

## ALIYAH

My dad got custody of me when I was three due to my baby brother being murdered by my mom's husband. I did not grow up with a mother, but my dad made up for it. He was my basketball and volleyball coach. He put me in piano lessons. I had all A's. I traveled and had a great childhood. I graduated high school and senior year I went to help my mom with my two siblings. I wanted to get closer with them and protect them as well. She was abusive. I had a car. We lived in hotels. I was paying with the jobs I had. I stopped going to school senior year and my dad got me back together.

I ended up graduating and moving on my own in 2020, when COVID started. I didn't get a graduation or a prom. Then I was told, "you don't have to do anything because there is a stimulus check." I got lazy. I moved in with a person I was in a relationship with. Soon, we got kicked out and I was on the streets. I went to live with my mom again. Big mistake. I called her to see if me and my significant other could move in with her. She agreed, but didn't tell me the situation. When we got to Plattsburgh, Missouri, I couldn't get hold of her. I asked the people at the house if they had seen my mom. They said they hadn't seen her in hours, but they had my siblings with them. It was a red flag.

My mom was getting evicted but said we could stay down the street at this man's house. We stayed there for a few days and my siblings got into trouble. They wanted to build a house for our new puppy, and they used the man's tools. He was very upset. We got into an argument and he assaulted me. The police didn't do anything. The next day I had to call the police, again. Their solution was to send me and my family to a shelter in the city an hour away. The nice people I met the first day I showed up, drove us an hour away for free and dropped us off at the shelter, leaving 90% of our things at that man's house. That week we were told he burnt and sold our things. Looking back, I realize my mom hated me because I made the decision to leave Plattsburgh. That was where she could get drugs.

She began spiraling and abusing my siblings. She wanted to take them back to Plattsburgh, and I said, "over my dead body". At the shelter, we were kicked out for being 2 minutes late after check-in. We had one room we all shared besides my significant other because you can only share with family. My partner and I got put out. I was living on the streets. My significant other called a family member and asked if we could borrow a house that her grandfather had left her. We got there, and there was trash up to my hips in every room. It was horrible. We cleaned up as much as we could. It was winter, the pipes were frozen, and there was no heat. There was barely any water. No water when the pipes were frozen, and no stove to put on for heat.

I got a knock at the door and it was my little brother and sister with their food stamp and

disability cards. I decided to take charge and change my life because my mom had also started me on hard drugs at age 17. So now, I'm on hard drugs, I'm living in an abandoned house, and I have my siblings with me. A very close friend of mine called, told me she's in the mental hospital and her family will not let her come home, could she come to my house. She had nowhere to go so I offered to help. We got a puppy. We went to the park every day. I enrolled them in school and we started to get our lives back. Janelle, rest in peace, ended up passing away later. But before that, she had gotten a social worker. When she told the social worker about our situation, the social worker put me and my siblings on her case. I didn't even know what a social worker was or what they could do. She took us to the pantry, she got us blankets, gave us socks, anything we needed. She helped so much. My grandparents took legal guardianship of my siblings after that school year. My significant other got on section eight and got an apartment. I moved in with her and I felt lonely because it was an abusive relationship. I let my siblings go and they're great. They're in school. They have tablets, phones, their own rooms, everything they could want. I'm very happy for them. I see them often, and spent a lot of time with them after my significant other and I broke up.

November 9th, 2021 is the day I met my now fiance. He saw and heard me getting abused through the phone, borrowed his sister's car, came and got me the very next morning and never took me back. That day I decided to go cold turkey without even telling him. I went through withdrawals. I couldn't sleep at night. He didn't know what I was going through and I couldn't explain because I was too embarrassed. That was the best decision I have ever made in my life. From then on, I was still working with the same social worker, for me and my fiance. We actually had a small breakup. We were homeless together before that. We went to work delivering Uber eats and DoorDash every day and got hotel rooms when we could.

When we broke up, it was devastating for me. I felt like a nobody. I've always had my dad, but I became suicidal. I was depressed, had thoughts of uselessness and feelings of fear of the future. I never thought about going to the mental hospital because it just seemed unacceptable at the time. But something was telling me to go. In July I was hanging out with friends and I ended up belligerent and intoxicated. I was begging to go to the mental hospital. They called an ambulance and I was taken to Irving Health. My life changed forever. We had an hour of phone time there. On my last day there, in that hour window of phone time, I got a call from a company called Restart. They told me they were ready to get me housed. I cried and cried. I don't know how it happened and I do not remember applying for it. Somehow, they reached out to me. Less than one month later, I was housed. They furnished my apartment, paid for my school, paid for my laptop and got me groceries. If I wanted a therapist, they'd get it for me. Medication, a psychiatrist...anything I needed. I just wish I knew what Missouri really had to offer in the past. There is so much help out there.

I was homeless for around two years. But it wasn't all completely on the streets. It was a lot of couch surfing and begging people to take me in. A lot of sleeping on people's floors, no blankets, not being able to change my clothes or shower, not knowing when my next meal would be. The support from my fiance, my dad, and my social worker really got me through. I want to go to Jamaica one day. That's my plan. I want to see the world and travel. The hardest thing I had to deal with was being on drugs and homeless at the same time, and having to look at myself in the mirror. You look at yourself differently when you would rather buy drugs than food. You know something's very wrong. Also, you never know what kind of danger you could be in or how people are gonna treat you. If people would get to know me, they would understand that I'm a real human being and I have big feelings.

I learned that it gets better. You really have to go day by day, make the most of every day. No matter what you do, no matter how little the accomplishment seems. Congratulate yourself for brushing your teeth. You got up out of the bed. Congratulations. You complimented somebody. You told the truth. You do what you're supposed to do. And that makes things easier. It also makes it easier for you to tell yourself when you're wrong. My dream is to be a mother because I didn't have one growing up. I know how to love and care for somebody, even though I didn't feel that from my mother. I really want to put a good person into the world and show them the life that my dad showed me. You have so much more in you and so much life to give. Your situation does not define you. Take charge and ask for help.

Home to me is where you feel safe. Your peace is protected there, it's where you can speak, think and act freely without judgment or harm done to you. Where you can do art projects, make memories, laugh, and just live your life to the fullest. That is what home is to me. You got this and if you're anything like me, something more is meant for you. You will make it out and you will smile again.