

A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF RURAL, LOW-INCOME, SINGLE MOTHERS'  
ASPIRATIONS FOR THEIR CHILDREN

A Dissertation by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the degree of Doctor of Education with a major in Educational Leadership.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate my work and journey, first, and foremost to my wife, Alisha, and my children, Jadeyn, Cason, and Aaron. My wife and children have stood by my side along this long and enduring voyage. They tolerated many days and nights where my typing took precedence over playing hide and seek, games, family trips, and priceless time that could have been devoted towards them. My beautiful wife has been the rock upon which I have relied upon throughout the entire process. Alisha always seemed to know when I needed a boost of energy. Her persistent words of support have helped carry me through the finish line. Second, I would like to thank Dr. Mary Jo Taylor for her encouragement and belief in my ability to start and finish the doctorate program. Mary Jo inspired me to inquire and eventually apply for admission into the doctorate program. Without her relentless suggestions I would have never attempted such a feat. Finally, I dedicate my work to the women who invited, accepted, and revealed their lives in the process of this study. Their insight and knowledge has forever changed my life and my understanding for the dedication and love that they have for their children. They have inspired me to look at the inside of people for understanding before casting judgment.

“The vision that you glorify in your mind, the ideal that you enthrone in your heart - this you will build your life by, and this you will become.” James Allen

“Dream lofty dreams, and as you dream, so you shall become. Your vision is the promise of what you shall one day be; your ideal is the prophecy of what you shall at last unveil.” James Allen

“Nothing is as real as a dream. The world can change around you, but your dream will not. Responsibilities need not erase it. Duties need not obscure it. Because the dream is within you, no one can take it away.” Tom Clancy

“You control your future, your destiny. What you think about comes about. By recording your dreams and goals on paper, you set in motion the process of becoming the person you most want to be. Put your future in good hands -- your own.” Mark Victor Hansen

“You make your own dream. That's the Beatles' story, isn't it? That's Yoko's story. That's what I'm saying now. Produce your own dream. If you want to save Peru, go save Peru. It's quite possible to do anything, but not to put it on the leaders and the parking meters. Don't expect Jimmy Carter or Ronald Reagan or John Lennon or Yoko Ono or Bob Dylan or Jesus Christ to come and do it for you. You have to do it yourself. That's what the great masters and mistresses have been saying ever since time began. They can point the way, leave signposts and little instructions in various books that are now called holy and worshipped for the cover of the book and not for what it says, but the instructions are all there for all to see, have always been and always will be. There's nothing new under the sun. All the roads lead to Rome. And people cannot provide it for you. I can't wake you up. You can wake you up. I can't cure you. You can cure you.” John Lennon

“You will achieve grand dream, a day at a time, so set goals for each day -- not long and difficult projects, but chores that will take you, step by step, toward your rainbow. Write them down, if you must, but limit your list so that you won't have to drag today's undone matters into tomorrow. Remember that you cannot build your pyramid in twenty-four hours. Be patient. Never allow your day to become so cluttered that you neglect your most important goal -- to do the best you can, enjoy this day, and rest satisfied with what you have accomplished.” Og Mandino

“We grow great by dreams. All big men are dreamers. They see things in the soft haze of a spring day or in the red fire of a long winter's evening. Some of us let these great dreams die, but others nourish and protect them; nurse them through bad days till they bring them to the sunshine and light which comes always to those who sincerely hope that their dreams will come true.” Woodrow Wilson

