

# A BROKEN VESSEL RESTORED:

## Despite turbulent childhood, **Amy Brown finds healing in the arms of Christ**

by Tim Ellsworth

**T**he alarm blares, and 10-year-old Amy Brown rouses herself from sleep and prepares to face yet another haunting day. It's her responsibility to wake her brother, one year older than she is, and get both of them off to school. Because if Amy doesn't do it, nobody will.

She walks by her parents on her way out the door. Both of them are passed out from the previous night's drinking binge. When she returns home later in the day, they'll be awake and already hard at work on another night's worth of drinking and drugs that will result in the same routine the next day. At school, Amy encounters a fresh day of teasing and ridicule from her classmates: "Oh, you're the one with the retarded daddy."

She finishes school and heads home, knowing full well the horrors she's likely to encounter that evening. Her mother is a bipolar, alcoholic junkie who's loud and vulgar and mean. Her father is a drunk, too, with the mental capacity of a 12-year-old. Think Lenny in "Of Mice and Men," and you get the picture. Because he doesn't know any better, he's also a sponge for his wife's constant spewing of filth-ridden insults and harangues that Amy can't help but overhear.

Amy fixes supper for her brother – cold hot dogs and cold canned green beans, again – and takes it to him where he's hiding between his bed and the wall, scared to death of what his parents might do to him if they find him. Physical abuse isn't uncommon in the Brown home. Amy bears a scar underneath her lip from where a book hurled by her father found its mark.

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Amy doesn't hide, but she doesn't stick around, either. She spends the evening playing somewhere down the street, or sitting in silence in the shed behind the house – just waiting for the day to end so she can go to sleep and repeat her hellish cycle of life the next day. She thinks it can't get much worse, but she is wrong.

To look at her now, you'd never guess the backstory that clings to Amy like a stubborn headache. At 21, she is outgoing and confident, with a bright countenance and smiling blue eyes that successfully conceal the hardships she's endured. That's because she found healing, redemption and grace in the arms of the Lord. She found a family in her "second parents." And she found reconciliation with the father who once abused her and neglected to care for her the way a father should.

"About the age of 10, I realized that I was smarter than anybody else in my family," Amy says. "That was a pretty difficult place to be. About the age of 11 I started helping with financial things. I started taking care of my brother in school and took on more of an authority position in the family."

Amy grew up watching her mother slowly killing herself with drugs. She remembers one night when her mom passed out into a coma in her front yard. She'd watch her dad get drunk, and witness strangers coming into the house on a regular basis. Her mom left her dad so many times that Amy lost count.

"I became really fearful of a lot of things," Amy recalls. "I never wanted anybody to know that I feared as much as I did. That's probably why I assumed such an authoritative position in everything I did. I had to be in charge of everything."

Her parents set no boundaries, offered no nurturing and provided no affection. The only person who invested in young Amy's life was her grandmother – her father's mother – who, though she had grown up in a dysfunctional family herself, had become a Christian.

"Every Friday my grandmother would come pick me up," Amy says. "She's the only one I have any memory of giving me a bath, or brushing my hair, or changing my clothes for the week. It was very evident to me that there was a difference in the peace that my grandmother had in her home versus all of the destructive, verbal and physical things that went on in my home."

Her grandmother sent her to a Christian Crosspoint camp when Amy was 12, and she remembers the Lord speaking to her heart during one night's invitation time. She knew she needed to respond, so she went forward, prayed and acknowledged her need for a God who was greater than she was.

But following the camp, Amy had nobody to teach her what a relationship with God meant. Little changed in her life – until tragedy struck about a year later when she found out her grandmother had colon cancer. For about eight months, her grandmother wasn't around. Then as a freshman in high school, Amy remembers being called to the office of Bolton High School by teacher Douglas Van Neste, the late brother of Union's Christian studies professor Ray Van Neste.

Mr. Van Neste was the one who broke the news to her that her grandmother had died.

"I remember him being the first person, besides my grandparents, to tangibly and physically grab ahold of me and let me weep," Amy says. "I wasn't much of an emotional person at all, and it was the hardest thing ever."

That's when Amy's life, though always difficult, spiraled out of control.

**She grew angry with God for taking away the one person who loved her.**

We're all going to die one day, Amy reasoned with herself, so why not live it up? And that's exactly what she did.

