

COMPOSITION



Memoirs of  
Resiliency  
and Hope  
Volume 3

Starting  
Write,  
Now



# Starting Write, Now

DEDICATION

For those who wander lost in darkness,  
Yet never stop moving toward the light.

For those who refuse to lose faith in their potential,  
And constantly push for a better life.

For those who refuse to give up, this book is for you.  
Believe in yourself and never forget:  
There will always be someone around to  
Lend a hand.



STARTING  
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## Prologue

Starting Write, Now features essays written by and about homeless, unaccompanied youths, all of which are participants of Starting Right, Now (SRN). These testimonials were composed for college essays, scholarships or post-graduate schools. SRN is ending the generational cycle of homelessness and poverty. These remarkable stories and the voices of these SRN students testify to the power of determination and hope.



**STARTING  
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## FOREWORD

### Beautiful Me

We all have a story  
And before if I were to write mine in a book,  
It would be stamped TRAGEDY  
I felt the effects of pain  
I have taken my own wrist and cut into the vein.  
Most of you know that I was Daddy's pretty girl,  
But in actuality I didn't feel pretty at all.  
The late night visits and the soft commands "Don't  
tell mommy"  
All it left me was feeling dirty  
Why wasn't I worthy?  
Daddy I was supposed to be your baby!  
Why would you hurt me?..  
I needed you, why couldn't you see?  
What all your special touches were doing to me?  
I wanted your love, I wanted to be Daddy's little girl.  
But what you made me made my stomach churn and  
curl.  
When I looked into the mirror I couldn't see what they  
saw  
"Kelsey you are beautiful"  
How? when I have so many flaws  
Do you see my arm?  
Those cuts hold my darkest secrets.  
The attempts to end my life  
Can you feel my heart?  
It's broken apart  
How can anyone ever love me.  
When I have so many scars.  
I couldn't help it, I started putting up guards,  
I was scared that all the ones I loved would depart  
Like I was just some piece of trash to discard.  
I was scared, I was alone,

I wish I could have known

My heart may have been broken but it is still intact.

My past will not leave me handicapped.

I look in the mirror and although it still may be cracked,

I see myself clearly and I am getting myself back.

My wings may be crooked but they will still fly

I may fall down but I will still get up and try

Never incapable but fully capable

I am stronger than you ever thought possible

I can guarantee you one thing

This world was meant for me to change

Daddy my success will be my revenge

My roar is as loud as a lion's

I am going to sing, I am going to shout.

I am not afraid.

Listen to my words we all have our stories,

But this is our chance for a new slate.

We all have our scars, we are perfectly flawed.

Do you know how many wonders you can create?

We have gone through hell and through it all we have fought.

We hold in ourselves the potential for magic,

Even though our stories have been tragic.

Look at me I understand you, I know what you went through.

But what happened does not have to define you.

My book is no longer a tragedy,

I think I will call it TENACITY.

I looked into the mirror and I finally saw what they all see.

I said hello to the beautiful me.

Kelsey Mitchell

SRN Student



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# Starting Write, Now



STARTING  
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Amillio

Amillio graduated from Blake High School. He is currently a freshman at Hillsborough Community College with the intention of becoming a Firefighter.



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We sleep in public parks; it draws less attention than superstore parking lots. My dad attaches a water hose to spigots for us to shower. Cheap dish detergent functions as our body wash, shampoo and antibacterial soap. Showering naked gives me anxiety, the inevitably cold hose water makes showering miserable. In the winter, when the outside temperature plunges into the mid-thirties, my dad insists I bare the frigid air in pursuit of hygiene. In addition to pedestrians, we constantly worry about roaming park managers and police officers patrolling the area.

I find sleep on a few panels of cardboard outside. It's difficult for me to sleep in the backseat of our car since I'm over six feet tall at 16 years old. Police sirens wake me. My heart plummets into my stomach as I frantically look around for my parents. My dad appears beside me but we realize my mom is stuck in the bushes we use as our restroom. The police evict us off the premises and we're back to square one.

A few months earlier, my family and I were forced to move out of our trailer because we couldn't afford the weekly rent. My dad suggested we live in our car to save money. We moved out of the trailer and pursued the open road. Living in a car wasn't too bad; except finding a place to sleep.

Every day we ate TV dinners, sandwiches or McDonalds. My dad bought a microwave and kept it in the car on top of our picnic cooler, which served as our freezer. Once school started, my dad dropped us off at my mom's job, since school was within walking distance. After school, I walked to the library to finish homework and wait for my mom. The cycle continued for the next eight months; find a park to sleep in, discretely heat our food, wake up early and leave for school/work before we were caught.

One day, the school called me down to the main office because they sent my parents mail to our old address. I remained silent as they asked for my new address. I didn't know what to say. My guidance counselor asked why I wouldn't give my new address and I was forced to spill my story. Shortly after, my guidance counselor recommended Starting Right, Now (SRN), a program for homeless teens, and set up an interview. During the interview, the Executive Director of SRN said if I was accepted, they could help me with a place to sleep, food, a savings account, job and tutoring assistance. It sounded too good to be true. After the interview, I anxiously waited for weeks until I found out I was accepted into the program. I moved into their transitional housing facility and felt a huge weight lift off my shoulders. The other students all come from diverse backgrounds with different stories but we all have one thing in common, we are homeless.

After a few short weeks, the program changed my life. I participated in computer literacy classes, tutoring, a leadership class and a diversity retreat. I never did well in school or knew how to express my emotions but SRN helped me overcome my obstacles. Now, my grades are improving and I'm learning about the world. I've been able to experience things I've never been exposed to, such as eating at a nice restaurant. I feel blessed to have this opportunity because it's a selective program. I never thought college would be possible. I no longer wonder if I'm going to college, I wonder which college I will go to. I'm excited to pursue a degree in exercise science and chase my dream of working in the field of sports. I also want to give back to my community by volunteering at schools and sharing my story with kids in situations similar to mine. I want to be an example of hard work paying off, by having a successful, happy ending to my life story.

Anne-Marie

Annie graduated from Gaither High School. She graduated from Florida State University and received a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education. She is currently a 4th grade teacher for Pinellas County Public Schools.



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My dad chose his girlfriend over me. Pretty simple. I was not welcome at his home. It was New Year's Eve and I went to my sister's. My dad never called to make sure I was okay. He didn't wish me a Happy New Year when the clock struck twelve. That night I cried. New Year's Day my sister spoke to my dad and he requested, "I come get my crap out of his place because he is not a storage unit." To avoid conflict, I went when he was at work and grabbed the basics - clothes and necessities. Within days I went from having a secure home and savings account, to being homeless.

There were days when I lacked motivation to get out of bed. I work every night until 11 p.m. and then complete homework until 1 a.m. Many days I would turn off the alarm and roll over on the couch to sleep some more. I was mentally and physically exhausted. Friends started worrying about my absences in first period. Quickly I realized that even though things were difficult, I needed to make school a priority. Living on your own as a high school student is not easy.

My hard work finally paid off. I saved enough to buy my own car. Describing the feelings I experienced that day is impossible to put into words. It felt so amazing. Even with Mount Everest sized obstacles in my way, I was able to make it to the summit.

My sister was shipping off to boot camp which meant I needed to find a place to live. I spoke to my guidance counselor about my circumstances, and she informed me of a program that helps youth in my situation. This program helps unaccompanied youth who are academically driven and motivated. After many interviews, I was accepted into Starting Right, Now, and they helped me get an apartment. The world had been lifted off my shoulders, and for once in my life, I felt like I was going to be okay.

Not many seniors in high school, live alone, work full time and maintain an A-B average. I have proven that I am a leader. I have embraced this responsibility. There are many bad paths I could have chosen, but I steered to the passageway entering college. I've learned even with huge challenges, I refuse to give up. I may struggle at times but I always push through. "Do not fear the wind of adversity. Remember a Kite rises against the wind rather than with it." Unknown

Alexis

Alexis graduated from Armwood High School. She is currently in her senior year at Saint Leo University pursuing a Bachelor's in Social Work.



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The gun, aimed at my sister's boyfriend, was held by the father of the little girl he supposedly molested. It was my last few days of school before summer break. I get off the bus to glass flying and cuss words spewing.

Rumors spread throughout the trailer park he was a pedophile. The father cocked his gun, ready to fire as the entire park grew silent.

I ran as fast as I could into my house. I thought he would shoot everyone in the park. For the first time in my life, I was scared.

Someone called 911 and police cars pulled up to our house. Events unfolded outside, in front of all the neighbors and the landlord. The cops arrested my sister's boyfriend. She began sobbing and begging them to give him another chance. Funny how the criminal system works....he only spent one night in jail before he posted bail. He and my sister found a new place to live, people to mooch off. My mom did not have a stable job so she could not pay the electricity bill on time. Our landlord spared us the first couple of times, yet once this incident happened, he called the electric company to turn it off.

The landlord gave us three days to move out. In small print, the lease stated "If the police were called at any point while staying here then the tenants would have to leave the premise." We had nowhere to go. No money and no savings. My sister left with her boyfriend.

Having slept one night without electricity, my boyfriend's family offered us temporary shelter and told us about Starting Right, Now a program that helps homeless families get back on their feet. I was iffy about receiving help because I am very used to being let down.

This incident made me realize each person has to choose their own path. I am determined to pave a different path for my life than the rest of my family. I want to be the first generation in my family to follow my dreams. College tests your limits. I am prepared. I am more optimistic since we have help. I am a stronger person, more aware of my surroundings. I want to be a Social Worker/Juvenile Counselor because I love helping people. I relate well to teens and want to inspire them to get back on the right track. In spite of everything I have been thrown, my passion for helping people has grown even stronger!

Avion

Avion graduated from Bowers-Whitley  
Career Center. He is currently a  
freshman at Hillsborough Community  
College with the intention of entering  
the Police Academy.



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Hand in hand with my foster family, we stand around the dining room table and say grace. At 19 years old, I'm celebrating Christmas for the first time. My mouth waters looking at the spread of food set in front of me - homemade mac and cheese, potato salad, turkey, and green beans. As we bow our heads to pray, my foster mom speaks about the importance of having each other - our mismatched family. I sit in a circle and open presents. I feel awkward. I'm not used to having presents to open. For the first time, I feel loved. I finally feel like part of a family. I should have known that would suddenly come to a quick end.

At three years old, I was dropped off at a group home. I spent my entire life in the foster care system. Kids are thrown into foster care because of abuse, neglect or abandonment. My mom was guilty of all the above. The group home was my living nightmare. Kids suffered in there; they fought each other and the staff never bothered to break it up. There's no one to turn to for help.

The first two years of high school, every three months, my caseworker would call and tell me to pack up to move again. I lived in too many homes to count. Each foster house was worse than the previous one and never felt like home. None of the foster families cared about me; I was just another paycheck for them. Moving made me harden. I stopped building relationships because I didn't want to get attached. I was mad at the world and started acting out. Eventually, I realized this was not the person I wanted to be so I turned to my faith and prayed for a miracle.

