

# It's Never Too Late

By Marshall Harrison, Dauphin County

September 25, 2007 - I thought it was the worst day of my life, but it was the best thing that could have happened to me. You see, on that day I was locked up on sixteen drug charges and thought my life was over. All my selfishness had caught up to me, and all my drug selling and drug using had come to an end. Up until the day of my arrest I thought my life was OK. I had three beautiful daughters and a girlfriend who loved me to death, but none of that mattered. All I could see was me doing my own thing and letting everybody deal with life on their own. Drugs were my only friends and I hung out with them all my life.

I did what many of us do – allow our past to control our thoughts. In my case, I was sexually abused at the age of seven. This horrible act made me angry inside, so angry that I didn't trust or love people – even myself – because I thought it was my fault. Not knowing any better, I kept this all to myself until I turned 35. I didn't want kids because I didn't have any love for myself, let alone love for a child.

I had my first child when I was 21, but I didn't play a part in her life. I would see her from time to time and make promises, but when it came to a choice of getting high or seeing her, the drugs won that battle. I remember one night I was getting high and I had enough with life and wanted to kill myself. I called her to say I loved her and I will see her around someday. "Always remember that I love you," I said. She knew what I was really saying and started crying. Then she said, "Even though you were not around, I still love you because you are my dad. So don't worry; I forgive you." That was ten years ago. It still wasn't enough to get me on the right path.

Finally, in jail, something clicked in my heart and woke me up. I found the peace that was missing all my life – God. This time things were different. I finally surrendered. I had enough with the way I was living and feeling about myself. I was tired of hurting myself and my family. Things had to change and change fast. So I read many self-help books, went to church in jail, and made a commitment to living a clean and sober life. I started to understand my purpose in life and wanted to become what God intended me to be.

Then I felt this love for my children that I never felt before. My youngest daughter, who was four at the time, said something really life changing for me. I spoke to her on the phone from jail and she told me she'd promise to stop being bad if doing so would make me come home. The thing that changed my life was the fact that she was willing to give up something just to have me in her life. **Whoever said a child can't teach you something?** At that moment I promised myself that I would never hurt or leave her again.

Being released from jail has allowed me to do the things I always wanted to do as a father. I spend some good quality time with my kids, mostly listening, because I have to get to know them all over again. I'm still learning how to be a father so I know things will take time. My main goal is to gain their trust, knowing that daddy is here and I'm never leaving them again. My youngest daughter still has her guard up when we are together. We laugh, play games, crack jokes, but when it's time for me to go back to the halfway house, she doesn't like it and never kisses me goodbye. My parenting group has helped me a lot; I'm still attending even though I completed



Marshall Harrison, of Harrisburg, and his daughter Mikayla, age 5.

what was required of me to do.

I know now that time is running out. Before you know it, your kids are all grown up and out of the house. I want to have a loving, trusting relationship with my kids and it all starts with me. So if you can learn how to do that with the help of others, sign me up. The sad thing is not the father that doesn't know, but the father that doesn't try. I have to try; they need me more than anything in this world. Today I can say that **I understand the importance of a father in a child's life.** You have to dedicate your life to your kids, and before I went to jail I didn't understand that. Now I tell this to every other father I meet, "Once you are involved in your kids' lives you'll never want to leave again."

*Marshall Harrison is currently a resident at the Community Corrections Center in Harrisburg. He attends the PFSA-affiliated family support program there. His children are now 22, 6 and 5 years old. ❖*

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