



CenturyCollege

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Liz Murray Shares Homeless to Harvard Story with Century Audience

It was hard to imagine that the composed, willowy young woman who stood on the Century College theatre stage this week and held the rapt attention of a capacity crowd for more than an hour was once a self-described “stinky kid” with bad clothes, bad hair and a bad attitude.

But Liz Murray’s story is real. She did grow up in hardcore poverty in the Bronx, and she did overcome unbelievable obstacles to attend Harvard University.

While her story is amazing, it was her delivery that most engaged people. With no notes and no electronic visuals, she stood on stage and told her transformative story with a sense of wonderment that left people in awe and in tears.

“What I found most remarkable went far beyond the story,” said Century College Acting President John O’Brien. “Liz has a tremendous ability to reach out to us all individually and find a sympathetic vibration that matters. I don’t think I’ve ever in my life seen someone establish such a warm and authentic relationship with a large audience. And, probably as a result, I have never seen our college and campus

community so resonate – and from the conversations of students gathered outside the building, I know she made a difference for the students who were there.”

Murray, 28, walked on stage, faced the audience started her story very simply. “I was a dropout,” she said. “I hung out with friends, didn’t go to class, shoplifted, lived on the streets.”

Home was a Bronx apartment building that featured crack dealers on the third floor and prostitutes in the stairwell. Gangs, drugs and violence were part of everyday life. Her parents were aging hippies who used drugs every day. Monthly welfare checks were spent on drugs, mostly. Grocery money was scarce and Liz and her sister were often hungry. Sometimes neighbors in the building would feed them, and sometimes the sisters would do other desperate things to keep hunger at bay – like splitting a tube of toothpaste for a meal.

In spite of everything, Murray said her parents loved her and they told her so on a daily basis. She didn’t blame them for their addictions. “People can’t give you what they don’t have,” she said. “I forgave them. Their love was my foundation.”

Sharing needles with strangers eventually resulted in her mother contracting HIV, and she was admitted to a hospital. Her father went to live in a shelter after being evicted from their apartment, and Murray was put in a foster care group home. Talking about this dark period of her life was the only time that Murray exhibited anger. She said foster care staff members were cruel to her and she ended up living on the streets. Meanwhile, her mother’s health was fading fast, and she felt powerless to help.

“I was lost,” she said. “My friend and I slept on the subway train, washed our faces in diners and started stealing. I had this perception of a wall. On one side were people with jobs. On the other side were my friends and I. We had no place on the other side of the wall. We justified that we could steal because it doesn’t matter. I don’t matter.”

Her mother, Jean Murray, died at age 42 when Liz was 16 years old. “I hadn’t seen my mother in a month before she died,” said Murray, choking back tears. “It is my single biggest regret.”

Finding herself at a crossroads, Murray decided to stop wasting her life and go back to school. After an exhaustive search, she finally found an alternative high school that would accept her. The founder of that school, a man named Perry, changed her life. “When someone comes from love, it makes all the difference,” said Murray. “He told me that he would hold me accountable for every dream I have.”

Murray dove into her schoolwork with a vengeance and also participated in debate and theater. She slept on the subway, begged for change and ate out of dumpsters, but stopped stealing. She didn’t tell Perry she was homeless because she didn’t want to go back to foster care. “I had the presence of mind to know that your history doesn’t matter. Every moment, you have a choice. My life may not have been my fault, but I was still willing to accept responsibility and fix it.”

Murray earned straight A’s and applied for a New York Times Foundation scholarship, attaching an essay about the barriers she had overcome. This led to a newspaper story about her life, and again, things changed dramatically. “New Yorkers showed up at my school,” she said. “Angels came into my life. They brought brownies, a quilt and books. Strangers got together and rented me an apartment, complete with a bed, furniture and clothing. That changed me. It knocked every brick out of my wall.”

Murray was awarded a scholarship to Harvard University, and, after attending part-time for several years, she plans to graduate this December with a degree in psychology.

“My friend says I am like Forest Gump,” said Murray. “I have no legitimate reason to be here.”

In addition to maintaining an active volunteering schedule, Murray plans to start her own leadership/personal development company and offer workshops for people.

Photo: Liz Murray

