

## **My Name Is Jeanette Wilson, and the System Has Made Me Stronger**

**By Jeanette Wilson**

### **Abstract**

I spent most of my childhood in the foster system, the juvenile detention system, and the prison system. After reaching a low point at age 18, I stopped my old behaviors before it was too late. Today, I have my own apartment, am study accounting in college, and am a good mother to my baby boy. I have grown a lot due to everything I have gone through, and it has made me a strong young woman. Now that I know that, I want to help others who have faced the same challenges I have.

## **My Name Is Jeanette Wilson, and the System Has Made Me Stronger**

I'm supposed to be in prison right now, but I'm so thankful I'm not.

It all started at a very early age for me, when I was 12. I'm the oldest of 10 kids, and at the time, there were seven of us. I was like a second mother in our household—so, imagine having that much responsibility. My father was not present most of my life, and I sometimes wonder if things would be different if he were. Sometimes I just wanted to play at the park and be a normal kid like I saw on TV, but I had no choice but to grow up fast.

I was only twelve years old at the time. I had been left at home with my siblings multiple times before, but this night was different. My mom was at work, at one of the two jobs she had to keep a roof over our head—and we were hungry. So, I called my grandmother that night because I thought she would help us find food. But instead of helping, she called the police, which is understandable. Anything could have happened to us, and it wasn't safe for us to be left alone.

The police were knocking, the baby was crying, and I was extremely frustrated. The officers heard the crying and started banging more loudly. My mom told me never to open the door for anyone, no matter what, but I didn't know what to do, so I opened it.

When my mother finally got home and saw the police there, the first person she blamed was me. That hurt my feelings, and it still does to this day. I was doing my very best, and she blamed me for a mistake that was actually her fault—it was not my fault we were hungry and left alone at home by ourselves. She couldn't bring us any food while she was at work anyway, and that's why I called my grandmother.

While the police were there, I walked out crying, and my mom came and snatched me by my shirt. I blacked out. That night I wanted to die. I began saying out loud that I didn't want to live anymore. So, of course, I was admitted to the hospital. I was diagnosed with depression because they noticed I was always sad and avoided interacting with others as much as I could.

After over a month in the hospital, I was the first of my siblings to go into Child Protective Services (CPS) custody, and the rest of my siblings went shortly after me. I didn't have contact with them after that. It wasn't until I saw my siblings for the first time in months—on my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday—that I began acting out.

I missed them and wanted to go back home, so I ran away. I was on the streets. I slept in vacant houses, ate at shelters, and sometimes took a shower at a gym. Eventually, I got tired of doing that, and I called my CPS caseworker to come and get me. They took me to a lockdown

facility, but I continued to act out and run away. I kept running away because I didn't want to be anywhere but with my family. I went into the juvenile system twice because I was caught stealing, but that didn't stop me from acting out either.

After a year of my siblings being in foster care, they went back home, but I wasn't allowed to yet. CPS didn't let me go home until they realized that the only way I was going to stop running away is if I went home. So, they let me go, but my case was still open. And even at home, I kept acting out.

By then, I was 15 years old. I wanted to fit in, so instead of being a leader, I was a follower. The friends I made at the time smoked cigarettes and marijuana, and influenced me to do the same. They even sometimes did these synthetic drugs that are often laced with substances that can kill you. On multiple occasions, I've seen people die right in front of me. I was given laced drugs once and was scared to death by the hallucinations. It was new to me. I met boys that were abusive, forceful, and evil towards me. My life path went downhill more and more as I tried to be there for people who didn't deserve my help. Even though I wanted to do better and was trying to change, I got involved with someone who didn't want the best for me, and I lowered my standards for myself.

I was getting my GED at 8 Million Stories at the time. I started talking to this guy named Melvin (name changed), and one thing led to another. The teachers knew what would happen if I didn't separate myself from him. They even warned me about what I could get myself into. Of course, I ignored their warnings because I knew what I was doing, right? Wrong! Shortly after I got involved with Melvin, my momma kicked me out for letting Melvin into her house without permission. I was homeless again.

Melvin and I agreed to stay together after that. It got to the point where I was hungry and tired of sleeping in a stolen car. I was desperate to get some money. I missed the pleasure of home-cooked meals and warm showers. So, Melvin convinced me to help him rob someone. I was scared, but I still played a part in it. We set up a man off a dating app, and I saw everything that happened. When we were caught, I regretted everything wrong I had ever done. I deserved to be imprisoned.

Sitting down in jail gave me time to think. I was in jail for 4 months. I was supposed to be out 3 months sooner but CPS needed to find a group home for me. Even though I was charged as an adult, I still had to be released to CPS.

Once I was released on probation from Harris County Jail at 17, I had to go live in a group home for girls CPS found for me. When you turn 18, you can choose to leave CPS. That was my plan, but I hated CPS so much, every group home and foster home, that just before I turned 18, I ran away again.

Since running away violated my probation, I went back to jail after getting caught. So, I sat there in jail, again, accepting that I would always be a failure. I could not do right because I could not get my mind right. I've since learned that you will never get yourself or your life right if you do not have a solution to your problems. If you do not have the answers you need, you will always fail.

I thank God and the judge that I'm not locked away.

After getting released from jail for the second time, I did everything completely different from that point on. Prison or death is not something I want for myself. I believe things happen for a reason, and that is why I have a story to tell.

Two years later, I'm doing very well. I have my own apartment, two jobs, and I am currently taking classes at Houston Community College for accounting. Being in CPS comes with after-care benefits that everyone should take advantage of. They give you up to \$3,000 for rental assistance, and you get a tuition waiver right along with \$5,000 for every school year.

I'm thinking about doing even more schooling since I can go for free. What makes me strive the way I do is my 9-month-old baby boy. I don't want to set the wrong example. I know that in order to break that chain, it starts with me. I want to be a leader. I will take my powerful story and use it to help others that have experienced the system. We need better leaders in this world. I want to use my experience to build a better future for young adults and kids like me.

I stopped my old behaviors before it was too late. I know I am not the person that I used to be. I have grown a lot due to everything I've gone through. It made me a strong young woman. Being strong means being weak first and growing from those experiences. You have to be strong to succeed. It all gets better. I know my situation is not as bad as so many others', and I am grateful for what I have. I want other kids less fortunate than me to have the chance that I've had to live the life I want. Now that I know that, I can help other people who've had the same challenges.

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### **About The Author**

My name is Jeanette Wilson. I am a 19-year-old accounting student and activist from Houston, Texas. And I am on the hunt for who I have not yet become.