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## ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry focused on what four low-SES single mothers had to say about their aspirations for and support systems they have for their children. Discussions with the mothers involved a mix of topics. The four stories are unique in their own way yet similar themes emerged relating to the experiences they face being a single mother with children enrolled in and attending school in grades K-6. The theoretical perspective of social capital and the narrative inquiry approach to research provide the foundation for this study. Individual narratives of the four low-SES single mothers' are shared. The mothers' provided insightful and critical assessments of their experiences being a single mother of school age children in a society that tends to look at them in a different view.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page #
CHAPTER 1 .....	1
The Status of Poverty in the U.S. ....	2
The Status of Poverty in Kansas .....	3
Status of Low-income Single Mothers .....	5
RESEARCH PROBLEM.....	5
OBJECTIVES/PURPOSE OF THE STUDY .....	7
RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	8
SUMMARY .....	8
CHAPTER 2 .....	9
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW .....	9
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....	9
Social Capital .....	9
FORMS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL.....	13
Social Capital in the Home and Family.....	14
Community Social Capital .....	15
School Social Capital .....	17
The Limits and Consequences of Coleman’s Theory of Social Capital.....	19
DISCUSSION OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH .....	20
Welfare-to-Work Legislation and Single Mothers .....	20
Poverty and Children .....	25
Parents’ Social Networks and Community Involvement .....	29
Teachers’ and Parents’ Beliefs about Involvement in Children’s Education .....	30
Role Construction .....	32
Parents Aspirations for Children.....	34

## TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

Chapter	Page #
SUMMARY .....	36
CHAPTER 3 .....	37
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY .....	37
RESEARCH DESIGN .....	37
NARRATIVE INQUIRY .....	38
RESEARCH SITE .....	39
Hillsdale Unified School District 100 .....	41
RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY .....	42
PARTICIPANT SELECTION .....	44
DATA COLLECTION METHODS .....	45
Narrative Interviews .....	45
Narrative Picturing/Visualization .....	46
DATA ANALYSIS .....	48
RESEARCH QUALITY .....	50
PROTECTION OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS .....	52
SUMMARY .....	53
CHAPTER 4 .....	54
INTRODUCTION TO THE NARRATIVES .....	54
CARLEY’S NARRATIVE .....	57
White Middle Class Background and Family .....	59
Carley’s Descent From Love and Companionship to Being Destitute in A Blink of An Eye.....	62
Carley’s Fall From Grace: Learning to Live on Her Own .....	66
Challenges and Opportunities of Raising Twin Boys on A Limited Income .....	70
Carley’s Aspirations and Dreams For Her Children .....	71

## TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

Chapter	Page #
Carley’s Insight on How the School Can Help Single Mothers .....	75
CHAPTER 5 .....	77
AMY’S NARRATIVE .....	77
Life on The Move Filled with Domestic Violence Along the Way .....	80
Frustrations of Juggling Three Children, Work, and School .....	84
Where To Go For Help.....	85
Off To Work and Struggling to Survive.....	86
Relationship and Experience with School.....	88
Trying to Escape Her Past.....	90
Amy’s Aspirations and Dreams For Her Children .....	91
MY PERSONAL REFLECTION .....	93
CHAPTER 6 .....	95
ALLISON’S NARRATIVE.....	95
Life on The Move .....	98
Escaping An Abusive Marriage, Abandoned by God, and Battling The Past .....	102
Determined to Remake Her Life.....	108
Allison’s Aspirations and Dreams For Her Children .....	111
CHAPTER 7 .....	115
TRISH’S NARRATIVE .....	115
Strong Family Upbringing .....	116
Ability to Interact and Socialize with Individuals .....	118
Trish’s Determination to Support and Encourage Her Four Children .....	120
Life After High School.....	120
Relationship with Edward .....	121

## TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

Chapter	Page #
Perceptions and Memories of School.....	125
Trish’s Aspiration and Dreams For Her Children .....	127
CHAPTER 8 .....	130
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS .....	130
CONCLUSIONS.....	130
SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE HOME, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY .....	131
Social Capital from Parents Growing Up.....	133
Social Capital Gained (and Lost) Through Marriage and Relationships .....	134
More Social Capital is Present in the Immediate Family than in the Community or at Work .....	135
Social Capital from Caring For and Building Relationships With Their Kids.....	137
Summary .....	138
SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT AND SOCIAL CAPITAL.....	139
Institutional Agents: Administrators, Counselors, and Teachers .....	139
Absence of Extensive Social Networks at School but Presence of Coping and Adapting .....	141
Social Capital and the Dreams and Aspirations These Mothers Have For Their Children .....	143
Summary .....	145
RESEARCHER AS SOCIAL CAPITAL .....	146
IMPLICATIONS.....	147
Bridging the Knowledge Gap and Gaining A New Understanding .....	148
School As A Source of Social Capital.....	149
REFERENCES .....	152
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	153
APPENDIXES .....	162

