



The Lost Boy

Jamal: The Lost Boy

Go to “Four Way,” an intersection in the Wynton Terrace projects where Baby Eric lives, and you may see Jamal, an 18-year-old, standing around with his friends. Jamal (not his real name) personifies the problems of unmet mental health needs, school failure, a juvenile record, and troublesome peers and leisure activities. His mother does her best. He has been tested, diagnosed, and serviced but he is a boy who never got enough attention from adults, particularly male adults, to learn what he needs to know to grow up to be a productive adult. Most of the influences around him have led him the other way. Now he is a lost boy.

His mother, a large, sweet-natured woman lives in the Walnut Hills area of Cincinnati, on the second floor of a duplex, with her daughter, her daughter’s two babies, an 11-year-old son, a 16-year-old son, and Jamal, when he is not staying with friends in Wynton Terrace. The family lived in the projects for a few years when she had a nervous breakdown and lost her job with the city. An older son, 20, was recently released from a state juvenile correctional facility and lives elsewhere.

Jamal happened to be home when the Children’s Defense Fund consultant visited and, to his mother’s surprise, agreed to talk. He is medium-dark brown, with short hair, and he wore a Celtics t-shirt, baggy pants, and open sneakers. Although pleasant and

polite, he was as closed as a clam. Only rarely did his hard shell open enough to provide a brief glimpse of the soft vulnerable creature inside.

Earlier, his mother had said that Jamal’s problems began in early elementary school. He started getting disobedient and aggressive with other kids, misbehaving all around. “It scared me. I saw him get so angry his face changed. I took him to a clinic, and they said he had defiant disorder and he was depressed. It was a lot of words, and they gave him some medications.” Part of the problem, she thinks, was learned behavior from watching his older brother who had an extreme hyperactivity disorder. Their father left when Jamal was three and has not been part of his life in any way.

Sitting in the living room, where shelves contain videos but no books, she and her son reviewed his school history. He attended at least eight schools until he dropped out during his third repeat of ninth grade. She had to fill in many of the details because Jamal didn’t remember or want to remember much about his school years. He did remember suspensions and said that principals and teachers didn’t like him and other students accused him of things he didn’t do.

“Jamal was held back in the third grade and placed in a class for students with severe behavioral handicaps. In class one year in a school that had a year-round program, with various vacation breaks, his teacher quit and the students in that class went on vacation for a big chunk of that year”, his mother recalled.

By the seventh or eighth grade, “I kept suspending myself,” he said. “I didn’t care too much. I just started goin’ with my own crowd.”

“My opinion is: Being out of school was better than being in school,” she said. “You kept being suspended for the same things. You knew.”

“It wasn’t nothin’ serious. Say a cuss word and get a three-day suspension.” When pressed, he couldn’t remember any “best time” in school and could name

just one teacher he liked, Miss Saunders. “There was others but I can’t remember

their names.” He couldn’t name a book he enjoyed reading, did not attend church, belong to the Boy Scouts, or participate in school sports. He did wrestle one season at a neighborhood center, for a team coached by his uncle. He was there six months, then quit after a match he was sure he would win. Instead, his loose shoelaces distracted him and his opponent pinned him. “I could of beat him but he won. I said, ‘Forget it,’ and I never went back.”

The interviewer talked about the importance of learning to go on after failure, but he didn’t understand.

“I failed a lot,” he said.

During his years in ninth grade, Jamal was often truant, began smoking marijuana, and built a juvenile record. “Our family was not out of control ‘til I had to stop working and we moved to the projects,” his mother said. “The first week, somebody held a gun to (her older son’s) head. My boys were picked on. They got off the bus and ran home crying. I had to do the down home thing. I said, ‘If you don’t fight back, I’m going to whop you.’ The next day, they took off running, but they had hid a stick. When the kids came after them, they started swinging and the kids went the other way.”

The move to the projects brought another trauma she confessed when Jamal wasn’t in the room. A man in the area gave alcohol and money to the boys, sexually abused them, and video-taped it. When she learned about it, she called the police. She has never looked at the videos and her boys don’t talk about it, she said. “I was going to court about child support. I just had a breakdown.” She burst into tears. “I wasn’t a good mother at that point.”

