

“She’s a bad influence. She’ll be barefoot and pregnant by the time she’s fifteen.” - The mother of a childhood friend, when I was 14.

“We want you to go with our select choir to New York City to sing at Carnegie Hall.” - My high school choir teachers, when I was 15.

How can adults look at the same child, around the same time in her life, and see such vastly different outcomes? What does the tightrope look like that this girl is walking to give the impression of failure to one adult and the impression of hope, talent, and hard work to another.

The night before I got on the bus with the select choir from my highschool to go to new york city, after months of rehearsals and fundraising, one of only two freshmen selected, police had come to my house and escorted my dad off the property in the middle of the night. My parents' marriage had been dissolving for years, and the night my dad came home completely drunk, the tensions came to a boiling point. He lit a candle in the living room and fell asleep on the couch, asking me if I'd sleep on the recliner chair so he wouldn't be alone.

It would be years before I started new cycles of dealing with his Alcohol Use Disorder, like driving him night after night to the nearest VA Hospital, 45 minutes away, for him to check in for detox, only to leave after a work up and check in.

Or lining up the cans and bottles I found hidden in the closet with notes asking how he would feel if those had been consumed by me, instead, and listening to him clean them up after returning from the store with more.

Or “tough love” of threatening to never talk to him again.

Or dumping bottles down the sink, knowing he didn't have money for more and the detox would be brutal.

I was still in the cycle of doing everything exactly perfect- being so perfect and so pleasing that I could be the light to lead him into sobriety. I was fifteen, and only just old enough to see the difficulties my family bounced through from the eyes of an adult, I thought. So, I brought my blankets and pillows and set up my bed in the chair, only to be woken up just before midnight by flashlights and stranger's voices coming through the door to my right, collecting my dad, and blowing out the candle on the TV stand, the wick having burned down most of the way since we fell asleep.

In the morning, a protection from abuse order (PFA) had been filed and read, I had showered and applied foundation under my eyes, and with a suitcase of clothes, a concert dress and a string of pearls, I hugged my mom, texted my dad who couldn't be at the school as outlined in the PFA, and boarded the bus for New York, terrified of what might happen while I was away. Terrified that I couldn't fix it if I wasn't there. As if I could fix it if I was there.

For me, this is a moment in the life of someone with a prevention story. There were many crossroads in my life where I had paths before me. Times when I had choices to make. Sometimes those choices were impossible to make. Impossible for a three year old. Impossible for a kindergartener. Impossible for a third grader, for an eighth grader, for a freshman, sophomore, junior, senior. And I didn't always make the best choices, or the safest choices. I didn't always learn something from the first time I made a less than wise choice, and I sometimes made the same choices again and again and again in the whirlpool of cycles of substance misuse within a family and thought, again and again and again that it might turn out different this time.

It's been fifteen years since I was the girl who woke up after a night of fighting, candles, brandy, PFAs and sudden life altering change, and got on a bus to perform on one of the most prestigious and beautiful concert halls in the world. It was a nightmare night, and it was something I knew how to handle. I knew how to be the girl who showed up, and hid away the nightmare bits, and performed.

It's been fifteen years, but in some ways I still feel like the girl on the tightrope. Between the "barefoot and pregnant," and the first alto on the third riser who worked hard for months to remember the words and adjust her imperfect pitch to the notes. Through nights of fighting and nights you could hear a pin drop. I honor that girl who kept fighting for the really good stuff, even when good stuff was hard to believe in, hard to trust.

And now, closing out the decade and peaking into 30, I see more good stuff everyday.

One of the crossroads I stared at over and over was my own choices around alcohol and drug use. I find myself making choices around that more often than you might think, for someone who's never had a drink of alcohol. For me, that's not where the good stuff is. It's in a job where I feel important and valuable as a person, in a circle of friends who think I'm funny and never make me question where I stand with them, in a relationship that feels like solid ground, in a home that I own and get to fill with colors and things and people I love, in my community where I can support others and be supported back, and by the grace of God, still stages where the lights warm your face and the people are good. You can't know how things would be if you had made other choices, those roads

are behind you. And I won't blame myself for impossible choices I made. But I do think my choice to lean into the adults I knew who saw my light, and my choice to avoid the substance that called my dad's name, have helped me keep finding good stuff.

There's a lot I don't know. But one thing I do know, beyond a doubt because I lived it, is that you can wake up from a nightmare and pick good stuff, even when it hurts. Even when it feels impossible. That's part of my prevention story.