
SURVIVING THE SYSTEM

My name is Angela Nelson, and this is the story of my survival. I grew up in the child welfare system in Illinois, spending most of eleven years in psychiatric institutions and group homes. I can honestly say that the system did not help me recover from any of the problems I came in with; in fact, it created additional difficulty. The system focused on controlling my behavior with little regard to the issues that brought me into the system in the first place. In particular, I received very little education and there was no effort to keep my family unit together. Despite the lack of regard for my future, I still maintained hope and I am living independently today. I know reaching my goals will be difficult, especially since there are few resources and little support available to me now.

My mother had me the month after her 14th birthday. My father was 19. My mother's father told her to have an abortion, but she decided that she wanted to keep me, and ran away to Memphis to live with her mother. My mother left me with my grandmother until I turned six. My mother had turned 20, and decided that she could take care of a child. She fought for custody, and I came back to Chicago to live with her and my stepfather. About seven months after I came to live with her, my stepfather left. Although I didn't know it at the time, they had had

an arrangement to suit both of their needs. She needed to show she had a stable home and he needed to obtain citizenship.

After my stepfather left, things went downhill rapidly. I went from



one relative's home to another and occasionally I lived with my mother. When I lived with her, she beat me and left me at home by myself. There were times when I told the public defender that I didn't want to be at home with my mother because she was beating me. He said he couldn't just take a child away from her home because she didn't want to be there. But I kept telling him it was because she was beating me. I definitely had been involved with the system before I came into the

system. But the system kept sending me back to her.

At the age of ten, almost eleven, things seemed somewhat normal. Then my uncle came to live with us. He started sexually abusing me and I told my teachers about it. He was removed from my house. The system didn't offer us any support. About a month later, my mother asked me to clean my uncle's room. I turned over the mattress and I saw a *Playboy* magazine and some matches. I lit the matches and put them on the bed. I went into the system after I set my house on fire. I never understood why I set my house on fire until years later, when I realized my mother probably would have eventually killed me if I had stayed at home. I think deep down inside, I realized that was my way out.

Little did I know that once I came into the system my problems had not even begun. Coming into the system with a label such as a fire setter sometimes prevents people from seeing who you really are. They really can't see past that label. I really think I was a decent kid and years later, my mother said I was a pretty good kid. Damn right—I *was* a good kid.

I got into the system and the first place I landed was a psychiatric institution. I spent 11 months there. From the medication to the seclusion to the restraints, how was I supposed to adjust? I was surrounded by people I didn't know:

nurses, doctors, psychiatrists, and other children who also had behavior problems. It was an unrealistic adjustment I was supposed to make. Needless to say, I didn't do too well adapting. Of course, more labels followed. I rarely saw anybody from my family. I saw my mother once or twice. My teachers came to visit me once. My grandparents came to see me once. I saw none of my cousins, aunts, or uncles. To this day, I just cannot comprehend how I survived my world being flipped upside down like that. But of course since I didn't handle it well, I was the one who suffered.

I got out of the first institution and I went to a group home. More strangers. I stayed there for three months. I believe I had so many unresolved issues that, before I could be anyplace successfully, the issues that brought me into the system would have to be addressed outside of a pill bottle. But that's clearly not what my treatment plan was. Therefore, since I desperately needed to be in control of my own existence, we battled. And they always won because they had the ability to give me shots, pills, restraints, and seclusions anytime I resisted, questioned, or disobeyed their nonsense.

After leaving the group home, I went back to the hospital for three months. That was just more of the same old nonsense of them controlling my existence. I left there and went to another group home

for three weeks. Still, nothing had been resolved and I was 13 at this time. The issues that got me into the system were no longer the issues at hand. I was faced with a whole new set of issues. The system wanted to control me, and I resisted.

I left the group home and I went back to the hospital. My father's mother tried to get custody of me. Needless to say, she was not a winner. Let's just put it like this—it wasn't a good match. But at least I wasn't in the hospital. One day I got into a fight at school. The school called my grandmother, but she was not at home. Since she was not at home, they called my social worker. She came to the school with another social worker. On the way to my grandmother's house, I told her that I wanted to get out of the car because I could go home by myself. She disagreed, and we fought. This fight with my caseworker at 14 years of age landed me a 4-year stay in a state hospital. Needless to say, the restraints and the seclusion and the medication that I experienced earlier in life do not compare to the seven days in restraints and another three days in restraints and the endless amount of medication and the countless hours in seclusion. If I could do it all over again, I would have stayed at my mother's house and let her continue to beat me and let my uncle continue to sexually abuse me. By the time I got out of this institution, I can assure you if

adult hospital. We all know that's a different ball game. I was thrown right into the mix of people there, many with serious mental illness. Thank goodness I had found a psychiatrist who was actually willing to listen to me. When I told him I didn't need medication, he said OK. He told me that if a staff member asked me to go to my room and I didn't get out of control, they wouldn't put me on medication. I haven't taken a pill since. Of course, since I had such a stellar record, programs in Chicago weren't exactly eager to take me. So I spent six months in the adult psychiatric institution. Not because I needed to but because I had no place to go.

Once the Department of Children and Family Services did find a place for me, they expected me to live alone and to basically take care of myself. Thank goodness for me there actually wasn't too much wrong with me. I have always thought I got caught up in the system. I got labeled because of my behavior, and I never had a chance after that. Unfortunately for me, I was just as uneducated when I came out of the system as I was when I went in. So I didn't have many skills or any money. I ended up on social security, yet again a financial burden to the system.

In all of this, I did come out with a wonderful gift for the arts. I was able to recognize an opportunity when I saw one. I was walking down the street one day and I saw a sign that stated, "Do you want to learn how to make tiles for free?" Being interested in the arts and not having money for materials, this was an opportunity to be creative at somebody else's expense. It was a great success. It gave me hope that I actually could do something meaningful with my life. Today I feel much better about studying for the GED because I have succeeded in something in another part of my life. I am good at art and it gives me a good sense of myself. Although there have been a lot of ups and



I didn't have mental health issues before I went in, I had them now.

When I was discharged from the hospital, I went to a group home in Denver. Of course, that didn't last very long. I returned to Chicago to the

downs in my life, I knew I could shape my own world and I have done so with the help of my creativity. I have been able to supplement my Social Security money with the sales of my artwork. Of course, making a living that way is hard, so I have been working toward my GED so that I will have more employment options. I failed the GED three times, but I am hoping to pass it this June. I am also working on a book that I plan to finish this year.

I would like to close by saying this: if people in the system could have looked to the future and could

have seen both me and my mother as productive members of society, they could have given my mother some parenting classes, helped her get some kind of skill or trade, and helped to educate me. We could be productive members of this society. Instead, she's on Social Security and she receives food stamps. I, too, am on Social Security and I receive food stamps. We are both still uneducated.

The system has to meet real needs in order for people to truly function in this society, especially if they already have challenges. If you

take a child from a mother and do nothing with the child, what is the point? If I had gotten some of the right kind of help at the beginning, much of what I suffered could have been avoided. So if you're trying to help children and families, look towards their futures to see what it is you can do to help them be successful when the system has left their lives five or ten years from now.

Angela Nelson lives in Chicago. Her artwork can be viewed at www.geocities.com/angelasceramics/tiles.

