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Norm Maleng Advocate for Youth Award Breakfast
Center for Children & Youth Justice
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Good morning, everyone. If you had told me when I was six years old and living in homeless shelter after homeless shelter...

... or when I was 12 years old and living in a meth lab...

... or when I was 15 and standing before a judge facing felony charges of robbery and kidnapping...

... or when I was 20 and still fighting the system to get the education I knew was my only hope for a decent life...

If you'd told me then that I would one day get up in front of 400 people and describe my life as a success story, well, I guess saying that's just plain crazy doesn't quite go far enough. Impossible? That's closer. But, here I am. And I am proud to say that I am a success, even though I know I have a whole lot more I need to accomplish.

When I was growing up in the Olympia area and living with my mom, we never really had a place of our own. We'd live in different homeless shelters until my mother got mad and broke the rules and they'd kick us out. Then we'd stay in our car or try to find friends to crash with.

I'm the oldest of four kids. All of us have different fathers, which isn't surprising when you know that my mother would sell her body to make money or to get drugs. She'd always choose the most abusive men she could find, and she never cared if they hit her or hit her kids. Moving around so much, I went to lots of different elementary schools. I'd wind up with head lice so often that I'd miss months of school. My mother just wouldn't take care of it, and they wouldn't let me back in class with their no-nit policy. One time, I'd missed so much school that the nurse and the principal came to where we were staying and asked if they could treat me. All that did was make my mom angry at me.

Her anger was pretty constant. I'd call Child Protective Services all the time or get my principal or a teacher to call. It didn't seem like anyone really cared though. They'd come to do a report and my mother would fool them. She was so system savvy that she knew just what to say, all the tricks in the book to cheat on urine tests for drug use, and exactly how to scare her kids into staying quiet. I had a cousin who told on her father for abusing her and they sent her to foster care, where she was raped and abused even more. She begged to come back home but the family wouldn't have anything to do with her. That became the lesson that my mother would hold up to me. "See what happens if you tell?" We were taught not to trust authority, and if I did tell, my mother would beat me for it.

She finally got so mad at me that she kicked me out when I was eleven years old. She said I was a burden and caused way too many problems. I didn't know where to go or what to do.

My father wasn't really in my life, except when he came over to give my mother drugs in exchange for sex. My mother made sure I knew that he didn't care about me and didn't love me. But when you're eleven years old, even a dad who doesn't care is a better option than living on the street. So I asked my cousins and my uncles and I managed to find out where he was living, which was in a meth lab near Olympia. I found him and threatened to tell the cops he was cooking meth if he didn't let me stay there.

I hate to say it, but living with a big time drug dealer gave me a much better life than I had with my mom. I lived in a mobile home instead of a homeless shelter. There was always food in the refrigerator. I had money for school clothes and school supplies. I thought it was great. I slept on the couch in the living room and there were always people coming in and out to buy drugs. I thought that if they wanted to see my dad badly enough they'd pay for it. So I started charging them at the door. It was my first attempt to begin a college fund.

You see, I'd finally realized that my life wasn't exactly "normal", and I knew even then that education was a way out for me. When I went over to my friends' houses, they'd all sit down and say grace and have dinner together. I'd eat by myself while my dad made drugs in the shack next to the house. My friends' families would talk and laugh and do stuff together. I'd let people in and out of the house at two a.m. They lived in big houses in neighborhoods near the school. I lived on off-county property with "beware of dogs" signs and locks on the gates. For the first time, I saw something that I wanted to have, and I knew that I had to stay in school to get it.

My time with my friends gave me a small taste of what normal was really like, but my real life was anything but. Our house would get raided a lot. When the police busted in, they'd treat me just like everyone else and throw me to the ground and handcuff me. I don't blame them. My dad taught me to fight whenever the authorities came onto our property, to kick and scream and curse at them to leave. Almost every time he got busted, my dad would pay people off, and the criminals who worked for him would go to jail but never tell on him. When he did finally go to jail for a few days, CPS just gave me to his brother who was also a drug dealer. My dad bailed out of jail with \$20,000 cash, gave me a Toyota Four-Runner, a half-ounce of dope and \$200, and said he'd come back. But he skipped bail and never did. I was thirteen years old.

I couldn't stay in my father's house because it had been seized by the authorities as hazardous property. So I lived with friends, or in the occasional foster home, which I always ran away from, and even back with my mom off and on. By then, I was smoking marijuana, popping pills and drinking a lot. It was an escape. It was what I knew.

