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A Son Walks Alone

Paulie's Story

Soon after Paulie was born, the fates seemed to have it in for him, pulling him from loved ones, beating him up, tearing his families apart, sending him demon after demon to wrestle. When we think of him as a newborn, we imagine softer landings for him. But our respect for Paulie, the teenager, the young man, the champion kickboxer, the cook who shares his skills, is boundless.

Thirteen-year-old Paulie Robbins sat up in bed, jolted awake by the shaking ground and the bouncing coins on his nightstand. It was yet another tremor in Palmer, Alaska, this one magnitude 4.0, enough to wake him at nearly one thirty one morning in December 1997. He rubbed his face groggily. In disorienting moments like this, he wished his father were home to be the man of the house. But Hank, a crab fisherman, was out on the Bering Sea, leaving Paulie's mother, Tiffany, alone with Paulie and his nine-year-old sister, Casey, in their trailer.

Hank's weeks away from them were a mixed blessing. He could be boisterous and lively, bringing the kids to garage sales in search of discarded treasures. He filled the shed he had built adjacent to the family's trailer with bargain tools and used them to

repair toasters, bicycles, lamps, door hinges, anything that needed fixing. In the summertime, Hank took the kids camping and fishing, trolling for salmon on the Kenai River. An experienced angler, he taught them how to catch rainbow trout on Skilak Lake, baiting their gang hooks with worms as they faced the glacier at the head of the basin. Indoors, though, Hank was another man entirely. His angry, violent outbursts regularly left Tiffany or the kids crumpled in tears.

Paulie still flinched recalling an afternoon many years earlier, when during a disagreement between his parents that escalated into a brawl, Tiffany fell to the carpet with a bloody nose, and Paulie, just six, rose to defend her. But his father pinned him against the wall in front of the dining cabinet, his hand around his son's throat. Then, suddenly, he dropped Paulie and left the room, returning moments later with a gun. Paulie thought, "Oh my God, he is going to kill me." But Hank did not point the gun at Paulie, nor at Tiffany. Instead, he put the barrel in his own mouth and forced Paulie to put his small finger on the trigger.

"It's time for you to make the decision what you're going to do for the rest of your life," Hank hollered into Paulie's face. The boy cried, silently. Tiffany, who had wet herself from anxiety, vomited. *I should do something*, she thought, but she was frozen. Eventually, Hank scoffed at Paulie for refusing to shoot, then left the trailer in a rage.

The violence accelerated, and Tiffany descended into depression as their seventeen-year marriage wore on. A sour melancholy, beyond what's common during the long, dark Alaskan winters, often paralyzed her. She slept away hours of the day, escaping via a mixture of antidepressants and pain medication prescribed for recurring back problems. Her frizzy reddish-brown hair splayed across her face as she dozed in the dark wood-paneled living room, sometimes leaving a dangling lit cigarette for Paulie or Casey to douse.

Paulie stood up and glanced at Casey asleep in the top bunk. He shadowboxed a bit near his sister's head, thinking about how his father would cheer from the stands during his Pop Warner football games. He sometimes felt more exhilaration from that sound than from victory on the football field. Paulie cherished that fleeting feeling, the thrill of seeing his father beam with pride, video camera in hand, his whole family together and happy.

Yet the last football season had ended badly for Paulie, and he was eager to prove himself again to his father. He had steamed through a fantastic fall, throwing dozens of touchdowns. His Bruins were undefeated, 8–0, coming into the playoffs against the rival Wolverines.

The Bruins went ahead early in the game, but the score tightened as the clock ticked down, and with just minutes to go in the fourth quarter, Paulie could not find an open receiver downfield. He took matters into his own hands and ran out of the pocket for the end zone. He peeled past the defensive line, and with only a free safety to beat, he raced to the goal line. The defender dove at Paulie's heels, tripping him up a few yards shy of the end zone, and Paulie, thrown off balance, leaped with the ball to try to score. But his arm hit the turf hard and bent fully backward, pulverized. Paulie held onto the ball, short of the touchdown. The crowd rose, hushed, as his coach and his mother raced onto the field. Sobbing and unable to talk, he limped to the sidelines, passing his father, who repeatedly asked what was wrong.

Tiffany brushed Hank away and led Paulie to a chair. He hunched over in severe pain, oblivious to his surroundings until he felt a sudden jerk as Hank's hand reached down and pulled his injured arm.

"Quit your bawling," he said, cursing. "Tell me what happened or I'm taking your whiny little ass home!"

Paulie walked to the car behind his family, his head bowed, his arm in excruciating pain. Casey was already in the backseat, and

Tiffany was in the front passenger seat, nursing a new welt on her eye. Paulie asked her what happened, and she insisted it was nothing, that she had tripped and fallen. They rode in silence to the hospital, where X-rays showed Paulie had fractured his humerus bone. The doctor reset it and applied a cast that ended Paulie's football season and the family's outings for the year. Hank's video recorder went into storage. The Bruins buckled a few weeks later in the championship game, with their star quarterback sitting on the sidelines.

Paulie was devastated, and Tiffany tried in the immediate aftermath to boost his spirits and remind him that the setback was temporary. Paulie still remembers with a grin how she looked him in the eyes each morning and encouraged him, "You are going to grow up and be something special, Paulie. You're not like everybody else. You've been given a gift." For her part, Tiffany hoped those words would inoculate him against the loss of his football season and other rough punches to come.

That early morning after the shaking of the ground woke him, he faked one more hit in Casey's direction and climbed back in bed, ready to sleep again. *At least Mom's still here*, he thought as he drifted off to sleep.

Not long after the earthquake, Tiffany obtained a new antidepressant prescription from her doctor, and as the drugs started working, she took stock of her contentious marriage, realizing she'd had enough. She collected her children around the kitchen table one morning and delivered two strong aftershocks: she did not intend to let Hank back into the trailer when he returned, and she had invited a man named Ben, whom she had met online, to visit them for Christmas. She described what a nice man Ben was and how he lived south of them in Alberta. It was plain to Paulie that Ben was not just any visitor—Paulie had watched Tiffany feverishly typing for hours at a time online. To get her attention, he sometimes

crouched next to the screen, facing her, close enough to smell the nicotine on her breath, but she stayed thousands of miles away, her eyes obscured by the reflection of the monitor on her large glasses. Looking to catch his mother's glance, he instead found in her glasses a wall of backward type.

