

Saved by School

Keynote speaker **Liz Murray** tells how education got her off the streets and into Harvard

Keynote sponsor



At 15 and homeless, Liz Murray had pretty much given up on school. Teachers had tried to help her overcome her difficult life but not much had made a difference. She would show up for class occasionally to get a hot meal and a bus pass.

Two years later, school saved her life.

Murray, the author of “Breaking Night: A Memoir of Forgiveness, Survival, and My Journey from Homeless to Harvard,” shared her story of overcoming almost insurmountable obstacles.

Murray and her sister grew up in the Bronx with drug-addicted parents. Although they tried to do their best for their children, what money there was went mostly for heroin and other drugs. Despite efforts at intervention by well-meaning teachers, Murray quickly became “probably the worst student.”

After her mother, who was HIV positive, became seriously ill, the family lost their home and Murray was on the streets. Because she had experienced violence from staff members of a youth detention facility, she had a great fear of the

system and felt safer living on her own.

She crashed on friends’ couches or rode subway trains all night to stay warm. On the rare occasions she showed up at school, it was only to get a bus pass or a meal. By the time she was 17, she had one high school credit.

Her mother’s death and pauper’s funeral was a transformative moment. Murray started to pay more attention to the ‘what if’ scenarios that played out in her brain — ‘What if I go to school regularly?’ or ‘What if I do well and graduate?’

Because her academic record was so poor, she was rejected by every high school she applied to until she tried the Humanities Preparatory Academy, a public charter school, and met the school’s founder Perry Weiner, an English teacher.

“You never know when you meet a person who is going to change your life,” Murray said. “He accepted me as a person 100 percent, but he held me accountable 100 percent.”

Thanks to the steady support of Weiner and other teachers and their constant push to get her to achieve

her full potential, she finished four years of high school in two years, taking classes at night and on weekends, all while still homeless. On a class field trip with Weiner, she visited the Harvard campus and was awestruck. She applied and got in but had no idea of how to pay for tuition. Then, she saw an advertisement for a four-year scholarship from the *New York Times*. They wanted someone who had to overcome challenges. Liz had no problem identifying a few. She won the scholarship and went on to graduate from Harvard in 2009.

Today, Murray is married with two children, and is working on her master’s degree in psychology.

She told the crowd that she worries sometimes that the difficult times and many pressures in public education could cause them to turn off and give up. She encouraged them not to obsess over the enormity of the issues and just “do what you can do.”

“My life was transformed in the context of advocates. I was surrounded by them and I learned to be one,” she said. “You all look like rock stars to me. Please don’t ever give up. You are changing lives.” ■

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