



# From Homeless to Harvard

Education paved the way  
to success for Liz Murray



**The following is an excerpt** from Liz Murray's New York Times bestselling book "Breaking Night." The book chronicles Murray's path from homeless teenager to Harvard graduate. In this excerpt, Murray is a 16-year-old homeless, high school dropout in New York who had recently lost her mother. One night, while spending the night in the apartment of a friend of a friend, her life begins to change when she learns about an alternative high school.

**A**fter a few weeks of being so dependent on people, I began sleeping a few nights a week on the subway, alone. Into the far corner of the subway car, I appeared just like any other traveler taking public transportation, rocked to sleep by the train's rhythm, well on my way home. No one had to know. But this wasn't safe. Sometimes thugs boarded the train, teenage guys in hoods, their pants sagging, barking loud words to one another, dominating the subway car. I'd awoken a few times to their stares, but never anything more. It was luck. So I chose hallways as my main refuge; they were a better bet.

The top landing of any Bedford Park building's stairwell felt so much safer. Lying there, flat on a bed of marble, using my backpack for a pillow, whole lives played out beneath me: the smell of food

cooking; lovers' arguments; dishes clanking; TVs blasting at top volume; my old shows, *The Simpsons* and *Jeopardy!*; rap music — all carrying me back to University Avenue. Mostly, though, I heard families; children calling out for mothers, husbands speaking their wives' names, sending me reminders of the way love — stretched between a handful of people — fills a space, transforms it into a home. I wondered how Lisa was doing at Brick's. How was she dealing with school when we had just lost Ma? I didn't have the strength to call her; I knew I just couldn't handle the questions I was sure she'd ask: "What are you doing out there, Liz? What are you going to do with your life? Are you going back to school?" It was too much to deal with, so I stayed away.

Many nights, I longed for home. But it occurred to me as I struggled for a feeling of comfort and safety:

I have no idea where home is.

Sometimes, waking up, I didn't initially recognize where I was. For those first few seconds, it could be University Avenue, the footsteps nearby, Ma and Daddy getting ready to binge for the night. Or Brick's place, Sam somewhere right within my reach. But when my eyes adjusted, it was always someone else's personal touches, their family's noises surrounding me, and their scents in the air. I was at Bobby's, Fief's, or one of a few other random places I'd sometimes go, the apartments of friends' friends.

I spent almost a week in this one girl's place. The guys were all crashing there a lot, hanging out with Danny, a friend of Bobby's who had always come and gone through our group of friends over the years and had become someone I counted as a friend, someone in my tribe. He was a tall, light-skinned Puerto



**Her story sounds like** a Hollywood movie — and it practically is. Lifetime Television produced an Emmy-nominated movie about Murray's life story entitled "Homeless to Harvard"...

Rican guy with large hazel eyes, handsome. Like Bobby, Danny loved video games and hanging out with our group. He always had a different girlfriend, and several other girls who thought they were his girlfriend. Paige was his latest. He had just moved in with her, and brought the group of us along with him to hang out.

Paige was twenty-two years old, a former runaway, grown up. Danny told me she'd done really well for herself, had a steady job and her own apartment, which she could pay for without a roommate. It was a tiny, one-bedroom apartment above a Chinese restaurant, so small that you could roll right out of the living room and into the kitchen because they were actually the same tiny room. But it was all hers. She made it happen herself.

When Paige cooked chicken and rice for all of us, the smell and the heat filled the small space like a sauna. That was when her curly hair