Now he saw a new liveliness in her eyes, as she encouraged the kids not to worry about this new visitor. And, she added, they didn't have to call him "dad" if they didn't want to.

When Ben arrived, Paulie did not call him dad or anything remotely like it. Ben was nothing like his father. Hank was stocky and strong; Ben was lean and wiry. Paulie carefully danced around him, eyeing him suspiciously, declining offers of kindness and assistance.

Ben seemed to sweep into their lives seamlessly, helping with the chores, wrapping Christmas presents, and sleeping with Tiffany in Hank's bed. It was unreal, and although Tiffany seemed happier than Paulie had ever seen her, he knew it could not last. He dropped to the lower bunk at night, aware that just a few feet away, his mother was enmeshed with her new boyfriend, while his father planned his return. He waited, watching the foundation of their family teetering. Something had to give.

Sure enough, it did. A few days later, Ben's estranged wife killed herself in their home in Alberta. Paulie couldn't quite make out the whispering between Ben and his mother during the next two days, but he listened intently, in anger and shock, when Tiffany sat the kids down once again and explained that Ben needed her help in Canada. She and Ben would be leaving together after Christmas. She described it as a fast trip, just to take care of a few things, and pledged they would return to the kids in a week. She sent Paulie and his sister to live with different friends. Paulie left home a day before his fourteenth birthday with some clothes, socks, and underwear hastily packed into a small duffle bag.

After a week, however, Tiffany sent word that Ben could not come back to Alaska, having previously overstayed his visa in the United States. Plus, Ben had his hands full in Canada, trying to win two of his four children back from foster care and removing his late wife's belongings from their home. Tiffany had to decide whether to return to Alaska alone or stay with Ben and try to arrange for the kids to join her in Alberta down the road. It was an easy choice for her. Alaska held mostly bad memories for Tiffany, but with Ben, she had found an ease and a peace she could not, would not, relinquish. She promised to apply for a student visa to allow Paulie to join her in Alberta, and she arranged for him to move in with one of her friends in the meantime. When Hank returned from crab fishing, he found his trailer empty, his family gone. He picked up Paulie and Casey and, in a rage, forced them to choose where they would live. Neither was eager to answer, but when repeatedly pressed, Casey chose Hank and Paulie chose Tiffany. His mother was the weaker of the two, and Paulie worried about her. Hank erupted, and nothing was ever the same again.

Until Paulie could move to Canada, he stayed with a girlfriend of Tiffany's, who gave him more freedom than he had ever experienced. It was intoxicating. The woman's son, more than ten years older than Paulie, roamed with a carefree tribe of twentysomethings, and Paulie, often unsupervised, lost weekends and eventually schooldays to cocaine and cribbage marathons, poker tournaments, and beer pong. He soon began to experiment with marijuana and other drugs, all readily available. As the weeks turned into months and the temperatures climbed enough for the spring break-up to begin, Paulie's attendance at school fell off, and he became edgy and unhappy about the long wait to rejoin what was left of his family. Just a week before his last day of eighth grade, he attacked the bully from gym class, who had been taunting him about his missing

mother for much of the winter. Paulie left the boy's face bloody and swollen, with his bottom lip split wide open. During middle school, Paulie had been a scrappy kid, encouraged by his father to fend for himself, but now he felt out of control, and the school agreed, expelling him.

Early that summer, after six months away, Tiffany finally sent a ticket for Paulie to join her and Ben in Alberta. When Paulie arrived at their home, he could see that Tiffany had settled into her new life without looking back. Ben's older child in the house, a six-year-old boy with autism, was a handful, but he and his four-year-old sister looked to Tiffany as their mother. And she embraced the role, announcing to Paulie within minutes of seeing him that she and Ben planned to marry soon.

Paulie didn't feel like he fit in. He continued to experiment with different drugs—downers, Ecstasy, cocaine—in larger doses, occasionally breaking into his mother's room to steal her pot. Ben tried to encourage him to attend high school in Calgary, and Paulie seemed momentarily to hit his stride when the football coach discovered his strong arm and gave him a spot on the team, but it was not nearly as much fun as it had been up north. He missed his teammates, he missed his family cheering on the sidelines, and he missed home.

He even missed Tiffany, even though she was right there in front of him. He loved her, and he knew she loved him in her way, but he felt like a spectator or a houseguest in her new family, not a son. The painkillers Tiffany had become increasingly reliant on muddled her mind and pushed her further away from him. Paulie eventually quit school, idling away most of the day, sometimes watching the children or listening to Tiffany's wedding plans. When the big day arrived, he put on his most ardent smile and sat to the right of his mother, watching her marry Ben in the very spot in their living room where Ben's late wife had died one year earlier.

Over time, Paulie started returning home at odd hours of the night, addled, incoherent, pale. New blond streaks lined his jet black hair, and he grew a stubby goatee, making him look older than his fifteen years. He ignored curfews, and Tiffany had a hard time keeping track of him.

She woke him one morning in his makeshift basement bedroom and discovered piles of shoplifted clothes. Paulie was planning to wear some and sell some for drug money. It was more than Tiffany could bear. She was not yet a Canadian citizen and worried that officials would discover the theft and punish her, perhaps forcing her to leave the country and her life with Ben.

She telephoned the authorities, turned Paulie in, and watched the police handcuff him and take him away. Paulie headed to a group home for delinquent youth. Before long, he was roaming Calgary, intermittently sleeping at Ben and Tiffany's house or on the streets, watching the hookers and the drug addicts. This was no life, he thought. He had a better shot back in the 907 area code—friends, a sister, even his estranged father. Maybe he could reconstruct some semblance of a home back there, and, in any event, it was clear to him, at the age of fifteen, that he had run his course with his mother and her new family.

Tiffany warned him not to go back to Hank in Alaska, predicting they would not get along, but when she could not persuade him, she handed him a creased and faded sheet of yellowed loose-leaf paper. "This is from your mother," she said, "your biological mother."