On my 18th birthday, my caseworker called and told me to pack everything up, I was moving again. I was used to the routine. But, walking in, I knew this foster home would be different. We celebrated holidays together and ate family dinners. They sat me down and talked about staying out of trouble, graduating high school and college. I couldn't believe how supportive they were. My foster parents even went to my school to make sure I had everything needed to graduate on time. With their encouragement, I went from failing grades to straight B's. I've never felt so loved in my entire life. In my foster parents' eyes, I was capable of anything and I was determined to live up to their expectations. Then, one day, my foster parents told me they were moving to Georgia. I wanted to move with them, but the Extended Foster Care Program wouldn't let me. With nowhere to go, I confided in my school social worker about my situation. She recommended me to a program helping homeless teens called, Starting Right, Now (SRN).

When I first joined SRN, I thought the program was too good to be true. I was scared it would turn out to be another group home, but I was wrong. SRN provides me with help applying to college, a stable home and, most importantly, a new family. Every student in SRN endured difficult obstacles, but no one lets their past influence their future. Seeing the other students accomplish their goals motivates me. My goal in life is to give back by opening a teen center. I will start my own mentor program. I cry sometimes because of the things I have seen other kids go through. It's heartbreaking. Growing up in group homes and foster houses, I witnessed things kids should never see. They give up on life because people give up on them. I want to help kids strive to succeed. I made a vow to keep my heart open and to always love. I tell myself that everything happens for a reason. I now understand the meaning of my life. I will chase my dream of helping other youth. I truly can't wait to reach that goal.



Brooklyn

Brooklyn graduated from Riverview High School. She is currently a freshman at Hillsborough Community College with the intention of becoming a Registered Nurse.



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I look through the back window and see my mother in handcuffs. The cold plastic seats of the cop car feel daunting. I scream for my mom and brother, but my voice goes unheard. My only comfort is my four-year-old sister sitting next to me. I want my mommy. An unfamiliar face approaches the vehicle and says, "Everything is going to be alright, you're safe now." I continue to cry harder. Nothing makes sense. At three years old, I take my initial step towards a long road of loneliness. It's the very last image of my mom and my little brother I can remember.

Weeks pass and I get the hang of the foster care system. Each week, I live with a different set of strangers I am told to call mom and dad. Moving from place to place isn't so bad until night time when demons greet me in my dreams. The dark taunts me with flashbacks of my mom being ripped away by strangers.

After months of bouncing from house to house, the unfamiliar face re-emerges. She tells me to pack my belongings and drives me to a townhouse where two strangers stare at me and call me by name. I discover this is my new mother - the woman who adopts and raises me.

One day, my eighth grade teacher instructed me to go to the guidance office. When I opened the door, I saw my father. His look was enough for me to know I was going home to a beating. At home, my mom was waiting with a pregnancy test in her hand. My dad charged at me, berating me and telling me I was a disgrace to the family. As I ran to avoid his beating, he threw any object within his reach to the floor, ordering me to pick up the debris. It suddenly hit me. They found out I had a boyfriend. His hands clutched me as he slammed my head into the refrigerator door repeatedly. My mom jumped in - I thought to save me - but instead she dragged me to the bathroom to urinate on the end of the pregnancy test, she held in her hand. I was thirteen years old and still a virgin. But no one believed me.

The next day at school, the nurse questioned why my face was so bruised. I tried to deflect her questions. After school, a police officer arrived at my house to interrogate me. Scared, I ran away. As an adopted youth, I fell under the stereotype of a troubled soul, corroded by the influences of my environment, and by default, automatically delinquent.

With few options, I stayed with a friend. The next morning while walking to the school bus, my heart sank when I saw my dad waiting. Cornered, he brought me home, captive. My relationship with him deteriorated just as rapidly as his relationship with my mom. Soon after, they divorced. My mom and sister moved out, leaving me with my unstable father. Living conditions were abysmal. I became depressed. Not long after my mom left, my dad lost the house because he could no longer afford to pay it by himself. With nowhere to go, we all moved in with my mom for a "few weeks." Weeks turned into months. As my dad struggled to reassert his authority, so did his blows. Trying to help my mom with bills, I got a job and worked each day after school until 9 p.m. But I could no longer take the abuse. So, I started couch hopping between friends.

The school nurse found out about my situation and recommended me to our social worker. The social worker said Starting Right, Now (SRN) offered the one thing I needed most - stability. I had the chance to receive housing, food stamps and a reliable source of help. The interview process was nerve wracking knowing everything I needed was just within reach. SRN accepted me into their program and for the first time, I had a home where I felt loved and welcomed. The program taught money management, coping strategies to deal with emotions, skills to improve my life and a peaceful, stable environment.

Now I have the opportunity to look to my future. I dream of going to college to become the best version of myself. Unfortunately, college was never an option because I couldn't afford it. Starting Right, Now gives me the tools I need to chase after my dreams. With the help of scholarships and grants, I aspire to attend the Culinary Institute of America and become a professional chef. I plan to reunite with my biological family and show them all I have achieved. My goal is to help children suffering through similar situations as mine. I desire to provide them with help and love. My long road of loneliness ended. I am now on top and I am happy.

Camille

Camille graduated from the University of South Florida with a Bachelor's in Environmental Science and Policy. She currently works as an Academic Specialist while pursuing a Master's in Global Sustainability, concentrating in Sustainable Enterprise.



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Foreclosure twirled my world upside down during my senior year of high school. My mom and I were forced out of our home and became homeless. We lived in and out of the car, in friend's houses and in Metropolitan Ministries. Yet I knew, if I wanted to accomplish my goals, I would have to stay strong and keep my grades up so I could attend a university. I graduated with honors, a chord from the Science Honor Society, and held a 3.7 GPA.

Ever since I was little, I have loved animals and nature. My grandfather was the one who initially sparked my interest in the environment; he was a hydrologist that worked for the United States Geological Survey.

When my mother and I moved to Florida, I started hearing about global warming and how it was going to affect the world in such a tremendous way. I feel it is my biological duty to help erase mankind's negative footprint upon the earth.

I was accepted into the University of South Florida where I am currently studying Environmental Science and Policy, and minoring in Geology. I participate in undergraduate research using foraminifera, while comparing today's ecosystems to what they were in the Miocene Epoch. Being published in a scientific journal by the end of this year is my goal.

Beyond my undergraduate Environmental Science and Policy degree and Geology minor, I plan to attain a Master's Degree of Global Sustainability along with a Master's Degree in Business Administration. With the Global Sustainability degree, I can concentrate in entrepreneurship, water or sustainable tourism. With entrepreneurship I could focus on a sustainable economy and environmentally friendly ways of transporting and manufacturing goods.

The world and its inhabitants excite me. I aspire to be part of the solution that gives all living beings the ability to peacefully coexist.

Chaille

Challe graduated from Plant High School  
and is currently a freshman at the  
University of West Florida.



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"Mom, wake up. Wake up! PLEASE, WAKE UP!" I scream at the top of my lungs. I panic as I look at her stiff body. I begin violently shaking her, but she will not open her eyes. I am certain something is very wrong. She is a light sleeper and any sound usually wakes her. We sleep together in the same bed every night. When I stir to arise, she always wakes with me. I sit next to her on our bed for hours crying, pleading for her to open her eyes, but she never does. I finally walk to my neighbor's house and tell her my mother isn't waking up. She follows me home, takes one look at my mother's lifeless body, and says, "Child, your mother is dead." At ten years old, I am smacked with the worst possible situation - my mother has died sleeping next to me.

Life after my mother passed was difficult. She was my best friend and my only family in Haiti. Two months later, my father, who I had never met, flew to Haiti to bring me to live in America with him. I only knew him as a voice on the other side of the phone, who called only on special occasions. I didn't want to leave my home, but I had no choice. I never said goodbye to my childhood friends or visit places where I built memories with my mother. I left everything I knew behind to move to a foreign country with a stranger, my father.

Living with my father was a difficult. I had to get accustomed to living with a man I hardly knew. Our first year living together we barely spoke. He was tough and strict, as opposed to my mother, who had a loving, gentle demeanor. My father never allowed me to leave the house outside of school. He tried his best to protect me from the dangers of the world outside, not realizing he was placing me in a cage. I knew the walls he constructed were only meant to protect me, but it was difficult.

In February 2015, I was in school when I received a call from an unknown number. A nurse at St. Joseph's hospital was on the other end of the line, telling me my father was in the hospital. At first, I thought someone was playing a sick joke. After school, a taxi took me to the hospital. When I arrived, I discovered my father was hiding stage 4 Prostate Cancer from me. I wanted to be upset with my father, but I knew he was doing what he did best - protecting me. My father didn't want me stressed about his illness. He constantly said, "School will always be your top priority. Don't ever lose sight of your future." He dreamed of watching me walk across the stage to receive my college diploma.

My father was a stubborn man, who never accepted help from others, not even his own daughter. He became weaker with each passing day. Finally, the doctors ordered him to stay in bed to preserve his strength. I often slept next to my dad, since it was the only time the hospice nurses weren't around. One day, I woke up to the sound of my father struggling to get out of bed. When I looked up and saw his sunken eyes and thin body, I knew he was dying next to me, just like my mom did. On April 16, 2015, my heart shattered when my father passed away. Death was becoming a norm in my life.

I was lost and devastated. I no longer had a support system to lean on; both my parents were gone. I started working to help pay the bills, but barely made ends meet. I confided in my school social worker about my situation and was recommended to a program called Starting Right, Now (SRN). SRN helps homeless, unaccompanied students in situations similar to my own. Now, I live in the SRN transitional house and am taking the necessary steps to achieve my dream of attending college. I long for the day I walk across the stage, diploma in hand and happiness in my heart, knowing I'm making my parent's proud.

Carlee

Carlee graduated from Plant High School and is currently a freshman at Florida Atlantic University.



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In the middle of my fourth twelve hour shift, I anxiously check my phone every few minutes, hoping to see a message from my mom that she will come home tonight. My pocket buzzes. Her text is a simple "no". I receive the same answer to the same question, night after night for a year. She has made it clear that her boyfriend is more important than me. It hurts knowing my mom never wants to come home and be part of my life. At 17 years old, I am on my own.

The next day, I quickly check my phone during work, expecting to see the same response from my mother. Instead, I see several missed messages from her. I unlock my phone and feel like I've been punched in the stomach. My mother sent me pictures of my empty room, boxes of my belongings and a message saying, "Arthur is my priority. You live with your uncle now." Her boyfriend always came first. He reeked of whiskey and spoke in a slurred dialect. I hated him, but my feelings didn't matter to my mom. Despite her attempts to keep his abuse a secret, I knew what happened behind closed doors. I always heard their faint arguments from upstairs. Like clockwork, she'd appear the next day with suspicious bruises, refusing to explain.

One night, my mom finally worked up the courage to move out of his place and into our own apartment. It didn't last long; they got back together shortly after. At first, my mom spent the night at his house once a week, which quickly turned into multiple nights out of the week. Over the course of a month, she moved back into his house, leaving me to fend for myself. On top of attending school full-time, I was forced to get a full-time job to pay the bills. My landlord grew suspicious. I never told him my mom moved out, but my gut told me he knew. I barely made ends meet. Most days, I went without eating. Even though I was struggling to get by, living alone was better than staying with my uncle.