Her mom had occasionally forced Amy to smoke pot and do other drugs, and at age 14, Amy became a full-fledged alcoholic and drug addict. She soon left home and found herself in a crack house in downtown Memphis, living on the

streets, with no place to go. One night the police found her, recognized her as a 14-year-old girl, and took her to the station for her to call her parents. A conversation with her grandfather initially brought Amy to a realization that she needed to be rescued.

"Amy," he said, "I'm so afraid that the next time I see you is going to be when I flip through the channels, and there you are, announced dead in a ditch."

He then told Amy that her grandmother went to her death convinced that if Amy could get out of her home, the Lord would use her.

"The fact that my grandmother, who never saw any fruit in her family whatsoever from a Christian standpoint, went to her deathbed believing that the God to whom she had surrendered, if I would surrender to him, that he would be faithful to work in my heart," she says. "I really believe that because my grandmother's faith was so strong, even upon death when all she had seen was destruction happen within her family, I was willing to take this chance."

Amy agreed with her grandfather that her life was out of control. She was ready to take drastic steps. So she signed herself into the Tennessee Baptist Children's Home in Bartlett a couple of months later. When she arrived to her new home and her new life, she found a Bible lying on her bed. She'd never read the Bible on her own before, and the first words she encountered – the first five words of James – changed her life: "James, a servant of God..."

"I realized that I had served myself for so long, and that I had tried for so long to do something to accomplish a good in my life, and that I wasn't able to do that,"

Amy says. "I finally realized that what I could surrender to was a God that could use such a filthy and such a broken vessel. I could find satisfaction in his mending and his grace, which were sufficient. God would still be able to use me, and it wouldn't be because I was controlling it."

Life at the children's home was different for Amy and a challenging adjustment. Whereas before, she had nobody to tell her to do anything, now she had to ask when she wanted to go to the bathroom. At times, she struggled to submit to the



authority over her. But she gradually grew to embrace the structure and discipline that the children's home provided her. She learned that discipline is a part of love, and the reason she felt so unloved as a child was because nobody set any boundaries for her.

"The children's home really transformed my perspective on what it looked like to have authority in your life, to respect that authority, to receive discipline as an aspect and avenue of one's love for you," Amy says.

Her commitment to the Lord strengthened, her attitude improved and her life changed under the care of the children's home. One day as she was sitting around a lunch table with some friends, the topic of college came up. One of her friends told Amy that she was thinking about attending a Christian college.

bitterness toward them and was reaping the consequences of their failures. Though she has no relationship with her mom, her dad attempted to visit Amy occasionally and remain a part of her life. She struggled with that initially.

"Slowly and surely, as I began to grow in the Lord, the Lord began to reveal through his word just how much it was my responsibility to forgive my dad and take responsibility for my own actions," Amy says. "I needed to let my dad be a father, even though his mental capacity only reached the age of a 12-year-old.

"I have to say, it's been one of the most beautiful things that I've ever experienced," she continues. "Because now I talk to my dad every day. We pray every night. I'm so humbled because I think about how my prayer used to be that God would take my dad out

Her father is now one of the most consistent parts of Amy's life. They have reconciled. And Amy is forever grateful.

"In the midst of me giving up the control, I've actually watched my dad become more godly and actually respond to the gospel," she says. "My dad is so much more joyful than he used to be, and

I couldn't be more full of praise towards the Lord for the way that **he was gracious in hearing my prayers**, but doing what he knew was best." 📖

**"A Christian school?"** Amy asked. "You mean there's such a thing as a Christian school?"

Yes, her friend replied, there's one in Jackson just an hour up the road called Union University. The minute she heard about it, Amy knew that Union was where she would go to college. She can't explain the feeling that came over her, but she knew it was unmistakable: "It was as clear as the day for me," she says.

Her junior year of high school, Amy applied to Union, and then began applying for various scholarships. By the end of her senior year, she had enough scholarship money to cover her costs for all four years of her college education.

Amy was a biblical studies major who graduated in May as part of the class of 2010. She plans to pursue a master's degree in counseling. At Union, she found a family atmosphere that she treasured during her four years of college.

"Being an ambassador for the school and telling people we are Christ-centered, I truly believe that," Amy says.

During her time at Union, when school wasn't in session, Amy found another family as well – Jimmy and Mary Turner. Mary was a former employee of the children's home who became a second mother to Amy. Amy lives with the Turners and calls them her "B-Mom and B-Dad."

As for her biological parents, when she entered the children's home, Amy prayed specifically that she would never have to see her parents again. She harbored great

of my life, because my life would be so much easier. And now I pray, 'Lord, please don't take my dad, because my life would be so much harder.'"

