

Keeshon's Story: A Knock Heard Round the Hood – Part 4

This story is Part 4 of a 4-part series.

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Leaving Home

When I was sixteen my mom had not compromised all of her desires for me. She was still my mom, and I still gave her a respected voice in my life. One desire she held firmly was that I should go to college after I graduated. I always resented this rule because even after being influenced by the Mennonites for several years, I still felt smaller than white people and thought college was a lofty idea. It wasn't a goal that was meant for someone who had been through the things I encountered. My mom had gone to college, but she was a white woman.

One evening, I returned from a week-long canoe trip with the men of our church. When I entered the house my mom was on the couch crying. She hopped up and hugged me like something seriously wrong was happening. My dad had been messaging an African scammer for quite some time, and my mom saw this as cheating. Because of my dad's pills, and I'm convinced, many years of abusive language and behavior from my mom, his mental state wavered. He did this because the person on the other side of the screen made him feel good, something nobody else in his life was doing at the time. My mom was also very mentally unstable, and blew the entire thing out of proportion to victimize herself and get the attention that she never received. My dad temporarily moved out, and they both swore that this was the end of their relationship. I can't justify the actions of my dad during this time, but this situation had me fed-up with having to pick sides. They were both making horrible decisions, and the only way for me to do any better was to loosen some of the influence they had on my life.

Knowing my parents were separating was really difficult for me. Because they weren't married, I knew this was a more Biblically sound arrangement. I wondered if we should keep it this way. On the other hand, I as their son didn't endorse something like this from preventing them being together. They were still both under the heavy influence of drugs and if they didn't have each other they would both end up dead. My mom by overdose, and my dad from not having a primary caretaker.

In spite of all of this, I approached my mom with an ultimatum. It wasn't me giving up on my parents. It was me realizing that if I was going to set out on a course to live a Christian life, I would need to somehow get out of this arrangement. I told my mom that I would drop out of school if I didn't get to go to Tidings of Peace Christian School (TOP). It was the school our church ran and I had wanted to be a part of it ever since I was baptized. Austin's father, Clayton, was making a big push for it as well, and was willing to advocate for me in trying to convince my mom. The rule that my mom gave Clayton was that if I went to TOP, I would need to promise to go to college afterwards. Clayton promised her that would happen, which I thought was crazy, but I took it as a blessing. Whenever Clayton said he was going to do something, it was going to happen. After the summer was over, I was finally going to be a student at TOP.

This summer was also the summer I was able to forgive my parents. Clayton sat down with me and his discipling efforts became more aggressive. He pointed out a verse to me in the book of Matthew that proved that if I didn't forgive my mother and father, God would not forgive me. I told Clayton that this meant I probably wasn't forgiven then, so we purposed together to make sure it happened. I don't remember a clear time or situation that caused this forgiveness to happen. It was almost as if God had just exacted my desire to become free from the pain of unforgiveness. Once I purposed in my heart to forgive, God granted me that peace.

This, to me, is the most common issue in the lives of urban youth. The pressure to forgive people of unforgivable things is not only difficult but a very confusing idea. Nearly everyone I encounter that has made progress on their spiritual journey finds themselves stuck at a place of unforgiveness. This is a deadly state, because without freedom, damnation is imminent.

The part that I could tell my mom wasn't happy about was Clayton's offer to have me move out and live with them. I learned years later that Clayton was offering it to me and would make it happen if it was what I wanted, regardless of her answer. There were plenty of reasons Child Protective Services could have taken me away from my parents, and I had been interviewed by

them before. Clayton wasn't sure if he could continue to be aware of the abuses happening in our home and not do something to help. I moved out in August and began to ready myself for the school year.

That school year didn't meet my expectations. I thought that despite the challenge of me being an example to all the younger students, I would find it to be an oasis. A first-year teacher and a lot of difficult subjects later, I realized quickly that this wasn't going to come easy for me. I still saw it as a worthy investment, because I wanted to return and be a teacher someday after college. At this point in my life, I realized there was a difference between appearances and what is actually in the heart. I had benefited greatly from becoming a Mennonite, but now it was time to truly change what was happening on the inside. The Mennonites were super easy to trick, but God wasn't going to be fooled.

Graduation in itself was a statement. My extended family came to support me, and I feared that they would judge me. My dad and mom were considered the failures of their respective families. I never saw it that way personally, but that was how we were always treated. I grew up feeling like the crack baby that neither family would ever fully accept. It had nothing to do with my race, but everything to do with the decisions of my parents.