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page #
5-1. Bottle of alcohol and cigarettes. ....	83
5-2. Outside sign of area hospital. ....	92
5-3. Area junior college football stadium.....	93
6-1. American flag. ....	102
6-2. Front view of United Methodist Church in Hillsdale, Kansas. ....	104
6-3. Picture of downtown Hillsdale, Kansas. ....	107
7-1. Picture of local PK-6 school building.....	126
7-2. Picture of a house in Hillsdale, Kansas.....	128

## CHAPTER 1

Prior to the Great Recession of 2007-2009, the U.S. Census Bureau was reporting seemingly good news: the average income in the United States saw a slight increase, the number of families, single adults, and children living in poverty, to a certain degree, were down. Poverty among racial and ethnic groups, the elderly, and adults between the ages of 25-44 were also experiencing a small decline in number (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Americans were optimistic about the future.

Despite all the good news a storm was brewing on the horizon. This storm would eventually destroy and wreck havoc upon hundreds of thousands of American people. The United States of America was about to enter a recession that economists compare to the Great Depression of 1929 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, September 2009). The recession of 2007-2009 brought the American workforce to its knees. Employers responded by finding ways to cut or control costs. Nine in ten employers have experienced laying off employees, cutting salaries, decreasing or eliminating bonuses, and instituting hiring freezes (Galinsky & Bond, 2009).

The recession has not helped reduce the gap between the rich and the poor. The disparity continues to widen and is the largest in recent history. Over 8.4 million jobs have disappeared since the recession's start in December 2007. That is three times the job losses of the dot-com bust of the early 2000s or the double-dip recessions of the 1980s (Gerson, 2010). Over the past year, America's labor force has shrunk by nearly one million. According to Sum, Khatiwada & Palma (2010) those individuals in the highest pay bracket have benefited from full employment during the worst economic conditions in 80 years, whereas the lowest-paid workers have endured an unemployment rate above 30%. The report stated those making \$100,000 to \$149,000 or \$150,000 or more accounted for 4% and 3.2% of the unemployed, respectively. By contrast,

those in the lowest income (making \$12,499 or less) and the second-lowest group (making \$12,500 to \$20,000) accounted for 30.8% and 19.1% respectively, of those unemployed during the fourth quarter of 2009.

In 2009, the federal government defined poverty for a family of three as living in a household that made less than \$17,102. Families of four fell well below the poverty line for earning less than \$21,947 annually (United States Department of Agriculture, 2010). The basis for those federal poverty thresholds though were originally derived in 1963 and 1964, using U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) food budgets designed for families under economic stress, as well as data about what portion of their incomes families spent on grocery bills. Taking what the Department of Agriculture determined to be the cost of a minimally adequate diet and multiplying that figure by three is how the U.S. poverty threshold is calculated. This formula is based on the assumption that families spend one-third of their cash incomes on shelter, one-third on clothing, and one-third on food (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2007).

#### *The Status of Poverty in the U.S.*

In 2008, the official poverty rate was 13.2%, up from 12.5% the year before. This was the first statistically significant increase in the poverty rate since 2004, when poverty increased to 12.7% from 12.5% in 2003. The poverty rate in 2008 (13.2%) was the highest poverty the United States had witnessed since 1997 (DeNavas-Walt et al., September 2009). In 2008, 14.1 million children under the age of 18 were living in conditions that would classify them as living in poverty according to federal guidelines (DeNavas-Walt et al., September 2009). Very few regions of the country have been unaffected by child poverty. In particular, rural children are more likely to live in extremely high-poverty counties than those living in urban areas (Lichter &

Johnson, 2007). The U.S. Census Bureau defined rural areas as those comprising open country and settlements with fewer than 2,500 residents. There are 2,052 rural counties in the U.S., they make up 75% of the nation's land, and are home to 20% of the U.S. population (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2007). In 2007, the USDA reported 14.2% (8.5 million) of rural Americans live in poverty and 13.1% (7.8 million) of rural Americans experience hunger and food insecurity.

