing in Santa Maria, California. We were told that my grandmother could take only one of us. Michael was put in foster care, and we never lived together as a family again. My grandmother used welfare, food stamps, and her Social Security payments to raise me; we didn't have much, but she provided a level of stability and security that I had never known. About three and a half years after I went to live with my grandmother, she became seriously ill, and it was decided that I would live with my mother and stepfather (whom she had met during the time we received services at the rescue mission). I spent about a year and a half with my mother, then returned to my grandmother's home after my mother and stepfather lost their jobs and we ended up homeless again. I stayed with my grandmother until I graduated from high school.

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I came to Philadelphia to attend college on a scholarship but struggled both emotionally and academically, feeling that I didn't belong and wasn't good enough. I didn't ask for help and was ashamed of my past. The price I paid was to get kicked out of school at the end of my first year. Afterward I struggled for several years to find my place in the world, but I was fortunate enough to get a job as a live-in nanny for a family of lawyers who believed in me and my dream of attending law school. I went back to college at night and finally got on the right path. I am now a successful tax lawyer living in Philadelphia.

I lost contact with Michael after I flunked out of college and would not see him for another 11 years. Michael contacted me in 2004, during my last semester of law school. He was addicted to meth and had HIV. He was working on the set of the television show *Frasier*—which was filming its last couple of episodes—and would soon be out of a job.

I spent the last six years of Michael's life trying to get him to rehab, trying to persuade him to go back to school to get his GED, and trying to have a real relationship with him. But in July 2010 I received a call telling me that Michael had hanged himself and was in a coma. I had to fly to California and remove him from life support. After my brother died I decided that I was going to advocate for those homeless children who felt invisible and powerless, that out of his death I could do some good.

Solutions from My Own Life

I long for the day when children will no longer face the fear and confusion of homelessness as I did at nine. It still affects my actions today, some three decades later, even though I'm now a successful attorney and speaker. This is why solving the issue of catastrophic poverty is so complex, because the repercussions continue to be felt throughout a person's life.

There is no easy, one-size-fits-all answer to the question of how we end homelessness and break the cycle of generational poverty. I can speak, however, to what has worked in my own life and what would have enabled me to overcome my circumstances more quickly and with fewer scars.

The latest trends in addressing homelessness are programs referred to as Housing First or rapid rehousing, which aim to get homeless families into housing quickly, in order to provide an environment where mainstream wraparound services can address the underlying causes of their struggles. This sounds great in theory, and there are aspects of this approach that can certainly work for some families. But more importantly, whether the challenge is mental illness, addiction, abuse, or another factor or factors, dealing with the root issues as opposed to just the outcome—being placed into housing—is what will contribute to a long-term solution that can potentially decrease the need for these services for future generations. In my own family, services including addiction and abuse counseling at the homelessness stage could have had an immediate and long-lasting impact.

In addition, we must attempt to keep children together with their parents whenever possible. While not all mothers or fathers are suitable caregivers, we can teach life and parenting skills when the parent does not endanger the child. In the life of a child, there is no substitute for having a caring parent at home, and we need to do everything possible to preserve those arrangements. While I was actually better off in some ways going to live with my grandmother, who lovingly cared for me, my brother was irreparably harmed by our breakup as a family. Looking back, having the opportunity to stay together as a family unit and receive wraparound services would have likely

saved Michael's life. He could have been protected from some of the abuses inflicted during his time in the system, which led to his own struggles with drug addiction, homelessness, and HIV—and to his tragic death.

Mental health services will play a critical role in ending homelessness and poverty. A significant threat to mental health, especially for children, is the lack of self-esteem caused by catastrophic poverty. My family's situation made me feel insignificant. This feeling, ingrained in me during my formative years, affected me into my adulthood. How can we expect our children to raise themselves from these depths of hopelessness when they don't believe they hold value for the world around them or can be more than the circumstances they were born into?

Generational poverty can be solved. I'm a living example of what can happen when public policy programs, such as food stamps and Section 8, are combined with solid educational opportunities and the influence of adults who believe in their children.

Teaching these children that they are valuable and intelligent and that they have the ability to determine their own futures must be done at home, whether home is a shelter, a private apartment, or another type of dwelling. Services provided to families must include reinforcement of the idea that they hold value and can achieve. School environments must continually strengthen this message as well.

Too often, out of compassion for the struggles homeless boys and girls have encountered through no fault of their own, we reduce the expectations we have for them. We tell them by our words and actions that since they have drawn bad lots in life, it is understandable if they don't achieve. We create a culture of low expectations, reasoning that of course these children won't be able to read as well as others or learn tough subjects, because no one could expect them to overcome their horrendous circumstances. We may tell ourselves that we wouldn't have been able to achieve in those circumstances, so they couldn't possibly do so either. This is a dangerous fallacy, because for many, education is the only way out of lives of poverty.

The fact is that homeless boys and girls have already been forced to deal with the most horrific difficulties life could throw at them. The abuse, the hunger, the constant moving—those are the hard things. If they are standing in front of you after all

of that, there is nothing in the world they cannot do. We need to stop telling these boys and girls things that we wouldn't tell our own children. We would never tell our sons and daughters that it's okay to believe they can't accomplish their dreams. We would never try to convey to them through words or actions that their dreams aren't realistic and that they should lower their expectations. However, every day we diminish the capabilities of the millions of children suffering from poverty by implying that they cannot achieve. While the mountains they need to climb may be higher, and the valleys they travel lower, they can succeed and live productive lives as our neighbors and peers.

When I was sent to live with my grandmother, I was put on a bus alone at the age of nine. She was there to wrap her arms around me when I stepped off that bus. One of the first things she told me was that I had been born into a different America from the one she grew up in, and she asked me what I was going to do with my life. While I may not have understood everything she said at the time, her words let me know that even though my young life was filled with tragedy and pain, I could DO something. Throughout the years I lived with her, she taught me to believe in myself and strive to live a different life. She not only asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, she made me believe that it was possible. Sitting with her, watching *The Cosby Show* and seeing the character Claire Huxtable—the first African-American woman lawyer I had ever seen—made me believe that I could really become a lawyer. Even with my grandmother's love and support, my road to success was rough. Poverty still afflicted me, leading me to make many mistakes, including failing out of college. If this was the case even when I had a more stable and loving environment, then success will be still more challenging to achieve for those who do not have the benefit of this type of intervention. But the recipe for overcoming tough situations is the same for all of us, regardless of background. To be successful we must be able to hold a vision of what our lives can be. Poverty is darkness, obscuring our children's vision of their future. We must continuously and unfailingly shine a light on their potential, to ensure that they never lose sight of their possibilities.

Generational poverty can be solved. I'm a living example of what can happen when public policy programs, such as food stamps and Section 8, are combined with solid educational opportunities and the influence of adults who believe in their children. While counseling during my childhood would have helped me to avoid pitfalls later in life, my experiences can serve as a guide to what is possible. And while the path to ending homelessness and eradicating catastrophic poverty in the United States will be difficult, we have a moral and social imperative to see it through. ■