There has always been a wall between me and the people I share blood with. Some people we are indebted to by coincidence, and for some others that commitment is easy to embrace. Family relations were always tense, and I dreaded them finding out more about my life path. They all wanted me to become more than my parents, and graduate from a great college and get out of the city. It would come as an initial disappointment to some of them that I planned to attend a Mennonite Institution and return back to my home area. The graduation broke the tension and forced my family to either accept me or move on. To this day they've expressed more desire to be in my life than I could have ever expected. I'm grateful for that and hoping to better communicate with them in the future. Many of the people in my extended family are successful and decent people. I've been blessed in ways others have not, and my previous identity issues are not as strong today.

The next year I worked as a staff member at TOP. I assisted Clayton in filling some holes while Austin was away for his first year at Faith Builders. I would be joining Austin soon and we would get to overlap during his second year. We had grown distant due to his marriage and life path, but I enjoyed getting closer to his family back at home and began to settle in as more of an established family member.

Clayton began working with me to begin the process that would fulfill the promise I gave to my mom. I promised her I was going to college, and now I had to do it. I toyed with the idea of getting a full bachelor's degree in education, but comfortably settled into a plan to attend Faith Builders Educational Program (FB). I applied early in the school year and made it a matter of prayer for the rest of the year. I was very anxious, because I knew that I was going to be in debt by the time all of this was said and done.

I was working with a student one day when the school secretary came in with mail for me. Once I was finished with the student, I opened up a letter from Faith Builders. I was granted a full scholarship. I ran through the halls interrupting classes. I never felt so relieved and blessed in my entire life. This felt like confirmation to me, as if God was giving me permission to take some time away from home and become a more solid person. I was about to invest two years into my life, and I knew that I had a ton of support heading into it.

Adult Life

My two years at FB took me to places I was able to avoid most of my life. It certainly wasn't the hardest time of my life, but it exposed many of the hidden things that I kept secret from anyone else. I was suddenly in an environment that took me away from my main support group. I would need to wholly rely on God to help me in the difficult times, and there were plenty of those.

This time also helped me to embrace and accept my identity as an Anabaptist. It's not that being Anabaptist was the most important thing in my life, but because of the group I had decided to join, it was significant. FB is unapologetically an Anabaptist institution, and this is exactly what I needed. I left FB asking myself if this was really the path of life that I wanted to take. FB gave me an idea of the history, teachings, and values that identify the Anabaptist tradition. I ultimately decided that I was happy to continue, that I wanted to go home and continue being a part of the brotherhood.

Getting home presented a greater set of challenges. I spent two years in a vacuum, and now I was back in the real world. I was also now a "real teacher". This was my dream. I had wanted to be a teacher at Tidings of Peace for years. Years of investment and hard work were now going to be put into practice. I couldn't wait.

My first day as a teacher confirmed to me that education was where I wanted to invest my life.

Education is the most effective tool we have to combat poverty in America. Working closely with students that were growing up in the same environment I did was invigorating. It felt like I was in my element, and I was doing what I was made to do. That feeling hasn't waned today. I may not always love every part of my job, but I love the big picture.

As far as where I am today with my family, I am in a very good place. My dad passed away 5 years ago, and I just recently lost Clayton to prostate cancer on Christmas of last year. But I was adopted into the Shenk family (officially) early of last year, which was largely due to Clayton's desire to see me as an acknowledged part of the family. We had been family for years, but he wanted to make sure everyone knew.

My biological dad and mom came clean off of the drugs soon after I moved out, and mom has kept clean ever since. She lives comfortably in a suburban home away from all of the troubles that she found living in the city. I love her and find her as an important part of my life going forward.

Overall, I dedicate most of my time to the lives of my students. I love to engage other urban ministries, and I do this by either going to share with their young people or by just coming to observe. I enjoy writing because it is timeless. I hope that by sharing my life with others, I can proclaim a Gospel and God that is accessible to all, and worthy of our devotion.

In closing, let's look back at where this all began. One invitation to VBS, and many reckless nights since then, I am where I am today because of God's grace. Thankfully, there were laborers sent to York to reach out to people like me. It is especially urgent in the current times that we live in that we all commit to labor for God in His fields. York is just one of many places God's people are needed; find a place to reach out to others and start acting. You don't need to go door-to-door, but any relationships you gain will not go to waste.

For more practical advice on how we could improve our Anabaptist kids/youth clubs, visit Keeshon's blog at <https://urbanitemusingskw.wordpress.com/>. The articles written there are for the purpose of encouraging and informing others working in urban environments.

The End