Eventually, I crashed on friend's couches, making sure to leave before their parents woke up. I felt completely alone. Oddly enough, couch surfing provided me with a sense of freedom I never had before. I no longer had to worry about paying rent or amenities. With extra time on my hands, and the absence of my mother, I fell into the wrong group of friends. I knew they didn't have my best interest at heart, but they were a welcomed distraction to my hectic life.

One night, I went out to meet my "friends." A guy, who never actually introduced himself, swiftly came to my side and handed me a solo cup. Distracted by his kind eyes, I downed it not thinking twice to ask what I was drinking. Shortly after, the music and strobe lights made me nauseous. I barely managed to stumble into the bathroom, taking refuge on the cold tile floor. I woke up in a dark, unfamiliar room. The vaguely familiar shadowed figure had me pinned down. I didn't know where my clothes were, but it was obvious he found a way to strip them from me. I opened my mouth to scream, but before I could make a sound, a cold hand wrapped around my throat. I thought I could fight him off. The last thing I remember is struggling to break free. I finally regained consciousness the next afternoon. I felt stuck in a haze and couldn't grasp the reality of the situation. In my moment of helplessness, I knew I reached rock bottom. I was homeless, defeated and terrified.

I decided it was time to live with my uncle. I reluctantly walked to his front door, debating if I was making the right decision, and tapped on the door. I realized my visit was not expected. My aunt popped her head out, saying she's not interested in whatever I'm selling. I couldn't believe she forgot who I was, but I quickly remembered her recreational drug use. Eventually, she let me inside. The stench of cigarettes was inescapable. After a few days of not seeing my uncle, I realized he no longer lived there. It was just the two of us.

I finally showed up to school for the first time in over a week and was immediately called down to the office. My stomach dropped as I walked into the principal's office and saw the school resource officer. He handed me a laptop and a few items my mom dropped off. Once the principal and I were alone, he called down the school social worker and I confessed my story. For the first time in two years, I broke down and finally admitted I needed help. They recommended me to a program helping homeless teens called, Starting Right, Now (SRN).

The day I was accepted into SRN, a wave of relief rushed over me. I finally had a safe place to live. At one point, I wouldn't let myself think about college. I knew attending college was a dream I could never afford. With the help of SRN, I plan to attend college and receive a degree in business. In the future, I want to own my own riding and training stable for horses. Riding horses has been a big part of my life and I want to share my passion with others. With SRN behind me, I can overcome anything. In the future, I hope to share my story and inspire others to overcome their obstacles. I'm on my way to achieving my greatest dream - attending college.



## Gidget

Gidget Benitez recently graduated from American University Washington College of Law (Washington, D.C.), and sat for the July 2016 Virginia Bar Exam. She completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Central Florida. She is the former Editor in Chief of the American University Intellectual Property Brief and was a Student Attorney in the Washington College of Law Civil Advocacy Clinic. She was one of SRN's first students and is an active member of the Hispanic Bar Association of DC, a member of the Leadership Council for Gifts of the Homeless, hopes to practice trademark law and eventually, work on intellectual property legislation on the Hill.



**STARTING  
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Fifty-six wins and five losses, the world's greatest boxing record, set by Muhammad Ali in 1981

As Muhammad Ali's circumstances led him to boxing, my circumstances inspired me to fight for my education.

After being evicted from my home and being forced into homelessness for the third time, my life became a title-prize boxing match at sixteen.

Failure, doubt and insecurity were my frequent sparring mates. Every day, I was in the ring with them, taking blow after blow. Through it all, I never surrendered my title belt; instead, I fought hard.

Ding ding...Round one. Failure had me cornered in the ring one night as my mother, caving to the emotional and mental stress of our circumstances, threw herself onto train tracks in a suicide attempt. As she howled that she had failed me as a mother, it was like wind whistling past my ears from a punch Failure connected to my jaw.

But Failure never expected me to punch back.

I bounced back swiftly, realizing I had to be the catalyst to change this cycle - to save my mother's life, and mine. I seized her off the train tracks.

From that moment on, education and survival were my priority. Looking at my grades alone, no one would have known I was homeless. It took three buses every morning and evening to get to school from a motel - but I never missed a day. I can remember sitting in chemistry class, listening to my classmates plan excitedly for Halloween - repeating to myself mentally that I would overcome this struggle as Doubt and Insecurity circled me relentlessly. With every taunt, I jabbed back, focused.

As I graduated from high school with a 4.0 GPA and the bell sounded for my next round, I knew I would not allow anyone to hit me below the belt.

Ding ding... Round two. Undergraduate study tested my endurance and mental agility at the University of Central Florida. Just as Muhammad Ali wanted to be the best of the best - I wanted more than just one degree and opted for two additional certificates.

In addition to the maximum of 17 credits every semester, I worked two to three part time jobs supporting myself all four years. The challenge kept me on my toes at all times; I was never sure when I would eat, or if I was going to be able to make ends meet. When the opportunity arose to study criminal justice and law in Russia, I worked double shifts and applied for scholarships to pay the tuition. The trip's purpose was to explore a foreign government's legal framework, but I walked away with far more knowledge.

In witnessing Russia's system of downtrodden citizens, I discovered the passion I had for the legal system, and the way in which it affects people in multiple countries.

The experience was a surprise blow, making me realize that I was just a small cog in a huge machine and that the need for change was bigger than just me. This epiphany led to the most essential directional shift in my life to date: my decision to go law school. As I walked the stage to accept my Bachelors degree and other accolades, I was unwavering and confident in my abilities, my sights on the prize of a legal education, my gloves ready. I immediately began the training necessary to aid me in making a difference, not just in my life - but also in the community at large.

Ding ding... Round three. I know my third round, though what challenges lie ahead is unknown, will not be my last. As I prepare to enter the ring again, I plan to defeat law school as Ali defeated Sonny Liston in 1965 - one of his most controversial fights ever. You know how the Ali vs. Liston fight of 1965 ended, don't you? Knockout.

Hillary

Hillary graduated from Armwood High School and is currently in her senior year at the University of South Florida pursuing a Bachelor's of Public Health.



STARTING  
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BOOM the door was kicked in. Men, fully armed, wearing bullet proof vests and heavy artillery helmets, rushed in the hotel room with bright lights mounted on their rifles and handguns. "Get under the bed and hide" my mom shouted. I could hear panic in her voice. Dazed and confused, my sister and I jumped under the bed. My mom made a break for the bathroom, flushing drugs and paraphernalia down the toilet. They rushed in after her and with impeccable aim, shined a perfect little red dot right between my mother's eyes. They arrested her while huge dogs snarled and snapped at us under the bed. Only seven years old, I was absolutely petrified.

I bolted for my mom, grabbed her hand and held onto her as if she was hanging from a cliff. Finally, kicking and screaming one of the men pried me loose and carried my sister and I to the bed, making us sit there until my mom was secure in the back of a cop car. That's when I realized these men were police officers. They loaded us in a separate car from my mom.

We drove to the jail house in silence, except my whimpers. When we arrived, we asked a million questions. But the only thing they told us was that our grandmother was coming to pick us up. They escorted us to a room full of toys where a lady handed us a teddy bear. I threw the bear as hard as I possibly could and wailed for my mother. We waited in that room for hours before my grandmother finally arrived. That night, the most traumatic night of my life, full of terror and tears, made me a strong person.

Initially, when my mom got out of jail, she was clean from drugs. All was well for a few years but it was not long for drugs and men to reappear. My life has been like a rubber ball, bouncing back and forth between my mom, grandparents, and other relatives. At 17, I realized my mom was never going to be stable, so I got a job and started supporting myself.

I am a senior in high school living in my own apartment. I don't have anyone saying, "get your homework done", "it's time for school" or "you need to go to work". The difference between me and most other high school students is I can't depend on my mom. I want my life to go in the opposite direction of my mom's. I am determined to graduate high school and enter college. I want to give my future kids the childhood I never had.

Crystal

Crystal graduated from Wharton High School and is currently a freshman at Hillsborough Community College.



STARTING  
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Lying in her hospital bed, tubes wrapped around her body and needles poking out of her arms, with tears streaming down my face, I quietly say, "Mama, it's okay. You can leave now. All your kids are here." I can't stand to see my mom suffer anymore. I walk closer to her bedside, put her hand in mine and whisper my final words, "Mama, I love you so much. I'm going to miss you." A single tear slides down her cheek as she takes her last breath. At 17 years old, I lost my best friend - my mother.

My mom was hurting for a long time, but didn't tell anyone. One day, I was at my friend's house when my sister texted me, "Come home. Mom is very sick." I rushed home, crying the entire way to my house. I stayed by my mom's side, staring at her pale blue face. She looked weak and helpless. My mom kept saying "I will get up in five minutes!" but I knew she didn't have the energy. Finally, the paramedics arrived and tried to help my mom walk to her bed. It was no use. She could barely breathe, nonetheless walk. The EMT's put her on the stretcher and rolled her into the ambulance. Before they closed the doors, my mom called my name, "Chrissy! I will be right back!" Suddenly, her head fell backwards and her eyes rolled to the back of her head. I didn't know at the time, but I witnessed my mom have the heart attack that would end her life. When the doctors woke her up, it was too late; 75% of her brain was dead. She could no longer talk to me and could barely move, but I knew she could hear me. I stayed with her as much as possible, constantly talking to her. Every time I told my mom how much I missed her, a tear would slowly run down her face. Two months after being admitted, my mom passed away.

My mom was the only person I could talk to; we were best friends. She was the one I would go to for advice. I'd walk into our house upset, but as soon as I saw my mom, a smile quickly returned to my face. After school, we spent hours talking around our kitchen table. She always knew how to make me feel better. Our small moments together are my favorite memories. I'd do anything to have her with me again.

The first couple of months after my mom passed were the hardest. I was forced to move in with my dad, but we had a rocky relationship. One night, he drank too much and lashed out on me. I refused to take his abuse and ran away. The first night I slept on the streets. Eventually, I confided in my school psychologist about my situation. She recommended me to Starting Right, Now, a program helping homeless teens in situations similar to my own. After a long, intimidating interview process, I was accepted into the program.

SRN changed my life for the better. Since I've been in the program, my relationship with my father improved significantly. We stopped arguing, and started talking every day. Before I joined SRN, I didn't know how to do laundry or cook. No one ever took the time to teach me simple life skills. Now, I can confidently stand on my own two feet. I appreciate everything SRN has done for me. If it wasn't for this program, I would still be stuck at a dead end. But, God is good. He showed me the road to success.

Before my mom passed, she made me promise two things. The first promise was to finish school and attend college. The second was to become an independent woman. My mom wanted me to be successful and never have to struggle the way she did. I will fulfill my mom's dreams. I'm determined to graduate college and have a career, not just a job. I dream of being a forensic scientist and helping society. I want to set an example for others to always strive for the best, never settle. I've learned success only comes to those who work for it. I'm determined to work hard and achieve every goal I set for myself. My ultimate dream is to know I am making my mother proud.

