

Marie and Cecil's Story

Interviewer: Alison Cornyn

Audio Editor: Nupur Mather

In 1912, my mother was born. She was the youngest of four children. Around 1915, her mother takes off; nobody has any explanation — she was there one day and she was gone. My mother was five or six and she is put on a train, her ticket pinned to her jacket she said, to Norfolk, Virginia. It was supposed to be an aunt — she goes to live with her; this woman abused her terribly — [she was forced to] clean the house, [she] beat her, [didn't] feed her. After so many years, [my mother was] sent back to her grandparents' house to live. She has two brothers and one of her brothers was a known pedophile. I don't know if when she came back he assaulted her—but something happened on that farm — she went bezerk. At that point, everything went crazy for her and they put her in the juvenile hall. When she was younger it wasn't her choice to be moved around, but then when she got older she decided to do it herself.

My mother had a tendency, even after she got married, to not really be around. I was given this folder at Social Services, a copy of it — mine, and it stated that we were left abandoned. It was in the middle of January — [the file stated] the little girl had climbed out this apartment window—who would've been my older sister — and was yelling down to the street, 'could somebody help me because the babies keep crying and we're hungry.' The downstairs door was locked by a skeleton key. They had to break the door down — it was in the description. The officers went up the flight of stairs. [In the apartment] there was no heat on — this old potbelly stove up there — and we were in very bad condition. We had body lice, head lice, whatever. It reeked — one of the officers — they actually said he had to descend the steps because he vomited because of the smell. They went to leave and they kept hearing a whimpering—they didn't know what it was — they thought it might be a puppy. They went into the corner under some newspapers and found my one brother in a fetal position with no clothes on, crying. They were ready to leave and then they found the fourth child — and we were left that way.

I remember when I read the report I was so furious. I went to my mother's and she said I had no business — 'it was none of my business' — and I said, 'Yes it is — legally. You said you went to work, you went to work for three days?' And she would not answer me. There were times my mother would not talk to me — she'd say, 'Get out of my house — you're nothing but trouble.' I'd say 'I want some answers,' and she'd say, 'Well you're lucky you didn't get sent where I was—at least you had foster homes.' — I said, 'foster homes? You think those are any better than what you went through?' I remember arguing with her. Some people would say to me, 'How do [you] feel about [your] mother?' and I'll say it to this day — I loved her, but I didn't like her. We just ended up on the same road that she was on. I think we've done a better job though. I talked to my brother about it the other day. We've never left our children — we broke that chain — that cycle of what my mother had because her mother did it, too. If I were to see my mother today, I don't think she'd be angry with me for finding out the truth either — even though we had our bouts. I don't believe she'd be angry. I think she'd want her story told. I really believe she would, so other people know. You know, this does happen and this is life and this happens to the human soul, heart, and body. I just get so tired of people saying that kids are resilient — [they are] to a certain degree, but you always carry those demons. They're there, they surface.