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A survivor tells the story of kid dumping

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As Nick and I talked, he took in the view of the Rhode Island State House from The Journal cafeteria.

"You don't know how much I love going in that building," he says.

He loves the excitement of it, the reporters and the politicians. He's been part of it. He's worked for his state representative. He's testified at hearings.

He wants to be a politician. And a lawyer. And a journalist.

Don't bet against him hitting the career trifecta. He's already been tested in ways few of us will ever know.

"I don't think I've been harmed at all," he says. "I think it's all part of a plan that's been assigned to me for upcoming events."

He talks about the dark, uncertain part of his life as "boot camp." It has taught him things and prepared him.

He's 15, smart and articulate and almost painfully polite. He introduces himself with a handshake. He even said it was an honor to meet some of the people here at The Journal. He reads the newspaper. When he opens his backpack, a copy of David McCulloch's biography of John Adams is the first thing he takes out.

He speaks from the other side of a lot of hard, cold statistics. He's a kid caught in a cruel social shuffle that has left him with a heavy load of uncertainty when he desperately needs something solid and reliable.

His insistence on being all that he can be is remarkable.

In the best of all worlds, he says, he would be living at home with his mother and stepfather, brother and sister. But that isn't going to happen. His mother and stepfather have broken up. There is a restraining order. There is some tension with his brother. He has emotional swings that have made it necessary to put some distance between him and the family home in Cranston.

After we talked Thursday afternoon, he headed for the bus stop and a ride to his latest group home in Providence.

At a time when he should have no concerns more pressing than homework and maybe the girl who sits two rows over in his Spanish class, he is forced to live his life in bits and pieces, never knowing how long he will be living or going to school in the same place.

There was a point in Nick's nomadic life, when the Rhode Island social service system put him in a foster home in North Smithfield. It was probably the best experience he's had, the closest he's come to his ideal of home and family.

"I can't tell you how loving this family was - how they accepted me into their home. They were so caring."

He stayed there for two days. That's all he was scheduled for. Then he went home to his real family for the Christmas holidays at the end of 1999.

Then he returned to a shelter in Woonsocket.

"It was decent for someone my age," he says of the shelter. "There were caring people there. There were activities set up for us each night."

As we talk, he sorts through a stack of notes he's taken on his life so far. There are also copies of psychiatric evaluations, school grades and newspaper stories I wrote about his stepfather, a popular local performer.

It is amazing how matter-of-fact he is about it, as if every 15-year-old goes through this kind of jolting, disjointed life in which faceless people are making the calls on where he will live and where he will learn. He sorts through his papers, tells his stories and provides a stunning personal voice for all the stories about kids in Rhode Island who get moved around like pieces on a real-life board game.

He has been in night-to-night placement under the Department of Children Youth and Families (DCYF). It is often little more than a couch to sleep on for the night, followed by a day of wondering where the next couch will be.

"It's scary -- ridiculously scary," he says. "There are punks in there, they took my sneakers, my clothing. I was threatened, assaulted. I saw kids hit each other with hockey sticks.

"You wake up in the morning at 5:30 and you go the DCYF building and wait to see where you're going to go the next night.

"You're not in school and I love school. You're not associating with friends. You're not treated decently. And how can your parents know where you are?"

In one sense, he knows it has to be this way. In another, he rails against the injustice of it and the self-defeating madness of dumping kids in often strange and frightening places.

He certainly doesn't blame his mother.

"My mom comes to see me. She's very supportive. The other kids will say to me, 'you're lucky you have a nice mother.' They don't have anyone coming to see them."

The list of his stops on what seems a journey with no real destination is daunting. It winds through Coventry, Woonsocket, North Providence, Cranston, Providence, Narragansett and points in between. He has been to Bradley Hospital and to a group home on the campus of Butler Hospital. He has been to a bunch of schools, some of which insulted his intelligence with course work and materials geared to children 5 or 6 years younger. He remembers being assigned the book *The Pokey Little Puppy* when it seemed like something from his distant past.

He once addressed the Cranston School Committee on how he felt he was being unfairly judged on his past in his classroom assignment.

Now, he is attending Hope High School where he's on the debate team. He's living in a group home in Providence which he considers one of the better ones he's been in.

"It's like a challenge at Hope," he says, "a challenge to help yourself learn."

And through it all, he remains this delightful survivor who seems to have held on to a real sense of who he is and what he wants to be, despite the efforts of the state of Rhode Island to keep him forever on the move.

There is a great temptation to listen to his story and thoroughly enjoy his company and then ask him something like "How the hell have you gotten through all this with so much hope and determination?"

We'll hear from him somewhere down the road. He says all that training he received in his own personal "boot camp" has gotten him ready. It's gotten him ready for war.

"It's a war with people who are trying to destroy kids' lives," says my new friend Nick.

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