Gyoed

Gyoed graduated from Wharton High School and is currently a freshman at Hillsborough Community College with intention of becoming an EMT/Paramedic.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

She pulls out a clear pipe and little baggie containing what looks like small pieces of glass. She carefully drops something in the pipe, flicks the clear green lighter and slowly lights the bottom. I am four years old and watch in awe while my mother exhales a big cloud of smoke. She's with a friend I've never seen before. The stranger has pale blonde hair with scabs all over her body, she looks sick. I see the look in my mother's eyes change as she becomes a different person. I know the look all too well - similar to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde - a mean monster consumes my mother's body. Her friend notices me and points to the door, I've been caught. In one sudden movement the door slams in my face and I'm exiled from her room. As usual, I'm alone once again.

Throughout my life, my mom suffered from chronic drug addiction - cocaine, heroin and meth. I bounced between family members because she couldn't take care of me. My mother moved us from Puerto Rico to Florida in an attempt to get her life together and escape my abusive father. She kept telling me we were on our way to achieve the "American dream". Shortly after we got here, my mom's addiction got the best of her. We lost our apartment when she chose drugs over paying the rent. She sent me back to Puerto Rico to stay with my grandparents, who were welcoming, but difficult to live with.

A year later, my grandparents allowed me to reunite with my mom back in Florida. My mom's destructive lifestyle had not changed and her bad decisions rubbed off on me. At nine years old, I smoked my first cigarette and used drugs a few days later. Following in my mother's footsteps, I quickly spiraled out of control. Even though it burnt my nine-year-old throat, marijuana served as my escape from reality. I was too young to think of the consequences. My mom and dad are addicts and dealers. I presumed I was destined to the same life.

A concerned neighbor called DCF and they came to my rescue. My mom, not wanting to deal with the commotion, sent me back to Puerto Rico for the fourth time. My grandparents tried hard to give me the love and attention I needed, but I knew my grandfather also suffered from drug addiction, as I watched him sneak out the back after church to get his fix.

Two years later, my mom turned her life around. I moved back to Florida for the fifth and final time to live with her and my uncle. My uncle was a good influence, getting my mom into rehab and giving me the love and support I needed. For one full year, my mom was drug free for the first time in my life. And then, old habits soon resurfaced. Life became a living hell. We had nowhere to live and went days without electricity, water and food.

One day, a friend of my mom's offered to help us get back on our feet. But as usual, something always happened. My mom drove under the influence and totaled our car. I no longer had a way to get to school. Missing school because of her bad choices infuriated me. I refused to let my mother drag me down with her. I made the most difficult decision of my life and left to finally break the cycle. I moved in with my girlfriend's family, but knew it could only be temporary.

I confided in my school psychologist about my situation and she recommended me to Starting Right, Now (SRN). SRN helps homeless teens in situations similar to mine and gives us a second chance. Starting Right, Now encourages me to focus on self-improvement and build a solid foundation so I can be successful. I never want to rely on any substance to feel alive. With their help, I am preparing for college, learning about financial responsibility and conflict resolution. I plan on pursuing a nursing degree so I can help society. As a nurse, I want to share my story so kids in detrimental situations can see there is hope. I look back and realize I was never destined to be a drug addict or dealer. I was always destined for greatness.



Jarian

Jarian graduated from Armwood High School and is currently in his senior year at Florida International University pursuing a Bachelor's in Hospitality Management.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

At the age of 15, I was kicked out of my house. My mother said she hated me. She was angry at the world, an effect of her brain surgery, refusing to speak to anyone. She disconnected the phones and would not allow me to talk to family. Cops and CPS came to my house because my sister cut herself due to my mother's abuse. My grandpa came to her rescue; she left with him. One day, I came home from school to my mom in a fit of rage. She was yelling and smacking me. I called my dad for help. He told me to get out. So, I did. I was young, but could take care of myself.

I did not want to end up like my brothers, locked in a cell. I was determined to attend school. I did not factor in how I was going to get there, where I was going to stay, or how I was going to eat. I began couch surfing and missing a lot of school.

A friend invited me to stay with him in his trailer. I cannot even count the days we went without power. I searched for a job, but no employer would hire a fifteen year old. I had to survive by any means - rob, steal or deal. I looked in the mirror asking, do I want to be a gangster?

I refocused on school, dedicating my time to playing football. One day during practice, I tore my ACL. I needed knee surgery. My dad refused to help. I wanted to attend college on a football scholarship. But, as long as I was under eighteen, my mom owned me, and I was not having surgery. I knew I had to be emancipated.

To be emancipated you must prove you can provide for yourself. Finally, at seventeen, I could get a job. I spoke to my school social worker who connected me with a lawyer to fight my case pro bono. The gavel hit the desk and my heart skipped a beat waiting for my judgment. What if the judge viewed me as a rebel child seeking freedom?

I entered the courtroom a child and exited a man. When the judge said, "you are emancipated", I became in control of my future. I worked 40 hours a week while managing my school work. I was exhausted.

One day my teacher and I were talking. He explained I worked double him, making ten times less. I don't want to live paycheck to paycheck. I want to show others it is possible to make it, no matter the obstacle. So I turned to a non-profit organization called Starting Right, Now, who helped me realize going to college is possible, as long as I keep my head in my books and away from distractions. They help subsidize an apartment. Now, I can focus on my grades and be a true student. I will attend college. And once there, I will take advantage of every opportunity.

Kelsey

Kelsey graduated from Robinson High School and is currently in her sophomore year at Florida State University pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Business.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

"Take your jacket off," my stepdad demanded. My lips parted to respond, but he wouldn't take less than my obedience. Hanging my head in shame, I peeked through my hair at the pile of clothes I had removed. My heart beat faster. My underwear was the only item left. As I lifted my head, the saltiness of my tears ran down my lips.

"Take them off or I will get my belt," he yelled. My hands trembled as I lowered my panties. Lyrics from a Veggie Tales song repeated in my head. The monster, my stepfather - the only father I have ever known, lounged on the couch, salivating as I undressed. His breathe sped up as each piece of clothing touched the floor.

My mom kept asking me why I had changed. If only she knew the truth. My biological father was never part of my life. I was three when my mother invited her boyfriend to live with us. When I turned twelve, he gave me extra hugs, calling me daddy's "pretty girl." His hand on my back or warm breath on my neck sent shivers down my spine. I struggled with depression, anxiety and severe anger issues. My stepfather's issues didn't just reside behind closed doors. He constantly lost his job; forcing us to move state to state. Keeping my dark secret consumed me. Moving every year inhibited me from developing relationships. I often sat in my room, curled up and cried. I was angry at my life, my stepfather and my mom for not recognizing the pain causing my anger. I questioned God. My faith was shaken and my hope for a better life teetered on a thin rope.

August 2012, I finally spoke up to my stepfather during a typical fight. I was being yelled at for my "lack of respect". "Honor your mother and your father," my stepfather said, condemning me with his favorite Bible verse. There wasn't a sliver of a chance I was respecting nor honoring him. That night, I gathered all the courage in my heart, looked him in the eye and told him, "Shut up, I don't want to listen to you and your scriptures. You are a hypocrite." The look of rage flashed in his eyes, reminding me of a demon. I knew nothing would ever change if I didn't find strength and tell my mother. When I did, we left in the middle of the night, while my stepfather was at work. We packed all that could fit in our car, along with our six animals and headed to Florida. As we drove down the driveway, I looked back at the house and a sense of freedom washed over me. It was over, it was finally over.

Life after my stepfather was hard. I watched my mom struggle to support us. There were many emotional and financial battles, such as giving up eating to have electricity. Time after time I walked into the kitchen hoping food would magically appear, only to be disappointed to find nothing. Food was a guarantee at school, but in the evening, my stomach felt empty. The rent was never paid on time and because of inconsistencies in paying, the apartment complex served us eviction papers. After two years of struggling in Florida, my mother moved to Arizona with my sister. I was dropped off at my uncle's house so I could finish school. I had already attended 17 schools so my mom thought it would be best to leave me behind. I enrolled myself at Robinson High School, as an Unaccompanied Youth. Although I was provided a bed to sleep in, I was still responsible for buying my own food, providing my own transportation to and from school and work, and purchasing any essentials I needed for personal use or school. I would wake up at five in the morning to get ready for school, come home for two hours to cram homework, and then head off to work. Most nights my shift ended after 1 a.m.

One day, I asked my counselor how to apply for free lunch, since I was an Unaccompanied Youth. She had me talk to the school social worker, who told me about Starting Right, Now, a program that helps teens in my situation. After meeting with the founder, I was chosen to participate in the program. Being accepted allowed me to create my happy ending. The dream of walking across the graduation stage and receiving my diploma was the only hope I had to escape the reality of my life. The program provides a stable home, food, academic tutoring and a mentor for the emotional support I lacked. In some ways the program feels like a family. I went from having poor attendance to never missing a day of school.

I was spinning, like an uncertain compass, in every direction, unable to choose a path. Now, not only do I have a path, I know my destination. When I look in the mirror every morning I remind myself I am the girl who was forced to face pain and struggle and still managed to come out on top. By attending a four-year university, I will be the first in my family to set the standard for future generations.

Sometimes life doesn't go as planned; I would know, because my life clearly illustrates this. I could build a mountain from wrenches that have landed in the middle of my plans. Life has challenged me with hurdles. Just as change is inevitable, obstacles forced upon us are inescapable and for most, there is no detour. When faced with these difficulties, lessons are learned. Allowing what I endured to defeat me is not an option. The path I am choosing leads to success. After all, I am a survivor and no matter how many barriers are thrown in my path, I will always keep climbing and reach the peak.

Kemari

Kemari graduated from Armwood  
High School and is currently a  
freshman at Saint Leo University.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

7:00 pm, like clockwork, crack-heads and prostitutes appear with bloodshot eyes; some snort cocaine in the parking lot as I sneak a peek out my motel window, afraid to be seen. I know the drill well... prostitutes lurk around the side of the highway waiting for a car to stop. They speak for a second and hop quickly into the car. I am afraid to open the door or step outside. I have been instructed by my sisters not to unlock the door for any reason. The room is small and cluttered with rusted scum, infested with roaches and reeks of mildew. I feel trapped. I sit up waiting for my sisters to get home, knowing they have to walk by what I witness outside. I am 15 years old and terrified something will happen to them. I don't want them taken from me - ripped away like everything I have ever held close to my heart. I never experienced a "real" childhood. My mom abandoned us in a motel. My sisters are all I have - so I hold on to them tightly!

The first night without my mother was awful. Being the youngest of three sisters, I was so thankful to have them with me. They were only 17 and 19 years old but they took care of me. I wasn't old enough to have a job but they both worked to afford the one small room we shared. The motel was not in a safe area and they had to walk home from work every night around 3 a.m.

My life unraveled into anguish the day we were evicted. Walking home from school I heard people screaming at each other. I realized the noise was coming from my house. My mom and landlord were arguing over unpaid rent, which was nothing new. It was the same cycle every year; my mom wouldn't pay rent and we were forced to move again. She didn't tell me what was going on, but she didn't have to. I knew it was only a matter of time until we were kicked out. The next day, our landlord put an eviction notice on the front door. Tears streamed down my face. We had nowhere to go.