Paulie stopped short, speechless. He knew he had been adopted, but he had no idea his birth mother had left him a note. When he was eleven or twelve, Paulie's parents had told him his birth mother, who they said was a teenage runaway, had abandoned him in a shed in the Alaskan countryside as an infant. How

could he have a letter from her now, fifteen years later? He opened the letter immediately and read its contents. His correspondent, homeless and then just seventeen, said she knew he wouldn't understand why she had chosen to surrender him, but hoped he might one day forgive her. And then, as only a mother can know, especially a young mother who for two years struggled to keep him safe and make ends meet, she explained:

> I didn't do this because I don't love you or want you. I did this because I would much rather die than see you be deprived of a father, proper upbringing, and happiness, for you are my world . . . I don't expect you to love me but I would love to meet you and see if you are well and happy . . . I love you my son. Please forgive me. Love you always, Frankie Sandmeyer

Reeling, Paulie put the note in his pocket and headed back to Anchorage, asking Hank if he could stay at the trailer. As Tiffany predicted, his arrival ignited a powder keg. Paulie and Hank fought constantly from the start. Hank was bigger and stronger than Paulie, and he had no tolerance for his son's drug use, his stealing, his flouting curfews. Their shouting matches routinely turned violent, and one in particular shook Paulie to his foundation.

Although he had been considered an eleventh grader in Canada, his Alaska high school put him back in ninth grade, and he cut a lot of school. When Hank caught him, he gave Paulie one of the worst beatings of his life—pulling his hair, kicking him, throwing him against the refrigerator, nearly breaking a table over him. Then he drove Paulie to school. During the ride, Hank cried his eyes out, saying how much he loved Paulie and wanted to be his friend. Dazed, still bleeding, Paulie sat motionless, wondering what love is.

A week or so after that fight, he called his football coach and said he wouldn't be playing on the team anymore, as he was leaving home. He left Hank's, empty-handed, and wandered the cold, dark streets of their northern town.

Paulie continued to become more involved with drugs, especially Ecstasy, a stimulant and low-level hallucinogen, stealing from local retailers so he could buy more pills. After he was arrested for shoplifting at a local store, Paulie tried to crash with his best friend, begging his friend's mother to hide him. But she knew Paulie had a juvenile record and was expected to report in regularly to a probation officer. She called the cops, who brought him to Covenant House in Anchorage, the only shelter for homeless and runaway teenagers in Alaska's largest city. Housed in the former downtown YMCA, the shelter was an unremarkable brick building that once had one of the city's only community pools. Covenant House had filled in the pool and converted the space into a living room for the city's destitute young people. Paulie could hardly believe he had become one of them.

Arriving at Covenant House

Mildred Mack was working an overnight shift when she first saw Paulie walk through the front door of the shelter. She had started at Covenant House six years earlier, in 1993, after the breakup of her nearly twenty-year marriage. She had loyally supported her ex-husband's army career, moving with him from Kansas to Hawaii to Georgia, uprooting their son and daughter each time, and finally arriving in Alaska. After the divorce she was faced with raising two teenagers on her own.

Mildred was hard to miss, one of the few African American faces in a city that is more than 70 percent white. She was older than the rest of the shelter staff—well into her fifties, with wavy

brown hair combed forward and high cheekbones that cradled inquiring, wide eyes. By most accounts, she was no-nonsense, demanding, and relentless, qualities that had helped her put her children's lives back together after the divorce, when all she really wanted to do was cry herself to sleep. She had found a way to force a smile and put food on the table, with no time for self-pity, hers or anyone else's. It was Paulie's terrible misfortune, he would soon think, to have Mildred Mack as his primary counselor.

When Paulie first arrived at Covenant House, it was obvious he needed sleep, a warm shower, and food. He came exhausted, having couch-surfed from one friend's home to another, sometimes with their parents' knowledge, other times sneaking inside after they went to bed. He spent a few nights walking the streets, bundled against the freezing temperatures, tired, and hungry. His body was just run down. The staff at Covenant House called local child welfare authorities to report Paulie's allegations of physical abuse, and called Hank to notify him of Paulie's presence at the shelter and request some clothes, but Hank refused. The next day, Paulie called Hank directly. Crying, he asked his father for his clothes, but Hank rebuffed him and fumed that Paulie was just avoiding reality by not getting help for his drug problem.

"Why don't you come home and stand up to me like a man?" Hank said.

"I will when I'm not a toothpick," Paulie responded, "when I can stand up to you without getting beat up."

After letting him rest a few days, Mildred expected more from him. He needed counseling, she was certain. He talked longingly of a birth mother he had never met and denied having a drug problem. He seethed about feelings of abandonment, Hank's beatings, and the many reasons he could not live with either parent, unloading story after story like a seasoned raconteur, but he was stymied by the simplest follow-up question: "What do you want to do about this?"

Mildred believed that Paulie needed to become serious about school, gather his important papers, and look for a part-time job. He had not finished one year of high school, and the longer he waited, the tougher it would be to earn his diploma. Without that, his prospects for finding his way off the streets would be much slimmer.

Paulie resisted and dawdled, complaining that neither parent had his birth certificate, so he couldn't go to school or work. He lounged on the shelter's couches and overslept, avoiding Mildred whenever possible. When she found him, she put him to work and peppered him with questions about his plans. Had he seen the social worker? Had he gotten his social security card? Did he go to school? And she was firm with him about the curfew that Paulie creatively attempted to flout, citing all manner of natural disasters and public transportation calamities.

He insisted that he needed a break. Mildred told him Covenant House *was* his break. He felt he needed a friend, but Mildred said she wasn't his buddy. She had a higher purpose in his life; she believed he could move himself forward—she could see it in him, plain as day.

Actually, she saw equal parts resilience and rage. She could tell Paulie had promise, but he was shiftless, simmering with anger, and unsure of himself. He peppered the conversations with Mildred with unsolicited non sequiturs: "I'm not a bad person," "I think my mother really wants me to be with her but she has a lot going on in Canada right now," "I really don't deserve to get beat up all the time," "I think I have some good qualities." She listened and probed during dozens of conversations. She tried to affirm and encourage him, but she knew that he was not trying to convince her or anyone else of his self-worth; he was trying to sort it out for himself.

As suddenly as he had arrived at the shelter, Paulie left, AWOL one night without so much as a good-bye. Mildred had seen it

coming for days. Moments after Paulie left the shelter, Tiffany returned the staff's call of several days prior. She told them she was Paulie's official guardian and assured them "if Paulie made allegations of abuse against Hank, they are true." When staff advised her of the pending child abuse investigation, she ended the call by pledging to dial the state child welfare agency, but the allegation against Hank had been dismissed for lack of evidence by the time Tiffany called.

