

# CHILD WELFARE LEAGUE OF AMERICA Children's VOICE

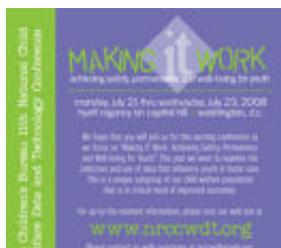
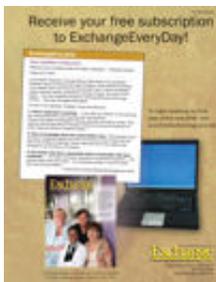
May/June 2008

Children's Voice  
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## From Foster Care to Fostering Care

*Child welfare administrator and former foster child Darrell Armstrong says we not only need to give children a voice, we need to give families a voice.*

### » ["Change a Lifetime"](#)

In honor of May as National Foster Care Month, we feature an excerpt here from the keynote address given by Rev. Darrell Armstrong during CWLA's 2007 National Conference. Armstrong is currently the Director of the Division of Prevention and Community Partnerships for the New Jersey Department of Children and Families. He is also Pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Trenton, New Jersey.

His is a success story of defying the odds. Born to a teenage single mother who spiraled downward into a life of drug addiction, Armstrong spent 13 years in foster care before settling down with and being raised by his grandparents. Today, he speaks with children currently in foster care about his experiences and offers encouragement to social workers, whom he calls "angels."

In his speech at CWLA's National Conference, Armstrong shared how, while recently enrolled in a marriage and family therapy studies program, he had been giving thought to the different theories around family therapy. In doing so, he began to reflect on the life of his own mother, Genice Armstrong, who gave birth to him at the age of 14 in Los Angeles. By 19, she had had a second child by another man. From there, life for Genice and her children grew complicated, and Armstrong wondered if things might have turned out differently if his family had been exposed to "solution-focused" help.

As I began to put pieces of my life story together, even from fragments of caseworker notes that I later got after my 18th birthday, I began to make some sense out of what I thought were nonsensical things because, in 1973, my life changed and my



brother's life changed. I was outside playing with my little 18-month-old brother, riding on my Big Wheel in South Central LA, when my mom's companion, her third one now, called us in to take a bath.



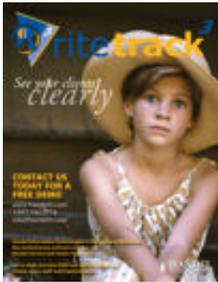
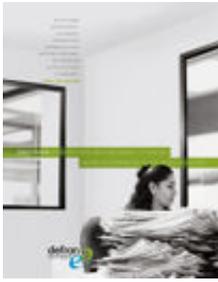
*Darrell Armstrong and his "angel," social worker Roberta Hawkins, with Armstrong's son, Daniel LaRue.*

Little did I know that the tubes that I watched mama wrapping around her arm were to make her veins pop out in order to shoot a heroin needle; in order to get high and to escape from her experiences. Little did I know that the little white lines of powder in the living room were lines of powder cocaine that they were snorting simultaneously while they

were shooting. Little did I know that mama's companion was angry and high and upset by the time that we came into the house; [he] didn't realize [exactly what was happening] when he stripped my brother naked of his clothes, ran a tub of scalding hot water, and put my little 18-month-old brother in a tub of scalding hot water. All I remember were the screams of my brother and remember the man taking him out of the tub, setting him on a table, and the outer layers of [my brother's] skin seemingly peeling [on] the day our lives changed.

We went to the hospital, and things seemed to move in a surreal, slow motion of reality. Police were called, LA Department of Children Services workers came rushing in, doctors and nurses [were] everywhere. I'm sitting as a 5-year-old boy, watching all of the traumatic realities going on, looking at my brother, wondering if he is going to be okay.

