

# Jessica and William

Jessica was fourteen. William was sixteen. They had decided to run away together. Both wanted to escape their families. They had no doubt that they could make it work. They would get a job, find a place to live, and create their own rules.

Since they were minors, they were reported to the police, but no one could track them down. They were easily lost within the thousands of people who live on the streets.

They found that surviving in the inner city wasn't just tough, it was impossible. The money that they had saved was gone within a few weeks and no doors were open to them. They wondered what they had been thinking. Their days were spent scrounging for food and finding a safe place to sleep.

At first, they had enjoyed the freedom, the independence away from school, parents, and responsibilities. But they soon discovered that they weren't going to make it happen. There were no jobs, no friendly faces, no opportunities except selling drugs or stealing. They were frightened, always watching their backs.

The runaways lasted for a total of ten weeks. Then Jessica discovered she was pregnant. It was time to go home. They were actually lucky to make it back.

Jessica's parents were furious with her. They asked her how she could ever hope to have a baby when she couldn't take care of herself? William's parents were already struggling to support their family and had no intention of supporting one more child.

I met both of them for the first time when they arrived for an appointment to register for school. Jessica's mom attended and was visibly stressed to the max, pacing back and forth in my office, shouting their story with a string of emotions. The teens didn't say a word. Both looked exhausted. They simply kept their heads down willing to allow her to take charge and lead the way. There was no choice.

When mom left, I asked them both what their plans were. They said that Jessica would be having the baby and staying at her mom's house. Both wanted to finish school and be together when William got a job. They were overwhelmed, completely unsure how to make this all work. Life was just beginning to get tough for them.

Even with the fatigue and nausea that come with being pregnant, Jessica did extremely well in school. She was proud of her achievements and stopped by my office to share her test scores, her ongoing projects, frequently asking questions about college, her baby's health and their future. Although, she had just turned fifteen, she was ready to take on her responsibilities as a mother with a mission.

William's attendance was poor. He had no support system at home and already had two little brothers who depended on him for everything. Both of his parents were

alcoholics. No food in the house, no clean clothes for the kids, no one caring about if and how the boys made it to school, made William's life tough and his education impossible. He was simply trying to support his brothers.

The day arrived. Jessica and William called from the hospital to say that they had a healthy little boy. They were so excited about their new son and agreed that they couldn't fit school into their lives right now. Both would not return until the following year. Their little family would stay in William's room. That way he could stay close to his brothers and make sure to watch over them as well. In the meantime, he had to find a job to bring in money to take care of his brothers, his child and Jessica.

Jessica, however, returned to my office much sooner than she planned. The baby was now three months old.

She sat sideways in the chair across from me with her hair hanging across one part of her face. It was clear that she was trying to hide the bruises where she had been beaten. "It's not about me," she said. "I can take of myself. But the baby, little Joseph. William shakes him like crazy when he cries. He's going to kill him. I can't stay with him anymore."

"I just don't know how to make this work," she said. "Don't bother calling the police. I'll deny it all. I love William. It's not his fault. His parents beat on him all the time. He doesn't know how to deal with all of this. We're both so tired. He still hasn't found work. I don't know how he pays for food and diapers. I don't even want to know."

Child protective services would eventually be contacted and eventually Jessica moved back with her mom.

Despite the best efforts of her parents, Jessica would go back to William as happens in many cases of abuse. He begged for her forgiveness. He stayed away from hurting the baby and took it out on her instead. She forgave him, again and again.

Eventually, Jessica and William disappeared from school completely. William was involved in street crimes where the risks became greater. He joined a local gang and was known around the neighborhood for moving drugs. At one point, he was shot in a drive-by but survived. The situation looked hopeless. I didn't hear from either of them for the next two years.

While talking to the principal in the front office about a teen's attendance, I felt someone approach from behind and tap me on my shoulder. I turned around and there was Jessica, looking like a completely different person. She was a young woman now with a great smile and a newfound maturity. Holding her hand and clinging to her leg stood little Joseph, dark curly hair and big brown eyes, looking healthy and safe.

"I left him," she said. "This time for good. He was in the middle of so much violence and danger. I just couldn't risk Joseph getting hurt. And, if something happened to me,

who would take care of my son? I didn't give William a choice this time. He cried when we left but I had to do it. I really love him still but we can't live his life."

Jessica returned to school for her senior year. Once again, she did an excellent job as a student and as a mother. She eventually found MPOWRD meetings where she could share parts of her story with the group, admitting the challenges of raising a child as a teenager and teaching other teens the importance of respecting themselves and never giving up.

**Your thoughts: (no names or places)**

**Why do you think that many teens have such a hard time following rules in their homes?**

**If you were the parent of a twelve-year-old son or daughter or both, what kinds of rules would you have in place as they approach their teen years?**

**What were Jessica's and William's chances of finding any success once they left their homes?**

**What advantages did Jessica have over William to find personal success?**

**Why do you think that William was so violent with both Jessica and his son?**

**Do you feel that there was any hope ahead for William?**

**What would William need to do to find personal power and a positive future?**

**What acts of courage empowered Jessica to create a better life for her and Joseph?**

**We all make mistakes. Life is its own proving grounds. Sometimes our decisions are worse than others. If we learn from them, hopefully, we won't repeat them again. What advice do you think William and Jessica will try to pass on to their son Joseph as he gets older?**