

Desperation over, education holds promise of better life

FRED DICKEY THE WAY WE ARE

There are times I can look in the distance of my mind and see a disheartening share of humanity floating in a sea of despair, their heads bobbing on the horizon like coconuts, slowly drifting away.

But then, I sometimes see a solitary figure clawing at the surf, struggling to reach the beach where the rest of us walk about unmindful of the desperation.

Alysha Hopkins is coming closer. It's been a long swim.

She walks across the corridor and up the stairs and into a MiraCosta College conference room. She's unnoticed in the library crowd because she fits in, which to her has got to be a glorious affirmation of belonging.

Yes, Alysha Hopkins, ex-street prostitute, is now a college student. And you can't imagine what that means to her.

Alysha just turned 24, but she has a gaze that's much older. She's a young woman who is friendly and soft-spoken, but doesn't smile much. Guarded. There's a bit of jut-jaw to her manner, but yet there's an undertone to her that implores: Don't judge me, understand me.

Alysha spent her childhood on the road, so to speak. She was in the custody of either divorced mother or father, or she was a ward of Child Protective Services.

During the decade of her custody, CPS shuffled her around. At various times, she was in a larger facility, then in a group home of up to six girls or in a foster home with a family.

She would for periods live with either parent or a grandparent, but from what Alysha freely acknowledges, they would call CPS and say, "We can't do anything with this child."

She says she had titanic clashes with her mother, who also has a hot temper. Alysha admits to unruly behavior from childhood through adolescence.

“I would throw tantrums. I would refuse to do anything. I would yell, scream, kick, break windows. I could be a bad kid.”

Do you know why?

“No, I don’t. But I do know that I’ve on and off been diagnosed or misdiagnosed with, like, bipolar, (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder) and (attention deficit disorder). I’ve been on over 20 medications, and even now I’m on a medication for depression, Prozac.”

Alysha says these things without emotion. One suspects she’s emoted out on the subject of her early behavior. She says, “Yes, I had behavior problems growing up, like I just remember always being moved around a lot because no one wanted to help me. I just felt like everyone wanted to put me somewhere to get rid of me and my problems, you know?”

Could it be they didn’t know how to help you?

She nods. “Maybe.”

She not only didn’t know where she belonged, she also didn’t know where she would be tomorrow. She was moss, a plant that has no roots and is compelled to grow where roses don’t.

Asked to talk about the years between ages 7 and 18 when she was frequently in the hands of CPS, she can’t seem to get the timeline or locations correct. It’s as though her adolescence was lived by someone else who vaguely sketched it to her.

She recites her jumbled history: “CPS has always been involved in my life. Foster care was, I remember, was at 11. So, after being in Polinsky (Children’s Center in San Diego) for about eight months, I went to — I believe — a foster home. Or, I went to a group home after that. Yeah, I went to a six-bed group home, and then I left there a few months later and went somewhere. I don’t remember ...”

You get the picture. I asked San Diego therapist Carolyn Gerard, who has worked with foster-care youths, to explain Alysha’s recollections. She hasn’t met Alysha but can speak generally to a syndrome that she recognizes.

Carolyn, why can’t Alysha remember what happened to her just a few years ago?

The therapist says, “It was the beginning of your interview, and she wasn’t yet comfortable. Her memory lapse could be some type of fear, feeling put on the spot. That turns that emotional brain on, and her heart probably starts pumping. The

rational brain goes offline.

“It’s as if you’re turning off a light switch. Because she’s a smart girl, the cognitive works well when she’s feeling safe and connected. When she’s not in a good place, her emotional brain turns on, and the thinking part turns off.”

Alysha, what was it like being in these facilities and group homes?

“It’s depressing. You get comfortable with someone you know, and then you or they have to move on.”

Did you get along with other kids?

“Not all the time, no. Sometimes I just put myself in a corner. Or if I’d finally make a close friend, then I had to leave.”

In a facility or any of the group homes or foster homes, were you ever sexually molested?

“I was, yeah. When? I don’t remember. When I was, I think ... I don’t remember exactly how old I was or what placement I was at ...”

You’ve blocked a lot of things out, haven’t you?

“Yeah. Not intentionally. It’s kind of hard to really remember, but I know I’ve been raped and molested.”

Then came Alysha’s 18th birthday, the day that all long-term foster-care children both look forward to and secretly dread. It’s the date the system turns them loose. They’re often shown the door with only a wave and a “good luck,” but with little guidance as to where that luck might be found.

Free and on her own in San Diego, she hooked up with a convict whom she had met. He was three years older and serving a term for cooking and distributing drugs. He was out and she was available.

What were you thinking?

“Honestly, that’s what I wanted. I was looking for that.”

Looking for what?

