

Yvonne

UHC: Basically we just want to get an idea of the events that sort of led to you becoming homeless in the first place, and if you could give us your own account to the years, however long it was, and leading up to right about now.

Yvonne: I would have to say, my behavior. So, being a child raised up in a home where there was no emotion...no emotional love or they not teaching a child anything.

UHC: Where are you from?

Yvonne: I was born in Atlanta, and when I was two I moved to Ohio, Cincinnati, Ohio. I lived there until I was 21, and then I moved back to Atlanta.

UHC: Who lived in your house with you?

Yvonne: My mom, she was a single parent. Her mom didn't raise her; her grandmother raised her. My mom was a quiet and humble person; real fearful, so she didn't know how to protect us. She didn't really know how to love...to love us. She did the best she could. She did the best she could, bless her heart. I was conceived by rape, so I began life kind of angry, you know, it was like a child was to be seen and not heard. So, I began to stay quiet and carry around anger, child molestation, and other things, that was happening to me. Because I didn't understand...

UHC: How old were you during all of this?

Yvonne: When it first happened I had to be 5 or 6, you know when it first happened. I wasn't penetrated, by sexually...by age 12 one raped me, maybe at 12. You know, I kind of carried that with me for a long time. [inaudible] Just looking for love in all the wrong places...trying to fit in; not understanding who I was or why I was here, not having any direction on...you know, what life was about. I didn't know anything about paying bills, or cooking in the kitchen... I'd wash pots and pans, and it was like, you going to just show me how to wash dishes, I got no survival skills. You know, I just had to go and learn on my own. I just couldn't get...you know, I couldn't make it on my own. You know, basically, I was never told nothing about a female; as far as the monthly thing, you know, it was just huh; nothing about sex, or nothing about showing me how to start a bank account, or this or that. I knew none of that, and it was like, you're 18 now, you're grown, now get out.

UHC: Is that basically what you were told when you turned 18?

Yvonne: Yeah.

UHC: Where did you go from there?

Yvonne: Well, the first time, with my oldest child, we went to a shelter... we went to a shelter for a little while.

Because of the difficulty in hearing this interview, from this point forward, the interview will not be verbatim; rather, the questions will be transcribed, and the responses will be summarized. Direct quotes by Yvonne are indicated by quotation marks.

Yvonne stayed at the shelter for two weeks, and her mother allowed her to return home after that. Yvonne, however, was unhappy at home with her mother. She was not allowed to show emotions, and was constantly yelled at and told she was wrong. Yvonne felt that even when she asked for guidance, she was denied, and was never taught some of the most basic skills needed for adulthood. She blames the squelching of her curiosity, and her search for life's deeper meaning to her turn to alcohol and drug use.

UHC: What types of drugs?

Yvonne says she used marijuana, cocaine, TLC, alcohol and pills.

UHC: How old were you when you started using drugs?

Yvonne was about 15 when she began her drug use.

UHC: Where would you, like, where would you guys get the money to use the drugs?

"It was free," says Yvonne. She goes on to explain that it was free when you hung out with other drug users, but that she had to start paying for drugs when she became addicted to crack cocaine. She says that throughout her time as a drug abuser, she knew that this was not what she wanted to be doing, she wanted help and to stop the drug abuse, and that she didn't want to be who she was. She often thought that if she had had a better family, or anything of substance, she would not be doing the things that she was doing. She said that at that time she was involved in bad behavior, and that drugs and alcohol brought her down "real, real bad." She soon suffered physically for her addiction, she lost a dangerous amount of weight, and her hair and teeth began to fall out. She says that her family eventually became scared of her, "because of the way I started looking, and who I became."

UHC: What kind of behavior are you talking about?

Yvonne: "Negative, anger, rage."

UHC: So, to your family to your family, or to people around you, or...?

Yvonne says that it was mostly targeted at her family, but was extended to anyone who attempted to get in her way. She says that she didn't really want to go looking for trouble, but, "I just really wanted a way out of the world at the time."

UHC: So, were you in Atlanta at the time?

