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By Jimmie Ferguson
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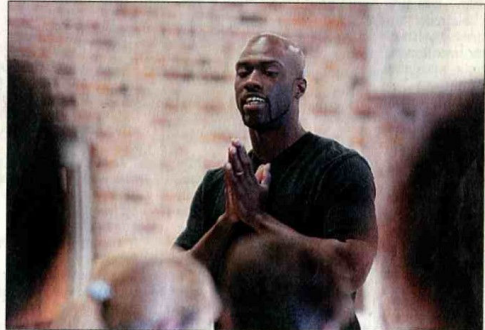
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Durden, 18, a senior at Killeen High School, is currently in the foster care system, while SaulPaul, 30, of Austin, left years ago.

Durden, who said she was not prepared to talk about herself, referred to an essay that she wrote for her English class about her life.

"Many people say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I'm here to tell you this is true," she said, referring to the title of her essay.

"I have been through hell and hot water to get where I am today," Durden said. "I have had many near-death experiences from the eyes of a child, starting with being in foster care. Believe me, it's not easy."

Durden said she has been in foster care for six years and has always been an outcast. Her family came to Texas from Chicago, and they initially lived in East Texas.

"I talked differently and saw things differently from those living in East Texas," she said. "I was picked on and pushed around by the kids in my class and heard about it when I got home."

Durden said there were times that she did get into trouble. "For what, I could not tell you, but I would get a spanking and also yelled at," she added.

Durden said she has always been a go-getter. "If I wanted something, I tried my hardest to get it," she said. "I learned to tie my shoes by myself and to ride my bike on my own without training wheels.

"Unfortunately," she said, "hard times were yet to come."

After turning 13 years old and starting junior high school, she said things began to go downhill in her life.

"My mother was on drugs, and we often moved from one motel to another," Durden said. "At times, we had to stay in the park, because we didn't have money for rent."

Durden said when she did get a chance to go to school, she took her lunch, put it in her bag and brought it home to feed her two younger brothers, for whom she was a mother figure.

Eventually, she said, the school called Child Protective Services, and she and her brothers were separated.

"Actually, I am very blessed that you all did come to get me," said Durden, as she gazed into the audience of numerous CPS caseworkers.

"I was moved to a shelter in Georgetown, where I really stepped into hell," Durden said. "I was a loner and got bullied a lot while living in the middle of nowhere. There was nowhere for me to run, so I would cry and cry."

After a time there, Durden was moved to Belton, where things seemed to calm down.

"However, the war was not over," she said. "As a black kid in Belton, I had a lot of friends for that year of my life. We would go skating and have fun, but then time came for me to move and that broke my heart for the second time in my life."

She was sent to Round Rock, where she said she was treated as if she were the ground that her foster mother walked on.

"I ate at a different table from the rest of the family," Durden said. "I did not get the nice clothes and shoes that the other kids got – or should I say, her kids got."

Durden said she had to mow the yard, front and back, during the hottest hours of the day.

"If I missed a blade of grass, I had to pick it up with my hands," she said. "If living at the house was not bad enough, school put the icing on the cake. I was laughed at because of what I had on and how I looked."

This, Durden said, got her into fights. "That just made things worse. So, after some time, I was moved again, not knowing where I was heading."

Durden ended up at a residential treatment center in Houston, where she believes she "found her backbone."

"I lived in a house with 28 other girls," Durden said. "This was the place where the caseworker sent a child who had nowhere else to go. There were some hardcore kids in there with me, and I was the new meat' for some time.

"I was picked on and ended up in therapy," Durden said. "The therapist was about as crazy as I was, and I saw her two times a month."

Durden said they went to school on the same grounds that they lived on.

"I always loved school," she said. "So, I would do outstanding in school and be a handful at home."

Finally, Durden said she was pushed a little too far.

"And as I was getting older, I began to understand that I had to stand on my own two feet and not let anyone push me around," she said.

"However, I learned that fighting couldn't solve all my problems. I settled down," said Durden, who was then moved to a "nice home" in Killeen – her last chance to be in a foster home.

Durden started the 11th grade at Killeen High School. She talked to the dean of admissions at the University of Texas-Arlington and was told that if she makes it out of high school, she will be accepted there.

"This was the best feeling in my life," Durden said. "I was always told that I would never amount to anything. Now, I'm on my way to college, and no one has anything to say. So, as you can see, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Durden is among 13 children in foster care in the Bell and Coryell counties this year who will be graduating from high school. The total number of foster children is 500.

SaulPaul told the audience that he is a benefactor of their efforts, something they don't get to see, because foster children usually move on.

"I became a foster child at the age of 3 when my mother passed away," said SaulPaul,

noting his father had already abandoned him.

SaulPaul said he also grew up in the system in Houston, making a lot of poor decisions.

"So many poor decisions, that I landed myself in the state penitentiary," he said. "That's what it took for me to realize that I had hit rock bottom. But along the way, a lot of people had spoken to me, encouraging me, because they always saw the potential in me.

"And the people who encouraged me never got to see the fruit. All they saw was when I was going down that wrong path," said SaulPaul, noting he decided to make a change in his life while he was incarcerated.

"I discovered my faith in Christ and God while I was in prison," SaulPaul said.

After he was released from prison after serving two years, he attended the University of Texas in Austin.

"When I got to UT, I didn't stop there," he said "I wanted to get into the prestigious, illustrious film school at UT, the top film school in the nation."

SaulPaul was successful and obtained his film degree.

"I decided my purpose was to sell my story," he said.

Since then, SaulPaul has made a film about his life.

"I have a natural talent as a musician who produces sound tracks to albums," said SaulPaul, noting he has been traveling the country for nearly four years sharing his story.

"I have been giving back to all the people, who impacted me as I was growing up and encouraging those in the position that I was in – becoming a detour sign so they won't make those bad choices," he said.

SaulPaul said he also talks to foster parents and placement agents.

"I know so many times you encourage people and do what you do, and you serve and you serve, because you are a part of the system," he said. "And the kids just come through the system, and you don't know what happened to them. They get moved and go to the next placement. Who knows whether your efforts are fruitful or not? But I am a fruit of your efforts, and I just want to encourage you."

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