“I didn’t know, and I didn’t judge. Why would I be like, ‘Oh, this guy’s in prison. He’s bad.’ No. I felt like I’d been misjudged and misled (myself), so why wouldn’t I want to be with someone like that? You know, we had similar feelings toward life.”

You still feel that way?

“No, not so much anymore. I’m doing a lot better now.”

Carolyn, why did she gravitate to the convict?

“Here’s a man that probably had a very difficult childhood also, and she senses it. He won’t judge her. They have this inner connection. It’s like when you go to a party, you’ll gravitate to people who you sense are going to be your type, people who you hope are going to be receptive to you.”

Alysha, did you feel you weren’t suitable for regular people?

“I don’t know. You know, you don’t think that way until after. I was with him for a couple of years. I didn’t think like, ‘Oh, this guy’s been to prison’ or ‘Maybe I should get someone that has a job.’ I didn’t think that way. I just got out (of foster care) and was looking to get into some trouble.”

You wanted to get into trouble?

“I was just living carefree. Free. I also got a felony. That was about three months later (post-foster care). That’s when I got my felony.”

How does a girl right out of foster care get into prostitution?

“Easy. I just started walking the boulevard (El Cajon). Walk the streets and cars would pick me up. I just put on some jeans and a shirt and they know.”

Were you ever in danger?

“Oh, yeah. There’s been times I’ve been hurt, definitely. They would hold me down and take my money or they would choke me. They didn’t want to accept the fact that they had to pay for my time.”

Any nice johns?

“Oh, yeah. Generous. A lot of nice people. A lot of people are happily married, they say. They just want to be around (the action).”

Of course, some of them wanted to “save” you, right?

“Yeah. There’s always those people that’ll be like, ‘Oh, just let me help you get you off the streets.’ You know? No, I didn’t want that. I was making money.

“The most I made in a day was about \$1,700. In one day. That was just one time. The

average was about \$800.”

What did you do with the money?

She shrugs. “I don’t know. Just blow it, really. I would do some (Ecstasy) and some coke, yeah.”

She was arrested six or seven times, she says. The charges involved prostitution or drugs. Her stints in Los Colinas women’s jail were for a few weeks to a few months.

Her felony conviction was for cashing two bogus payroll checks, one for \$8,000 and a second for \$2,000. It was the second that got her arrested. She went to the well too often. Surprisingly, she says she wasn’t given prison time, only probation.

Did you have a pimp?

“No. I mean, I had a guy I was giving money to, but we didn’t call them that. They can’t be pimping me out if that’s something I want to do. You know, that’s my man. You know, we’re doing this together.”

He was good with you doing that?

“After a while there was feelings involved, so then he didn’t want me doing that anymore. But he couldn’t stop me from doing what I wanted to do.”

You wanted to do that?

“Yeah. At that time.”

Did you have any feelings for any of these johns?

“Yeah. Sometimes.”

Really? It could be sexually satisfying to you?

“No.”

Would you block it out?

“Oh, hell yeah. All the time.”

Did it make you feel like, “I’m somebody?”

“Yeah. That’s why I continued to do it.”

Did you ever say to yourself: I’m a whore!

“Yeah, more and more.”

Carolyn, so many prostitutes scorn their jobs and their customers. Alysha didn't. She wasn't judgmental.

“Right. Sometimes people can shut down those connecting, loving parts. They learn to shut the emotional brain off and see it as, ‘This is just a job to be done.’ ”

After two years on the streets, Alysha met a guy who saw more in her than a street walker. She dropped out of prostitution and moved to Temecula, where she earned a high school diploma in adult school.

She also had to learn how to make her way in what we like to call the real world. She got a job at Walmart but was fired after a month for “being mouthy” with a supervisor.

She and her guy now live in Oceanside, where he's employed as a nurse's assistant and she works full time for a fast-food place at a low wage, but says she likes it.

A couple of years ago, she took a deep breath and enrolled in MiraCosta College.

Classes haven't been easy. She didn't prepare for the demands. She chugs along, not close to making the honor roll, but she keeps at it. Her goal is to earn a psychology degree so she can somehow help others like herself.

She's under the mentoring and support umbrella of Jaymie Gonzaga, a counselor at MiraCosta who runs a program for students who have been in foster care.

She's also working to have her felony and misdemeanor convictions expunged from her record.

Are you ever tempted by the old life and the easy money?

“No. I'm so tired of that. I don't even remember that I used to do that. Honestly, I'm so stuck on what I need to do for my future that I don't even remember that.

“I'm good now. Thank God.”

Alysha Hopkins is trying to make herself into someone mirror-worthy. If she falls short, don't let it be on our heads for denying her encouragement.

Everyone is born loved and special. That's what this young lady is trying to become again. She is looking for herself.

Swim, Alysha, swim.

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