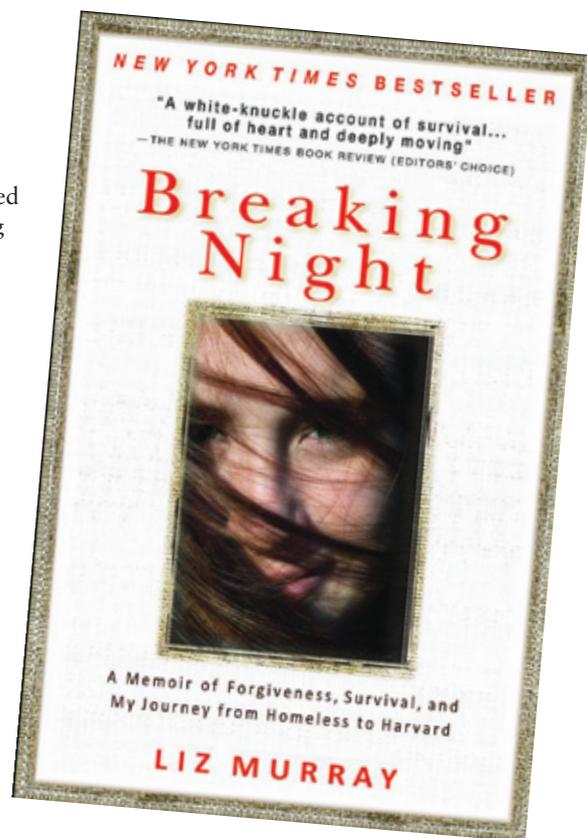
moistened to her temples, making it cling. She wiped it back before speaking.

"Are you sure you're not looking for a GED?" she asked me while lowering a steaming dinner plate onto my lap.

"No. I've been thinking I want to get my high school diploma," I told her. "I'm really not interested in a GED. I've heard they're great, but it's not what I'm looking for...But it's hard for me to be in school, ya know? It's crowded, and I feel really behind."

"Well, my old high school might be the perfect place for you then," Paige said as she filled a dinner plate for Danny.

From Paige, I learned what an alternative high school in New York City was like. "It's a place like a private school, but for



This article is reprinted with permission from Washington Speakers Bureau.

## Hear Liz Murray's Powerful Story at the 2017 State Education Convention

**LIZ MURRAY** will be one of the featured keynote speakers at the 96th State Education Convention, Jan. 18-20 in Milwaukee.

Liz Murray's life is a triumph over adversity and a stunning example of the importance of dreaming big. Murray's life as the child of cocaine-addicted parents in the Bronx was bitterly grim. There was never food in the house, everything was filthy, drugs were everywhere, and the welfare checks were spent before they arrived.

By age 15, Murray's mom had died and she was homeless — living on the streets, riding the subway all night, and eating from dumpsters. Amidst this pain, Murray always imagined her life could be much better than it was. "I started to grasp the value of the lessons learned while living on the streets. I knew after overcoming those daily

obstacles that next to nothing could hold me down." Determined to take charge of her life, Murray finished high school in just two years and was awarded a full scholarship to Harvard University, all while camping out in New York City parks and subway stations.

Murray's story is exhilarating and inspirational. Her delivery is innocently honest, as she takes audiences on a very personal journey where she achieves the improbable.

Her story sounds like a Hollywood movie — and it practically is. Lifetime Television produced a movie about Murray's life story entitled "Homeless to Harvard", which was nominated for three "Emmy Awards." Murray is the recipient of the White House "Project's Role Model Award" and Oprah Winfrey's first-ever "Chutzpah Award." Her memoir, "Breaking Night," landed on the *New York Times* best seller list within a week of its release and quickly became an international bestseller published in twelve countries, in eight languages.

Murray received her Bachelor of Science degree from Harvard University. She is currently pursuing her master's degree in Psychology at Columbia University.

Murray is passionate about speaking on the importance of personal motivation, transforming problems into opportunities, and what it takes to make a difference in people's lives.



anyone who is really motivated to go, even if they don't have the money. The teachers really care about you," she told me.

I scrawled the name and address of her school down in my journal while she went on, speaking about her experiences in high school, trailing off into a story about an ex-boyfriend. As she spoke, I took my pen and darkened in the phone number to her school, until I gave the digits dimension, a life of their own that soared up from the page.

Later, when the apartment was dark and everyone was sleeping, I took over her loveseat and wrote by the nightstand light.

On one page, I made a list. *Things to Look Forward to When I Eventually Get a Place:*

1. Privacy
2. Being warm all the time
3. Food, any time I want

4. A big bed!!!
5. Clean clothes, socks especially!
6. Sleeping and no one wakes me up
7. Warm baths

I turned to the next blank page and tapped my pen down a few times. The hall clock was ticking. All over the walls were Paige's abstract paintings from her high school art class, vivid reds, yellows, and greens splashed across big, beige canvases. I studied a photograph tacked up beside the paintings; a woman who looked like an older version of Paige with curlier hair was wearing her Sunday best, standing beside a stout man with a salt-and-pepper beard and a tie. Paige was sandwiched between them. "That was at my graduation," Paige had told me earlier. "We took a million shots that day. Yeah, my art teacher cried, sad to see me go," she'd said.

