

COOPER JOHNSON

The hot morning sun penetrated the broken venetian blinds. The night hadn't offered coolness and relief. Cooper's dirty sheet was still sticky from humidity and sweat. Hunger and thirst gripped the seven-year-old as he came to consciousness. The resident rat was scurrying through the ceiling above his head. He panicked and tried to cover himself by hiding his head under his stained pillow. He hated rats.

The house was deadly quiet. A cockroach was hanging on the end of a light string. Cooper's presence startled the bug and it launched itself toward the boy. It was almost more than Cooper could take. He hated the bugs that infested the apartment, he hated living there, and he was sure he hated his life. Cooper soon discovered he was all alone in the house with nothing to eat in the moldy fridge. Tears swelled in his eyes and his thin frame began to shake. Sometimes his drug addict mother would be away for days, leaving him in the care of his older sister. But, on this morning, even his sister was nowhere to be found.

The knock on the door demanded his attention. At the door was the landlord, the one his mother always tried to avoid. Within the hour Child Protective Services arrived. Cooper was placed in foster care and became a ward of the state. He would learn later that his mother had died from a drug overdose and his father was never identified. He was not sure where his sister was. Cooper had a hard time expressing his fear and feelings, so instead he acted out and became difficult to place. Cooper felt unloved, abandoned, rejected, helpless, and often hopeless.

Cooper's criminal career started at the age of twelve. He stole bicycles from the school and money from his foster parents. He was in and out of juvenile detention, and when he turned eighteen he was ill-prepared for independence. He knew of only two relatives, his mother's parents, but he was turned away at their door by his angry grandfather. His grandmother turned away in tears.

Alone and homeless, he turned to theft to pay for drugs to self medicate and escape his reality. He was arrested while attempting to run away from the police with stolen property from a warehouse. He was soon in an orange jumpsuit facing a judge. Because he had a knife, he received four years in prison. During his incarceration, no one came to visit and he never received a letter. He was sure that no one knew or even cared that he existed. Lonely, discouraged, frightened and with little hope for a better life, he often contemplated suicide.

A life skills class was offered at the facility and he decided to attend. It was the same county jail and lifeskills course his cousin, Jason, had taken two years earlier. The class had a powerful impact upon his thinking and forever changed his perspective. He realized that he could create a new beginning for himself. He had hope that he could succeed, and was eager to get started with his new life.

When released, Cooper had his well-worn life skills workbook with him—underlined, highlighted and riddled with personal notes. He returned to his grandparents knowing his grandfather had died and his grandmother would be willing to take him in. His uncle ran a trucking company and helped him get his license and job as a driver. Cooper's new beginning was taking shape.

At a favorite truck stop, Cooper saw a new waitress. He couldn't take his eyes off her and wished she was waiting on his table. He got her name, and with his heart pounding and his hands a little clammy, he greeted her directly and asked if he could call or e-mail her. With some embarrassment she said, "Yes, that would be nice." And so started a long-distance courtship that evolved into marriage. With his small inheritance and his earnings, he was able to mortgage a small home in the country with six acres of fruit trees. It was an ideal place to raise a growing family. They loved each other and their love only grew with their newborn child. Holding his baby son next to him he could sense his breathing and the rhythm of his heart. For the first time, Cooper had joy and peace in a family of his own. He embraced his new roles as a husband and a father, and his wife and children embraced him in return.

31. What can we learn from Cooper and the Johnson cousins who overcame their adversity? _____
