

mcall.com

Despite a horrific upbringing, 22-year-old graduates from Moravian

By Steve Esack

OF THE MORNING CALL

May 16, 2010

David Fisher stood in the night supervisor's office with all his possessions: an electronic piano, cell phone and backpack stuffed with clothes.

"Do you start any fires?" the supervisor asked while searching the backpack for weapons and drugs.

No, David replied.

He turned out his pockets to prove he wasn't carrying weapons or drugs. The supervisor confiscated his cell phone. She allowed him to keep the keyboard, though, an act of kindness; electronics are not permitted at the shelter.

She directed him to the boys' bedrooms on the old Victorian's second floor, where she handed him sheets for the only unoccupied bed waiting in the darkness. He gently covered the mattress, conscious not to crinkle the plastic protecting it from the bodies of boys who come and go. Exhausted, David slept.

"I woke up with three people staring at me," he said.

He padded down the steps, briefly introduced himself to the other teens and sat in a corner alone.

"It hit me where I was," David said. Valley Youth House, a Bethlehem shelter for abused and neglected kids ages 12-17. And the tears flowed. For three hours.

He sat on a sofa crying while his brain played vignettes of his life: A biological father who bailed. A violent older brother. A mentally ill stepfather. A bipolar mom who would vanish for days on dates with Captain Morgan and a crack pipe.

The anger welled and he willed the tears to stop as determination took the place of self pity. On Feb. 4, 2005, David was homeless and had just turned 16 when he swore he would survive and thrive.

On Saturday, David, now 22, fulfilled that promise when he graduated from Moravian College with degrees in sociology and psychology. Later this summer, he will take a free ride to Lehigh University to pursue a master's degree in the hopes of becoming a professor.



David Fisher from Bethlehem listens to Kevin Joseph Horn's Statement of the Master's Graduates speech during the Moravian College 2010 Commencement at the Hauptert Union Building Quadrangle Saturday morning May 15, 2010.

It is a journey he could not have taken without teachers, counselors, professors and friends who marveled at how his will and mind passed seemingly unscathed through the darkness of his childhood into the light of academia.

"A lot of people we see who go through hard knocks tend to withdraw into themselves, and I think that is based on self-esteem issues," said Jeff "Mac" McCausland, development director of Valley Youth House. "But David feels -- rightfully so -- that he's overcome some tough obstacles growing up. We're pretty proud of him."

The effects of neglect do not fade with age. Abused and neglected children are 25 percent more likely to become juvenile delinquents or teen parents, and are prone to develop poor grades, drug habits and mental health problems, according to Child Welfare Information Gateway, an online service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The National Institute of Justice says abused and neglected children are 11 times more likely to be arrested and 2.7 times more likely to be charged with a violent crime as an adult.

In 2003, a New York state nonprofit, Prevent Child Abuse New York, estimated that a third of abused and neglected children will eventually victimize their offspring.

Those statistics hang like wet leaves on David's family tree.

"His life was hell," said David's mother, Tina Duell. Now clean, sober and living in Quakertown, her problems were at the root of her son's.

Born in 1959, Tina grew up in Philadelphia, the daughter of a Catholic mother and Jewish father. Not satisfied with either religion, at 18 she chose the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, better known as Mormonism.

In 1981, while pregnant with her second child and on a Mormon pilgrimage to Utah, she abandoned her faith for the alcohol, tobacco, coffee and illegal drugs Mormonism prohibits.

"I was off and on using drugs, meth and coke," Tina said. "I went straight in '84, and I quit smoking in '87."

David, her third child, was born in 1988 in Boyertown. His father eventually split, the third, but not the last, man to leave Tina.

In 1993, Tina married Bill Duell, a Bethlehem native a dozen years younger than she who would develop his own mental problems. The next year the couple would have Tina's fourth son, Joseph Duell.

Motherhood, never easy for Tina, got harder. She was in and out of mental hospitals and in 1995 was diagnosed as bipolar, a brain disorder that causes mood shifts.

The family responded by moving several times, forcing David to change schools often in

kindergarten and first grade until they eventually settled in east Allentown.

Clothes were always too big or too tight, and McDonald's was frequently on the menu. But Tina was sober and happy with Duell, who treated David as his own. She also reconnected with her Mormon faith, attending a church in Whitehall Township where David joined the youth group and learned piano.

There was trouble in their Nelson Street apartment, though. On June 4, 1998, a teenage brother with a rap sheet wrapped his fingers around David's 10-year-old neck and squeezed.

"Everyone gave me the option to either let him go or punish him with jail," David said.

"Naturally, I said let him go."

Allentown police dropped the simple assault charge, court records show.

Money problems stressed the fragile family too. In 1999 Duell suffered a nervous breakdown working at Atlantic States Cast Iron Pipe, a Phillipsburg foundry where danger was an occupational hazard. "It was the stress and working environment," he said.

Duell eventually was diagnosed as bipolar and schizophrenic. His medication turned him into a shell of his former self. The only job he could find was delivering newspapers, a pre-dawn task Tina and the children helped him accomplish.

Tina, whose constant aches and pains had been diagnosed as fibromyalgia, also took low-paying jobs as a housekeeper and cashier. She had her own mental breakdowns and was hospitalized.

To help out the struggling family, Duell's parents let them stay in a Bethlehem Township house they owned, and David again changed schools.

Whatever was going on at home, David blocked it out of his head when he was in the classroom. "He was very smart," Tina said. "Always a 4.0 average while helping me and taking care of Joseph."

