

## My First Bicycle

For many people around the world, turning seven is not usually the birthday that one reminisces about, but then...I could never forget my family at the Faith Mission homeless shelter and what they did for me that day. According to the National Center on Family Homelessness, about two and a half million children are homeless each year in America added into UNICEF's reporting of twenty-eight million children worldwide. At any given moment in America, out of a random group of thirty children, perhaps in a school or in a park, one of them will not know the safety and refuge of a good home. For some children it is because they lack parents who can care for them, for some it is due to poverty, and for others it is because being homeless is the safer alternative from being in the home.

There are so many homeless youths, but ironically, we hear so few of their voices. There is a misconception that just because we are living in the wealthiest nation on the planet such stories are impossible here. Poverty, however, is not limited by borders and emotional poverty can touch even the wealthiest of us. I was a lucky boy, and even more than that, blessed to have encountered so many heroes of the helpless when I was but six years old. My mother was pregnant at the time and she, my eighteen-month-old sister, and I were escaping the drug induced violent rages of my stepfather. In the middle of the night, out of desperation and fear of losing her unborn baby, my mother called the police, and we fled from our home. Even though that meant that we had become homeless overnight, it was better than having an enemy in the house.

That early August evening in the year 1995, the officer drove us to the YMCA homeless shelter in Fort Wane, Indiana and there we stayed for two short days before being transferred to Faith Mission in the nearby city of Elkhart. At first, I did not know what was going on or what

the future would hold for us. I was happy to be away from my stepfather and overjoyed that my mother was finally safe. When you are a child, a mother's presence is more constant and important than the sun's; as long as I had her, no matter where we were, I felt safe. Faith Mission provided every convenience to make us feel comfortable. Due to my mother's condition, they turned the basement of their shelter into the likes of a new loft. Even though they were filled to capacity when we had arrived, they made room for us out of nothing.

Faith Mission lived up to the name, for they dutifully fulfilled their mission to provide a safe haven for many victims of domestic violence. They provided us a bunk bed and I got the top bunk. An old rocking chair was given to my mother, and my sister and I would sit on her lap while listening to the stories she would read from the shelter's collection of children's books. For the most part that was the extent to our furniture. We did not have many belongings because we could only pack what we could fit into the small police car that transported us, but Faith Mission readily and freely gave whatever clothes or supplies we needed. Most of the residents stayed in shared spaces and none of the kids were over the age of twelve. It was mostly a really young group with more kids than guardians.

There was a common bond between all the people staying at the shelter formed by ties of understanding, empathy, and a genuine concern for the others well-being. As for the staff, they were all my guardian angels. When we first moved into our new loft style refurbished basement, it was a relief, mostly because of the absence of my stepfather and also because there were plenty of kids my age there to play with. Being there transcended having a community; we had become family. Suddenly, I had gone from being in a dysfunctional and unstable home to a place where kids could make a few happy memories. A month and a half

went by quickly, and as if to outdo themselves, the staff at Faith mission had planned something very special for me.

On the morning of my seventh birthday in the middle of September, I awoke excited. Life had slowed down, and I had forgotten my troubles. I was happy to be one year older. My mother's first words to me that day were 'Happy Birthday!' The weather was perfect, and somehow, I knew that it was going to be a special day. My morning was filled with lots of hugs and well wishes. The other children giggled under hushed breaths seeming to know something that I did not. Unbeknownst to me, my mother had partnered with the staff at Faith Mission to throw me a surprise party and I was definitely surprised. Who would have ever guessed that one could have such an experience and at such a place, but this was no ordinary homeless shelter. That day, when my mother led me to the playroom on the first floor, the children and their parents were waiting for me. They all lifted their hands and shouted, "Happy Birthday!"

My mother must have told them that my favorite cake was chocolate because they brought it out to me singing the 'Happy Birthday Song.' I felt like a normal kid, but it was not because of the cake or the birthday party. It was because I had a real family that loved me. After we all ate cake, they had one more surprise for me. From another room, they rolled out a brand new shiny red bicycle. My eyes must have opened to two times their original size. It was beautiful. I never had a bike before, and I did not even know how to ride it. They immediately began to teach me how to ride it there and in just about an hour, I was speeding, zipping, and flying circles around the playroom.

Looking back on my life I have accumulated many fond memories, but those of my childhood are some of the most special ones. With the help of Faith Mission, my mother, little

sister, new baby brother, and I eventually received government housing after two months of staying at the shelter. When Rev. Howard VanHarlingen and Rev. Harold Barger first founded the mission in 1956, could they have known of all the lives that they would save or that what they built would still be saving lives to this very day? They had encountered numerous homeless individuals in their travels which led them from being remote spectators to being on the ground in the trenches. Their legacy and the bonds that I had formed with other homeless children have taught me that what homeless people are lacking more than nice clothes, warm meals, or even a home is someone who cares.

The National Center for Biotechnology Information reports that there are approximately ten million victims of domestic violence each year in America. Naturally, this affects the number of homeless youths each year who have to flee their homes. Fleeing, however, does not guarantee safety. There are countless risks associated with homelessness such as food insecurity, exposure to the elements, and the risk of being abducted or abused. Among the homeless, children are the most vulnerable to these kinds of dangerous situations. It is estimated that thousands of people die each year as a direct result of being homeless; the number of children deaths are unknown. If it had not been for the tender-loving virtuous people of Faith Mission, then I could have been one of them.

From my own experience, I have learned that there is a path to eradicating homelessness. Faith Mission is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit. This means that they receive government funding and non-taxable income, but there are not enough shelters to currently meet the needs of the homeless. If we invest in our children, then we are investing in our future. Therefore, no child should ever have to worry about the impossible task of providing a safe place for

themselves when there yet remains the option to fund worthy enterprises of philanthropy. Community outreach programs are the bulwarks of our citizens. We must not only stop there, but endeavor to make the shelter an interdiction to homelessness. Support for families is something everyone should readily have access to, and we need to educate the public to make them aware of how they can get access to such resources. If we can vaccinate over a hundred million citizens in less than half a year, if we can send a chimpanzee into space, then we should be able to provide safe environments to the very youths which will one day inherit this planet.

My seventh birthday and the gift of the red bicycle was more than a happy memory. It proved to me what humanity is capable of. Sometimes, in a shelter, all of your rooms are filled to capacity and there is no room for anyone else. By all appearances you have reached your limit, but that is when you dig deep and find that there is still a little room left...in your heart. That is when you can see what you did not see before. Suddenly, you realize there is a basement that no one is using. Humanity will never know what it is capable of unless we search our hearts and discover that there is room enough to care for a child. In this country there are two and a half million stories like mine that we have never heard; certainly, we can find a safe space for them.

While living with my stepfather, I was in constant fear every day for my sister, for my mother, for my unborn baby brother, and for myself. It was like falling into a dark pit with no bottom. No child should have to fear for the safety of their parent and no parent should have to fear for the safety of their child, but, too often, we sometimes do. I, however, am not the exception but the evidence that hope still exists. While at Faith Mission, I was experiencing

childhood nirvana every day. The tears that brought us there were quickly replaced with the sounds of joy and laughter. It was like riding a bike for the first time.