

## LaShunda Leslie-Smith brief autobiography:



My story is not unique. I grew up in the inner city of Rochester in a middle class family. From the outside our family looked OK but my stepfather was severely beating my mother with an extreme amount of domestic violence. We went to Alternatives for Battered Women (ABA, now Willow) a number of times. It was always a relief to be out of that house and in a safe place. It does something to a child to see someone they love do that to someone they also love. My feelings were very conflicted-“I love him, I hate him, I love him, I hate him.”

After a while I sought outside my home for that sense of belonging and to fill a void and need my family was not able to fill. Attention was given to my stepbrother and sister and I was left (the independent one) to fend for myself. I delved into different kinds of behaviors, smoking marijuana, fighting, etc. At one point I asked my mom if she was going to go to my parent-teacher conference. When she said “No – they always tell me the same thing that you are doing fine” I was disappointed and decided if I couldn’t get her attention for positive behavior I would get it for negative behavior. “If she didn’t care, I didn’t care”. No one knew or asked what was going on in our home. Our parents taught us “what happens at home stays at home”. We were a family of pretenders.

This situation led to more and more risky behaviors – unprotected sex. Eventually I became a mother at age 14 and was now responsible for my little son. Being at home did not work anymore. There was a lot of conflict so I moved out to sleep on the couch of my aunt’s place. She had a severe problem with drug abuse. I ended up caring for not only my son but her three children while she was out on drug binges. I began to understand what it meant to be poor. It was not an OK environment, especially for my son. There were drugs, rats, roaches, etc. I wish I could have helped my nieces and nephews, but I had to leave. I applied for public assistance and got my own apartment.

I had fallen far behind in high school and wanted to get my high school diploma, but the demands of raising a son and trying to live on my own were difficult. I went to re-enroll by myself with no parent to advocate for me, and they placed me at Josh Lofton High School, a school for trouble makers where I didn’t feel I belonged. At first I thought I would just stay the required 6 weeks and transfer, but I ended up staying the whole year. I did not think I was a bad kid, but I got involved in that jungle with fighting. But the teachers were extremely caring and supportive. There was also a day care there for my son. In the evenings I put him in child care and worked a job to pay for pampers, food, and other expenses. During that year because of the caring relationships I developed with the teachers I really turned around and caught up to my class. They would tutor me after school sometimes and expected me to succeed. This was really the turning point in my life. I was able to enter the following year as a senior and complete my high school degree on time.

I came to recognize that setbacks are to be expected and to look at them as challenges to overcome. One setback for me was when I found that the father of my son was not interested in a relationship with me or our son. I had to give up on the dream of becoming a “happy family”.

After I graduated from high school I began to dream of going to college. I applied to St. John Fisher College and got in through the Higher Education Program (HEP). However, I lost my provision for child care because it was only covered if it was a 2-year, not 4-year program. My day care provider offered to care for my son for \$40/week, which was a miracle! So I was able to go to college and graduate on time.

I am happily married. I have gone on and gotten several degrees: BA in Psychology with minor in Child and Family Services from St. John Fisher, Masters of Social Work from Brockport and Nazareth, Certificate in non-profit management from Roberts Wesleyan College, and currently working on my PhD at the Warner School of Education. I am now the Executive Director of Connected Communities, a non-profit working with the Anti-Poverty Initiative and Mayor Warren’s office in the Emma Beechwood neighborhood. We would like to see sustainable, affordable, attractive low income housing, good schools, neighborhood job opportunities, and safe streets in our community. I am giving back with the skills I have learned and experiences, both bad and good, that I have had.

But even with all that success, I feel my greatest success was moving my son onto his college campus and seeing him be a responsible contributor to society. He is the first in four generations of my family to not become a teen parent.

It is my desire to do for others what those teachers at Josh Lofton did for me. I work with youth through a non-profit that I founded, “Successful Pathways”, that is supportive of young people. I want to communicate that I believe in you, advocate for you, and sometimes push you. I care for you, and nothing will make me stop caring for you.

I would like to say to youth that it doesn’t matter how you start – it only matters how you finish. You may be facing all kinds of challenges. Seek out a caring adult, latch on and let them help propel you toward your goals. You have a unique purpose. Your challenges only help shape you and help you become more productive. You can get through them! It’s all about perspective – change your perspective, and you can change your life and the world.

Editor’s Note: Material drawn from an interview with LaShunda for the *Creating Hope* video.