

FEATURES

How do you convince someone that who you were at 15 is not who you are today?



Dara Pettinelli
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Courtesy of Dina Sarver



More than 2 million people are incarcerated in the United States. This series looks at what happens to their lives—their relationships, families and future prospects—when they get out.

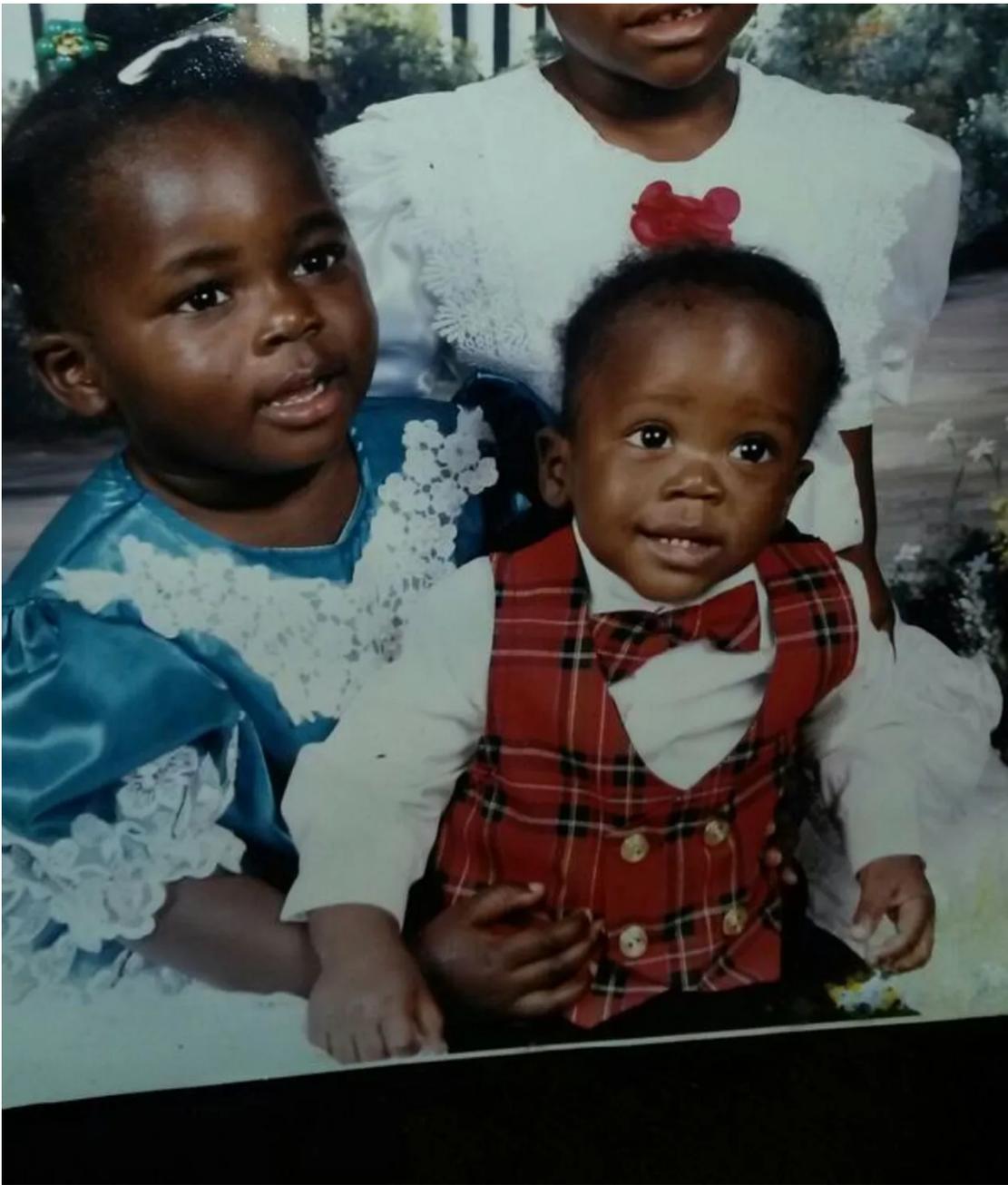
By Dina Sarver, as told to Dara Pettinelli

When I was a teenager, I did so many things I can't even repeat now because it will bring me to tears. I didn't care who I was hurting; I didn't think about anybody but myself. Now I'm in my 20s and there's so much shame; I can't believe I ever reached that point and made the decisions I did. Little did I know then how the person I was would haunt me the rest of my life.

In a Haitian household, life is about school, work, home, and church. My parents emigrated to the U.S. in the mid-80s. My mother worked as a prep cook, a housekeeper, jobs like that, and my father, a minister, was able to start a congregation in Fort Pierce, Florida. I am one of 10 kids and the 7th oldest. Up until 8th grade, I was always in the gifted programs at school. My father was a great dad and very school-oriented—he went to all my parent-teacher meetings, he came to all of my plays. We lived in a huge house in the suburbs, and my mother didn't have to worry about finances. My biggest concern was playing in the treehouse with my Barbie dolls.

But then they divorced and everything changed. I was 9 when my dad moved out. The kids all gravitated toward our mom, but it was a lot for her. We got our lights and water shut off a lot. Our house went into foreclosure. It was a complete culture shock to go from suburbia to section 8 housing. Eventually some of the older kids went to live with my dad. He stayed in the area, but I only saw him on occasional Sundays. His absence was a big hit for us; I couldn't comprehend it. I just think he didn't want to deal with my mom. That's when I started to act out.