When I was 15, my mother stole \$5,000 worth of dope from some people. They got their revenge by breaking into the house where she was living and tearing the place up. The woman who owned the house told my mother she had to pay for it. When I visited my mom in rehab, she ordered me to "take care of business" – to get drugs and money and whatever it would take to fix up the house. I knew what she'd do to me if I didn't try. So I did.

It was the biggest mistake of my life.

I was getting high with three guy friends and we decided to rob the home of some of my dad's drug customers. I'd delivered dope there for him and I knew they had guns and money and even silver bars in the house. While I waited outside on the dirt road near the house, my friends went up to the front door, knocked, and asked to borrow a cup of sugar. I never thought anyone would get hurt. But then

they slammed open the door and I heard a woman scream. When I went into the house, I found that the guys had tied people up inside. They were screaming and threatening and terrorizing them. It got way out of hand. I was in shock. But it was too late.

A couple weeks later, one of the guys was picked up on another charge and he told the whole story. He said that I had planned it all, that I was the mastermind. Fair enough – I guess I was. And at the age of 15, I was charged with six Class A felonies and took a plea for three. The judge saw a small glimmer of potential in me and I was not tried as an adult. Had it just been four months later when the laws change, I would have been and it would have destroyed my life. But I still got the equivalent of what they call “juvie life” – incarceration in the Juvenile Rehabilitation Authority until my 21st birthday.

When I finally arrived at JRA’s Naselle Youth Camp, I had a third grade reading level and a fourth grade math level. My long commitment to getting an education was still there, somewhere, but it was buried deep under tons of resentment, rebellion and anger.

I couldn’t understand how my parents could do such terrible things all their lives and always seem to get away with a few days or months in jail or rehab. And here I was with a sentence of five and a half years. I lashed out at everyone, refused to communicate much less trust, and thought everyone at JRA was against me. I burned a lot of bridges.

Meeting a woman at Bible study one day showed me that there were people who had overcome way more than I had, yet they still had faith and hope. I began to get in touch with my own spirituality and values for the very first time. I finally began to recapture my determination to succeed, and that’s good, because I was sure going to need it. Just because I’d decided to get my act together didn’t mean the system was going to cooperate.

When I told the principal at JRA that I wanted to take college classes, he just laughed at me. You see, most kids who go into the juvenile justice system were like me – way, way behind in their academic studies. The system focuses on getting them caught up or on helping them earn their GEDs or high school diplomas. College? Well, it just wasn’t going to happen, at least not for me.

But I refused to give up. I found another kid at JRA who was very intelligent and not nearly in as much trouble as I’d been, and he wanted to take college classes, too. I knew that if he could get started, I’d have a chance. Once he got the OK, I turned to some people who supported me and they wrote letters of recommendation:

A counselor at Naselle, Jennifer Koehiser, who believed in me, my middle school math teacher, Sue Steinman, a Tumwater police officer, Don Stevens, my guardian ad litem Barbara Timmer.

Finally, JRA said they’d give me a chance to take Sociology 101, but I had to make an A if I wanted to go beyond that one course. Well, I not only made an A, I got a letter from the instructor saying I had written the best term paper he’d ever read in the past 30 years.

But when I was transferred to Echo Glen, the fight started all over again. This time, I even got the JRA’s legal services provider for residents involved, and I made it happen there, too. I continued to be able to take college classes, one at a time. Slowly, I was getting an education.

My last year in custody was spent in what they call transitional care, and I went to live in a group home, kind of like foster care, in Spokane. It's supposed to prepare you to be released, because when you turn 21, they just boot you out with no probation, no parole, no counseling, no anything.

Let's just say that my transitional home wasn't the best of places either. There was alcoholism and even ex-cons in the house. But I couldn't complain. After all, I was a convicted felon so I had to be a liar, too, right? And all I cared about was going to community college. I just kept my eye on the prize. I could now have a part-time job and I worked at Lowe's. I could apply for financial aid and grants and scholarships and loans and take three or four classes at a time. I wasn't going to give that up for anything.

To make my last year a little easier, I started going to Bible study again with a group of older women. It wasn't easy, but I knew I had to be honest with them about my past. Every week that went by, the more I trusted them and the more I told them. It was there that I met the woman I now consider my godmother, Kristi Hensley. Honestly, she's more than a godmother – she's the mother I'd always dreamed I could have, and I am blessed that she's treated me like a daughter.

