

Michael's Story

Richard B. McKenzie

“Homecoming” is a film that finally grasps something that few people ever do -- that we are larger than our biographies. Our pain and hurt is only a small fraction of who we are. We read numerous articles of abuse, neglect and drug addiction, but few ever tell the real story, that the important part is what comes after the storm. It is who we are now!”

Those are remarkably poignant words from Michael, at the time a 16-year-old who was growing up with 110 other disadvantaged kids in a self-described “modern-day orphanage,” The Crossnore School, located deep in the mountains of North Carolina. Michael was commenting on a documentary that looked at “*The Forgotten World of America’s Orphanages*” through the eyes of aging orphanage alumni as they gathered for their annual homecomings, which has aired on PBS stations across the country over the past two years.

Michael’s “biography” is one filled with considerable family disruption and pain early in his life. Now, however, he is writing a life story that is heroic, one that shows what a kid can do “after the storm” with help and direction from caring people in a home apart. Michael’s story really is one of “who we are now” – and can come to be. He is currently a freshman at New York University with hopes of majoring in international affairs. How Michael got to NYU is as remarkable as the fact that he is attending one of the country’s top universities.

For his first 10 years, Michael’s life was fairly ordinary, middle-middle class at worst. His father worked for the post office. His mother worked in real estate. But his father had a mental illness that affected the lives that Michael and his twin sister were living with their mother in Asheville, North Carolina.

When Michael was 11, his father’s illness worsened, causing him to cycle between periods of medicated calm and mental instability, ultimately forcing him to quit his job of 20 years. Shortly after his mother and father separated, his mother lost her job because of a regional downturn in the housing market. With no family income, the medical bills, and lots of other family bills, began to pile up. The bank foreclosed on their home, his mother’s credit cards were canceled, and her car was repossessed, shifting Michael and his mother and sister to virtual homelessness. Michael then learned what it was like to live in a world in which the next meal became a daily struggle.

Michael’s mother sought relief by taking Michael and his sister, then age 12, to live in South Carolina with relatives, but that was only a temporary solution. The threesome had to continue on the move, with their finances worsening at every turn in the road, causing Michael and his sister to return to living with their father whose mental problems had worsened.

Between age 11 and 13, Michael and his sister had been through five moves and three schools, which, of course, meant that their academic progress and grades were suffering badly. Michael’s teachers, sensing home problems, called in the state’s child protection services. The

social workers concluded that the father could handle the care of only one of the twins. That was the end of the “storm” for Michael.

At age 14 Michael was sent to The Crossnore School, nestled on the side of a mountain at a crossroads in the middle of nowhere, where he was taken in to spend his high school years on a beautiful campus covered with rhododendron and filled with hope. With all the worries about food and clothing taken from him, and with the support of caring teachers and house parents, Michael’s innate intelligence and good sense began to show in his school work, and in his personal commitment to demonstrate to all around him on campus that “our pain and hurt is only a small fraction of who we are.”

During his junior year of high school, he was selected to attend a summer-long political science boot camp at Princeton University with 350 other high schoolers from across the country, during which he easily made the grade in several highly competitive university-level courses. He was honored by his fellow students who selected him to introduce Brian Williams, the NBC nightly news anchor, who addressed the students at Princeton.

During his senior high-school year, Michael was admitted to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as well as Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Sensing that the upcoming 2007-2008 academic year would be the opportunity of a lifetime for an expectant political science major, he dared to apply to be an unpaid intern in Barack Obama’s presidential campaign. Michael was one of the youngest people to be selected for Obama’s early campaign staff. He delayed his college matriculation and was assigned to Obama’s Las Vegas campaign office, all with living assistance from Crossnore donors.

Having proven his mettle with six months of unpaid work, the Obama campaign put him on the payroll and assigned him to rural Nevada and later western North Carolina as a field organizer. Michael also worked in Houston where he became a Regional Get Out The Vote Director, an assignment usually reserved for much older and more seasoned campaign staffers.

As Michael moved through the primary campaigns, other universities took note of his budding record. In the end, he took a substantial scholarship offer from NYU because his work on the Obama campaign proved to him that he needed to know much more about international affairs to understand domestic politics, with there being no better place to go to school than near the United Nations.

When asked what made the difference in the turnaround in his life, Michael quickly singled out Phyllis Crain, the head of The Crossnore School (who has her own remarkable story to tell and who has redirected the childhoods of hundreds). Michael also gave credit to the caring Crossnore teachers and house parents. Then he added, “The importance of the other kids there can’t be understated. Being around other kids who have faced sordid problems was crucial. When I hit campus, I no longer had to hide who I was, or was not. Everyone had a sob story. I no longer had to focus on where I was or who I wasn’t. I could think about the person I could be. I took the opportunity and moved on.”

Michael is now having the time of his life, in absolute awe of where he is.

Michael’s twin sister? Unfortunately, she stayed with her father, enduring her father’s continuing mental problems. As do hundreds of thousands of disadvantaged kids in the country, she had to stay in the eye of her “storm.” She dropped out of high school and remains unemployed today. Before leaving for New York City, Michael gave his sister his car. “I can’t

keep a car in the city, and she faces the dilemma my mother faced: You can't afford a car if you aren't making a living, but then in North Carolina today you can't make a living without a car."

Michael had the good fortune to leave his "storm" behind. No one needs to worry about Michael. He is going places, but then he has already achieved more than anyone would have predicted, considering his biography before the calm that followed his personal storm. As his opening quote suggests, he has a perspective on life that parents across this country could hope their children could acquire, without the trauma that Michael has faced, and faced down.

Now, with the presidential election settled, no one should be surprised if, after he graduates, he will start his career in some far corner of the White House, a world apart from where he could have been.

Richard McKenzie, a professor of economics and management in the Merage School of Business at the University of California, Irvine, produced the mentioned award-winning documentary, *Homecoming: The Forgotten World of America's Orphanages*, which was directed by George Cawood. He has developed several works related to the orphanage issue, including an edited volume *The History of Orphanages Reconsidered* (Encounter books, forthcoming in February 2008).