He went back to Hank's trailer, where Hank beat him worse than Paulie could ever recall, zip tying his thumbs behind his back and throwing him into the car. Before they went into the probation office, Hank cut the ties and hauled Paulie across the parking lot. Hank told the probation officer that he could not handle Paulie any longer. Together, Hank and the probation officer agreed to send Paulie for an assessment at a local psychiatric hospital, then to a drug rehabilitation center in Idaho, for two years. Paulie and another boy attempted to escape after only two months. They were caught and locked in a juvenile jail for a month.

Idaho officials contacted Tiffany and agreed to bus Paulie to the border of British Columbia from the detention center after his stint ended. But when Paulie stepped off the bus at the border crossing in the dead of winter, Tiffany was unable to meet him; she lacked the necessary immigration documents. She wept through the phone, urging Paulie to wait on the Idaho side of the border until she could develop a plan. It was getting late. Paulie lay down on the curb and put his jacket over his legs to keep warm. When that failed, he walked over to the visitors' center bathroom to warm himself with the hand dryers, making four or five trips throughout the night.

The next evening, Tiffany finally appeared in a friend's car and told Paulie to hop inside. They drove around looking for a less traveled route into Canada and found one where the agent waved them right in. Paulie entered Canada illegally that night, joining Ben, Tiffany,

and the children just as they were preparing to relocate to Ontario, on Ben's whim. On the way east, they slept in their station wagon, stuffed with their pets and all of their possessions.

As they settled into their new home, Paulie slowly realized that Tiffany had become a prescription pill junkie. She'd found a new doctor in Ontario right away, one who gave her Oxycontin and Valium. She was hooked almost immediately and took Ben down with her. Virtually comatose during the day, Tiffany let cigarettes burn holes on the couch, the recliner, and eventually her own knees and legs. Mired in addiction, she and Ben faded away, and life unfolded in slow motion, painkillers thickening the couple's words and movements. Paulie introduced his mom to a local drug dealer, and they returned to the house and took morphine pills together, the boundaries between mother and son eroding further and further. Paulie spent less and less time at home, running away frequently, taking up with local truants, petty thieves, and drug couriers.

In a few months, he returned to the streets of Anchorage, tiring of Tiffany's addiction but knowing Hank's place was no longer an option. He felt unnerved by an abiding sense of not belonging that he could not overcome. Tiffany had tried to love him as best she could. Paulie did not blame her for failing to protect him from Hank's fists, though Tiffany blamed herself. Looking back on Paulie's childhood, from the safety and security of her new life in Canada, Tiffany indicted herself for not standing up to Hank more. During all of those years in the trailer, she was a wreck. She threw up virtually every day for a decade, a jumble of depression and dread. She believed that if she dared intervene on behalf of the kids, Hank would kill her. Yet later, away from Hank, she could not shake an overwhelming sense of remorse.

It was not all Hank's fault, either, Paulie knew. Hank had encouraged Paulie to share some of his core passions: fighting, fishing, and football. That was how a man like Hank expressed

affection. Some days, Paulie felt that his father just suffered an accursed temper that made him impossible to live with, but the problem was bigger than that.

There was something wrong with them as a family. They didn't go together. The pieces did not fit. This was not about love, whatever that was; this was about connection. The older he got, the more distant Paulie felt from all of them. It was too easy to live apart from them, to say good-bye and not miss them deeply. He came to think of them as his rented family, and he did not belong to them or with them. Home was somewhere else, it had to be. He searched for it, yearning. The chase took him everywhere and nowhere, six months with Tiffany and Ben, six months with friends in Anchorage on the streets, a few months with a relative in the Lower 48, a chain of group homes, Covenant House, Anchorage's parks, the transit center, street corners, and benches.

Alaska's rave scene temporarily quenched Paulie's thirst, introducing him to a community of dance party and drug enthusiasts. Raves popped up across the city, starring turntable magicians who pushed the churning dance floor into all-night frenzies with a succession of fast-paced electronic songs and accompanying light shows. Paulie favored trance music, and he was attractive in that crowd, his piercing brown eyes suggesting sensitivity, his square jawline virility. The girls flocked to him. He spent countless nights spinning and swaying to the progression of thumping sounds spun by the rave's DJ ringmaster. The communal spirit of the dance floor filled him with a sense of belonging. He didn't have to ponder his lost home and family; the music invaded all of his senses. The bigger the space, the more dancers in his midst, sweating and moving in sync to the music, the better he felt.

In no time, he was drawn into a drug subculture among the ravers, centered on Ecstasy. Some called it the hug drug, because they claimed it helped them be more in touch with their feelings, thawing hearts and minds in the frozen north. But the side effects

could be serious: depression and paranoia, not to mention involuntary teeth clenching, blurry vision, and increased heart rate.

Paulie peddled the green-and-blue tablets before and during raves and, for a while, made a life of it. He was sleeping on the streets or on friends' couches or bundling with other ravers in a shared hotel room or in Town Square Park, across from Covenant House. But Anchorage was freezing—the snow fell from late September to April, and in midwinter, the sun barely showed up. After ten-hour dances on a drug that caused a marked spike in body temperature, Paulie struggled to stay warm. When he became too cold and weary, he returned to Covenant House, and Mildred soon caught on to his pattern: first asking for help, then professing to change his life, followed by resistance, anger, and a quick exit. The steps refueled him for the next foray on the streets, but he never tackled the heartache and the substance abuse that continually kept him in bad straits. He missed his mother and felt deeply alone. The drugs took hold of him, and didn't let go.

He idled on the top level of the F Street mall, buying one soda and refilling it all day so no one would kick him out for loitering. He pinched food from the garbage and could find a coat, gloves, or fresh socks from Covenant House any time he wanted, whether he lived there or not. But he was decidedly not interested in the shelter's rules, least of all the ten o'clock curfew. He wanted liberty.

By the time he was seventeen, he had come to Covenant House eight times in nearly three years, and most times he'd leave in a huff, after complaining about Mildred "getting in my face." He was unwilling to return to school or study for his high school equivalency diploma (GED). He missed meals and counseling. When Mildred laid down the law and told him not to waste his days loitering downtown, he bristled, and the lure of the streets prevailed. The parties, the beer, the drugs, and, most of all, the freedom trumped Mildred's voice, Mildred's rules, Mildred's agenda for his life.

Most days, Paulie was glad for the dark, and there was a lot of it in Anchorage in the winter. It made it possible for him to hide, backing up into doorways, sleeping on or under benches, without feeling exposed. He didn't mind eating out of the trash cans as much as he minded being seen doing so. But the eighteen-hour winter nights were dangerous. Homeless people routinely freeze to death on the streets of Anchorage; some have been crushed to death when the dumpsters they sought shelter in were emptied into trash trucks.

