

Congressional Briefing: Addressing the Mental Health Impact of  
Violence and Trauma on Children

October 11, 2011

**DAVID WASHINGTON**

My name is David Washington. It's an honor to be here. Thank you, Helga [Luest], for inviting me. I was asked to come here this morning to speak about some of the things that happened to me related to trauma and where I am now.

The first trauma that I experience was when I was in second grade. I was raped by two men at a playground. At that time, because of the nature of the rape, I had to go to the hospital and we had the police involved. I'm sure my family didn't know what to do or how to respond to what had happened. My mom made the statement of: look at what you've done to this family or what you are doing to this family.

At some point I started to internalize the rape as being my fault. I don't think that is unusual for survivors. But what happened also in that year was that I started being sexually abused by someone else in the neighborhood and I was unable to focus in school – and we all know that second grade is really critical. So, I had a hard time learning the ABC's and 1+1=2 and the school decided that I was learning disabled at that point. And from that point, until I was in the ninth grade, I was in the special ed classes.

Luckily I was exposed to the arts and music became an escape for me. So I learned how to play the saxophone and I would practice 3-4 hours a day, and when I wasn't practicing, I would go out into the backyard and do the isolation – kind of like my own little fantasy world.

When I got older, in the ninth grade I developed a rare type of cancer and they told me that I would have had three days to life. I had a growth in my throat the size of a grapefruit and the doctors said that one day you probably would have lied down and you probably wouldn't have woken up. And I became very angry about that. I was raised under the religious tenants that only those who are punished by God have things like that happen to them.

Not knowing how to cope with the sexual abuse and the rape, once again I felt that there was something wrong with me and I started to connect with people who were consuming alcohol. So I started to drink in the ninth grade and the first time I drank was the first time that I felt normal.

It was the first time I was accepted by my peers – in my eyes.

So I started to hang out with people who would drink and do other things, but I decided that I wanted to do something with my life. And I wanted to go to college,

but because I was in these learning disabled classes – you know these classes that are off the side of the gym and you have the same teacher all day – I told my dad that I wanted to go to college and study music. In order to do that, I needed to take certain classes and the school told my dad that there was no way your son would be able to take these classes and pass. But my dad was very persistent.

And one thing I forgot to mention was that my mom walked out on us when I was eleven – so I think that was eight grade.

And my dad was a very strong person in my life. So I got to take the class and I got a “B.” And I remember they were like – how did that happen?!

And still in my mind, even though I got the grades, I didn’t think that I was OK and I was still drinking.

I got to come to college. I got a partial scholarship to go to a college up on Georgia Avenue that I was pretty excited about. But not having any boundaries and ways of understanding danger and safety, I started running around with people who were from Lorton. And didn’t know where Lorton was, I thought it was just another town like Hagerstown. I didn’t know that it was a prison.

I got involved in other things. Eventually within one year of being here, I ended up homeless, living from place to place and just wanting to die. Just wanting to die.

So my father let me come home. I got clean. I somehow ended up in a twelve-step program. With six months clean – no substances at all – I had I guess what you could call a nervous breakdown. I became depressed, angry, I wanted to quit my job (and I had a pretty good job at the time) and someone said there’s something wrong. And I was sent to a program in Florida.

They put me in a substance abuse program and I said I had been sober for six months and they said “denial.” For some reason, they put me in the unit for people that were sexually abused. When I got on that unit my first reaction was anger – that wasn’t the issue. I didn’t feel that that stuff had affected me at all. But thank God for the great treatment I was given. I was 25. I was able to understand what had happened to me.

That was the first step in my recovery to getting clean and then accepting that I was a survivor of rape. And I haven’t said this too often, so it is a little stress inducing.

There was never any treatment. I don’t know what the creative minds were thinking – the parents and the schools. I guess they just thought that was normal behavior. When I did get in trouble, because I was a good kid from a good family, they just brushed it aside. I got into a fight with the principal and the principal actually said “I didn’t think you had it in you.” So I’m assuming that’s a good thing.

But I was always the quite, subdued person.

I've been fortunate enough to come to work in the field of trauma. In 2002 I went to work for a county detention center implementing trauma services for men and women who had experienced adverse childhood experiences. And I also got to do some work with the juvenile justice service. I just wanted to share that of ten people that come to our program, nine of them have never been treated for trauma.

When I look at them, I see me. And I think what if someone had taken the time to ask the question "what happened to you?" instead of "what's wrong with you?" What would have happened if there had been treatment for a young man who was raped? Back then we didn't really talk much about it - we just shoved it under the rug. What would have happened if they hadn't labeled me "learning disabled?" What if someone would have said - he's probably not responding to what's going on as a result of the rape.

Until recently, very few people knew about the sexual abuse. I finally told my dad in 1991. I never told my mom - I don't plan on ever telling her.

When I come here today and I think of the "what ifs" and then I just heard what was just said. I think about the possibilities and opportunities that could have become - the opportunities that could have been available to me if someone intervened earlier - had I gone down a different track.

So again, it's an honor to be here today. Thank you.