

LUIS PRESENTATION

“I know what you’re thinking. Who is this kid? What could he possibly have to say that could make any difference in my life?”

I know what you’re thinking because I’ve sat where you’re sitting. I’ve had those same thoughts.

Before you shut me out, please do me a favor. Just listen to my story. Give me 20 minutes of your time. If you leave here saying, “What a waste,” it’s my fault, not yours.

Let me tell you a little about my journey, how I came to be speaking to you today.

My earliest memory is when I was 4 years old, living in Arizona with my biological parents, my sister and my aunt. Somebody threw me in the pool. I didn’t know how to swim. I was scared, panicking, choking on water, thrashing around, my heart pounding as I tried to climb out. I managed to save myself. I have no idea how.

My father was a construction worker, a heavy drinker. My mother was bipolar. She comes from a family of crazy people. At least one of her sisters is in an institution.

When I was a kid, we moved all the time. Right after the pool incident, we came to Las Vegas so my dad could find a job. It was sudden. All the moves were like that. Things would be okay for a few weeks, then start falling apart again. I learned at a young age you can’t run away from your problems. They always follow you.

We moved into an apartment in North Las Vegas. I stayed home with my mom while my dad worked. She started abusing me. She’d obsess over every little thing. When I did my chores, I was never fast enough or good enough for her. If I was picking up stuff from the floor, if I missed something, she’d hit me with a belt or a broom or she’d make me do military jumping jacks. She could turn on you quickly. When I was 8, I was late for a birthday party. She grabbed a knife and stabbed me in the arm. (*Note: Show scar*) Then she filled up the bathtub with cold water and made me get in it. I remember sitting in the water and watching it turn red. She bandaged the wound herself, never took me to urgent care or emergency. I was afraid to tell anyone because it would make her angrier. I would think to myself, “You know what happens when you tell.”

It wasn’t the last time, either. My head is covered with bumps and scars. (I hope I never lose my hair.) Years later, when I met my biological mother again, I was shocked to see how small she is. I always pictured her as a big, scary woman.

When you’re little, you don’t know what’s going on, what’s right or wrong. You just go with it, feeling lost all the time. My nickname as a kid was “Smiley.” No matter what happened, I had a smile on my face. But I wasn’t smiling inside.

By this time, my dad was drinking even more, and also gambling and doing drugs. There was no food in the house. I was hungry all the time. I started wandering the streets alone, sleeping in the playground near my house to get away. Soon, I was stealing food from grocery stores and homes.

Like I said, we moved constantly. I never finished a full semester of school. I was behind in all subjects. Teachers would discount me, write me off. They just saw my actions, not the real me. They branded me as a trouble-maker. One of them said, "You don't need school. You need to be locked up." I never talked to anyone; not teachers, counselors, other students. I just sat there, a skinny little kid taking up space. Nobody tried to help me. The signs were there but no one cared enough to notice. I fell through the cracks.

At 9, I began running away from home, roaming around downtown, the Fremont Street Experience, the north end of the Strip. Not the best neighborhoods. I had nowhere else to go.

The cops would pick me up and take me to Child Haven, a group shelter for homeless youth in North Las Vegas. At 10, I got in real trouble for the first time. I saw a little trashcan fire on the street and something clicked. I began to set fires. I had no idea why. I just liked to watch things burn. At Wal-Mart, I went into the back storage room and lit a box of clothes on fire. I tried to set cars on fire. One time, I almost blew myself up.

The cops arrested me while I was watching a fire. They assumed I set it, although I didn't. I was so thin they couldn't get the handcuffs to fit. I spent 3 months in the Las Vegas Detention Center, not a good place for someone so young. It made me worse. I started drawing weird, demented pictures. (*Note: Do you have samples?*) I hung around with older kids, gang members who tried to influence me.

Finally, they released me to a case worker, Brett. Meeting Brett brought a lot of firsts for me. My first medical, dental and eye exams. My first plane ride. (I helped the flight attendant hand out peanuts to the other passengers.) They flew me to Salt Lake City to a residential home with a dozen other at-risk youth. I received psychological counseling and they put me on meds. I couldn't deal with the structure and ran away after a couple of weeks, then came back and allowed myself to "settle in." It was the first time I ever spoke to anyone about my past. I realized that trying to keep everything inside wasn't healthy. I started feeling better. I had my first Christmas, my first birthday celebration. It was the first time I ever felt like a kid. But I still sensed something was missing. A family.

I stayed there until I was 13. At that time, Brett thought I was ready for foster care. He found a family, the Jolleys, who wanted to take me in. I thought it would be a permanent arrangement. Nobody told me otherwise. Nobody bothered explaining what "foster care" meant.

I moved into a real home for the first time. It was in Layton, Utah, outside of Salt Lake. I let myself get close to this family. They treated me well. They had a young son of their own, Cooper, who became like a little brother to me.

I remember one day, I asked Cooper if it was okay with him if I called his mother, "Mom." He said yes. I felt great, started calling the Jolleys mom and dad. I would kiss her good night. I liked the idea of having a family, even if it was just to say "my mom got mad at me." I never knew life could be so good.