In 2009, Covenant House Alaska and the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, published results from a ten-year review of more than four thousand individual case files belonging to youth who sought shelter between 1999 and 2008. Like Paulie, 66 percent of those young people had not finished high school, and 40 percent of them had lived in a mental health residential program. Nearly one in three kids who came to Covenant House Alaska had spent time in foster care. Almost half of the girls and young women at the shelter were survivors of sexual assault, as were about 7 percent of the boys.

These hardships were not unique to children and youth in Alaska. In one of the largest-ever studies of homeless youth in New York City, researchers at Columbia University's Center for Homelessness Prevention Studies, in partnership with Covenant House Institute, reported in 2009 that almost half of the 444 homeless youth who sought shelter at Covenant House New York reported significant violence at home. One in five reported being beaten with an object. Thirty-five percent of the young people had spent time in foster care. The data paint a stark picture of the life-altering events that may drive children into unaccompanied homelessness: abuse, instability, emotional trauma.

Paulie had confronted all three, so he was far from alone. Deeply isolated, he sought solace in the music, the community, and the pills of his rave world. He often found buyers among them for the handful of Ecstasy pills he carried with him, selling on the down low in bathrooms or dark corners of the floor. Eventually, the police caught up with him, charging him with twenty-five felonies—one for each pill he delivered in an unusually big deal and three for the other pills he had on him when he was arrested. He spent three months in the McLaughlin Youth Center, Anchorage's juvenile jail. He was just three months shy of his eighteenth birthday. If he had been tried as an adult, he might still be in prison. At McLaughlin, he appeared depressed, in part because he was coming down from the Ecstasy. He had eaten sporadically on the streets, so he arrived at McLaughlin looking gaunt. His record of hospitalization and treatment left McLaughlin officials worried that he was a suicide risk, so they isolated him. He could feel himself bottoming out, squandering the days on his cot, crying, wondering what kind of life this was. He wanted to change.

When the news of Paulie's arrest reached her at Covenant House, Mildred felt sad but not surprised. *Maybe this is what he needs*, she thought.

After returning to Covenant House from McLaughlin, Paulie was unhappy to find Mildred still there. She occasionally heard him grumbling about her, and she chalked it up to a play for sympathy. She was not out to win any popularity contests with the kids, and if she tried, she would lose badly. She did not hug or purr or sweet talk, and even if she did, she was sure those were not the things Paulie needed. He did not need another friend. Mildred watched him intensely, like an eagle attending its speckled eggs high above the arctic wilderness, trying to figure out what it was he needed most.

"Why can't you just leave me alone?" he pleaded one afternoon, sprawled across the couch, having failed to go to school yet

again. He had repeatedly told her about the humiliations of showing up with mismatched outfits from the shelter's clothing room. Had she even been listening to him?

"These chores you should be doing, Paulie, one day they're going to help you. You're going to go to work and have a good work ethic, you know?"

"I am sick and tired of you with this tough love bull. Just leave me alone!" he hollered.

She bent down to face him and saw him trembling, his eyes moist, searching as far away from her as he could. She looked into those tired brown eyes and for the first time she had second thoughts. Maybe this was not the way. Maybe Paulie needed most to retreat into his shell, to rest, protect himself, and heal. Maybe the beatings and the drugs and the end of his family had exacted too great a toll, and he was not as resilient as she had estimated. If she turned her focus away from him, perhaps in time he would overcome his hurt and inertia. She wanted to give in, to tell him it was okay just to lie back down and relax. But her steely determination, which had forced her out of bed and into the workforce, would not let her do it. She prayed for God to give her the wisdom and grace to know what to do with this boy. She stood silently and waited for Paulie to do his chores, and she didn't leave the room until she saw him reluctantly pick up a broom and start sweeping the hall.

After an especially tense day with Paulie, Mildred unleashed her frustration at the afternoon staff meeting. "I don't know how to reach this boy," she said, almost pleadingly, and stopped herself short, the plaintive tone in her voice lingering. It was a rare display of disquiet from Mildred, whom younger coworkers dubbed Miss Military for the confidence, structure, and discipline she brought to her work. Mildred excused herself from the circle and retreated to an office, where, hidden behind a stack of boxes, she cried quietly.

Working at Covenant House is not for the faint of heart. It is a calling, not a paycheck. Any young person staying at the shelter who thinks you're doing it for the money will tell you so, immediately and often. Imagine being a residential adviser in a college dorm, struggling to bring order to a crowd of sleep-deprived, hormone-addled, and opinionated young people living away from home, some for the first time. Then subtract most of the high school diplomas and stable family histories, and add trauma to the mix and varying degrees of loneliness, anxiety, and stress. Then put everyone in crisis, perhaps with fresh wounds from fights with family or friends or pimps or recent abandonment by foster care. Add a handful of mental illnesses and addictions, the panic of having no permanent address, and try to make sure everyone gets along enough and keeps quiet enough so that the others can rest. The goal is to do all of this with unconditional love and absolute respect. The work can take its toll.

Mildred went to find her long-time confidante and supervisor, Connie Morgan, a veteran of the shelter's first days in Anchorage. Connie originally hailed from Olive Hill, Kentucky, population seventeen hundred. That small town taught her to prize community, and her folksy, Southern amiability won friends readily, including native residents of the icy northern tundra of Alaska, where she had followed her husband on assignment from the federal Indian Health Service in the mid-1980s. Her natural affability thawed the reserve of the Inupiats she met in Barrow, the northernmost American city, and helped land her a spot as one of Covenant House Alaska's first employees, charged with helping to build the Anchorage program and recruit the new shelter team.

Connie could see Mildred struggling with Paulie. He always seemed to teeter on the ledge, leaning toward decisions that could help him turn his life around before he dove back into street life, never dealing with the grief over losing his home that he wore like an extra layer of skin. Mildred increasingly believed it was

not enough to keep him warm and safe for a couple weeks, then watch him go back into the flux. She wanted to pull him off the edge of the abyss before he fell, save him from the streets and the drugs, get him focused on the promise of his life. But she didn't know how.

She trusted that Connie might. Connie had worked with hundreds of homeless teenagers, many of whom had survived unspeakable violence, and Connie repeatedly told her that no kid was unreachable. But Paulie's life was upside-down. His father beat him, and they could barely be in the same room together. His mother had abandoned him on her way to a new life in Canada, then did drugs with him. All of this left Paulie pining for some mysterious birth mother who had supposedly left him for dead in a shed as a baby. Grownups had unwittingly trained this boy never to trust them.