My mother is high, no other family around, and from that moment my brother Quincy and I never lived together under the same roof again. He was placed with his dad's great aunt who literally raised him until his 18th birthday. I, on the other hand, went to live with three different foster homes--one for a week, one for a month, and another one for a year and a half. And I remember each of those homes vividly in my mind. Five years old, crying myself to sleep, wondering why I was snatched away from mama, not realizing mama was addicted to crack and cocaine. I would contend that every 5-year-old boy and 5-year-old girl in America, under my circumstances, would have thought the same thing: "I don't care that mama's hooked on crack, I want to go back and be with my mama."



I remember Mama Jo, my third foster mom, wonderful lady. I remember vivid memories of her making me drink prune juice. Oh I'll never forget the prune juice experience, but Mama Jo was a wonderful lady; opened her home. And I thank God for all of the foster parents out there who open their homes to children like me and over 500,000 other foster children in America.

### Saved by "Angels"

Long story short, I was able to go back and live with mama but mama was still with the same male companion. Maybe the reunification strategy didn't work, I don't know, but I came back and she was still with him and then I realized I was about to go back into the system.

My grandfather, who had five other children, opened up his home and took me in and I went over to spend what I thought was one night. One night turned into two, two nights turned into a week, a week turned into a month, a month turned into a year, and then a year turned into 10 years. I would see my mama. She would come over now and again. Mama would say, "Baby, it's all right, mama is going to get us back together." When I was 8, 9, and 10, I believed mama. But when I was 12, I began to say, "Mama is not going to get us back together."



*Darrell Armstrong now has a large support system, including his brother, social worker, and wife Melanie.*



And I began to go through this internal machination of, "Did I cause this for my brother and for myself? Maybe if I had brought him in earlier when my mama's companion told us to come in, maybe he wouldn't have put him in a tub of scalding hot water." I would contend that young boys and young girls are going through their own psychosis of wondering [whether] they are the cause for their problems.

In New Jersey, we have 1,919 children waiting for adoption, and they are wondering, "What did I do for mama to give me up, or for daddy to reject me?" Their identity is lost. I began to say to them, like I heard a preacher say to me when I was a kid, "Mama

and my dear daddy are not there, but God will be a mama when you don't have one, and God will be a father when you don't have one." For me, as a 12-year-old boy, that made sense to me--that the Divine, as I believe, sent angels my way; angels like Mama Jo, angels like my granddaddy and grandmama, angels like my social worker Roberta Hawkins who has been with me ever since I was 5 years old.

[Roberta Hawkins] came to my high school graduation; came to my Stanford graduation; came to my Princeton graduation; was with me when I got married to my wife in 2002; was there in LA when I blessed my children; and will be there for the rest of my life. She calls me her angel and I call her my angel, and although it does not matter, she happens to be a white woman. And although it does not matter, she happens to be a Catholic woman of faith. And although it does not matter, the reality, and the only reason I tell you, is because I don't want you to ever underestimate how you can touch one child's life by the work that you are doing.

### **Maintaining Hope in the Midst of Hopelessness**

My mama was never able to rid herself of her...demons of temptation. I got a sad call while I was in seminary at Princeton that I always feared I would get. My aunt called me, my mom's only sister. It was six o'clock in the morning my time in New Jersey, three o'clock in the morning her time. She said, "Darrell, I need you to sit down." I said, "Aunt, what is wrong?" She said, "Darrell, your mama's dead." I said, "Aunt, tell me what happened." She said she died of a drug overdose.

I made a decision that morning I was going to preach at Shiloh Baptist Church. I wasn't yet pastor. I said I could stay home and wallow in my own grief and self-pity, but I made a decision to go into a community of faith where folk were there who loved me and were there who could pray for me. And I went and I preached both of those sermons and the deacons and the other leaders and the others in the church, they gathered around me and they laid hands on me; they prayed for me as I prepared to board a plane and to fly six hours; and as I was 33,000 feet in the air heading my way to LAX airport, I'm wondering "What am I going to say as I prepare to preach my mama's eulogy?"