The final day of our eviction, we packed our belongings and headed to a motel. The motel was on the side of a highway, hidden between fast food restaurants. The hallways were outside so there was no sense of security. My neighbors were junkies, drug dealers and prostitutes. We were three young, teenage girls living alone in a single motel room for seven months; it was the worst experience of my life. My mom left us without saying a word, not even goodbye. A week later, she called to tell us she was at a different hotel with her boyfriend. I was shocked. My mom couldn't pay for our rent but she could pay to stay at a nicer hotel with her boyfriend? He didn't even have a job.

We didn't have a stove and the mini fridge was too small to fit anything. Our only options were cheap fast food or microwaveable food. We ate Wendy's and ramen noodles for every meal I promised myself, if I ever got out of the motel, I would never eat these items again. We lived down the street from school so transportation wouldn't be an issue for me. I feared my peers would see where I lived so I sprinted to the motel every day so no one would see me. My sisters were tirelessly working so I was always alone. I felt sad, depressed and constantly thought about my mom. Every night, I laid on the futon, staring at the ceilings tiles, as thousands of unhappy thoughts ran through my head. I couldn't leave the room because my sisters didn't want anything bad to happen to me.

One day, I was called to the guidance office to see our social worker. I found out my sister confessed our situation to the school social worker and she recommended us to Starting Right, Now (SRN), a program that helps homeless youth. We were able to interview with the Executive Director, Vicki Sokolik, and she accepted us into the program. Ms. Vicki said we wouldn't have to worry about bills anymore. They would provide us a stable home and food and help us with academic support so we could attend college. Most importantly, she said we could be kids again.

At first, I was hesitant to join the program but it was the only way to keep what was left of our small family together. Now, my sisters and I are the first in our family to graduate high school and enter college. Starting Right, Now (SRN) gave me the opportunity to participate in leadership classes, emotional intelligence training and set me up for a successful future. Growing up, no one was by my side to say "congratulations" or "good job". The SRN staff encourages me to reach for the stars and dream big. Now, I look forward to attending college, with the help of scholarships and grants, and continuing my education. In the future, I want to help society by sharing my story and encouraging others to pursue their dreams. I want to show others that no matter where you come from or what your situation is, you can achieve anything you set your mind to. As my favorite poet wrote, "The eyes see these materials for building, see the difficulties, too, and the obstacles. The mind seeks a way to overcome these obstacles." - Langston Hughes

Luis

Luis graduated from Bowers-Whitely  
Career Center and is currently  
attending the Barbering Program at  
Erwin Technical Center.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

My mother turned the belt around, hitting me on my temple, slicing the corner of my eye open. Blood ran down my cheek. Adrenaline coursed through my body making me numb. My step-father, in the background, charged at me, egging me on to fight back. I vaguely remember my sister screaming; then everything went dark.

At school the next day I was interrogated about my black eye. Not wanting to get my mom in trouble, I said I started boxing and had a match the night before. My step-father, constantly tried to instigate a fight with me by throwing me dirty looks and softly commenting under his breath. When I would stick up for myself, my mom would beat me with her fists or a broom, telling me to respect him. They constantly kicked me out of the house, forcing me to escape to my Aunts' house. They would reprimand me for being lazy, even though my step-father hasn't worked in three years. He sat in bed playing video games all day while I worked to pay the bills.

My day started at six a.m. taking two buses, then riding my bicycle two and half miles to get to work. Then, I would go to school, back to work and finally get home around midnight each day. I would give my mom money for the bills. One day, I discovered she had stolen \$2,000 out of my savings account. I felt alone and hopeless, no one was on my side.

I became a master at hiding my anguish behind a smile and being active at school so no one would suspect my situation. I took it upon myself to make my education a priority. I threw myself into extracurricular activities, holding leadership roles, and participating in countless community service projects, knowing it would make me a better person. One day, I mustered up the courage to record my mom abusing me on my phone. I showed my teacher the video of my mother punching and choking me, telling me I was worthless. She said I wouldn't amount to anything and she didn't care about me. My teacher watched the recording in awe and immediately called DCF.

I believe everything happens for a reason. Even though times were tough and I lost everything, I still saw the light at the end of the tunnel. I kept my chin high so I could prove my mother wrong. My cousin was in a similar situation and told me about a program he joined called Starting Right, Now (SRN). They provided him and many other teenagers with stability and resources to live a successful life. The program has given me a place to live, a loving family and classes to help better myself. When I was accepted into the program a weight was lifted off of my shoulders. SRN relieved the stress in my life so I can focus on becoming a happier person. I plan on attending college and becoming a motivational speaker, serving kids in situations similar to mine.



Kyle

Kyle graduated from Armwood High School and attended the Welding Program at Hillsborough Community College. He is currently employed as a welder.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

It all started my freshmen year of high school. My mom told me to go live with my dad. I left that day hoping things would cool down and I could come back in a couple days. When I went back, my mom and stepdad called the cops and I was told to move out of my mom's house that day. It has been almost four years since we have spoken.

I lived with my father the rest of my freshmen year and a couple months into my sophomore year. My dad and I always had a fairly close relationship even though he never made good choices. My dad is an alcoholic. A little after moving in with him, our house was foreclosed on. My dad had no job and no savings, so he got a job that required traveling, which left me with no parental guidance. When my dad was in town he was constantly drunk so I stayed in my room as much as possible, but eventually arguments between us ensued. He would have money for his girlfriend's beer and cigarettes, but no lunch money or gas to take me to school.

The day I left my dad's house, my life changed. I got a job and worked after school, saving up enough money to buy my own truck so I would not have to rely on others to get me to school and anywhere else I needed to go. I finally had full control of my life.

The greatest influence on my life has been my "uncle" Ricky Sewell, who was actually my dad's best friend until he started choosing booze and girlfriends over his friends and family. Ricky took me in when my dad did not, and treated me like a son. He has given me guidance and has set a good example of how to be a man.

My goals are to graduate from high school and to start the welding program at Hillsborough Community College. I want to begin my career as a welder so that I can support myself as soon as possible.

Melanie

Melanie graduated from Sickles High School and is currently a junior at the University of South Florida pursuing a Bachelor's in Women and Gender Studies.



STARTING  
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I opened my eyes as his body pressed against mine. I was not startled because this had been going on for a while now. He was a grown man who had known me since I was in diapers. I was staying with him by the demands of my mother while waiting in Canada to become an American citizen, all alone.

His hands ran across my body and he whispered in my ear, "Good morning sunshine," although it did not feel like one. He got on top of me, kissed my forehead, and laid in bed with me for a few hours. That was his routine. He would crawl into my bed morning and night. What happened in between consisted of "accidental" walk-ins while I was changing or getting out of the shower. Or even the occasional grab of the hair, brush against the cheek or the slow lingering of his eyes before I could find an excuse to walk away. "You're so beautiful," he said while he served me breakfast in bed and ran his fingers across my hand.

When I finally decided to tell my parents what was going on, my father said, "This is a conversation you should have with your mother." When I called my mother, the only response I got was the sound of her hanging up the phone. No one believed me. I had no support system to get myself off this horrible road.

That is when I decided to become independent. Today, I'm a different person. I learned I control the road I travel. I can hop on and off and support myself. I moved out the house before I even turned eighteen, got a job, and paid my own bills. Now I'm in Starting Right Now, a non-profit program that aids me, providing a solid foundation and allowing me to continue my growth as an independent woman. I am about to graduate high school and attend the University of South Florida. Never again will I rely on someone else to save me. My obstacle was not a bump in the road that left me broken and bruised. It was a wake-up call to embrace anything life throws at me and turn it into an opportunity.

Olivia

Olivia graduated from the International Baccalaureate Program at Strawberry Crest High School and is currently a sophomore at Florida State University pursuing a Bachelor's in Social Work.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

Four horizontal lines for writing, located to the right of the SRN logo and text.

The ride to his house is nothing new, nothing unfamiliar to my 17 years. Walking in, there are no lights, and I can barely see, but I know exactly the room. No time is wasted. For hours I do what I need to for a place to stay for the night. Years earlier, I had read a book that involved characters so desperate to survive they used their bodies to pay for what they needed. I did not realize I would later find myself in a similar position, saying I would never lower myself to such a level. Now I understand because I have been there myself.

It's 11:00 p.m. I just got off work, completing another eighteen hour day: school, work, homework, a couple hours of sleep in between, then it starts over again. I'm exhausted, but I have nowhere to stay, having been kicked off of a friend's couch due to too many late nights of work.

I know what I have to do tonight. I feel dirty, used, nothing more than an object rented for the night then thrown away. With no place to stay and work the next day, I do anything and everything in order to not sleep outside during the middle of winter and still make it to work on time to keep my job at the burger joint, Five Guys.

Time passes slowly. I am numb. I feel nothing other than impatience for the sleep that will eventually come once my debt is paid for the night. I choose to black out because I would rather not remember the abuse my body is suffering, even though I will see and feel it the following day. After what feels like days, it's over. Passing out once more, I relish in the sleep I know I've had to earn.

It's too good to be true. After sacrificing my body in order to pay for what my money could not, I'm told to get out at three in the morning. I feel cheated and furious because we agreed to the terms beforehand. I let myself be fooled and have no way of gaining back what was given to me that night: shame, disrespect, and a bad reputation. It's suddenly so clear I need him more than he needs me. With nowhere to go, I beg for a ride closer to my job but find myself alone and in the cold with nothing on but my work shirt and jeans - exactly what I tried to avoid. Finally finding a little unlocked Miata, I wedge myself inside and search the car for anything that could keep me warm. It's fifty degrees outside and the car provides hardly any relief. Shivering and uncomfortable, I finally doze off knowing I have work very soon.

A few times I almost dropped out of school - the easier choice - but I'm proud to say I am in the International Baccalaureate Program (IB). I had to learn to balance a job, find a place to sleep, and an IB workload. In my experience, poverty and hardship shadow lack of education. When I was homeless, few things mattered to me. I forced myself to care about work, shelter, school, and transportation. I was determined to stay in school, despite my exhaustion. My desire to be successful was the driving force pushing me to attend school each morning and ultimately reach out for help.

I was sixteen when I became homeless after escaping sexual abuse at my parents' house. I found myself bouncing from house to house, never knowing when I would be kicked out. I had problems being an independent, underage student and confided in a school social worker. She told me about Starting Right, Now (SRN), which is a program helping homeless teens. I was counting down the days until my eighteenth birthday when I would be legal to interview for the program, without my parents' consent. During the interview, I was nervous and scared but desperate to get out of my current situation.

I don't often get a break in life. When I was accepted into the program, it felt surreal. SRN gave me an opportunity, unattainable on my own. They care about me and provide a stable environment, which I never imagined having. I walked on eggshells in the houses I stayed in, never feeling welcome or secure, until now. Starting Right, Now empowers me by helping me plan my future so I'm never trapped in a situation like my past. No longer do I have to barter my body. I am respected and understood as if I am part of a real family. Help and relief came just in time to secure my future. Now, I'm going to college and pursuing my dream to obtain a Business Degree. At eighteen, I am ready to put the past behind me and focus on my future.