Connie suspected that he was too smart and handsome for his own good. Paulie's considerable intelligence, good looks, and abundant charm kept him from the harshest consequences of the streets. Even after stints in juvenile jails in Canada, Idaho, and Alaska, Paulie had avoided the bottoming out that landed many young drug abusers on the road to recovery and many homeless, truant teenagers back to school.

"A lot of our work is like small steps," Connie said to Mildred. "And not everything is going to go well. We can't expect kids to come in here and have some earth-shattering experience. Paulie has been through the mill. He keeps coming back, yes? He trusts us more each time, right?" Then she sighed, and answered her own question. "Right."

Connie knew that Mildred thought she had to be strong and demanding for Paulie's sake, but it was mostly a well-rehearsed facade. Underneath Mildred's veneer of certitude and toughness dwelled a soft center, one she hesitated to reveal. She needed permission to experiment a bit.

"Try something different," Connie advised. "He expects you to lean into him. Try giving him some carrots. If he wants an extra hour on curfew, barter: give it to him if he enrolls in the diploma course."

It could not hurt to try, so Mildred did just that. And in a matter of days, Paulie started to earn the privileges he sought. Suddenly, carrots in hand, Mildred found it easier to lure him toward an education. She still insisted they meet every day and review his plans and accomplishments. When he was late, she waited for him. When he feigned ignorance of the scheduled meeting time, she sought him out, without exception. She was not letting go.

A few weeks later, Paulie approached her in the hallway of the shelter. She sensed he was coming to the end of his latest stay, because his attendance at meals had become less frequent and his requests for extended curfews more common. "Mildred, I never did anything to you. Why can't you just leave me alone?"

She looked at him with a faint smile. He just shook his head, shrugged, and walked away.

Covenant House had started out for Mildred as a job. She was working at the Salvation Army after her divorce but not earning enough. She had read an article in 1990 about Covenant House Alaska after it first opened, the piece prominently featuring Covenant House's then president, Sister Mary Rose McGeady, talking about how the shelter gave her a way to bring the values of her faith into her work. Mildred, a fellow Roman Catholic, applied for a part-time position on the evening shift. Soon it became more than a job, and she left the Salvation Army to join Covenant House full time.

She was inspired by the shelter's dynamic duo: the unfussy and accessible Connie and the spunky young executive director, Deirdre Cronin, a red-headed fireball with a heavy Queens accent. Deirdre had volunteered at Covenant House in New York City right out of college, as part of its Faith Community

program, a corps of volunteers who dedicate a year of their lives to work at Covenant House sites in Anchorage, Atlantic City, Fort Lauderdale, and New York. Deirdre moved to Alaska after Sister Mary Rose offered her the chance to lead her own agency, albeit one far from her family and friends. Deirdre jumped at the opportunity; her enthusiasm for serving homeless youth reached from the pushed-out kids of Times Square to runaways from the most remote Native Alaskan villages, no matter what their faith.

"I am a fan of Jesus," she often declared to the staff matter-of-factly, "and while I never met him personally, I'm pretty sure he never said you have to pray in order to eat and have shelter. They're all our kids."

When Paulie resurfaced at Covenant House at the age of nineteen in 2003, still homeless, tired, and cold, both Deirdre and Connie encouraged Mildred. "Find his spark, Mildred. You can do this," Connie said. If Mildred was feeling uncertain about how to break through to Paulie this time, both Deirdre and Connie had confidence she would do so, and Mildred never let Paulie see her doubt.

Paulie told her he wanted to stop eating out of trash cans. She told him he had to stop using drugs and get his equivalency diploma, a job, and some savings. He didn't quite roll his eyes, but it was close. She admired his courage for coming back yet another time, but she wished he would check his adolescent swagger at the door.

Paulie told her he had received his diploma a few weeks ago, without having had to study much. Mildred was speechless at first, then put her hands on his shoulders and gave them a shake, beaming. He had his GED? It was a terrific omen, and it confirmed to her that he was naturally smart. After all, he had no formal

education beyond a few months of the ninth grade, yet had passed the high school equivalency exam on the first try.

"All right, then!" she said.

He had to smile. Her voice, the one that had taken root in his head during the last year, had finally started making sense. He heard it on the streets, in a crowd, though she was nowhere in sight. Nothing had gone right for him when he followed the ravers, the drug pushers, and the other kids on the street, so for something different, he had started to listen to the voice of Mildred Mack. Maybe she really did care about him. He wanted to make the right decisions, the kind that Mildred had been encouraging, choices that would help him off the streets. He was tired of being a victim.

During the next several weeks, she saw him for the first time apply himself steadily at the shelter, tackling his chores without any lip, finding a part-time job, then another, saving his paychecks, and expressing an interest in Covenant House's Rights of Passage independent living program, which gives young people the skills they need to prosper on their own, while insisting that they work, budget, and save during their extended stays.

He began to engage in the life of the shelter, owning his substance abuse, sharing openly at youth meetings about his use of Ecstasy and the downward spiral it caused. He wanted to make drugs a thing of the past, and he attended Narcotics Anonymous meetings, eventually joining peer counselors in downtown Anchorage to encourage homeless youth to avoid drugs and leave street life behind. He signed up for the shelter's chess tournament and won handily. And he poured himself into the weekly Cov Poetry Slam, writing about the quest for family and acceptance, sharing his poems with staff and other young people.

A Knight walks alone
Looking for his sister
Do you know where you are?

Calls the voice
"No"
Do you know who your father is?
"No"

Within a month—his longest stay at Covenant House until then—Paulie was accepted into Rights of Passage, and he planned to leave the crisis shelter for his new digs several blocks away. The morning before he left, Paulie invited Mildred to go for a walk. They bundled up and headed outside, passing the mural painted across the back of the building depicting a young person sitting on a trash can next to the words "Life on the Street Is a Dead End."

"Umm, I just want to say thanks for helping me. You got my ass in line. You never gave up on me."

She shook her head no and reminded him of the last time he had stayed there, when he asked her why she wouldn't leave him alone.

"Yeah," he said. "You didn't really say anything."

"I know, I know," she said, looking down, pausing. "Paulie, I wanted to say never. I'm never going to leave you alone, you know, because I believe in you."