"Yes." She goes on to say that she really wanted a quiet and peaceful life, and wanted someone to show her, "how to live." She laments that she had to find out the hard way that drugs and alcohol, and hanging out with the wrong crowd, is not the answer. The

situation became so bad, that Yvonne prayed for a change, even if that meant jail time. She was desperate for anything to change her situation. She reflects on her faith in God and prayer. She speaks of the unwavering faith even in the worst days of her addiction. She always maintained her love for God, but felt that maybe he didn't love her anymore. She says that now she realized she was wrong. She kept praying and she says her prayers led her to decide to leave her home in June of 2007, and buy a bus ticket to Florida. She thought that at least in Florida, she would have a beautiful and peaceful landscape to look at. She only stayed in Florida for five hours, and said, "There wasn't nothing in Florida!" None of the shelters in Florida would take her, so she returned to the bus station, and it was there she met a woman carrying a Bible. The woman showed concern for Yvonne's situation, so she asked her where she was going, and when the woman told her Greenville, South Carolina, Yvonne decided to go there as well. She had a lay over in Atlanta, and while here she called her sister hoping she would invite her to come and live there; she didn't. She also called all the shelters in Atlanta she knew of, but none answered the call, so she continued her journey to Greenville. Yvonne believes that this is where God intended her to be, because so many doors opened for her in Greenville. She says this helped her to find God again.

Once in Greenville, Yvonne shared a hotel room with a woman she met on the bus, who was, as she says, and alcoholic. Eventually the woman put Yvonne out of the room, and she felt unsafe, but refused to leave. The manager of the hotel came to her and told her to leave or he'd call the police. Yvonne said, "Please call the police. For the first time in my life, I said, Please call the police." The police came.

UHC: Why did she kick you out?

Yvonne says that the woman became intoxicated and began to be argumentative. When Yvonne left for a while to allow her to cool down, she refused to let her back in the room. The police came, and Yvonne told them, "I'm not here to cause trouble. I'm from Atlanta and I wasn't going to leave this property until I knew where I was going to live." The police asked her where she wanted to go, and she told them The Salvation Army. The police called them, and they said to bring her, even though it was 4:30 in the morning. She said that was an important turning point for her. She began attending church again while at the Salvation Army, and continues to go to church there to this day. She says for her, The Salvation Army, is a place of hope. She now feels she is blessed. Blessed to have a beautiful home, and a refrigerator, and blessed to tell her story. She says she had asked God to let her, someday, be able to "tell the tale" so that she could help other people. She says, "If God saved me, I know he would do it for you." She says that she has been given things back, mentally, physically, and spiritually that she never thought she's have again. "I got back my self-esteem," she says. She says she has peace. She compares her life before to her current home. She used to have to sleep in unsafe buildings, and while she was pregnant, she slept in a closet in an abandoned building.

UHC: How many kids do you have?

"I have three," Yvonne says. Her oldest is 28, middle child is 27, and the youngest is 18. They live in Atlanta, but have visited her in her new home, and speak to her on the phone quite often.

UHC: You mentioned you left Atlanta June of this year?

"Umm-hmm."

UHC: How long have you been in this particular house?

She got into her home on July 6th.

UHC: So, it didn't take much time from that night when you were calling the police at the hotel, to where things started to fall into place.

"It didn't take no time," Yvonne says. She attributes this to following God's will. She says ultimately, however, she got what she needed from church and from meetings. She says she appreciated what was being done for her, she was humble, and followed rules and regulations. She is amazed with her own transformation, and was even able to go to the dentist to get dentures. Her hair that was falling out is now growing back.

UHC: Is your family so proud of you?

"Yes, when they see me." They are proud of her, and she was planning a Thanksgiving trip home to Atlanta, but her youngest daughter said she was afraid for her to even come home for a visit, because she didn't want anything to spoil her progress. Yvonne told her daughter not to worry, because she truly doesn't want to live that way anymore.

UHC: Was there ever a time that you missed that type of lifestyle? Is there anything you miss from the person you used to be?

"No!"

UHC: What was it like when you were homeless? How often would you have to switch places? What would you eat?