Jamal’s juvenile record is two and a half pages long: two assaults, curfew violations, driving without a license, unauthorized

use of a motor vehicle, theft, criminal trespass, failure to stay after an accident, disorderly conduct, domestic violence, and parole violations. His first criminal charge, assault, came, he said, when

13 kids jumped on him, he got angry, went inside, and got a knife. When the boys tried to jump him again, “First person came at me, I cut him.”

“I can understand him going off like that,” his mother said, “but the judge said it was premeditated because he went back in the house and came out again. It was the wrong thing to do.”

The domestic violence charge came when Jamal and his older brother got in a fight that their mother couldn't stop so she called the police. Jamal spent months in and out of the Hamilton County detention center and a juvenile community corrections center. Although these institutions have education programs, the course work isn't what Jamal remembers. "People talk about, 'This is how he got caught. This is how he got caught.' It's a crime school."

In February 2004, he stopped going to school. "I'm 18 in the ninth grade. It's not worth it." He says he now is looking for a job. His mother has driven him to grocery stores and fast food restaurants that she heard were hiring. He filled out applications but no one has called.

As Wright pointed out, street corners are good networks for crime but not for jobs; only one of Jamal's friends, who are all high school dropouts, has a job. Asked how one gets a job, Jamal responded, "Luck." He doesn't expect to find one. This is a realistic appraisal given the shortage of jobs, but high school dropouts like Jamal sometimes have an additional problem. Spending weeks out of school for suspensions or truancy, they have lost the habit of showing up. Jamal's older brother lost several jobs because he would come in late or get in arguments with the manager.

"Ain't no way to make money," Jamal said. "No choice but to sell drugs."

"You have a choice," his mother said. "You don't have to sell drugs."

There are programs, though insufficient, for jobs or recreation but these boys don't see them. They have traveled so far out of the mainstream and so far into the Pipeline to Prison that all they see are the Pipeline walls. They don't see the ways out.

"Either that or rob."

The police seem to believe Jamal is selling drugs or doing something else illegal. Several times, they have picked him up from around the Four Way. A week before the interview, he said, the police followed him when he was bicycling around Wynton Terrace and stopped and searched him. Finding nothing, they gave him a ticket for riding a bicycle without a light. Now that he is 18, an offense could send him to adult prison.

His mother mentioned the Job Corps and a boy he knows who got a certificate in food service and now has a job. She thinks he should go to the program in Dayton where he wouldn't be hanging out with his friends.

"I'd be stuck all the way out of town and I wouldn't know nobody. I'd be broke and I'd have nothing to do."

"They give you a place to stay and stipend for food and clothing and a lump sum when you finish," said his mother.

"I know somebody who went there and he said it was crap." This conversation underlined a characteristic of lost boys like

Jamal—their narrow world view. There are programs, though insufficient, for jobs or recreation, but these boys don't see them. They have traveled so far out of the mainstream and so far into the Pipeline to Prison that all they see are the pipeline walls. They don't see the ways out.

What boys like Jamal need are “long-term real relationships,” said Hurst, the director at the time of the National Center for Juvenile Justice. “I interned with a psychiatrist once, and for children with some sort of conduct disorder who have trouble connecting actions and consequences, a low frustration tolerance, and a pattern of self-destructive behavior and decisions, the remedy is a long-term real relationship with a person or people of acceptable character.” He said that the “most honest” program of this nature he knows—a mentoring program in Arkansas for parents who had abused their children—does not ask the mentors to take on more than one family at a time and their involvement lasts until the children get to the age of reason and responsibility, “which sometimes seems to take forever.”

What would Jamal really like to do if he could snap his fingers and do and be whatever he wanted?

Jamal shook his head and finally said, “I don't know.” Is there something you enjoy doing?

“Building stuff. A guy who does dry wall showed me a little bit of that. I didn't get paid.”

He also likes music. He can play the beat machine. He and some friends put together rap sounds on a machine. “Some guy was going to make a CD of us but he died.”

Do you have anything going for you?

“I ain't got nothing going for me. Talk to girls. Other than that, ain't nothin' out there for me.

Are you worried about ending up in prison? “Sometimes I think about it. I don't care no more.”