Children attending a public school in the U.S. and who meet eligibility requirements qualify for free meals/snacks/milk under the USDA's National School Lunch Program (NSLP). During FY 2007, 14.9 million children each day received free lunches and 8.5 million children each day received free breakfasts. The NSLP is one of the largest food and nutrition assistance programs in the United States, feeding millions of children every day (United States Department of Agriculture, 2008b). Those children who meet the guidelines set forth under these programs also tend to be at-risk for failure in school and fit the low socio-economic status standard (SES). Both genders and all family compositions have started to rely more heavily on the National School Lunch Program as rising food and fuel costs have forced families to make tough economic decisions at home and abroad. For the purpose of this study, guidelines established by the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Program (NSLP) were used to define what constituted poverty (United States Department of Agriculture, 2008b). NSLP's definition of poverty was used instead of USDA's broader definition because it identified and focused on school-aged children.

### *The Status of Poverty in Kansas*

The number of Kansans living in poverty grew during the first part of this century, even as the State's median income increased by more than 4% (Stephens, 2008). Census data suggest poverty rates intensified with the economic downturn in the early 2000s, which had the adverse



effect of reinforcing the concentration of poverty in many remote parts of rural America (Lichter & Johnson, 2007). Recently released data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2008) indicates the number of people in Kansas living below the federal poverty level increased from less than 9% to almost 12.8% between 2000 and 2006. In most Kansas counties, the poverty rate increased at an even high rate for children under the age of 18. Statewide, about 15.2% of children live at or below the federal poverty level; in parts of central and southeast Kansas the rates were even higher (United States Department of Agriculture, 2008a) .

During the 2008-2009 school year, there were 478,757 children enrolled in and attending public schools in Kansas. According to KSDE (2010a) 46% of Kansas children met the qualifications to participate in the Kansas School Breakfast and Lunch Program (KSBLP). Of those, 36% (171,256 children) qualified for free meals and 10% (47,710 children) qualified under the category of reduced meals. In order to qualify for this benefit program, recipients must be a resident of the State of Kansas and a parent or primary caregiver responsible for a child (ren) who attends school (high school or under). Those who qualify for free meals/snacks/milk must also have an annual household income before taxes that does not exceed \$18,941 for a household size of two; \$23,803 for a household of three; \$28,665 for a household of four; \$33,527 for a household of five; \$38,389 for a household of six; \$43,251 for a household of seven; \$48,113 for a household of eight; \$51,853 for a household of nine and \$55,593 for a household of ten (United States Department of Agriculture, 2010) .

In program year 2009 (July 1, 2008 through June 30, 2009), Kansas' schools served 55,214,367 reimbursable meals to students. Based on 176 days in the school year, this equated to 313,718 meals per day. Nearly 45,000 more needy students received free or reduced lunches in 2007-08 than in 1999-2000, this equated to an increase of 29% while at the same time Kansas

school enrollment remained essentially flat (Kansas State Department of Education, 2010b) . According to Deputy Commissioner of Education in Kansas, Dale Dennis, Kansas school districts spent slightly more than \$387 million to help educate “at-risk students” during the 2008-09 school year (Kansas State Department of Education, 2010b). If the national recession continues to drive up poverty in Kansas, the costs to educate children will have a huge affect on federal, state, and local taxpayers, who bear some of the burden when families, especially low-income single mothers, already struggle to pay bill and purchase groceries (Green, 2009).

