

A WALK IN OUR SHOES

(Brother speaks)

We were faced with the task of telling where we've come from. Before we do, we ask that no one here feels any sympathy. We want our story to move mountains, not bring any more tears.

(Sister speaks)

A stranger is someone you have no emotional connection to and there is no emotional connection to you. On October 23rd, 2001, I was born to a stranger. A few days later, I went home to a grandmother who loved me unconditionally until God took her home. Because of her, I had an escape until I was 7 years old. Unfortunately, I can't say the same for my brother. You see, living with my mother was like waking up in a mine field. You never knew where you were sleeping that night or where your next meal was coming from. This is typically what happens when you're put second to something, whether it's drugs or even a man. Your significance is cut in half. That being so, between the two of us, we have faced every hardship you can imagine. There were days we were so hungry that we went to sleep so that we felt nothing at all. There were days we sat in the guidance counselors' offices being questioned about marks and bruises. Standing here today, you only see 2/4 of something beautiful. We have two younger sisters, aged 9 and 5. My mother was good at tearing things apart and leaving greatness in her path. From age 7 to 11, I was neglected, abused and took every beating I possibly could for my three younger siblings. Each of my mothers' boyfriends brought a new nightmare within themselves.

The system failed us, day in and day out. While living in a hotel, our mother was arrested for the first time. We had never known our fathers so my brother and I were taken into the system and separated. After spending three months in jail, our mother was given the option of drug court, to which she agreed. This is what brought us to Brunswick and me to Safe Harbor for the first time.

By the time I was 13, I went home to a sober mother. She had three years of sobriety, working a great job with all four of us children living with her in a nice home, but that wasn't enough to keep her clean. In January of 2017, she met and married a man within a 9-day time period. By January 22nd, our mother was gone and addiction became our reality once again. Having a mother who never loved you is a tough pill to swallow but having a mother who loved you enough to get clean and once again put drugs first is a pill who chose to spit out entirely. From January 2017 until recently, we bounced from home to home taking care of each other and going unnoticed by the state once again.

We caught our breath in August of 2018 when Safe Harbor had two beds available – one for a girl and one for a boy. I no longer had to work to feed the

two of us. My brother didn't have to steal to have school clothes. We were together and each of our needs were met and not because we were breaking our backs to meet them on our own.

Being at Safe Harbor, I've learned a lot about myself and I've worked hard to improve because there is always someone behind me, pushing me, telling me the things I need to hear. Today, I leave our Children's Center to start a new chapter of my life at STRIVE (Safe Harbor's Transitional Living Center for young women) where I'll be focusing daily on how to better prepare myself for life after 18. I am confident in taking a step away from my brother because I knew he is in good hands. My brother and I are here to attest that God truly gives his toughest battles to his strongest soldiers.

(Brother speaks)

The truth is, you'd have to walk a thousand miles in our shoes just to see what it's like to be us, or any of the kids here, because words don't do the years justice. My shoes are shoes that I wouldn't wish to see anyone else walking in. My shoes are shoes that I took off and put on the rack when I became a resident here at Safe Harbor.