



Ambition Backstory

Liz Murray grew up in the Bronx, New York City. Addicted to drugs, her parents sometimes sold household items in order to get their fix. As a child, Liz hated school because when she did go, she was teased; there was no one to make sure that she showered or got up on time. As Liz grew older, her parents lost their apartment, and her father ended up in shelters. For a time Liz was placed in a group home. Her mother, who suffered from AIDS, became increasingly ill and was hospitalized. Rather than submit to the dehumanization and sadness that had characterized her experience in foster care, Liz chose to fend for herself. Liz slept on friends' couches or floors at odd hours, camped outside or rode the subway all night.

After her mother's death, Liz, then 16, felt that event as "a slap in the face" that caused her to question where her life was going. With an eighth-grade education, Liz decided that, as she said, "Life rewards action. I was going to go out there and... have action in my life every day instead of this stagnant behavior that I had been partaking in for so long."

Liz was admitted to an alternative high school, the Humanities Preparatory Academy, where she doubled her course-load and completed high school in only two years. One of the top ten students in the school, Liz went on a school-sponsored trip to Boston and walked through Harvard Yard. "It's not as though I had some sort of epiphany at the moment ... It was just more that I got jealous of how these students had so much opportunities, and I'd felt that I'd had very little. And so then I thought, 'Well, what's the difference between me and anyone here?' And I filled in all the gaps."

Her grades qualified Liz for the New York Times College Scholarship, and she applied for and was admitted to Harvard. But far from resting on those considerable laurels, Liz continued to break new ground. A member of the Washington Speakers' Bureau, Liz has found she has "a knack for" sharing her story and insights with audiences across the country. Her story was adapted for film by Lifetime Television in the 2003 film "Homeless to Harvard: the Liz Murray Story." Liz is also an avid writer whose memoirs, "Breaking Night," were published in 2005. Liz returned to New York City to care for her ill father, and is currently pursuing a master's degree in psychology and sociology at Columbia University.

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