

June 12, 2002

Dear Edwin,

Today is our last meeting, and I am writing you this letter to do what I promised - to share some thoughts I had about you. Just to remind you, the DSS asked us to meet together for a trauma evaluation. The purpose of our meetings was so that I could hear from you some stories about your life in order to get to know you - what you have been through, who has been there to support you and take care of you, how your experiences have affected you, and how you were able to get through some of the really tough times and come out strong. I have also been asked to think about what I think would be good for you now, and what you need to go forward into your adult life. You have been my main source of inspiration and insight, and many your stories will stay with me forever.

I remember what you told me about your early childhood in the Bahamas...how your father would drink and then beat your mother up. Sometimes your mother would be able to hide you from the violence. At other times you would try to help her. As a three or four year old there was not much you could do, but you tried! You would get on your father's back and try to make him stop, and he would often fling you aside and hurt you, too! Once you even tried to stab him - you saw that on TV - but he was easily able to stop you. He was so big and you were so little, but you were BRAVE.

Before you were four years old, you survived being locked in a closet, hearing adults scream and fight, see them hit each other, run away from your father only to have him find you, and put up with police, sirens, and many other things that were most likely overwhelming and extremely frightening to a very young child.

Then I will never forget the story of how one day you woke up and your mother was gone. You thought back on how she sang you to sleep the night before, and then she began crying. You were very afraid when you realized you were alone. Still you didn't know that would be the last time you ever would see your mother.

For the next while things were very confusing. No adults were really taking care of you, and you went from house to house. Bigger kids thought it was funny to show you how to smoke weed, to have you watch sex movies, and to make you do the things in the movies. That introduced your mind and body to sex, but you were too young to understand those images and feelings. Later when you came to the US and began to show other kids what you knew, adults in school and at home got very upset and thought of you as some type of a sexual offender even in the fourth grade! What I understand about that is that you were "turned on" to sex before your mind could grasp it, and that you still have trouble sometimes understanding sexual signals from girls - when they want to flirt, when they really want to say no, and all kinds of complicated communications around sex that happen between males and females. These you will have to learn, just as you will have to "unlearn" in your body what you were taught about sex as a four-year-old.

Witnessing Project: A Witnessing of the life of a youth in the care of the DSS by Glenda Alderman

You told me you never knew your mother had died until three years after it happened. Your relatives who were taking care of you in the US made a big mistake in pretending that she was still alive - even going so far as to put presents from her under the Christmas tree for you. They were probably trying to save you pain, but when you did find out, you were shocked, angry and betrayed. You were about eight or nine then. After that you began to ask girls to do sex things, and you also began to smoke and drink. I suspect those were ways you found to dull your strong feelings, or distract yourself from intense feelings you didn't understand.

When I asked you, you told me some stories about hurting kittens. What I understood from those stories was that you were very angry and you didn't know how to manage that huge anger. You wanted to see something get destroyed. At times your anger has been so enormous, you wanted to hurt people too, and you have done some of that. Afterward, though, you felt really scared and sad - you even started to shake when you thought of it.

When you were extremely angry about not having your mother and father, and about being mistreated by your relatives, you thought of hurting other people or destroying their pets and property. You have gotten a lot of ideas from TV about how to do this, but at the same time an inner voice is telling you this is wrong and dangerous, and you have to learn to develop other ways to express the HUGENESS of your anger. Medicine can take the edge off; therapy can help you continue to tell your stories, and as you do, they will lose some of their power.

Here are some really special things I learned about you:

You don't want to be hurt anymore, in your body or your heart, and if someone tries to hurt you, you will fight back. This can be a positive thing if you learn to manage it.

You love your sister and your brother and you feel intense loyalty to them. Especially Sheila - you and she have been through it together. She is the one who really knows you and the stories of your life. You and she will always have each other for support.

You have found some ways to deal with your feelings when you are "amped" (being "amped" happens to many people who have been through trauma.). You can relax yourself by counting forward and backward to 10. You are willing to take meds which do help people who have been through similar experiences.

You have goals and plans and hope. You want to get a job, save money for a car, get your permit and license. You may want to go to ITT Tech to study electronics or engineering.

You have some skills as an artist!

You know how to motivate adults to like you and to work hard on your behalf. You have been able to form a small network of people who will "get your back" - Dave Bennett, Circe, and myself are a few of those people.

You are not afraid to talk about your life. It takes real courage to share those stories and to tell others about them. This is one of the most hopeful things I see about your ability to heal from everything that has happened.

You have not lost the ability to play, have fun...be a kid. That also is a very hopeful sign for the rest of your life.

As far as what you need now, I think your own ideas are good ones. You need a living situation in which you can slowly learn how to live independently. You are too grown to be a "foster child" but too young to be completely independent. All humans need care and connection with other people throughout life, and you are no exception. But those caring for you need to also understand your need for independence. This may be tricky at times...it is in most families. People your age may want to have kid-type parenting at some moments and very little parenting at others. You can use Dave and Circe to talk about how to communicate your needs to the adults who are providing a home for you.

Trauma is nothing more or less than events that happen to people outside of the normal which are too frightening or overwhelming to manage at the time they happen. You have had a bunch of those. Also, you have had to rely too much on yourself and not enough on others. At the same time, you have learned a lot. You DID have a mother...and a father, who before he started drinking and being violent, had some good qualities too. You have a sister and brother and relatives who care. You have us, and there will be others because you know how to attract good people to you. Most of all you will have yourself. And that's a lot.

It's been a pleasure getting to know you. With your permission, I will share some of your stories with other young people who are struggling, as examples of what can be overcome. Thank you, Edwin.

Fondly,

Glenda Alderman, LICSW
Supervisor of Trauma Services