Phillip

Phillip graduated from Steinbrenner High School and proudly serves in the United States Marine Corps. He was recently promoted to a Lance Corporal.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

"My blood sugar....my stomach! Get me some orange juice please!" I froze in the doorway, surprised he was asking for my help. My dad, a strong man, never showed weakness. With no orange juice in the fridge, I improvised with sugar water. He gulped it down, placing his hand over his face as if he was tired of everything. He was usually stoic, but I witnessed fear on his face. I had no idea how to help. He was drenched in sweat and gasping for air.

I didn't know how bad my father's illness really was. He told me the pain was a symptom of forgetting to take his insulin. A week later, he was diagnosed with stomach cancer. I couldn't believe it. One of my greatest fears is losing my parents before they see me become successful. Taking in the news about cancer was overwhelming. I knew he was beginning to die.

I grew up mainly with my mother who was unable to maintain a stable home. I cleaned myself and washed my clothes at fast-food restaurants on a regular basis. I linked up with a bad crowd to rebel against my mother. When I turned 18, my mother moved away and I had no choice but to move in with my dad. I did not really know him well.

It was my father's mission to "make a man out of me." He made me get a full-time job and start paying bills. I was only a senior in high school. It was exhausting to work and keep up in school. My dream of graduating was slowly deteriorating. My father and I butted heads. He barely spoke to me unless it was yelling out orders. He was never proud of me or showed any affection. I craved guidance to help shepherd my decisions for the future. With the cancer riddling his body, he became violently angry. I felt like a burden. I needed to leave, but had nowhere to escape. I confided in my school mentor about my situation who put me in contact with Starting Right, Now (SRN).

With SRN I found a home where I am happy and feel welcomed. They provide me with a stable environment and peaceful place to lay my head. I'm supported in continuing my education and encouraged to do well in school. I'm on track to graduate from high school and will be the first of my siblings to go to college. I have a plan for my future, which includes fulfilling my dream to serve in the military. I'm on my way to becoming someone not only I can be proud of, but my parents can be proud of as well. I see a great future ahead of me and I will work hard to pursue my dreams.



Randall

Randall graduated from Armwood High School and will earn his Bachelor's of Communication Degree in December from Coastal Carolina University.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
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I threw the first punch. Then guns started shooting and I ran behind a car. I felt a bullet fly right past the left side of my face. My mind went blank ... After that day, I stopped putting myself in those situations, giving myself a curfew. I did not want to die.

I lived in the projects, full of bad people my entire childhood - drug dealers, Killers and rapists. People would visit our home, lay their guns down and start measuring drugs. I learned how to break down weed quickly. I sold pills, shot guns and robbed people. My mom has spent a lot of my life in jail. I do not know my father. This was all normal.

Starting high school I decided to change my life by trial and error. I associated with different people, acting how they wanted, not realizing I just needed to be me. My junior year of high school I was given the opportunity to join a non-profit organization that would mentor me. They would help me with housing, school expenses, a job and emotional support. I knew I needed the support if I was really going to change my life. The program made me think...will I graduate or end up in jail? Will I make anything of my life? I was worried my past would catch up with me; all the times I was arrested; all the times I didn't take school seriously; all the times I lost my temper. Those times have changed forever. The program made me participate in leadership camps, Dale Carnegie, work part time, never miss school, turn in all assignments and attend anger management classes.

From all of this, I realize I don't have to be who anyone wants me to be. I play football and wrestle for my high school to keep myself occupied. The busier I am, the less trouble I will get into. Being busy prepares me for the real world.

I live alone in my own apartment this year because I can't live with my mom. She lives in a small trailer with nine people and there is no room for me. I need to stay on my positive path. I hope I will be outstanding not only on the field and in the ring but in the classroom. I will work for it because I don't want anything handed to me. I want to make my mom proud and give my brother and sister someone to look up to. I have reconstructed my life into something different than where I grew up. I abide by a curfew I set for myself. If I can make it from a terrible neighborhood to a college campus, I know I can be anything. "When we are no longer able to change a situation - we are challenged to change ourselves." Viktor Frankl.

Raphael

Raphael graduated from Waters Career Center and is currently a freshman at Hillsborough Community College.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

"YOU WORTHLESS BITCH!" erupts out of my father's mouth. My parent's argument dominates the room, deafening the sound of our video game. I turn up the volume, attempting to shield my little brother from abusive slurs, but my mother's cries are too clear. Barging out of the room, I see my father spit in her face. In one swift movement, he launches my mom's delicate body into the Kitchen wall. A painful grimace distorts her face, she looks like a ragdoll. My mom falls to the floor, revealing a hole in the wall resembling her silhouette. I ache to protect my mother; her weary body is no match to my father's wrath. At 12 years old, I try to summon the courage to stand up to my father, but I'm paralyzed with fear.

I learned the hard way to stay out of my parent's fights. We lived in a small, empty apartment with one bedroom, which belonged to my parents. I slept in the living room on a dingy sofa with my brother. One night, my mother's bone-chilling scream startled me out of a deep sleep. I sprinted towards their room and frantically banged on the door. As my father swung open the door, I caught a quick glance of my teary-eyed mother. Infuriated, my father turned his wrath on me, preaching how I needed to respect him. I refused to respect the man who taught me to treat women like queens, yet tried to strangle my mother to death.

I needed to escape this living nightmare. I confessed seven years of domestic violence, my deepest secret, in a suicide note. I slowly walked barefooted towards the Kitchen drawer to grab a knife. I grabbed the blade, pressed it against my skin and asked God to forgive me. As I held my breath I heard the soft patter of footsteps; my little brother walked into the Kitchen. Looking into his eyes, I felt ashamed. I couldn't leave him alone. In a single moment, I decided I would never let the actions of my abusive father control my life. Neither of my parents worked, which resulted in our family being chronically homeless. In six years, I faced five evictions in seven cities. They couldn't afford a stable home and most nights I starved, but they always had enough money for drugs. My father used to refer to the lines of coke as his medicine. My mom would be high on painkillers while my dad quickly snorted lines of white powder through a cut straw. At one point, I thought my father had a job at Home Depot. He periodically came home with expensive tools we had to hide around the house; I naively thought we were playing a game. One day, I was waiting in the car as he quickly ran into "work". Thirty minutes later, I saw my father being dragged out of the store in handcuffs. I quickly realized he wasn't working for Home Depot; he was selling stolen tools.

The last time I saw my dad was December 24, 2009. Christmas Eve morning, my dad stepped out of the apartment to run an errand. He said, "I'm heading out. You know the drill: lock the door, don't answer the door for anyone and stay in the house." My father was arrested shortly after he left. At the time, my mother was in rehab. She came back when she found out about my father's incarceration and used it as our chance to escape. We quickly packed our belongings and moved from Pennsylvania to Florida, staying with anyone who would take us in.

We stayed in friend's houses, but usually had to pay rent. I took on a part time job while attending school to pay the bills. My mother still didn't work and I didn't make enough to support all three of us. Eventually, we ran out of loved ones willing to help. At 17 years old, my family finally had to separate. My brother was sent to live in Philadelphia with my father, who was recently released from jail. I stayed with the father of my best friend on a temporary basis.

Eventually, my guidance counselor called me down to her office. I repeatedly choked on syllables as I confessed my struggles; blistered feet from walking miles in excruciating heat to school, exhaustion from working long hours to pay rent and bearing the recent separation of my family. She recommended me to a program helping homeless teens called, Starting Right, Now. A few days later, I was accepted into the program and felt the weight of the world lift from my shoulders. They provide me with the stable home I need. With their help, I plan to attend college and become a social worker. My purpose in life is to give back to those who lost hope. I refuse to follow the footsteps of my parents. I'm determined to work hard, achieve greatness and help my community.

As my brother boarded the plane, his final words to me were, "promise you'll never forget about me." I'm determined to be successful and set a good example for my brother. I dream of having the financial stability to help my brother pursue a college education and achieve his dreams. The ancestral chains of poverty will be broken by me. Success is no longer an option, but a lifestyle.

Shanquell

Shanquell graduated from Tampa Bay Technical High School and is currently in her senior year at Florida State University, pursuing a Bachelor's in Biology with plans to attend Medical School in the Fall.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

Do you know what it's like to be sitting on the bus, laughing with your friends without a care in the world and notice every single item that was ever inside your house now placed in the driveway? The denial instantly soaked into my mind. That's not my house, can't be. Maybe the neighbors are having a garage sale. As the bus approached the corner of my stop, reality smacked me in the face.

Reaching my house from the corner never felt so long in my life. Fear, confusion, anger crept up on me similar to a hungry tiger while stalking its prey. Finally I reached my mother; the look of despair on her face immediately warned me everything had gone wrong...quickly. The police told her our landlord took thousands of her hard earned money as "rent" but never paid the mortgage and instead let it fall into foreclosure. There was no way my mother would get her money back.

That day had to be one of the worst ones of my 17 years of life, but the hardest part was waking up in the morning and going to school as if everything was normal. Thankfully, I was blessed with a strong mother. With her strong will, the help from people who care about us and a great organization at our side, our worst nightmare is now in the past.

Education is and will continue to be a predominant part of my life. I'm only the person I am today because of the lessons learned through the obstacles and situations I was forced to face and overcome, but learning from the "real world" isn't everything. School is also as important, if not more, as knowledge gets you much farther in life. This characteristic also justifies my reasoning to become a part of the medical field because you're given the wonderful opportunity to spread your knowledge to help people live a healthy, longer life.

I refuse to be another statistic. I refuse to put my education in jeopardy. I refuse to give up. I'm putting my all into my education and determined to graduate from medical school and I will not let anyone or anything hold me back. I've experienced life at its worse and seen the detriment it caused to those I love and I would never want to see them in such a situation like that again. Therefore I must be successful, determined, hardworking and fearless not only for me, but for those that mean the world to me.

Shaquille

Shaquille graduated from King High School  
and graduated from the Welding Program at  
Hillsborough Community College. He is  
currently employed as a welder.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

It was a hot summer day, school had just let out a couple of weeks before. Me and a couple of my older homies were hanging outside Tommy's Corner Store. We were just doing what we did on a daily basis - smoking Newport's and selling drugs - while keeping an eye out for the law, and our parents, of course.

When things got "too hot" on the block, we would go to the park down the street or behind the local Wynn Dixie and smoke weed, while everything cooled down. 30 minutes later, we would be right back at it. It was systematic. We were constantly looking for a way to make a quick dollar.

While living this unforgiving lifestyle, I witnessed everything from robbery to shootouts. I even engaged in some of these activities myself.

But on this day, all of this would cease and a turn of events would change my life and my perspective of life for the better. My family - my sister, brother, mom and myself - were staying with my auntie and her 3 kids. Her oldest child had two babies there as well. My mom had been working with my sister's social worker to find places to live and a job. The social worker referred us to a white lady, Vicki Sokolik, who had founded a non-profit - Starting Right, Now - whose purpose serves to provide homes and support homeless and needy families to ensure a fair chance for their youth to complete high school, attend college and receive an education.