### *Status of Low-income Single Mothers*

About half of all women will confront the issue of being a single mother at one moment in their lifetimes and a majority of children will reside in a household headed by a single female (Snyder, McLaughlin, & Findeis, 2006). Single mothers are faced with unique challenges amid America’s economic structure. This situation is even worse for women who live and work in rural settings. Women who work in rural areas are more likely to be poor, which makes it that much more difficult to support a family on one income. Labor markets in rural areas are not particularly kind to single mothers (Cotter, 2002; Snyder et al., 2006). The jobs available to them are usually volatile, provide few benefits (e.g., health insurance, pensions, dental, daycare), and offer wages equal to the federal minimum wage law of \$5.85 per hour —far less than what is needed to raise them out of poverty (Brown & Lichter, 2004; LaborLawCenter, 2008; Seccombe, 2002).

### *Research Problem*

Single mothers in poverty have been stereotyped by many people and are often portrayed in the media in a negative light. For example, single mothers are oftentimes characterized as incompetent and lacking the skills and/or abilities to provide basic necessities for their children.

The common stereotype is they are lazy, have no ambitions for themselves or their children, the epitome of the "white trash" stereotype in rural areas (Borner, Dworin, Semingson, & Semingson, 2008; Gorski, 2005, 2008; Ng & Rury, 2006). A lot of assumptions are made about single mothers in poverty (both urban and rural) however, few researchers have directly asked single mothers in poverty about their lives and their aspirations for their children. So-called scholars like Ruby Payne (Payne, 2003; Payne, Devol, & Smith, 2001) have resurrected the debunked culture of poverty and have further reified stereotypes about these women.

Much of the research on poverty during the past two decades has concentrated on high poverty rates of African American and Latino female-headed households in urban settings (Cotter, 2002; Jackson, 2003; Neblett, 2007; Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, & Jones, 2001). Despite the wealth of knowledge about urban poverty, little is known about rural, single, low-income mothers support systems and the aspirations they have for their children.

Educators and the general public have a desire to create an environment where students reach their fullest potential (Gorski, 2008). Despite overflowing with good intentions and desires, many have accepted a shared and treacherous myth about poverty. According to Gorski, the "culture of poverty" myth, the idea that poor people share more or less monolithic and predictable beliefs, values, and behaviors, is a major contributor to misunderstandings about poverty. The culture of poverty myth is built upon false stereotypes that have found their way into conventional beliefs and are now viewed as unquestioned truth in mainstream society. The belief that poor people are unmotivated and have weak work habits, are uninvolved in their children's learning largely because they do not value education, and are linguistically deficient are a few of the myths that have penetrated our way of thinking. A full understanding of class and poverty is essential for educators, policy makers, parents, and students if they are to dispute

this myth and attain a deeper understanding of those living in poverty (Gorski, 2008; Ortiz & Briggs, 2003; Rodman, 1977). One way to increase understanding of the lives of people living in poverty and to counter stereotypes is to hear directly from individuals living in those circumstances. Capturing the stories of people can serve as a counter story to the dominant narrative about single mothers living in poverty in the U.S.

This study presents narratives of low-socio economic status (SES) single mothers with elementary school aged children and how they describe the aspirations and support systems they have for their children. This study has the potential to contribute to the needed literature on low-SES single mothers' profound experiences and the aspirations they have for their children. The majority of literature (Blalock, Tiller, & Monroe, 2004; Jeynes, 2007; London, Scott, Edin, & Hunter, 2004b; Watson, Charner-laird, Kirkpatrick, Szczesiul, & Gordan, 2006) on this topic comes from the social science field and focuses on minority single mothers living in urban areas.

A narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kramp, 2003; Stuhlmiller & Thorsen, 1997) was used to record the stories of low-SES single mothers' aspirations and networks they employed for their children. By using a narrative inquiry approach to research, I hope to offer a counter-story - one that challenges the prevailing assumptions and stereotypes about single mothers in poverty.

