

Bruised Optimism in a Fight for Survival

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Eddie Crist and Alisha Carrington have barely survived a quarter-century, yet their lives have already been marked by drugs, violence, imprisonment, and death. Today, the two are trying to turn a new leaf in their lives in the American capital, which has so far given them poor odds for survival.

Eddie

- My childhood was not normal. I grew up without a mom and dad and it was hard to watch other children play with their dads. There was one dad here and another dad there, and one mom here, and another mom here. Other children were swimming with their parents or going to the park. I wanted to have it too, so much, but I never got it.

- My mother was a drug addict and she never did anything. She used all the money for drugs. I got my clothes from the church or other charities. Most things she did for us was to say that she loves us. I forgive her now, but I wouldn't have then. I would have had bedtime stories, hugs and kisses and stuff to do together.

- My mother used to beat my brothers and sisters when she was high, so I ran. I ran into an acquaintance who was a friend of my mother's and lived a couple of blocks from our house. I was only two and a half years old, but I made it all the way. My mom's friend called child protection and adopted me later.

- I have never met my father. I'm not looking for him actively but I hope I meet him one day. I asked my mother about him several times, but she always says that we'll talk about it later. I guess my mom did not know for sure who my father was and that she was too proud to admit it to me.

- My mother died when I was in prison. She took an overdose in the bathroom of whatever it was for drugs she used. When the guards in the prison informed me that my mother died, I started to cry. I cried for hours and could not sleep. I thought it was my foster mother who had died. When I realized it was my biological mother, all the pain disappeared. She never created any love between us.

Alisha

- My childhood was difficult and dysfunctional. There was a lot of fighting and violence, especially verbal violence. Sometimes words hurt more than a belt. My mother used drugs and was suicidal. She also suffered from schizophrenia. She jumped several times out of the window and cut her wrists and went in for constant care. My dad also used drugs and was frequently in prison. Growing up was a hard time for me.

- I started cooking when I was six years old. I had to do it because my mom was always high. Oftentimes, she almost burned down our house. When we were without food or when my mom sold our food stamps to get drugs, it was I who had to scrape together something or knock on a neighbor's door to get food for us. As a nine year old, I got to see my younger siblings go on their way to school. It was I who was the adult in our household even though I was a child.

Eddie

- When I was ten years old, I used to sit near our house and watch a guy who gave small bags to people, who in turn gave him the green paper. I was really curious as to what it was. One day the guy dropped a bag on the ground without noticing it. I picked up the bag and took it home. A few months later, I saw another older acquaintance with a bag and I told him that I have a similar one at home. He gave me 10 bucks for it. It was the first time I was selling drugs, though I did not understand it myself then. I had just turned eleven.

- Until I turned seventeen, I sold drugs daily for six years. I sold marijuana, PCP, cocaine and embalming fluid (what you put in dead people). I made a quick cut and got all the money I needed. I never counted how much I earned, but I always had enough to buy clothes and jewelry. I was good at selling drugs and was never caught. I lived a life on the street. In my circle, there was probably just one in ten people who did not sell drugs.

- I got kicked out of school because I was selling drugs, smoking weed. When chicks started to show interest in me, I was disinterested in school. It was my clothes, jewelry, and money that got them to like me. None of my siblings graduated from high school.

Alisha

- I was bullied as a child. It was either my junkie mom, my clothes, my hair or my disabled brother that was the cause. In primary school I swallowed it and hid my feelings away, but in high school I had enough. I started fighting. I fought against both girls and boys. There were many schisms between different neighborhoods. It was about survival. Either you hit first or you got beaten.

- I started high school but was expelled and barred in all schools in Washington throughout the first year because of the fights. It was not really so much a fight at school (it happened mostly outside), but I had gained a reputation. While I was expelled, I ended up in prison, so I never returned to school.

Eddie

- I was there for murder. My brother's car was connected to a fatal shooting, and he was suspected. Since I was underage, everyone thought I would get a light sentence, so my brother told police that it was I who was guilty.

- I find it hard to trust anyone today because everyone failed me. My brother, my cousin, my friend, they were all a part of my family and they set me up. I never thought that they would disappoint me. After nearly three years in prison and two trials, I was found to be innocent and I was released.

- During my time in prison, I continued to sell and use drugs. The guards smuggled drugs, cigarettes and telephones to me that I sold around the prison. I smoked grass and took ecstasy pills to keep alert.

Alisha

- I was sixteen when I went to jail. I was convicted of manslaughter even though it was self-defense, and got five years. Then I got two more years for fighting in prison. There wasn't a great difference between my home neighborhood and the prison. The drugs and violence remained. The only difference was that in one, I was sitting behind bars all the time and couldn't get out.