By then, I was just one course away from having enough credits for my Associate's Degree, and when Kristi and her husband, Ernie, learned that my dream was to go to a university to get a four-year degree, they encouraged me to submit my application. And since Kristi and Ernie had three sons who were all Cougs, we set our sights on Wazzu, and I was accepted.

But I was still in custody, and JRA refused to let me go to the three-day orientation in Pullman. Once again, I wouldn't give up. I got JRA attorney Charles Rosenberry on the phone again and they made an exception, but they said I had to be back at my transitional home in Spokane every night. So, Kristi and I left at five o'clock in the morning and we drove home at midnight for three days in a row. That summer marked three major milestones – I turned 21, was released from JRA, and I became a full-time student at Wazzu!

In addition to getting help from the Hensleys and the church and different nonprofit organizations and college financial aid, I needed to work while going to school to pay my way. That was when it first hit me that checking the box Yes on the question, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" on job applications would slam many doors. I was never shy about asking people to take a chance on me so I could get jobs, and I am grateful that many people did a whole lot more than just that. They fought for me. Two years later – this past winter – I graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in criminal justice.

I'm still fighting, not just for me but for others. Last year, I testified before the Legislature on a bill to allow Class A juvenile felony records to be sealed, as long as youth have a clean record five years after their release, and at the discretion of the judge. Everyone told me it didn't stand a chance, but the bill did pass. Unfortunately, during those five years while you're waiting, it is really difficult to find a job or get a place to live with a felony record. After I graduated, I applied for 35 jobs. I got just two calls back and went in for one interview with a telemarketing company. I got the job, and I was so excited! But then they said, "Just one more thing. On the question about felony convictions on the job application, you put down 'will discuss upon interview'. So, discuss." I told them my story, and they told me good-bye.

Miracle of miracles, and again through the help of people who believe in me, I did finally get a job in Seattle as a research assistant with Dr. Trupin at the University of Washington. But I was turned down

for housing by three different landlords. I have great credit, but I couldn't pass a background check. Fortunately, I found another Coug with a rental house who gave me a break.

A couple years ago, I wrote a letter to the judge who sentenced me. I reminded him of the letter I had written the day I was sentenced, setting goals and making promises. To date, I have done everything I said I would do, plus lots of other good things, too.

But I have more goals, more dreams. I want to work with youth to help them avoid the mistakes that I made. I want to help them learn to value education, to understand that knowledge, education, a degree, are things no one can ever take away from you. But again, that is extremely difficult with a felony record. There must be reform so that juvenile mistakes won't have lifelong consequences for young people who have truly been rehabilitated like the system intends and are committed to turning around their lives.

I was encouraged to apply for a pardon from Governor Gregoire, and the State Pardons and Clemency Board gave me a unanimous Yes! Most people have to wait ten or fifteen years before they even stand a chance. Still, I knew a pardon would be a long shot for me, even though I believed the Governor felt I had something to contribute. In 2009, she recognized me with the Governor's "Spirit of Youth" Award, which is given to juvenile offenders who excel despite their past mistakes. And last fall, she appointed me to serve on the Washington Partnership Council on Juvenile Justice, which advocates for juvenile justice reforms and best practices to improve the system.

For months, I called the person in charge of pardons at the Governor's office every single week. And then, just three weeks ago, I got the call and learned that I am now officially no longer a felon. I got my pardon!

The news of my pardon is huge for me. It will open so many new doors. But I know that for so many others like me, their only chance for success is real and lasting systems reform – the kinds of changes that the Center for Children and Youth Justice is working toward.

Both the foster care system and the juvenile justice system need to put kids first and to emphasize education more. People who still have custody of their kids despite lots of CPS investigations should not be allowed to game the system and continue to hurt their children. When kids go into foster care, they shouldn't be split up or forgotten like me and my siblings were. And if youth do go into the juvenile justice system, they should not encounter constant roadblocks. They should get every possible chance to jump-start their college education and be prepared for a lifetime of learning.

But these things don't happen without reform, without organizations like CCYJ, or without caring people like all of you. There are thousands of children in foster care waiting for stability, thousands of youth in the juvenile justice system waiting for support, thousands of success stories waiting to happen this very minute. I'm never going to stop fighting for them. I hope you won't ever stop either.