Dina pictured at 4 years old, standing behind two of her siblings

I was the oldest of the younger kids so I watched out for everybody. Because English isn't my mom's first language, I was responsible for making sure bills were paid and that our food stamp application was sent on time. She did the best she could. I had to take a job as a dishwasher at 13 to bring in extra income. Instead of focusing on going to school and to the skating rink, I begged my mom to get me more hours at the restaurant so that I could help financially.

It's hard to focus on school knowing that there are so many things out of your control. I couldn't tell anyone because I didn't want my mom to get a knock on the door from child protective services.

My first arrest was at the age of 12 for “disrupting school functions.” From there I got more misdemeanors, usually from fighting with peers at school. I dealt with a lot of bullying. My clothes were hand me downs and were probably torn, I had a gap between my teeth, and short hair. Who knows why they singled me out, kids are mean. I got expelled twice.

At 15, I stole my neighbor’s car and found out I was pregnant. A judge sentenced me to six months in a residential facility for pregnant juvenile delinquents. I didn’t understand that my fingerprints were being transmitted to the FBI database because I had committed a felony.



Dina, age 15 and about five months pregnant, at the YMCA Character House, the juvenile detention center where she spent six months.

I blamed my mom for a lot of things, I don't know why. I had to see how she loved me. Before I did time, people would tell her to send me to Haiti so that she could focus on the other kids. But she persisted. There were times I didn't want to come home and she'd bring me food. I was doing drugs, she didn't care. If I called her, she came. I always met her in a public place so she didn't know where I was staying. It took me being isolated and pregnant to realize I wanted to be the same mom to my son. Being in juvenile detention was a wake up call. I had my mom before I was incarcerated and I didn't want her. Now here I was three hours away from home, and the only person I wanted to see was my mom.

In some ways it was like being in prison and in other ways not as bad. We were housed 23 hours a day with one hour of recreation time, but we also had school (inside the building) and a nursery and common living area.

From my father's perspective, it was very shameful to be a teenager and pregnant, but inside the system I was taught that what I thought was almost impossible—how could I be a mom?—was something I could do. In my mind, I thought I had lost my giftedness and that school was out of the question. The first person who ever told me I was better than that was in juvenile detention. There was a teacher there who pushed me to get my GED because I was doing so well on the high school courses I was taking online. She said I wouldn't even need to study for the exam and that it would be a waste for me not to go to college.

Before getting discharged, I wrote my father a letter to let him know that although I understand he's a good person, certain things could've been prevented if he had just been present. I didn't want to blame him because I made my own decisions, but I wanted to let him know how I felt so that I could forgive him.

After returning home, I got back on track. I got my GED and then completed an associates of science degree. But after getting accepted into a nursing program, I discovered that my juvenile record could stop me from going to school after all. Nursing programs often do criminal background

checks and even though there are three asterisks that say juvenile record on my rap sheet, it was a felony arrest. At that point it finally hit me just how much of an impact my juvenile record would have on my life, and how many other people were in my same situation. Anytime I apply for a job that requires a background check with fingerprinting, such as nursing, police, government, or in schools, they can find my juvenile arrest, no matter my age.

I decided to pursue a bachelor's degree in healthcare management, but before my last class, I again found out that due to my juvenile record I might be unable to graduate. Internships are required to graduate, but because it was in health care, it would require a background check. I hit another roadblock. I had to get the help of two attorneys to speak on my behalf to convince the dean of my program to let me graduate. It was heartbreaking.



Incarcerated juveniles show higher unemployment rates and lower wages up to a decade or more after their confinement. — Justice Policy Institute

I think everyone is under the assumption that once you turn 18 your record disappears, and that's not true. There are a lot of things I can't do, like chaperone my seven-year-old son's school trips or coach his soccer team. I'm completely different from who I was at 15, but that time is going to follow me regardless. All anyone has to do is pay \$24 for a basic background check to see my teenage felony. Rap sheets don't go into detail, they just list the arrests, crimes, and dates in black and white. I would be very hesitant to hire anyone like myself on first look without the context.

I speak for all rehabilitated juvenile delinquents when I say that if this is how society is going to judge us, we'll never reach our full potential. There are juveniles out there who don't have the same support I did—how are they going to look at their life and decide to fight for it?

Right now I'm studying for the LSATs and hopefully I can get accepted to law school. The Florida bar doesn't say they hold juvenile records against you, but for anybody with any offense they want to see that you have been rehabilitated in addition to how many years it's been since your last offense. For me, that's more than enough of a shot to make it. I want to get some laws changed that affect juveniles like myself. Who better to serve than me? I'm an example that you can make it.

There is a happy ending to the story. My parents reconciled and got back together 3 years ago. My dad's an awesome grandpop. I'm still with the father of my son. (He's been with me since before I went away.) Today we have two boys together who are now 7 and 4. Even though my kids were born in a disadvantaged state—born to a teenage mother who wasn't working and had no education—I don't want them to suffer; I want them to have the world. They're why I'm so persistent. I don't want my past to be an excuse for anything.

Dara Pettinelli is the senior growth manager at Fusion. She's a big fan of the Real Housewives franchise on Bravo and eating candy for dinner.