I tapped on my journal's empty page again, and wrote:

Number of credits required for graduation from high school — 40?...42?(find this out)

My age when the next school year will begin — 17

My current address —Wherever I am staying at the moment

My current total of high school credits — 1

It would have been zero credits, except that every now and then I used to swing by John F. Kennedy High School with Sam. She didn't even officially go to my high school, but with more than six thousand students enrolled, who would notice one extra? Together, Sam and I sat in the back of Ms. Nedgrin's overcrowded social studies class and performed an act you could call "I'm totally weird, look at me." Sam's hair back then was fire-engine red, held in a bun with large chopsticks, and her

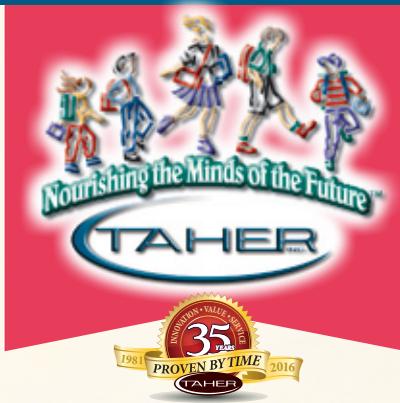
***With 35 Years Of Experience, and 250 Public School Clients, Taher Can Professionally Manage Your Program Better Than Ever***



*Chef Inspired Meals*

*Staff Development & Training*

*Optimum Financial Results*



***Committed To Serving Fresh Wholesome Food***

**www.taher.com**  
tel. 952-945-0505  
sales@taher.com



black makeup was caked around her eyes like a raccoon. I was Goth and wore all black, as I had almost every day since I got out of the group home. For a matching accessory to my outfit, I shoplifted and proudly wore a black leather dog collar, crowned with silver studs. Our clothing was torn up in holes that were “cool.” It just so happened that on one of the days when I sauntered into Ms. Nedgrin’s classroom, I took a social studies test and passed. This is the reason I was given the one high school credit. Well, that and the pity Ms. Nedgrin took on me.

With no in-class preparation, I had scored an 81 out of 100 on an exam, and this got her curious enough to pull me out in the hall one day to plead with me to come to school. “You’re a smart girl,” she said. “I read your file... Your mother is sick, isn’t she? You’ve been in placement before?” Her eyes were watery and sympathetic.

“Yeah,” was all I said, avoiding eye contact.

My whole life teachers had acted that way, like they felt sorry for me. The Westchester-living, string-of-pearls-wearing ladies took one look at my life and it always made them sad. And anyway, if she thought I was so smart, she was mistaken. The only reason I passed the test was because I read one of Daddy’s books that was on the same subject, the Civil War. And the questions on her test were super basic. Really, what I did wasn’t as impressive as she thought it was. And why was she crying? She stood there with her crisp, royal blue dry-clean-only dress and her eyes filled with worry, wiping away tears. She hugged me and said something, words that I held on to for years: “I understand why you don’t come to school, and it’s not your fault. You are a victim of these things, I understand, sweetheart. It’s okay.”

For all of Ms. Nedgrin’s good

intentions, I’d heard only one thing she said, and that was that I didn’t have to do my schoolwork, for reasons that were not my fault. I was a “victim.” She understood. Well, I didn’t want to do my work anyway, so, great.

That was the last time I showed up to school at Kennedy, and when my report card arrived in the mail at Brick’s place, there it was, a row of F’s and a single D, just one passing grade from Ms. Nedgrin’s class. I was the same age as someone getting ready to enter college and this was my entire high school education so far — one pity credit.

Under the light of Paige’s end table lamp, I used my pen to continue darkening in the phone number and address in my journal, and along with it some new words, *alternative high school*. ■

Reprinted with permission from Washington Speakers Bureau.



## Convention '17 January 18-20

**Save the dates!** The 96th annual Wisconsin State Education Convention will take place January 18-20, 2017, in Milwaukee.

Join public school leaders from around the state to hear from nationally renowned keynote speakers, learn from experts at informative breakout sessions, meet with colleagues and vendors, and celebrate public education.

**Registration opens Nov. 1**