He faced her and quietly responded, "Thanks, Mildred."

"Don't thank me, Paulie. I did for you what I did for my own."

"I'm kind of your own by now," he said.

"That you are," she said with a grin.

At Rights of Passage, Paulie, who logged a grand total of eleven stays with Covenant House, had his ups and downs like all of the kids. He worked at Arby's at the mall during the day and spent a lot of time imagining life with his birth mother, wondering where she was, if she was even still alive. He grew certain that he wanted to try to find her, but he didn't know where to begin. His birth records

were sealed, and he had no idea what she looked like, whether she had changed her name, where she lived. It was a painful cul-de-sac, longing to find her, knowing he could not, then fantasizing about her once again. At night in bed, he unearthed her letter to him, rereading it repeatedly. *She wanted me*, he thought. *Out there, somewhere, my mother wanted me*.

When he was twenty-one, he moved downtown into an apartment with a friend for five months before finding his own place three blocks from a spare, underground kickboxing center. The owner encouraged Paulie to give kickboxing a try, and it felt right to him.

Paulie lost his first public bout, which he invited his father to watch, but when he talked to Hank afterward, it was as if Paulie had won in a knockout. Hank was electric, impressed by how strong and fast his son had become. It reminded Paulie of those Pop Warner games. Eight years later—too late, on so many counts—Paulie had won his father's esteem as a fighter.

As a boy, he had cared more about his father's reaction than about the play on the football field. But now, although Hank's enthusiasm pleased Paulie somewhat, it did not color his perception of the match. Paulie had lost, and he did not want to do that again. He threw himself into the rigors of the ring, training four to six hours a day, all day on the weekends, weightlifting to build muscle on his lean frame. He never wanted to be skinny, which is how he saw himself, and his new routine helped him grow stronger and feel better about himself.

The sport taught him about staying on his feet when all he wanted to do was lie down. He relished the chance to care, bleed, coach, and sweat with kids who thought only about kickboxing, not about drugs, not about sex, not about violence, just about the respect they had for each other and for the sport.

He woke at four or five in the morning to run, then started his workday, and afterward returned to the gym until it closed.

For hundreds of hours during the next eight months, he practiced footwork, reflexes, and the finesse and reach of his kicks. He couldn't count on his bulk, so he won by wearing down his opponent with careful strategy. Victory was contingent on being in top physical form, and he was.

For Paulie, fighting allowed for the physicality of a street brawl without the negative feelings directed at his adversary. Most of the kicks did not even hurt Paulie when they landed, blunted by surges of adrenaline. The real pain came later that night or the next morning when he awoke unable to move a bruised, stiff limb or two. He took as his motto "Pain is the greatest teacher, time is the ultimate healer, and heartbreak is the best motivator."

Kickboxing seemed to Paulie the first of his pursuits that gave him back exactly what he put in. The harder he trained, the better he became. He loved feeling in control. His childhood and adolescence had been chaos, making him feel weak and adrift for so long that he had never imagined a sense of autonomy that was not drug-fueled. The sport redeemed him, he believed that. He would not eat from a trash can or sleep on the street again. He would not beg or steal or let himself be attacked again. He gloried in the ring, winning ten straight matches after his first loss, and within eight months, he won a statewide championship bout in his weight class.

Kickboxing did not pay most of his bills, though, and he kept busy in a number of Anchorage's best restaurants, first as a waiter, then as a cook, sometimes as both. He had not been back to the shelter in several years, though it was not far off his usual path. Eventually, he decided to volunteer at a dinner for the kids of Covenant House. He just felt it was time to give back. Paulie arrived at the restaurant before six o'clock in the morning on the day of the dinner to start prepping for 120 hungry kids and staff members. Once the other volunteers began showing up, about one for every young person, he walked down to Covenant House to

escort the kids through the snow, to the restaurant. They had no idea what was in store.

Flowers graced every table in the burnt-sienna dining room. The menu included vegetable crudités, salad, rosemary poultry and stuffing, gravy, two kinds of potatoes, baked veggies, and three desserts: a chocolate cream pie, pecan pie, and apple crisp. The kids were awestruck. The meal was like nothing they had ever seen or tasted before.

Paulie worked the tables in his white chef's uniform with the grace of a practiced waiter, but by the time he had talked to the third or fourth kid, a wave of melancholy struck him as he remembered life on the streets. Whether he looked left or right, each face was his, a dizzying room of Paulie Robbinses. He was surprised to discover how much a part of their struggle he still was, feeling so connected to them and separate from society at the same time.

THE COSTS OF NOT CARING

—Tina Kelley

Sometimes, the right solution solves fiscal problems, as well as human ones. Homelessness is expensive, and helping young homeless people find a firm footing keeps them from becoming older homeless people, with more costly, entrenched health problems and chronic needs. According to a 2009 report of homeless people in Los Angeles, those ages forty-six to sixty-five accrue five times the health-care costs of those under thirty.

I've often been dismayed by the waste in government-sponsored social service solutions. Remember when New York City used to spend up to three thousand dollars a

month to put homeless families in dangerous welfare hotels, when the same amount would have more than covered rent in a decent apartment? Have you watched the costs of health care skyrocket, in part because preventive or routine care is not available, and poor people end up sicker or dead, when the emergency room is their only option?

It just makes sense to meet human needs before they become more acute. That's how Covenant House saves society millions of dollars, with its ability to provide thousands of young people with safe shelter, affordable health-care referrals, educational programs, and employment help. Rights of Passage, our transitional living program, costs less than fourteen thousand dollars per young person, for an average stay of seven months, compared to forty-seven thousand dollars per year to keep a kid in juvenile detention in California.

Yet beyond the dollar costs, consider the psychic ones. After spending a night in a cardboard box as part of Covenant House's Solidarity Sleep Out for homeless youth, I understood much more about the toll "sleeping rough" takes on the hearts and the heads of young people. The cold, the noise, the wind, the fear—I don't know how kids bear it. They become exhausted and, eventually, sick from the cold and the worries that keep them awake. Imagine trying to get a good night's sleep in a subway car, in a rat-infested park, or in a room with someone who trades a bed for the use of your body. Imagine waking up having to figure out the next semiacceptable place to stay!

There are small steps that each of us can take to save the lives of our kids. Mildred grabbed hold of Paulie and never let go during the course of five years, even as he drifted away from her, over and over again. It begins

there—taking an interest. The government will never love children the way families must, and when families cannot or will not, the answer is in each of us to find the extraordinary in the next Paulie and help unleash his sacred potential.