- For two and a half years, I was in solitary confinement. 23 hours in the cell and one outside. I was too young to be in the same department as adult prisoners, but there were no facilities for minors so they had to isolate me.

- For the most part, I tried to sleep. I took so much medication I was able to sleep during the day. I was depressed and felt alone. It felt like I would never return home. I felt hopeless and I was tired. I just wanted it to be over.

- I cut my wrist with a razor blade as I got in the shower. Afterwards, I was angry at myself. I viewed it as a failure: damn, I cannot even kill myself.

Eddie

- When I went to prison, my son was six months old. One morning I woke up in my cell and thought that my life is no longer all about myself. I realized that I have to live for my son now. I wondered if I actually wanted to go home and continue to sell drugs just to be convicted for a new long sentence. I saw many young guys getting 25 or 45 years in prison. I realized I did not want to encounter the same. I realized that I am not that type of person. I fell on my knees and began to pray. I gave myself a promise. I sold the last phones and drugs and ended up with everything. From then on, I would live right.

Alisha

- I wanted to change but I realized that the prison would not help me. There is no rehabilitation there. I simply did not want to be a part of the prison system anymore. I didn't want anybody else to make money off of me when I was locked up. I got a feeling that I wanted to do something important. I did not know what, but I wanted to change something.

Books that save

Alisha and Eddie's stories are dramatic, but they are by no means unique. They have so many peers that President Barack Obama this year felt obliged to do something to help young blacks to be held outside the prison.

"We must do what we can during this year of action to give young Americans the support they need to make good decisions, be strong, overcome problems and ultimately achieve their goals," said Obama last spring when he launched a program to support young people, especially young blacks. Black people in the United States face far greater challenges than their white peers. Among other situations, young black men are six times more likely to end up in prison than young white men and homicide is the leading cause of death in young black males. Black men make up 6% of the U.S. population, but constitute 40% of all homicide victims.

"Violence on the streets and in their homes. Easily available weapons and the lack of good teaching. Poverty and untreated mental health problems. Given what these young people are witnessing, it is difficult for them to get out of the spiral on their own," says Tara Libert, president and founder of the organization Free Minds. Barack Obama may have addressed the problem this year, but Libert and her organization have tried to help poor young men and women in Washington, D.C. for over ten years. Her method is books and poetry.

“Books are beginning to change. You need to find a book that the youths can relate to, one that is about the same things they have experienced themselves.”

Free Minds organizes book clubs and writing courses for young prisoners in Washington, D.C. Every week, the organization meets with prisoners who want to discuss books they have read or poems they have written. When the young inmates become adults and are sent around the country to federal prisons, Free Minds continues to keep in touch with them.

“We send newsletters, birthday cards and have a ‘book club across the miles.’ We send books to 46 different prisons in 23 states.”

For over a decade, Free Minds has helped a total of 875 prisoners.

“We have had a lot of success. But it requires an intensive effort by all parties.”

Eddie Crist and Alisha Carrington are two of the organization's successes. Both joined the book club during their incarcerations. For Alisha, the organization came into the picture just after her suicide attempt.

“Free Minds was crucial for me. Many young people don’t get any support from their families when they go to jail. My mother was still in the dope swamp and my friends did not keep contact. The contact with Free Minds was like a ray of light in a dark place.”

“I started writing poetry. It was therapeutic and a way for me to get out my anger.”

Today, through Free Minds, Eddie and Alisha travel to schools in poor neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. to talk about their lives and experiences.

“I’m just trying to get them to understand that it’s not cool to go to jail. I try to make them understand that that is not the place they want to be,” says Eddie.

Eddie Crist has been released for about half a year. He works as a Poet Ambassador for Free Minds and full-time on a building site. He says that it’s hard to find a real job when you have been in prison and have tattoos on your face. But he is an optimist.

“I do not care if I’m broke. The only thing I want to do now is to finish school and create a relationship with my son. I want to be a good father and see him succeed in life.”

Alisha Carrington was released a year and a half ago. She is currently working at Free Minds full-time. After much difficulty, she has found a home of her own where she can stay with her nearly ten year old daughter, away from her junkie mother. Because of the prison sentence, she had to give up her dream of becoming a veterinarian. Instead, she is studying sociology.

“The good thing about being banned from all high schools in DC is that the city is now required to pay for my studies,” Alisha says with a sly smile, as if she has gotten her revenge.

And even though life is hard, Alisha sees a bright future.

“I am an optimist because it's better than being a pessimist. When you spend a long time on something that does not lead to good results, you will change your ways if you're smart. I have a lot of problems, but I'm not stupid. I know when it's time for a change.”