

Youth Culture Lesson
Finding Teachable Moments in Culture
From *YouthWorker Journal* and YouthWorker.com

Finding a Future

Senior Overcomes Homelessness to Become Valedictorian

By Paul Asay

What Happened

Griffin Furlong graduated June 4 from First Coast High School in Jacksonville, Florida. The 18-year-old crossed the stage as the school's valedictorian, earning a 4.65 grade-point average and having never missed a day of school.

It's a remarkable achievement by any standard, but Griffin's story is more remarkable given the fact that for much of his childhood—including months before he graduated—he was homeless.

Griffin's mother died of leukemia when he was 6. By the time he was 7, he, his father and his older brother, Sean, began hopping from one shelter to the next. "I had to grow up really fast," he said on "Today". "I've seen things that kids wouldn't ever see in their lives. I would be starving at night, and I've seen my dad physically abused in front of me. I don't take anything for granted anymore."

He rarely talked about his difficulties with others, though. "I don't just walk up to people and say, 'Hey, I'm homeless.' It's a hard thing to do." Yet he survived. He and his brother formed a tight bond, often playing baseball, and he dove headlong into school. "I knew I was going to be poor for the rest of my life, so I thought if I could continue to do well in school, eventually scholarships would be coming my way and I would be getting a free education."

The scholarships didn't come as expected, but Griffin's education is still in good shape. Planning to study engineering at Florida State University this fall, the graduate has received a few need-based grants for housing, and his friends have set up a GoFundMe account that has collected \$66,400—enough to pay four years' worth of tuition.

Talk About It

Griffin's life hasn't been easy, but sometimes life's difficulties make us stronger. Have you had to overcome obstacles in your own life that in hindsight helped make you tougher? Do you know people who have overcome serious difficulties to do amazing things? Who?

Griffin rarely talked about his struggles. Many people who could use a little help never ask for it. Have you ever needed someone to talk to but couldn't ask for help? What barriers keep people from getting the help they sometimes need? Are people too proud? Too bashful? Do they sometimes simply not know how to bring up the subject? Can you think of ways to help such people?

Like many of us, Griffin turned to his family in times of trouble. When has your family helped you make it through a tricky situation? When have your friends helped pull you through a difficult spot? When has your faith?

What the Bible Says

“I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:12-13).

“If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small” (Prov. 24:10).

“But you, take courage! Do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded” (2 Chron. 15:7).

“Who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor.1:4).

Paul Asay has written for The Washington Post, Christianity Today, Beliefnet.com, and The (Colorado Springs) Gazette. He writes about culture for PluggedIn and wrote the Batman book [God on the Streets of Gotham](#) (Tyndale). He recently collaborated with Jim Daly, president of Focus on the Family, on his book [The Good Dad](#). He lives in Colorado Springs with wife, Wendy, and his two children. Follow him on Twitter @AsayPaul.