

My name is Rusty Booker. I'm 17 years old. I was born and raised in Louisville, KY. I just want to thank all of you for giving me an opportunity to share the story of my life with you.

My life was never easy. I was born to a mom of 17. Living with my mother and stepfather was so difficult. My stepfather came home every night, got drunk and beat my mom. My brother and I didn't sleep well not knowing if we would be next. At age eight my parents divorced and my mom started drinking. She never laid a hand on my brother and me. Drinking was her way of forgetting the past. I was sent to live with my stepfather and his wife at age nine. The abuse started then. Belts, ping pong paddles, even his hand all against flesh. I wouldn't be able to sit while my bottom and legs were marked with bruises. My brother soon came afterwards. I was placed in foster care and then back with my stepfather. Months after I was placed back with my stepfather. I started sending letters to my previous foster family from an abandoned house's mailbox so my stepparents wouldn't know. A month or so after the letters, I had built the courage to run.

I contacted my previous foster family and they told me to look for a Safe Place instead of going back home. I went to a library that had a Safe Place sign on the front. I was 12 at the time and until that day didn't know what Safe Place was but was glad that there was a place like the library where I could get help. They took me to the YMCA Safe Place Services shelter in Louisville. When I got to the shelter the staff welcomed me. I felt safe for the first time in many years. They did an intake and got me clothes, hygiene products and clean linens. The next morning I had a warm breakfast and it was good. I met with a caseworker who would change my life forever – Mr. Bill. When we talked, at first I had a hard time connecting with him and getting solutions, but it wasn't long before I was sharing my life's story with him.

The shelter determined that going home was not going to be possible and I understood. Within two weeks, they arranged for me to be placed in a foster home with a loving family. But I still had problems and over the next several years, I was placed in a psychiatric hospital and along with that came therapy and meds. Then came another foster home, group homes, even jail. I started using drugs and after witnessing my friend getting shot because of drugs, I thought to myself, nobody asked me what I wanted. I felt like I was to blame and was powerless to change my life. I had no family, no home and at this rate, no future. After another failed foster home, I went to Safe Place again and asked for help.

I knew the shelter was there for me. Again I felt safe and understood. I met with Ms. Missy and told her everything that I had been through. She didn't judge me or laugh at me. She understood me and made me feel wanted. The next day I met Mr. Quan, a man with a story for every lesson he learned that I needed to learn or had already but in a rougher way. He too, understood me. He has taught me very many ways of how to not let little things get blown way out of proportion. And then there is Mr. Bill. When I saw him again after several years, I gave him a hug. I felt so relieved to see someone I knew that really cared about me and loved me more than anyone I know. I'm not really going

to put his business out to the public, but I will say that he has been through a huge amount of things that other kids and me can relate to. Bill, Ms. Missy and Mr. Quan and the other wonderful and amazing staff at Safe Place Services are keeping me drug and alcohol free. I don't know the last time I have felt this good about myself.

To some, these people I mentioned may just be ordinary people, but to me and six hundred other kids a year in Louisville, these people are heroes. Mr. Bill even gave up his vacation to bring me to DC so I could testify today.

There are 14 kids at the Safe Place Services right now who have experienced many of the same things that I have. I would like to be able to convince kids that Safe Place is a first step to get help and the shelter is a place where they can feel safe and begin to solve their problems. Many times when I was younger, I wanted to run for help, but when I was in a rural area there weren't many places to go. Louisville is a smaller city compared to here in DC or LA or even Atlanta. Kids all around the country, thousands of kids, feel like I did. No one understands them and they need a place to turn. I hope that they, too, will be able to get to find Safe Place sites to get to a shelter, feel safe, and have a bed, food, someone to talk to instead of roaming the streets, bumming money or doing anything just to survive.

I'm asking for your help to make a difference for kids just like me, because every kid deserves a second chance. I plan to finish my GED and plan to go to college and get a degree in law enforcement. Thank you for letting me share the experiences I have had. I know I'm headed in the right direction. I used to always ask myself "Why me?" Maybe this is why. Maybe what I have been through can make a difference for someone else. I hope you will make it possible for kids like me to have these programs in their city.