
Michelle's Story

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Well, I'm the fourth of six children. We were latch-key kids and we were home. I lived in Mount Vernon [and] went to school there. My mother — not only did my mother work in the bars and after-hours clubs — but she also sold drugs. So, anything could happen and there were even times when the house [was] raided. So, before I went to the training school I went through that [in addition to the struggles of] moving [often] and a single parent household where my mother was not there a lot.

Before I went to Hudson State Training School I became very rebellious. I just felt like I wasn't really being attended to, so I would run away. My mother would be at work a lot. I really didn't have a lot, so I ran away and I started shoplifting and stealing the things that I wanted. Back then I would just steal food and clothes. Just food and clothes. I wouldn't listen to my mother and I did what I wanted to do. She couldn't control me because I was out of control. When you ran away in Mount Vernon your parents called the police and they had a youth bureau that would be involved with looking for you. So, several times my mother went and got me, but then one time she wouldn't take me. So, they placed me in Woodfield Cottage in Westchester County. Going to Hudson wasn't necessarily for the stealing as much as it was for just being oppositional and defiant.

Physical? Yes — my mother — she threw things, she hit you — and I shared all of that when I went to the family court because it was like, 'Oh, I'm going to get in trouble? So are you.' I knew she was very angry with me coming to court and she wouldn't take me home; those are some of the ways I ended up going to Woodfield College and also on to Hudson. I wasn't listening to anybody because I was very, very angry and I wouldn't listen. I wasn't babysitting anymore because I had babysat a lot and I had had it.

I went two times, so I probably was 13 or 12 the first time, but going up there you don't know what to expect. When I got there it was this big campus and it looked scary because we got there at night. It looked like a haunted place. I had my room and it was the first time in my whole entire life that I ever had my own room. [The room] was bare, steel, cold-looking, empty, scary, and you could hear every sound at night, and any minute a big overwhelming smell would fill your room and it would be a skunk.

You would just wait, so I was waiting for them to tell me what to do. It was so funny because my mother would scream — she didn't know how to handle me because she was in a school for girls herself before she came straight out of there and got married to her first husband. So, she would scream, 'You're going to be in line for eating! You're going to be in line to go to the bathroom! Someone is going to be telling you what to do.' And she knew that because that had been her experience — and that was now mine. You really were busy [at Hudson Training School] because you had assignments—cleaning—my assignment, of course, had to be to cook. My mother cooked, she was known for her cooking. So, you learned how to do everything — use the buffer, wax the floors. That place was spotless. On Saturdays was our general cleaning. I liked to sew, so I started sewing more. I had a garden. I was the pitcher on the baseball team — I was everything. I guess the whole model and concept there was that if we were involved in all those activities — those would be the way we would be made whole — we would get what we needed so that when we went home, we were different. But I don't think that was all that we needed.