#### *Objectives/Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to describe low-SES single mothers' aspirations for and support systems they have for their children. Mothers' narratives were gathered and the findings provide administrators, educators, policy makers, and citizens with insight into these mothers' lives that have the potential to guide school decisions. The study involved four single low-SES

mothers who have children attending an elementary school in a rural setting. The study was guided by the following research objectives:

1. Describe single low-SES mothers' aspiration for their children.
2. Describe how single low-SES mothers support their children's education.

### *Research Questions*

The following overarching question guided my study: What do low-income mothers have to say about their lives and their future aspirations for their children? Out of this overarching question, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the aspirations of single low-SES mothers for their elementary school children's educational success?
2. How do single low-SES mothers support their elementary school children's education?

### *Summary*

Single mother families have become increasingly common over the course of the past three decades. The number of children living in poverty in 2006 compared to 2000 has increased by 1.3 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Single mothers are faced with the challenge of balancing a family around low paying jobs that provide limited benefits. Long hours, exhaustion, and few benefits are the pay-offs for being able to model values and work ethics specific for their children. A number of low-income single mothers do have a desire to improve their children's lives and future well-being (London, Scott, Edin, & Hunter, 2004a). It is imperative for policy-makers and educators to engage and work with low-income mothers in ways that empower them to make a difference in their child's lives. Literature on the role that the community plays within the educational setting clearly establishes how such involvement is potentially beneficial for teachers, administrators, parents, students, and communities (Sanders, 2003).

## CHAPTER 2

### *Theoretical Framework and Literature Review*

Chapter 2 is a review of the relevant literature related to my study. It is comprised of the theoretical framework and a review of the empirical research and other literature related to the research problem.

### *Theoretical Framework*

My background and experiences as a building administrator and now as a superintendent in a small rural district have helped me understand how important relationships are with parents. Seeking understanding through the connections, bonds, and aspirations low-SES single mothers have with parents, with the school, and within the community fits well within assumptions that define social capital (Putnam, 2000; Stanton-Salazar, 1997) as a theoretical framework of choice for this study.

### *Social Capital*

The term “social capital” originated early in the 1920s, but it was not until some time later that French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and American sociologist James Coleman were credited with the use of social capital as a theoretical concept (Dika & Singh, 2002). Bourdieu (1986) wrote about three interacting sources of social capital: cultural, economic, and social. Coleman (1988) focused on the way social capital can help create human capital in individuals. More recently, Stanton-Salazar (1997) examined the role that relationships between youth and institutional agents play in the multicultural context that youth and working-class parents must negotiate. All three researchers explored the influence close ties with others have on relationships with individuals and families. Both Bourdieu and Coleman converged on similar ideas, however, there are significant distinctions in their theories (Dika & Singh, 2002).

In Bourdieu's definition of social capital, membership in the dominant group provides group members and their associates with the backing of capital shared by everyone in the group. Relations within the group may exist as material or symbolic exchanges. Social capital is made up of social obligations or connections and at some point could be converted into economic capital. Bourdieu went on to suggest that the amount of social capital that an individual possesses depends on the size of his or her interconnected networks that can be activated and by the amount of economic, symbolic, and cultural capital that is possessed by those people to whom he or she is connected. When all things are considered, Bourdieu defined social capital as the investment of the dominant class to maintain and reproduce their group interests and it is the responsibility of those individuals to protect the group's central position (Dika & Singh, 2002).

Coleman's (1988) explanation of social capital is frequently cited in U.S. educational literature. Bourdieu's definition differs somewhat from Coleman, who took a rational-choice perspective. Coleman posited each person has control over a certain amount of resources that are built into social structures and institutions, which can be converted into social capital. Unlike Bourdieu, Coleman does not recognize class differences in access to social capital, but seems to presume all have equal access to valued social resources if they make the right choices.

According to Coleman (1988), social capital resides in forms of social organization that produce something of value for the individuals or "actors" involved. Coleman argued that individuals rooted in close-knit and bounded social networks have a greater chance to accumulate social capital. Social capital has the means to provide somebody with the resources, or opportunity to do something that otherwise would not be possible if not present. Certain forms of social capital valuable in easing particular actions for some may be unsuccessful, or unlikely to be worthwhile

for others. Social capital exists in the connections and associations among persons and can assist with productive activities within the group (Coleman, 1988).