The hardest thing I ever had to do was to stand in front of my mama's casket. That alone was difficult, but guess who was sitting out in the audience? The man who my mama had been with for 25 years; the man who put my brother in a tub of scalding hot water; and the man I later found out was with my mama as she overdosed on crack and heroin.

As I felt my mama behind me and I looked at him in front of me, I did what I had to do. I preached words of eulogy to respect my mama, Genice Armstrong, whom I honor every day I get up. And I looked at him with as much inner strength that I could, and extended my hand and said, "God bless you" when I laid my mama into the ground, six feet under.

He happens to be the father of my last two brothers. So what do you do when your brothers' daddy puts your other brother in a tub of scalding hot water and was there when your mama overdosed on crack and heroin? What do you do? How do you make sense of this craziness?

As I conclude my presentation, I'm convinced that we need to give families hope in the midst of hopeless situations...and I want you to think about a solution-based approach, a positive approach that isn't focused on your past, but focuses on your future.

I tell foster children every time I speak to them, "Don't worry about where you start. It's not about where you start, it's about where you finish." We can help them understand that they may have been born to a crack mama or a drug-addicted daddy, but that does not have to define their reality... I need somebody to tell a mama like mine that "Your children can have a better life and that you don't have to stay in the environment that you find yourself." I need a therapist, I need somebody in this Child Welfare League of America, who can go into America's urban and suburban realities with a solution-focused mentality to say, "Rise up above your circumstances and don't worry."

### **Wrapping Ourselves Around Mamas and Daddies**

So some of you might be wondering where my brothers are today. My second brother, Quincy, who was placed in a tub of scalding hot water [and] had multiple contusions to his head, had to have operations to get his eyesight repaired because of other abuse that my mama's companion inflicted on him and me when we were children. Right now, he is heading an office that is distributing ship parts for some of the world's biggest cruiseliners. I would say he's overcome a lot.

Some of you might be wondering where my two youngest brothers are. Michael, who is now 31 years old, got caught up in the Crips street gang in LA; was out there selling crack, doing this, doing that, knuckleheaded kind of business, until he got caught and spent some time in jail. All along the way, I'm trying to help him understand how to make choices and consequences for your actions and it was in jail that he came to a sense of himself and made a decision to get out. Not only to get out of his situation but to turn his life around. Just recently, about five years

ago, he got married, he met a young woman who had two children. Together, they've had two children, and now they are in LA and they are working. They've recently taken in my youngest brother who is now 18 years old, born addicted to crack cocaine, and together we are trying, as a family, to make some sense out of what happened to us as children.

Incidentally, my mom's companion died two years after my mom did of other drug-related causes. And so I [have had] to console my younger brothers about the loss of their daddy that they knew but kind of didn't know because they were raised in foster care. And their oldest brother is on a speaking circuit, trying to raise attention and draw attention to the realities of what it means to deal with issues of out-of-home placement and permanency planning for America's children, and to help them understand that they can have a better life, irregardless of where they started from.

So I implore you, Child Welfare League of America, to continue advocating for the children, but not just to help raise the voices of the children, but to raise the voices of their families, and to wrap ourselves around mamas and daddies who don't know how to be mamas and daddies, and help them understand what it means to raise their children and to have a better life than what they see around them.

I want to thank you for giving this young boy--Genice Armstrong's oldest son--an opportunity to come and to present my story. Because I believe when you can tell your story, it rids you of your demons and it's about how you tell your story.

I used to get embarrassed a little bit. My grandmama used to tell me, "Don't tell all that, leave that stuff in the closet." And I would say, "Grandmama, do not be debilitated by what your past did. Take control of your past and own your past. It's not just telling your story, it's how you tell your story." So now, I don't think grandmama is embarrassed anymore....

But thank God that there are angels like you in this room who [are] there to stand with our children and our families, to help them have a better prospect at life. God bless you, and may this one story, of Genice Armstrong's oldest son, inspire you to keep doing the work that you are doing for America's foster children.

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