

## OPINION

# Rivera: 'I didn't like the person I was when I was homeless,' a youth survivor story

Raquell Rivera, guest writer Published 1:01 p.m. ET March 4, 2020 | Updated 1:10 p.m. ET March 4, 2020

Youth homelessness is not something you bring up in conversation when you're homeless. You may pass a young person with a backpack on the street, and not even know they're homeless. That was me. There were people in my life who didn't know my situation unless I told them, or they guessed.

Your life is always set in the here-and-now, survival mode. If you think too far forward, you lose track of what's happening now. You only think about how scared you are, and when or where you're going to eat and bathe next. I felt lost the entire time – nowhere to go and no one to talk to. I was always running away from something.

I grew up in Lansing and first become homeless at 18, in my senior year of high school. I came from a large family but had an unstable, unhealthy home.

Toxic parents. I spent months couch-surfing at friends' homes, not uncommon in youth homelessness. Hey, can I stay over for a night or two? Normally, I didn't stay long enough for their hospitality to wear out.

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Bryan McGruder, with Projects in Assisting the Transition from Homelessness, left, talks with a homeless man on Grand Avenue in downtown Lansing. January 2020. (Photo: Nick King/Lansing State Journal)

After graduation, I was way too embarrassed to keep asking. So for 10 days, I carried my backpack with \$20 in my pocket and walked the streets of Lansing until I was too exhausted to keep walking and could finally go to sleep. I'd eat every other day, and bought hot food from the gas station. I don't even know what I thought about. It was so mechanical. At night, I slept in the abandoned playground of a closed elementary school on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard – no sleeping bag – in one of those play tunnels where I could stay hidden.

I didn't like the person I was when I was homeless.

I was self-destructive and had an eating disorder. Life was depressing, and my relationship to the world was negative.

The turning point came when I remembered one of the programs we had at school, Jobs for Michigan's Graduates, run by a youth specialist from Peckham Inc. I recalled that she talked about a shelter for youth homelessness through Gateway Youth Services in Lansing. Finally, I had a safe place to stay, and started seeing a therapist.

I liked living there. I had chores, always went to bed on time, and had respectful staff members. There are few places like this in Michigan. Homeless youth are not homeless by choice. They don't have resources. We definitely need more of these shelters.

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Today, I'm not running away. I'm running toward my life and a future. Because by chance I saw a Facebook ad about the non-profit Women in Skilled Trades (WIST), I am working as an apprentice union carpenter in one of the big, new commercial buildings in East Lansing. I have bills... and I just filed my own tax returns!

One of the WIST co-founders and her family have "adopted" me; they treat me like family. I'm still super awkward and weird – I love Hogwarts and Harry Potter – but I'm happy and very giggly.

When I finish my apprenticeship, I want to convert the credits toward an associate degree and work toward a degree in engineering. I renovated the house I live in – redid the flooring, painted, replaced the light fixtures and bathroom vanity.

My plan is to build my own house, maybe in 10 years. I also want to be a mom, but not anytime soon! That will be another dream realized. I would never want my kids to go through anything like I had to go through.

*Raquell Rivera, 22, spent nearly two years homeless and today advocates for programs such as Lansing's Gateway Youth Services, Child and Families Charities.*

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