Without some of these actions, the lives of homeless young people can take deeply dreary turns—for want of a nail, the kingdom is lost. I often wonder how kids without a home fare in cities without safe shelters. The waste of potential, in terms of human and financial costs, is painful to contemplate.

Volunteering at the dinner rekindled Paulie's relationships at Covenant House. From time to time, Deirdre, the executive director, texted or called him, inviting him to speak to the kids at the shelter about his life or grab a cup of coffee with her to catch up. She invited him to join her for the shelter's candlelight vigils, an annual outdoor event designed to remind people of the struggles of homeless teenagers as the winter closes in. Deirdre also invited Mildred, who had retired to Washington, D.C., asking both of them to stand with Covenant House supporters—elected officials, advocates, families, and friends—for the evening's program.

It was nine degrees as Paulie stood next to Mildred, both draped in down jackets, scarves, gloves, and hats. Deirdre took to the podium, her voice rising across West 6th Street to Town Square Park: "Every young person deserves a place to be warm and safe this winter. But more importantly, they deserve to know that they are special and beautiful and loved."

As the program ended and a children's choir finished singing, Paulie and Mildred locked arms and walked together from the stage into the warmth of Covenant House.

"You know, Paulie," Mildred said, as she smiled somewhat devilishly, "you are special and beautiful and loved."

"Yep," Paulie said with a grin. "So are you." A beat passed, but he could not help himself, "And trust me, Mildred, there were a lot of times I never thought I'd say that."

Homeless, but Graduating

Paulie's struggle to finish high school is typical of the challenges many homeless youth experience in school. Among the hundreds of young people who sought a bed at nine of the Covenant House shelters in North America in 2010, only 37 percent had a high school diploma or its equivalent. Without either, they often cannot find full-time employment and can quickly fall deeper into poverty and street life, especially in times of recession. All of Covenant House's U.S. shelters offer high school equivalency courses, and many innovative educational programs for homeless youth are worthy of replication. Education may very well be the single most important tool for young people aiming for self-sufficiency.

For example, advocates for homeless young people have championed a new cadre of schools, many of them created by charter, tailored to welcome homeless young people and meet their needs. The Center for Education Reform, a nonprofit group in Washington, D.C., that tracks charter schools, has contact with seven that specifically target homeless young people. In 2011, Broome Street Academy opened its doors to about 125 of New York City's most at-risk students, those who are homeless, in foster care, or come from very low-performing middle schools. The academy is on the third floor of The Door, a forty-year-old multiservice center for young people in Manhattan. Although The Door does not provide shelter, it offers almost everything else, including counseling, food, career services, health care, and legal

aid, serving as a daytime refuge from the streets for many homeless youth. With a personalized program, the academy plans to tackle the issues that drive homeless and at-risk students away from school, while tripling the current graduation rates for this population.

Two charter school programs in the United States have taken the unusual step of operating through homeless shelters for youth: Covenant House Michigan in Detroit and the Academy of Urban Learning in Denver, Colorado. In 2005, Covenant House Michigan launched three charter high schools after Sam Joseph, the agency's founding executive director, estimated that 90 percent of the youth in the main shelter were high school dropouts. Although the charter school movement has been criticized for skimming the most motivated students and families away from the public school system, Covenant House Michigan actually helps the Detroit Public Schools by enrolling only dropouts and young people the system has expelled. On average, students at the schools are two to four years behind, and about 30 percent of them have been involved in the criminal justice system. A quarter are parents themselves.

Each school provides a team to work with students on their social and emotional needs, with counselors, a family liaison, and a psychologist. The schools try to move past whatever caused the young people to drop out in the first place—bullying, feeling in danger, hardships at home, not having clean clothes to wear.

More than 630 young people have earned their high school diplomas through Covenant House Michigan's schools in the last six years, although critics say the schools have four-year graduation rates significantly lower than other Detroit charter schools, and test scores trail as well. That's understandable, given the hardships and the lack of support homeless young people face. School officials are working to show the value of schools that engage disconnected and very transient homeless youth, breaking cycles of

welfare dependency and incarceration that are not visible through the traditional school metrics.

Currently, almost 60 percent of the schools' graduates go on to some kind of formal, postsecondary training, either college, community college, trade schools, or certificate-granting programs. Covenant House Michigan's schools encourage graduates to push forward, knowing that a college degree more than doubles their likelihood of employment.

For the last twenty-five years, Youth on Their Own (YOTO), has helped homeless or abandoned young people ages thirteen to twenty-one graduate from high school in Tucson, Arizona. Supplying support services and a stipend of up to $125 a month to students who maintain good attendance and grades, the program has managed to shepherd 92 percent of its students to diplomas, in a state with only a 75 percent graduation rate.

In almost every high school in Tucson, the program works with school liaisons—school employees such as teachers, counselors, or dropout prevention specialists—who volunteer their time to Youth on Their Own as mentors, helping kids find clothing, health care, tutoring, job placements, college scholarships, and referrals to safe places to sleep. Community members have generously donated food items, clothing, bedding, diapers for the babies of young mothers, school supplies, household goods, and prom wear.

A little more than a third of YOTO's students are under the guardianship of the state of Arizona, because they have been abused or neglected by their parents; many live in group homes. The rest are eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds who sleep from couch to couch, in subsidized apartments YOTO helps them find, or on the street. None of them go home to Mom and Dad at night, but they have a fierce desire to graduate.

The stipend, which is prorated according to what grades the kids earn, takes the edge off their poverty, said Teresa Liverzani-Baker, YOTO's executive director. For fifteen-year-olds whose

parents have skipped out on them, leaving them with no money, no car, and no doctor, the stipend can help them avoid some crises.

The program to date has helped eighty-six hundred homeless young people in thirty schools and has given out thirty scholarships to a local two-year college, paid for by donors. The group was able to help about 570 of the 740 young people who applied in 2011, though Ms. Liverzani-Baker wishes they had reached more, to help each student, and to help Tucson as a whole. Homeless kids often stay in the city they grew up in, and if no one helps them become educated, they can grow into unemployable homeless adults.

She'd also like to expand the program around the country, but funding for a full-time staff person is needed to operate the program. It could be a dream job for the right person, to help young people graduate, even in the face of obstacles that they themselves had not created. A high school diploma, they know, is their ticket to get anywhere in life.