The importance of social capital, when defined as a concept, lies in the fact that it calls attention to properties of social structure used by individuals (actors) to attain their interests (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Stanton-Salazar (1997) studied the socialization and schooling experiences of working-class racial minority youth. He observed the roles that relationships among youths and institutional agents (such as educators and school counselors) play in multicultural contexts working-class minority youth must attempt to manage. His principal theory argued in order for children to be successful in school they need to have access to relationships with institutional agents, and the ability to enter into those networks that interlace these relationships into groups. Furthermore, Stanton-Salazar made the case low-status children are in a difficult position to acquire social capital based on flaws within the social system. He argued:

Structural problems are not unfortunate quirks in the system that have yet to be fully resolved; rather, they are mechanisms intrinsic to the inner workings of mainstream institutions that function both to problematize the social development of working-class minority youth to engineer their failure in school. (p. 8)

This is of particular importance for low-income children during the time they are attending school. Oftentimes they show up to school lacking the resources necessary for successful participation in the educational system. Low-income adolescents' lack of knowledge and lack of accumulated social capital is routinely problematic, serving to interfere with their social development (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Furthermore, no matter what background they come from all children bring to school the cultural knowledge and information present in their



neighborhoods and households used by members within their community for successfully navigating everyday tasks (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

However, cognitive and language skills important to accomplishing useful academic tasks are built upon the foundations of white, middle-class culture. Success within schools for low-status children has never been a matter of learning the technical skills necessary to accomplish the task at hand, however, it has been a matter of learning how to “decode the system.” Children from the dominant group start learning the rules necessary to be successful in institutions early in life, usually within the home and community. If members of the subordinate group are to have success in school they need to learn how to tap into the cultural logic of the dominant group. For them, making sense of this cultural system means learning to decode the institution’s cultural, linguistic, and social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Schools, in general, are not set up to teach low-income students how to decode the cultures embedded within the institution. Not only do schools fail to teach low-income children the necessary skills to decode, they implement pedagogies that are detrimental to the overall success of the child. Ability grouping and curriculum tracking put low-income children in a position where they never become equipped with the funds of knowledge to decode the system. Students in low status groups therefore miss out on the opportunity to learn the culture and norms established by the dominant group. Stanton-Salazar suggested that just because middle-class white children come to school with the decoding skills necessary to navigate the social institution of school does not mean low-income children know nothing about decoding. Low-income children come to school with a different set of cultural resources. They are very proficient decoders in a number of cultural spheres within their communities; however, this usually is not the case within mainstream institutions, particularly the school setting. The

development of social ties to institutional agents (teachers, counselors, mentors) is critical for the social development of low-income children because these partnerships are sources they can use to learn the appropriate decoding skills necessary for navigating the norms and cultures of the institution.

For the purpose of this study I drew upon components of Coleman (1988), Bourdieu (1986), and Stanton-Salazar's (1997) theories of social capital. As used here, the concept of social capital was used to determine the amount and quality of support inherent in low-SES mothers' collective networks. Through the use of narratives, I have identified how these mothers accessed valued resources and commodities and how they negotiated the rules and norms held by school personnel as institutional agents. Giving low-income single mothers the opportunity to speak for themselves about their lives revealed greater insights into the existence or lack of forms of social capital.

### *Forms of Social Capital*

In the past few years there has been increased interest in social capital in Pk-12 education and scholars have suggested the presence of social capital can lead to increased success for school-aged children (Coleman, 1987; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). However, little research has been conducted into how different forms of social capital or social networks influence low-SES single mothers and their access to social capital in a variety of settings. It is important to distinguish the different forms of social capital because they imply different resources, support, and obligations. Below I briefly describe three forms of social capital and illustrate why they were important to this study.