My mom let me know about the appointment with Ms. Vicki the day before. Today was the day...I walked in the office with my mom. Ms. Vicki was there. She was very vibrant with big eyes and a bright, white smile. She was soft spoken and very sweet. She began to ask me very formal questions. "How old are you?" "What interest do you have?" "What are your friends like?" She wanted to know more about my friends and so I named the two I had just been hanging with before the meeting - Frank D. and Boo Boo. She went on to say that I needed to stay away from the crowd that I kept. I needed to surround myself with positive people. I needed better habits. I was offended and responded accordingly. My demeanor became hostile, "Ain't nothin' wrong with the friends I got. I like my home boys. We might live negative lifestyles but they are positive people." She encouraged me to find friends my age, get active in sports, go to college and be productive. Ms. Vicki politely suggested I take some time to think about my life and if I wanted, we could meet again.

When I got back in the hood, I saw a police cruiser with lights flashing at Tommy's Corner Store and one of the homies I mentioned in the meeting was being booked and cuffed and taken to jail. I heard from my auntie that the police had raided Frank D's house and arrested Boo Boo too. He went to prison for two years. Having them taken away was an omen that God was talking to me through them. I could see that my mom really wanted this help. This was God's answer to her prayers.

The next time we met, Ms. Vicki asked if I was ready to make a commitment to go to school every day, stay out of trouble and be productive in my off time. This was all part of the SRN program. I was really ready to tell her "no thanks." But, my mom got all emotional.

I swallowed my pride, bit the bullet and told Ms. Vicki that I would enter the program. She let me know that there were requirements and I didn't really meet the qualifications because I had a criminal record and I was kicked out of school. But she said she saw something in me and that I had what it took to make it out of my situation into a better life. So, she was willing to bend the rules and go out on a limb for me and my family. On the way to the car, I could tell my mom was relieved of her burden.

One year passed and I was back in school, playing football. I moved across town so I wasn't hanging out with my homies often. I was staying out of trouble and had even kicked most of my bad habits, like smoking and drinking, and had adopted some new ones like exercising and reading. I attended SRN workshops to improve my attitude, academics and social skills such as ANNTOWN, Dale Carnegie and Kaplan SAT tutoring. I can honestly say I have benefitted immensely. Two and a half years later, I am coming into my senior year of high school. I have totally turned my life around and am living a better lifestyle today. I have ambitions and goals. I make plans and execute them. My heart and soul have been enlightened and relieved of any festering stress. My mind is clear and sharp. I know what is important and significant. My intentions are positive and my actions are heartfelt.

My perspective is in order. I can see the big picture and realize how the little things, like hope, faith, hard work and dedication play into that picture. I work hard at these things and better myself as an individual. I seek knowledge, wisdom and understanding of the world I live in. Every day, I pray for serenity. Mostly I seek courage to change things I can and the wisdom to know the difference between what I can change and what I can't. With the knowledge I seek and the power it bestows upon me, I want to change the world around me as I know it to be a world for the better.

College is the next step in this journey. Not only in a scholastic sense, but in a spiritual sense. I know if given the opportunity to attend a University, I will bring an undying hunger for knowledge and an unquenchable thirst for wisdom, combined with a humble, proud personality. I will have spirit, team spirit, school spirit and most importantly, a spirit of life.



Skye

Skye graduated from the International Baccalaureate Program at King High School and graduated from the University of Florida with a Bachelor's degree in History. She completed a Post Baccalaureate in Bio-Medical Sciences from the University of South Florida and plans to enter Medical School in the Fall.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

"It is my junior year of high school and yet another night of uncertainty. Where am I going to sleep? What am I going to eat? The sky is growing dimmer and I am feeling vulnerable, tired, and hungry."

Everyone's eyes are fixed upon me. It is 2011 and I am standing in front of over 150 people, giving a speech about my life as a homeless youth. At this point, I am a freshman at the University of Florida (UF) and it has been two years since I broke the cycle of homelessness. Shoulders back, I am beaming with pride as I tell my story of overcoming every obstacle set in my path. My story encapsulates the potential donors for the non-profit Starting Right, Now (SRN), and by the end of my speech, I receive a standing ovation; they are mesmerized by my strength and commitment.

SRN is a non-profit that provides a select number of homeless youth an opportunity to obtain a higher education through mentorship. Before joining the program, both of my parents suffered from addiction, and I was forced into the streets by my father. Upon discovering my homeless status, a counselor associated with my high school's International Baccalaureate program helped me apply to SRN.

Vicki Sokolik, founder of the organization, interviews me: "Before we begin, I need you to know that this opportunity may not work out. We have anywhere from three to five interviews a day. I am ready to hear your story but I just need you to know the reality that you might not be admitted." I nod my head slowly, anticipating disappointment.

Within hours, I discover that I am one of only ten homeless youths who have been accepted into the program. They put me in an apartment and help me pay some of my bills. They provide me with food and a bed. Because of their help, it is not long before I am graduating high school, attending UF, and making my way to study abroad in Chengdu, China.

China is where I am finally able to stop simply surviving and finally begin living. My eyes are able to see beyond my own basic needs, and the fast-paced, crowded streets of Chengdu reveal a desperation I thought only existed in third world countries; sick and injured people lie in the streets begging for help, and I feel the need to make a change.

When I arrive back at UF, I join an activist group on campus- Students for a Democratic Society. Through this endeavor, I discover a love for engaging the public. I am a community advocate, working directly against legislation that could further marginalize the poor and the homeless. I start numerous projects, such as organizing free meal events twice per week, but I find that people I encounter are not only hungry, but also sick or injured. I begin exploring different avenues for healing my community.

"Grab the computer, it's time to see the patient in room 5."

Upon graduating from UF, I am a medical scribe in an Emergency Department.

The physician begins speaking and I am typing vigorously: "64 year old female presents to the emergency department with complaints of left lower extremity edema..." We leave the room and my physician goes over my HPI note with me. "Don't forget to include the history, it is one of the most important portions of a patient's chart. She has coronary artery disease." I never again forget to note the history.

Within weeks of completing training, my colleagues know to call me if they want a shift covered. I am working anywhere from 40 to 75 hour work weeks and I am not sleeping much. The charge nurse offers her office to me; she hands me a key and tells me to ensure that I nap between shifts.

After this fulfilling experience witnessing medicine at work, I am more certain about my purpose. As such, I apply to a post-bachelor program at the University of South Florida (USF) and spend my spare time volunteering in an Organic Chemistry laboratory at the university. After one year, with my skills developed both in the classroom and the lab, I am inspired to apply for a summer research position at the University of California, San Francisco. I am proud to say that as of June 2016 I have been researching immune cell and stem cell differentiation as a potential for therapeutic muscle regeneration at UCSF.

By the time I have received my B.A. in History from UF, finished my pre-medicine prerequisites at USF, and moved across the country to join a prestigious research team at UCSF, I have proven my ability as a motivated, enthusiastic, and resourceful individual, especially when considering the profound obstacles I have overcome and the opportunities I have had to create for myself. Each experience has opened a new page in my book of life. Each page read is accompanied by a new lesson learned, and each new lesson introduces an even stronger ability to empathize with the world around me. My commitment is true, and my heart is full. I wish for nothing more than to go further with my studies in order to help provide my community more compassion and healing. I am dedicated, just as I have been in my past, not only to survive, not merely to thrive, but also to excel at working alongside people in an effort to heal the world, one person at a time. There is no greater honor.

Taylor

Taylor graduated from Durant High School and received a Bachelor's in Social Work from Saint Leo University. She is currently completing a Masters Program for Social Work at Florida State University.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

July fourth...Independence Day....at 17...you do not want that to be literal. But, in my case...July fourth is the day I left home.

I left a note on the Kitchen table, grabbed a bag full of clothes, my cat and ran. That very day, I gained strength and hope for my future.

My mom had an unrealistic ideal....a daughter stayed home to clean house. In 10th grade, I was a 16 year old drop out, against my own will. I caused so much commotion (I wanted to go to school) she decided she didn't want me around and placed me back in school for my 11th grade year.

That year my mom spun out of control, losing custody of her two younger children. She began drinking again, and married a man after only knowing him for three weeks. They separated, seven weeks later, leaving us homeless. I was forced to move in with my friend so I could finish out my 11th grade year. My mother moved in with my uncle...so I thought.

Turns out she had moved in with another man. Once school was over and summer began, I had to move back in with my mom. Being there with her was awful. Watching her drink and make bad decisions became too much for me to endure.

I was tired of being abused and neglected. So, I made the hardest decision, causing me to become independent and live without a mom. Leaving made me a leader and showed me qualities I never thought I had. These skills will make me successful in college this coming year, because along with leadership comes responsibility. To this day, I do not regret the choice I made. I thank God everyday for standing by me each step of the way. I hope I am accepted into St. Leo University and can fulfill my dream of being the first college educated person in my family.

Tieyenna

Tie graduated from Armwood High School and received a Bachelor's of English from the University of South Florida. She currently works as a Teaching Fellow with Citizen Schools, a nonprofit through Americorps. She also works for Education First, an International Company that teaches English.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

From a young age, I was molested and raped by my mother's fiancé and a teenage boy who would babysit. When I turned four, my sisters and I were moved into my great grandmother's house because my mother had to serve time in prison. While there, my oldest sister stepped on a garden pitch fork in the backyard, causing severe trauma. DCF was alerted and we were taken away.

When I was ten my father was granted full custody. I was finally going to be with my dad and I was so excited. My stepmother despised me because she wanted to have a family of three - her, my father and my unborn sister. Every time she got the chance to blame me for something and get me in trouble she did, which made my father beat me. He didn't spank me like a parent. He would come at me with full blows of belted up fists like I was a man, not his child. I began to hate him.

School became an issue. I would come to school each day so unhappy and empty from my life at home that I got myself into a lot of trouble. I felt like if I acted out in school enough my dad would give me a little bit of his attention. It didn't work. I was just labeled as trouble.

At twelve, I saw my mother for the first time since I was four. But our relationship was short lived when she was sent back to prison. My father and stepmother also split, leaving me drifting, trying to find a place to stay.

For the next couple of years my life was a float. I had no real home and was very unstable. My freshman year I was sent to live with my grandmother who tortured me. She would curse at me calling me a worthless bitch and other inappropriate names. Each day, when I got home from school, I had to clean whatever she wanted before she allowed me to do my schoolwork. By the time I finished, I would be too sleepy to do homework, causing my grades to be low. I was forced to live with my grandmother until December 29 2009. On that day, my grandmother was in a fit of rage, and ready to fight. She told my sister and me to get out of her house. I agreed and began packing. She ran in my room, punched me in the jaw and then again in the mouth, busting my lip. I kept blocking her blows until my aunt ran in the room and grabbed my grandma. My sister and I ran to my friend's house and called the police. The police took pictures of my face, lip and bruises and called HRS.

My mother picked me up, drunk, and was instructed to take me to the department of children and families as soon as possible. We went in the next day. Starting January of 2010, I decided to strive to do better and get out of this life. When the semester started, I was late almost everyday to my first period class because I had no transportation. My teachers began to wonder. I went from being in school all the time, on time, to being there some days and late. Though it was hard living pillow to post I managed to keep decent grades, join the school tennis team, and pass all of my exams.