"Being homeless...I'm going to put it like this; you take a chance of being raped, beat, or killed. You are lucky if that's all that happens to you. There are much, much, worse things that happen to people that are homeless." She says that getting to sleep was hard, and that you were constantly exhausted. She explains that you develop a fear of falling asleep because you never know "what is going to happen to you, or who is watching you." She says that there were always other homeless people watching you to see what they could take from you, or even do to you, including rape.

UHC: What kinds of places would you stay in?

Yvonne said she stayed in empty apartments, and back stairways.

UHC: Did your kids stay with you?

No, says Yvonne, she did not want to put her kids through that. Her children were taken in by her family. She feels that she put her youngest daughter through enough, even when they had a home, due to her addiction. She says it took her a long time to realize that her drug addiction was not only hurting herself, but also those around her. She says that you step out of that situation with anger and rage, loss and no trust. Yvonne says her self-esteem was destroyed from the drug abuse and homelessness. She explains that she did "treatment," for eleven months.

UHC: What kind of treatment?

"Drug treatment." She says that when she got out of drug treatment she went right back to the same area and her sobriety didn't last even a month. She says she was constantly surrounded by drugs and alcohol, and she had a false sense of strength from the conquest of the problem, and eventually fell back into the habit. She says that she has been off and on drugs for years, and has been trying to "get clean," since 1993.

She says that once she even spent 5 years clean, but she remained miserable, because she didn't work on any of the deeper issues. She still felt she needed help; she needed someone to "tell her how to live." She says she never dealt with the issues that she was left with due to her history of molestation. She eventually had a therapist that told her that it was okay to cry; to be upset and not angry. This really altered Yvonne's perception, she had always thought that she had to fight.

UHC: You talked about the five years in which you were clean but miserable; would you say that right now, you're clean and happy?

"Yes, I'm very happy."

UHC: How long have you been clean?

"Going on five months."

UHC: Do you feel good about what you've done?

"Yes, yes I do."

UHC: What was it that you the most problems, when you go back and get high again? What drug called to you the most?

"Crack cocaine; I would say crack cocaine and alcohol."

UHC: As far as crack cocaine; is it something that you just did, or did it rule your life?

Yvonne says that at first when she did crack cocaine, she just wanted to feel "another high," and that she didn't even know that it was addictive. She says, "Don't do it, don't try

it, I recommend that. It is a drug so powerful, so manipulating, it will have you lying to your baby, lying to your mom, it will have you prostituting."

UHC: Were you prostituting?

Yvonne says that no, she wasn't really doing that, but that she was around women who did, and she often allowed them to use her home for that purpose. But, she says, "I just couldn't get to that point." She admits, however, to using and manipulating men for drugs and money. She says all of this was possible because her drug abuse had robbed her of feelings.

UHC: Tell us about the times in which you were sober and homeless.

Yvonne says that most of the times she was homeless she was using drugs. She goes on to discuss the shame involved with homelessness. She says that she spent a lot of time wondering if people knew she was homeless. It brought her shame to eat out of trashcan, or to be unable to bathe herself or change clothes.

UHC: What is a typical day of being homeless like?

She says that having a job and going to work everyday is much easier than being homeless. She says, "You always have to get up and search for food, search for another place to sleep." She says that being homeless is hard work. She spent a lot of time sitting in hospital waiting rooms to just keep warm, or trying to figure out what churches will be giving out food or supplies. She says that it is tiring to be considered, "the scum of the earth." Yvonne thinks that if there were better and more comprehensive mental health care facilities, there would be less homelessness.

She said that the treatment by society hurt her, and that she spent a lot of time feeling shamed. "You may be cursed at or spit at, you may be beaten." She says that homelessness made her feel worthless.

"You're right."

UHC: How has this place changed you?

"There are times when I look around, at what a beautiful place this is, and think of what heaven must be like. If God put a place this beautiful on Earth, imagine how beautiful heaven is." She says that she feels peace and love, and a sense of community.

UHC: Are you learning to trust again?

"Well, being who I am, and what I came from, it is hard, but it's getting better and better everyday." She goes on to say that she is getting closer with her neighbors, and is happy to learn to have friends.

UHC: What about the people that work here? How are your relationships with them?

"Oh, my relationships with them are beautiful." She goes on to say that they are like angels, and are caring and sensitive. She says that their doors are always open.