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## A BROKEN CHILDHOOD BUILT COURAGE



**I** NEVER GOT A CHANCE TO MEET MY OLDEST BROTHER, BECAUSE HE HAD BEEN STRUCK BY LIGHTNING ON THE FRONT PORCH OF OUR TINY SHACK BEFORE I WAS BORN. My other brothers told me of the tragedy years later. So I grew up for a long time in the little town of Kannapolis, North Carolina, assuming that my family had only ever been seven children. David was the oldest, then Greg, Janice, Ron, Wesley, me, and my youngest sister, Donna. And when I was about three or four years old, I realized that my family was poor.

My siblings gave me plenty of attention. It wasn't always positive attention, but for the most part, we got along quite well. Like many younger siblings in a family will do, Donna and I argued over almost

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anything we did together, because we fought for the spotlight. We wanted everything for ourselves, while in reality we possessed nothing of value. For her part, Donna was a kind soul and would allow me to have my way. Sometimes the others would step in and demand that I play fair, but I rarely listened to my siblings.

One thing was for sure: we all loved each other. We needed that more than other families, since our mom and dad were rarely at home. When they were, there was no peace between them, or in our house. Our father, Joe, and mother, Shirley, were rolling stones, never settling down. Mom got pregnant by Dad when she was no more than 16 or 17, and instead of having their first child out of wedlock, they got married. I don't really know how long their marriage lasted, but our lives were a nightmare from the time of our births to the time that social services discovered my siblings and me living alone and barely surviving. I called us "The Dirty Seven."

My older siblings played a vital role in demonstrating courage to me in my early years, especially David, who took the "father" role in our survival during childhood. He became a true champion and hero to me, as we lived on the brink of disaster in a world of drunks, poverty, sexual and verbal abuse, and shattered dreams. If I knew then that our security would come from just us, the Dirty Seven, I would never have believed we could make it to adulthood.

When we were growing up, our parents would come back to the house every so often to check on us. Sometimes Mom would bring strange men home to stay overnight, or for a few days. There was never

enough money to get food to go around, so every day we struggled to survive. Sometimes neighbors would bring food, but on many nights we would go to bed hungry. I remember a time when I was so desperate for food that I ate any leftovers I could find in trash cans.

The little house we lived in had a tin roof, and when it rained, we had to put out containers to catch the rainwater. We all slept in the same room in one bed because there was no other space. The only source of heat we had during the winter was an old stove, which got so hot that it turned bright red and glowed like a star throughout the night. I really liked watching that star because it allowed me to feel some comfort and security, if only for a little while.

Our bathroom was an outhouse about 25 yards from the shack. It was filled with all types of spiders, and sometimes snakes would slide through to interrupt our train of thought. The snakes gave me a great deal of fear and anxiety about going to the outhouse, but my brothers accompanied me on my visits. The outhouse always had an awful smell, which even took over our living space.

There were many days I cried myself to sleep because I missed my parents. I guess all my siblings missed them, but we didn't talk about it because the pain of loneliness that we all felt was so great. David quickly emerged as our family leader and made every decision for us, because he knew we couldn't depend on Mom and Dad. There were no relatives that wanted to take on the extra load of our family, so we scraped by from day to day, living with hope and prayer. David impressed upon us to love each other, because it would be only our own

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strength to help us make it. He made sure that we continued to go to school, even when we had nothing clean to wear. David's primary concern was that we should not give up and be like our parents. He pushed us to grow up and show courage, confidence, and character in a world that had given us nothing but hell. One day, I realized that I survived only by the sacrifices made by my siblings to give me food and protection.

Violence was all around us. There were many times relatives would be fighting in the streets for everyone to see. Alcoholism was rampant in the different houses where we sometimes sought refuge. One day, our grandfather got drunk, chased me and some of my siblings with a water hose, and then beat us with it. In that moment, I felt my life being torn out of my body at every blow from that old madman. The terror and the beating may have lasted only minutes, but it left me with a nightmare that would not go away.

The biggest shock of my young life came on a cold winter night when I was almost six. I went to find warmth at the house of one of my sister's friends. There lived two older women who made bootleg liquor in the house and sold it to the neighborhood drunks. I was welcomed into an extremely dark and quiet house by a lady named Ms. Louise. She gave me food to eat and time to rest and get warm. For a short while, I felt safe in the cozy home. But suddenly, speaking in a hushed voice, she began to touch me in an area that I never experienced a touch before. This was shocking to me, because I never felt these sensations before. She forced herself on me, but I couldn't physically do

what she wanted me to do, so she told me to go find her boyfriend, who lived down the street. Feeling guilt and shame, I went out into the cold and darkness, and time seemed frozen. I could never bring myself to tell my siblings about what happened because I didn't think they would have believed me. For many years, I tried to convince myself that it did not happen, but every time I would see this woman who had done this to me, I felt ashamed and could not bring myself to make eye contact with her.

One restless night as my siblings and I were gathered to sleep all in that one bed in our shack, there was a loud commotion at the front door. Mom had returned home. She never asked about how we were getting by, but acted as if everything was normal — as if she had always been with us. She brought in a tall, dark-skinned man who had the smell of beer on his clothes. But this woman had become a stranger to us, and I sensed that this surely was an evil man with her. Mom demanded that we return to our room and not bother them for a while. I knew what they would be doing in the room next to ours, because she had done this many times before with other men. David and Greg left the house because they didn't want to be around. The rest of us just held on to each other, hoping that the nightmare of Mom being there with that cruel man would pass. They were there for several days before the man even told us his name. To me, "Ted" was an evil man because he hated us for being there, and mistreated me, as if he knew one day I might reveal his dirty secrets. He physically and sexually abused my mother right in front of us, and physically and verbally abused my

siblings.

One night in particular, I remember “Ted” coming home drunk and upset, over what I don’t know. He blamed me for something, and threatened to beat me with his fists, as my mother watched without saying a word. But David stepped in and protected me from that man. To this day, I’m grateful to David for saving me that night. These kinds of episodes would take place often. It was not until my brothers got a little older that it stopped, because they threatened to retaliate. Finally, Mom and that evil man left and never returned. Once again my little family of siblings stood alone, but together.

David remained our fearless leader and continued to be there for us. We attended grammar school, which was a four-mile round-trip walk each day. Donna was in kindergarten, I was in the first grade, and my siblings were in second, third and fourth grades. I was not a nice child, nor was I a smart student. I can’t recall if we ever did homework, because when we got home from school, we were mostly concerned with getting our next meal.

Finally, someone reported our situation to social services. They came to the aid of seven children who were in desperate need of love and attention. As I look back today, I have no doubt the only thing that allowed us to survive to that point was the courage God gave us.

Here’s a poem I wrote concerning that time in my life.

# CHILDREN OF DREAMS

*Oh, so many tiny faces lie before me, and  
behind me, but never beside me.*

*I cry desperately to bring them closer, because their little voices  
remind me of memories that I've stored away for eternity.*

*Yes, they have the strength of the wind, and  
the determination of a raging sea.*

*Still, I cry silently trying to bring them closer to me.*

*While their images fill the space around  
me, so many eyes cover me.*

*From the darkness, I see the color of rainbows engulfing their  
souls, as I cry compassionately for the ones that have gone.*

*Still, their voices come to me in my sleep, because  
they never leave us in a world of misery.*

*It is their innocence that we seek, for  
they are the Children of Dreams.*