The summer going into my senior year my situation got even harder. Now I had a job, working six days a week, far from where I lived. Getting there took hours. I was living with my mother, her boyfriend, and my older sister in a one bedroom duplex. The space was very crowded; I slept in the living room on one couch while my sister slept on the other. My sister and mother are night time people, so they would stay up late, making too much noise for me to concentrate on homework or get any sleep. After a few months of living this way, I decided enough was enough, and went back to sleeping from pillow to post. Every day, I would be searching for a classmate to allow me stay on their couch for the night.

In February, the social worker at my school told me she contacted a program she believed could help me out. That program is called Starting Right, Now. Two representatives of Starting Right, Now came and interviewed me and five other students separately. They told us they would only pick a few that fit their program. Another student and I were chosen out of six. There my life began to change. I signed a contract, agreeing to abide by specific rules and take on certain responsibilities, and with that, they helped me get my own apartment, a computer, printer, internet access and a school bus to get me to school. They also helped me get a job at McDonalds. For the first time in my life, I had no worries about where I was going to rest my head at night. I could finally focus on school. My journey has just begun.

I have proven I am a fighter. I have proven I am resilient. I have proven I am not a quitter. And I would love the opportunity to prove that I am worthy of being admitted into USF St. Pete. I want to ensure I do not end up like the rest of my family. I know that through education, I can escape homelessness. I already have taken the steps to prove my strength and determination. I am like an oak tree.

The strongest oak of the forest is not the one that is protected from the storm and hidden from the sun. It's the one that stands in the open where it is compelled to struggle for its existence against the winds and rains and the scorching sun.

Tyler

Tyler graduated from Plant High School and is currently a freshman at Florida International University.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

With my head down, I enter the room not wanting to see the view in front of me. I stand in the doorway, silently summoning the courage to look up and see my mom. The sight of her brings me to my knees. Uncontrollable tears stream down my face. As I walk towards the casket my body trembles. I reach down to touch her face, but quickly pull away, the coldness of her skin scares me. I see bruises on her body, evidence of the pain she endured until her final day. As I tell her my last goodbye, I have the strangest sensation she will open her eyes. I want her to wake up and hug me, but it never happens. My mother died, when I was only 17 years old, from a hemorrhage in the brain, caused from wet brain, occurring in people who drink heavily for years.

My father struggled deeply after my mom's passing. Instead of dealing with his pain, he selfishly saturated himself with alcohol to achieve numbness. My sister and I were caught in the middle of this inevitable storm. Alcohol consumes everything, deteriorating the life of the addict and everyone surrounding them.

My mother and father's addictions started with an occasional bottle of wine at night, which turned into three or four bottles a day. Handfuls of vodka littered the floor of our home. My father regularly drank himself to the point of alcohol poisoning. I often missed school to stay home and help him sober up for work. It was a constant battle to get my father out of bed. I'd lift my dad from his urine soaked bed, carry him to the shower and watch over him in case he started seizing. Around February, he hit what I hoped was rock bottom. While I looked after him one day, I realized his drunken state was worse than usual. He couldn't walk or talk. While I carried him, he grew limp and stopped breathing. I fell to the floor to administer CPR. His eyes were wide open, staring back at me as I frantically pumped his chest. "CALL 911", I screamed to my sister as she ran into the room. Finally, he let out a big gasp and started breathing again.

His problem worsened each day. He lost his job, bills began piling up and we were evicted on Mother's Day, the first one since my mom passed. We begged our grandmother to let us stay with her in New Orleans. My dad continued to drink himself into a coma. My dad had to return to Tampa for a DUI court date. The morning we left, he was too intoxicated to walk, nonetheless drive. While I drove 10 hours, the car reeked of urine from my dad peeing on himself. When we arrived in Tampa, my father disappeared to drink. The second night we were there, he had a mental breakdown and threatened suicide. Without hesitation, I told him to get in the car and drove to the top of a parking garage. When we reached the top I looked him in the eyes and said, "Jump! See what happens to your family!" He started sobbing. My father actually hit rock bottom. We drove home to New Orleans the next day and checked him into a long-term rehab.

At the end of the summer, I had to make a decision - drop out of school and stay with my family or return to Tampa to finish high school. If I returned to Tampa, I knew I had a large support system. My teachers and principal knew my mom had passed and were aware of my dad's history. Determined to go to college, I chose to finish school. My father's car was repossessed and I struggled to find a way back to Tampa. I reached out to my high school principal and they bought me a one-way bus ticket from New Orleans. I put on a brave face as I boarded the bus, leaving my sister and grandparents behind, but burst into tears as the bus pulled away. When I arrived in Tampa I had nowhere to stay. My school social worker and principal recommended me to a program called Starting Right, Now (SRN). SRN is a program helping homeless teens with housing, stability and academics. After interviewing with the program, I prayed every night to be accepted. Shortly after, my prayers were answered and I was admitted into the program.

I'm determined to succeed in life and set a good example for my sister. I plan to attend college, obtain an ---- in entrepreneurship and start my own business. I dream of creating a non-profit for kids with parents suffering from addiction. I hope to create a space where kids can go when the stress and emotional toll from their parents becomes too much, which is a feeling I know all too well. I'd like to provide them with stability while helping the parents down the road to recovery. Ultimately, helping them become a family again. I wish to do for others what Starting Right, Now is doing for me - giving me an opportunity to succeed. SRN provides me with hope and light, when everyone else threw me away.

As I stood beside my mom's casket I made two promises to her. The first promise was to never drink. The second was to accept any challenge life throws and conquer it with my head held high. It took a while to accept the obstacles life threw at me. However, I learned complacency is the enemy of progress. With the help of Starting Right, Now, I will not only advance. I will excel and succeed.



Yves

Yves graduated from Blake High  
School and is currently a freshman  
at Florida State University.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
NOW

I arrive at the Haiti airport holding a one-way ticket to travel to the United States to go meet a man I have never met, my father. I am terrified of leaving my mom. I am only seven years old. Tears run down my cheeks as my mom says "one day, we will see each other again." I fear she will forget about me, her only daughter. My mother calms me down, convincing me leaving her is the best option. I will have a better life, she tells me. I do not want a life without my mom. I am leaving my impoverished home in Haiti in pursuit of the American Dream. A flight attendant comes to get me. I am apprehensive, but go with her as my mom tells me she will come on the plane soon. I anxiously wait for my mom to walk up the aisle, but she never appears. I hear the engines roar and the heavy plane door close. I look out the window and see my mom waving to me from the tarmac. A flight attendant helps me buckle my seat belt as my body is frozen. Everything becomes very real. I wave goodbye to my mother for the last time.

When I arrive in the US, the flight attendant takes me to the baggage area, where everyone is speaking English. I am frightened because I can't understand anything. A man walks up and shows an ID. The attendant hands me off to a stranger, my father.

I had read about America - a place with shiny streets and beautiful homes. But reality hits quickly as I come face to face with my house located in a dirty, dangerous neighborhood called "the projects". In an instant, I lose all hope for a better life. We live in a house with two other families. It is cramped. I sleep on the carpet in a large room. I have no bed, not even a mattress.

There is no air conditioning and we share our room with bugs and rodents. My dad is barely around and I miss my mom. I learn how to take care of myself - make food, wash my clothes, get myself to school, whatever it takes to survive.

I throw myself into school, learning English quickly. Kids bully me, making fun of my thick Haitian accent. I want so badly to fit in and not be teased.

As if life is not bad enough, my father loses his job. He becomes abusive, beating us and barking orders for us to clean the house and cook his food. I am now only 12. He makes a rule that we were only allowed to go to school and then come straight home. We are not allowed to play outside or leave the house. My life quickly turns into a prison sentence. His "new girlfriend of the week" moves into our home and never offers help or even tries to know us. I long for a stable family with parents who make me feel loved.

I lived like this for years. One day, my junior year of high school, I went to my neighbors to have my hair done. When my dad got home, he was infuriated I was not there. He started banging on doors, looking for me. My friend's mom came outside to calm him down and let him know I was OK. But, he insisted I leave at that moment. When we got home, he said "this will teach you not to do that again," and lashed me with a belt across my arm. I never tried to rationalize his fits because there was never a reason. When I would try to defend myself against his brutality, he would yell at me to leave if I did not like it, knowing I had no where to go. He would tell me "you better hush about this at school." I hid my marks under clothing until they faded. He was afraid I would try to run away so he hid all of my documents, including my passport and social security card. Sometimes, as punishment, he would make me sleep on the porch with only a jacket to keep me warm or to use as a pillow. I felt dirty and ashamed.

I eventually broke down and told the social worker at my school what was going on. She luckily had me interviewed for Starting Right, Now (SRN). My father was elated that I was no longer his burden. My older brother had been through the same situation - he is from another mother - and was already in SRN. I now have a peaceful place to call home. I don't have to worry about not having a bed or food. And I now see a promising future ahead of me. After high school, I will enter college and study social work. Now that SRN is a part of my life, I am sure I can reach my goals. I want to be financially stable and be able to support my family while giving back to my community. I want to eventually travel to Haiti, Jamaica and Africa and help prevent hunger and death rates by carrying medicine to prevent disease.

It has been 10 long years since I have been reunited with my mom. But, I have never given up hope that one day we will see each other again. I have made education my priority because I hope to make her proud. I want to show her my high school and college diplomas and share my knowledge back in her homeland.

Camille

Camille graduated from the University of South Florida and received a Bachelor's degree in Public Health. She is currently attending school at Nova Southeastern University to become a Registered Nurse.



STARTING  
RIGHT,  
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My mother's boyfriend molested me night after night until I was 14 years old. He would watch as I dressed myself for school and "accidentally" walk into the bathroom as I bathed at night. One night as I lay sound asleep, he crawled into my bed. After that night, I wasn't the same little girl anymore. He pirated my innocence. I wouldn't dare say anything and steal my mom's happiness. Many nights I cried my eyes out, afraid of the world. I thought god had given up on me. I was no longer mommy's little Camille. I didn't know who I was; it was as if he kidnapped my identity along with my childhood.

September 2010, Immigration took my mother away from me. My mother had never been in any trouble and I couldn't understand why they deported her. That day was like living a permanent nightmare.

Ever since then I've had to work long shifts with no leisure time. I moved into my best friend's house, sleeping on her living room floor. I had no where to go. Until recently, I was referred to Starting Right, Now. With their help, I have an apartment, a bed and a mentor.

Watching my mother struggle to provide for us, made me focus on my education. I spend countless hours burying my head in books. There's only one thing I focus on - my college admission. I want the opportunity to take care of others by becoming the best nurse possible.

"Only if you've been in the deepest valley can you ever know how magnificent it is to be on the highest mountain" -Richard Nixon. I know I can reach my personal summit.

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STARTING  
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## STARTING RIGHT, NOW

Starting Right, Now ends homelessness  
for youth through one-on-one  
mentoring, providing a stable home,  
obtaining employment, teaching  
financial literacy/life skills and  
promoting educational achievement.