I began to understand the value of education. At first, they placed me in special ed classes. I knew I didn't belong there. I didn't want to be seen as "different." I studied hard and realized I could make something of myself. A defining moment. One teacher took a real interest and began working with me. I found out that I enjoyed history. I got involved with PE, began running track. It was a good environment for me.

It lasted 18 months. Then, my foster dad, who was in the military, got transferred to Japan. The day the family sat me down and told me they were all moving and I couldn't go with them, I cried. I had placed my trust and faith in the system. I allowed myself to feel love for the first time. And now I felt abandoned. The system let me down.

The Jolleys were "it" for me. The only family I ever had. They changed my life. And now they were gone. I wouldn't put my guard down ever again.

After that, everything happened fast. I got sent to a new home where I finished 7th grade, then to Carlin, Nevada to live with a different family. It was strange, a redneck town, the smallest place I'd ever seen.

Still, I made friends at school, tried out for the football team and made it, got mainstreamed, began getting caught up. I discovered books and reading, especially biographies. Clinton, Reagan, Shaq. Especially Shaq. I identified with him because he overcame a lot of obstacles. His story gave me hope.

I started reading about business and politics and thought, "I can do this." I learned about the opportunity to serve others. This was a new concept for me. Maybe someday I could give back, get involved in something greater than myself.

I spent 3 years in that school. Towards the end, I remember thinking, "What will happen to me if I stay in this small town? What kind of future will I have?"

I decided I needed to get out. The next year is a blur. I moved in with a family in Elko, Nevada, which is a larger town. Then, to a group home in Las Vegas. It wasn't for me. They didn't expect anything from the kids, just let them play video games and watch TV. They never made them do their homework. I hated it but stayed focused on my goals. From there, I went to Boys and Girls Town. All in all, I attended 5 different high schools during that time.

Somewhere deep inside of me, I had a belief I could get out and make something of myself. Strength and courage is all about changing your path. In my senior year, I applied for a college scholarship. I wasn't counting on it, because I still didn't trust the system. I took matters into my own hands and found a fast-track high school graduation program in Missoula, Montana. I drove there, enrolled in Sentinel High, and got my diploma in two weeks. I was the first person in my biological family to graduate from high school, the only one who ever got the chance.

I was 18 years old and finally out of the system for good. That summer, I returned to Elko. Through some friends, I began working two jobs: The first was construction, laying pipe from 6 am to 4 pm Monday through Thursday. The second was working the graveyard shift at the Maverick convenience store Friday through Sunday. I was saving all my money for college. I got accepted into UNLV and enrolled for the fall semester.

Going to college made me nervous. I kept asking myself, "Do I belong here? Am I smart enough? Can I compete?" The first college paper I ever wrote was a disaster. It was only the third paper I ever did in my life and I got a 67%, a D. It was a shock, a rude awakening. I could have given up right then and there. Instead, I got angry. I was able to focus my anger in a constructive way, thinking "I'll show you." But mainly, I needed to prove something to myself.

I found a Writing Center on campus and took advantage of their tutoring resources. I worked my butt off. On my next paper, I got an A. That first semester, carrying a 4-course load, I got a 3.7 GPA.

It felt great, a big boost to my confidence and a tremendous sense of accomplishment.

Which takes me to today. By all rights, with my background, I should be dead or in jail. Instead, back in January, I was appointed by the Governor to the state of Nevada Juvenile Justice Commission. The goal is to reduce the risk for minority youth, to keep them from entering the Juvenile Justice System and going down the wrong path. We vote on funding for programs. I serve with a diverse group of legislators, community leaders, judges, attorneys and other influential people. I say this not to brag but to show you what you can accomplish if you set your mind to it.

This summer, I served an internship with a foster club. All of us overcame incredible odds and are now productive citizens who want to help others. After training in Oregon, we traveled across the country, conducting workshops for kids just like us who were let down by the system. We deliver a message of hope, education and motivation.

My goal is to help influence adoption legislation so that what happened to me never happens to one other youth. I am speaking for youth who don't have a voice. I am speaking for youth who don't have opportunities. I am speaking for youth who don't have someone to feed them or take them to school or talk to them.

I'm here to tell you that I'm not special. I'm not the smartest or strongest person in this room. If I can do this, so can you. We all have our own gifts, talents and abilities. You can start paving the path you want to take. You can discover who you are, not who people say you should be. You can use the past to make you stronger. The time for excuses is over. The cycle stops here.

Maybe you're thinking, "I have nothing. I have nobody. Why should I do this?"

To make sure your kids have a Christmas.

To make sure your kids have enough to eat.

To make sure your kids are loved.

To make sure your kids don't have to go through what you've gone through.

You can find that permanent home, that family, that love you seek. You can build it yourself, starting today.

When I give this talk, I hope one person in the audience truly gets it. I hope one person begins to see the possibilities. I hope one person changes his or her life.

So I leave you with this question: Are you that person?"