At Bethlehem's East Hills Middle School in 2002, David's eighth-grade PSSA results were off the charts. He scored better than 88 percent of his classmates in reading, better than 97 percent in writing and better than 80 percent in math.

Drugs and divorce

The summer before David entered Freedom High School, he was growing increasingly flippant toward his stepfather as anger welled over Duell's worsening mental condition. An argument escalated to a fistfight when Tina gave Duell permission to punch David. "It was a horrible fight," Tina said.

Duell was charged with simple assault, disorderly conduct and harassment, district court records show. He pleaded to lesser charges. A year later, Duell filed for divorce, and Tina and the boys

had to find a new place to live.

"It's David's fault Bill left," Tina said.

Tina and Joseph ended up in a homeless shelter in Easton. David stayed with friends or church members until Tina found an apartment for them in Bethlehem Township, near Freedom.

In 2004, in the middle of his sophomore year, David noticed his mom, who had been clean for 17 years, starting to stray from their Mormon faith.

"My mom started smoking cigarettes, and I was like, 'What are you doing?'" said David, who knew nothing of his mom's past drug use. "She'd say, 'It's for my nerves.'"

By spring of that year, Tina was uncorking the booze and snorting cocaine. By summer, her sons were alone in Bethlehem Township and she was in an Atlantic City hotel, lighting her first crack pipe.

"I didn't like it at first," Tina said, "and then I started liking it, liking it, liking it."

She would vanish for days, leaving no money and only freezer-burned chicken patties for food. David didn't know what was going on. So he hacked into her e-mails and found a sordid diary of vices and boasts no son would want to learn about his mother. When Tina came home, David was waiting with printouts.

"He threw the pages at me as he read, ticking them off," Tina said. "I was appalled he went into my stuff."

She cussed at him, smacked him and called KidsPeace to try to commit him.

When his junior year started, David had had enough.

"When David left home, he ran to my house," said Diane Condomitti of Bethlehem Township, the mother of his then girlfriend, Danielle.

Over time, Freedom High School teachers overheard conversations they could not believe. David Fisher, an honors student who never caused problems, was living at his girlfriend's house or crashing with friends.

"I didn't believe he was without a home or his mother had an addiction," said his music teacher, Rosemary Murdy-Haber, now retired. "He was an excellent student. At lunch, I mentioned it to a guidance counselor."

Guidance counselor Loretta Lohenitz talked to him. Then she and other counselors called the nonprofit Valley Youth House. The day after David's 16th birthday, Condomitti dropped him off at the curb. "We had to make him start his own life," Condomitti said.

David stayed at the shelter, attending mandatory therapy, for three months until Valley Youth House found him a Bethlehem apartment. The nonprofit paid the \$625 rent; he got a job at Wegmans to pay for utilities and food.

Valley Youth counselors taught him to balance a checkbook, save money, cook and care for himself. He usually lived alone because roommates the shelter sent got kicked out for drinking or drugs.

"Working at Wegmans and school gave me a break from everything," David said. He maintained a 3.8 grade point average and missed only five days of school his junior year.

It's the same grade point average David graduated with in 2006, helping him earn academic scholarships to Moravian College that fall.

He was still homeless, however, and estranged from his mom. The death of her father started their reconciliation the summer before college. But David had no intention of living with her again.

Keeping childhood secrets

Although David lived in a dorm, he had nowhere to go when semesters ended or Christmas break rolled around, until Jesse Rodriguez, an ex-girlfriend's brother, offered a room at his house. Rodriguez, a corrections officer, shared David's enthusiasm for video games, Japanese cartoons and weightlifting. And he recognized his drive to succeed.

"A lot of people who had his beginnings would give up," Rodriguez said. "I see it constantly at work. But he's a mentally tough person. He's got a passion, a thirst for knowledge; he writes [term] papers when he doesn't even have to."

His professors noticed David, too, as he accumulated a 3.73 GPA. But he rarely shared his childhood secret.

"He doesn't wear it on his sleeve," said psychology professor Bob Brill.

David thrived in Brill's statistics course, discovering a gift for research writing he wants to turn into a career. He wrote a 10-page research paper for managers to consider at Wegmans, winning a cash prize for devising a solution to keep the supermarket chain from losing \$4 million a year from cashiers forgetting to scan items under shopping carts.

Dana S. Dunn, a psychology professor, saw David's gift for writing when he taught him for the first time last fall.

"I was impressed by his wit," Dunn said, "and then he started turning in writing samples and I said, 'Where have you been?'"

Dunn was so impressed he invited David to co-author a study and a textbook review, which

David gladly did. He also invited David to Thanksgiving dinner, which David turned down.

"I didn't want to be the homeless kid at the table," he said.

David did not turn down help offered by sociology professor Debra Wetcher-Hendricks. Knowing David had nowhere to go and no job lined up, Wetcher-Hendricks called a colleague at Lehigh University's Department of Sociology and Anthropology. With her help, David will begin working as a teaching assistant in August, earning a stipend while completing a master's degree in social relations.

Before beginning his new Lehigh life, David enjoyed a much-deserved moment of revelry with his Moravian classmates Saturday. He packed up his fish tanks, rolled up his Batman posters, turned in his dorm key and donned a cap and gown.

"I'm not genius smart; I'm learned smart," David said. "I study hard. I work hard. I do homework. I didn't want to be a statistic."

steve.esack@mcalls.com

610-820-6506

Copyright © 2010, [The Morning Call](#)