

Lovely Warren brief autobiography:

I was born and raised in the 19th Ward of Rochester, NY. Also, my grandparents lived on Jefferson Avenue, a more challenged part of the city. As a child growing up, life was pretty good with my mom working at Kodak and my dad working at Xerox. It was a classic middle class family. When I was about 13 years old things started to change for me. My father began using crack cocaine and developed a serious drug habit that really impacted our family. My dad and I were always very close, riding bikes together and playing tennis together. I began to see he was choosing drugs over me.

When I was about 13-14 my mom went to pick my dad up at a house where he was using drugs. When we got home he started to leave again, and I ran after him and asked, "Are you going to choose drugs over me?" and he left. I fell on the floor crying and screaming. My mom was trying to comfort me. At that time I felt that this thing was so powerful that no bond or love could prevent him from using drugs.

At this point, I spiraled a little out of control. I began getting in fights. I was very, very angry. My frustration in my home life was fueling the anger that was in me. At the drop of a hat I would fly off the handle. Being angry is not the issue it's how you communicate that anger and what you do with it. A Vice Principal of my school said to me, "Lovely, you are smart and beautiful. You want to be a lawyer. Don't become a victim of your circumstances. Don't let your problems at home define your future. This pain won't last always. Imagine yourself as a lawyer. Concentrate on your future not on the right now." That really helped me.

My extended family surrounded me with love and support, but it was still a struggle for me to reconcile this conflict with my dad. My mom also had some major health issues she was dealing with.

I had a lot of friends that were living in street life, hustling and dealing drugs. It was part of the environment I grew up in. I wanted to know what a better life looked like but also wanted to stay loyal to my environment and friends. This was a challenge for me. I was the second generation to go to college in my family. My aunt (for whom I am named) went to college and got her PhD. I grew up seeing that college was an option. My family instilled in me that I was a "McCleary" and "McLeary's don't fail". I loved that about my family but could see that many of my friends did not have that foundation. But there was a constant struggle between what I knew was right and what I saw in my community. It made me feel sad, angry, and sometimes betrayed. Emotions will come, but it's what you do with them that counts.

There were many times I felt discouraged or alone, but I never felt like giving up. I was a fighter and would take the challenges head on. My faith in God is what drives me. I believe He has put in every individual what it takes to be successful. No one can define your future except for you. I was born and raised in the church and had faith in God, and I always knew right from wrong. I had many mentors who believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself. The foundation of my family helped me realize failure was not an option. Everyone can be successful at something. I also learned to recognize my own resilience to help me overcome my challenges.



I would also draw on the strength in my family. One thing my grandparents did was they took us back to South Carolina where they had picked cotton as sharecroppers. We could see what they had overcome. If they could overcome those difficulties, certainly I could overcome the problems I was facing. What was so hard today that wasn't at least as difficult back then? I began to see my obstacles as stepping stones to success. I could either let obstacles stop me or turn them into stepping stones and move on. "It's OK, I know you are hurting now, but don't let that stop you."

I also learned to listen to my inner self. When I was in college at Buffalo, I had a boyfriend that was not a good person. I listened to that inner voice and decided to transfer to another college to end that relationship. It was a good choice.

When I was in college I was diagnosed with a rare kidney disease. The treatment didn't help. I reached a place of despair but the health providers helped me find a way. At first, I felt like I was finally at the brink of reaching my goal of becoming a lawyer when I might lose it all, but in the long run it made me stronger and prepared me for future challenges. It helped me become a better person.

I had to forgive my father. It was many years later that he and I talked about it, and I had to let it go. My dad has been clean for 15-20 years now, married and doing well. It took a while for our relationship to not hurt. But I had to let it go and forgive him. If I didn't let it go, it would give me challenges the rest of my life. I also had to ask forgiveness of a girl I had negatively impacted when I was so angry and fighting in high school. She was going through some things at that time, too. It is true that "hurt people, hurt people". When you are in pain it's easy to hurt others.

I have my bachelor's degree from John Jay College and Juris Doctorate from Albany Law School. I am a member of Westside Church of Christ. I enjoy spending time with my husband, Tim, and my daughter, Taylor, and our dog, Rocco. Currently, I'm the Mayor of the City of Rochester and want to see our city be filled with safe and vibrant neighborhoods, better jobs and education. I wouldn't be the mayor I am today without the support of the teachers, administrators, mentors, and family, which is the very fabric of Rochester. But for me success is not about a job or an academic or business achievement. Success is when you are a good person, a compassionate person. You help when you can help, being careful not to purposely cause anyone pain but to be kind and compassionate. I am grateful to my family and the people of Rochester who helped me not become a victim of my circumstances but to overcome my challenges.

I would like to say to youth today:

"Just remember, 'Trouble don't last always.' When you feel like you are in a dark tunnel and you can't see any light, keep walking.... you don't know if soon you will open a door and light will be on the other side. Don't give in to the darkness. You are loved! Believe in yourself and know you can accomplish the dreams you have. Everyone has had obstacles, but by not giving up you leave the door open for success. Times will be hard, there will be struggles, but don't give up. God has given you everything you need for success – don't fail yourself."

Editor's Note: Material drawn from an interview with Lovely Warren for the *Creating Hope* video.