### *Social Capital in the Home and Family*

Social networks that parents associate with have been observed by Sheldon (2002) as a form of social capital. According to Horvat, Elliot, and Lareau (2003) “Social capital must be taken to refer to the material and immaterial resources that individuals and families are able to access through their social ties” (p. 323). Coleman (1987) refers to social capital as “The norms, social networks, and relationships between children and adults that are of value for the child’s growing up” (p. 36). As Coleman explained it, social capital within the family, such as involvement in helping a child with homework or spending a little time engaging in group activities, may be viewed as an investment in children.

It should come as no surprise that current parent and family involvement paradigms concentrate on the cultural patterns of “school readiness,” and exhort parents to “take an active role in your child’s life,” and “be active in your child’s educational experience” (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Coleman (1988) gave reasons to believe only certain types of families are likely to accumulate large amounts of social capital. Coleman argued individuals who are rooted in densely connected social networks are more likely to build social capital. Coleman paid particular attention to how social capital operates to help create human capital among children. He asserted social capital is strongest in families where both parents are present and play an active role in the development of their children. Two parent families also put children in a position to bond with more than just one parent and provide them with another avenue to tap into social capital outside the family unit. The amount of time parents spend with their children affects the amount of social capital present in the home. The relationships parents develop with their children during the time they are around each other can lead to greater compliance and commitment from them. Social capital within the family is built

when parents are present and give their children both physical attention and informal affection (Menaghan & Parcel, 1991; Parcel & Menaghan, 1993, 1994). Coleman's influence can be seen in research that has concluded children benefit from the stability of the union found in two parent families (Otto & Atkinson, 1997). In addition, children benefit from exposure to social connections both parents have with groups outside the confines of the family group, such as friends, civic organizations, school functions, and work relationships (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995).

### *Community Social Capital*

Not only does social capital exist within the family, it is present within the realms of the community. Circumstances and events within a family's social life have been shown to help shape parent involvement in the community. The social relationships children enter into at birth could last their entire lives. These relationships are built upon the kinships and community ties their parents establish, over which children have little or no control (Hofferth & Iceland, 1998). Other networks will develop as time passes, e.g., friendship, work, and colleague networks. According to Coleman (1988) human beings form or develop their supply of social capital by "investing" in relationships between people.

Social capital is generated when a family is embedded in social relationships with other families and organizations within the community. The development of social capital outside the family is key to youth development. When looking outside the scope of the family, social capital within the community exists when an adult takes an active interest in the activities of someone else's child. Sometimes that interest might involve one parent enforcing the expectations and norms imposed by parents of the community. Every now and then it might be a matter of listening to problems not discussable with parents, and from time to time it might involve being a

mentor or volunteer within youth-related activities. Parents develop faith and confidence in the support and help made available to one another by being actively involved in such a system (Coleman, 1987). While Coleman did not speak to social class or other disparities in his theory, more contemporary concepts of social capital have addressed these differences.

In a study of 88 third-and-fourth-grade children and their families Horvat et al., (2003) found that parental networks differed dramatically by social class. They showed through a process of interviews and observations of children's and parent's responses to four questions related to children's lives both in and outside of school: participation in organized activities, existence of ties between parents of school peers, parental ties to professionals, and frequency of contact with kin. The role organized activities played in shaping parental networks was of great importance. Whether it was a working-class family or a middle-class family, informal connections between parents were shaped largely in part through the out-of-school activities in which their children were involved. For working and middle-class parents, their children's out-of-school activities were the foremost way for them to develop connections with each other. Parents used the time available while waiting for their children's activities to start or finish to get to know other parents. Regardless of the importance of organized activities and the role they played in promoting parental networks across all classes, there was a considerable gap in the rates at which all children participated. Middle-class children enrolled and participated in more activities than did their poor or working class counterparts. Knowing the importance these activities play in the development and formation of parental connections, these differences suggest in this situation, middle-class parents are in a better position to establish relational links (Horvat et al., 2003).

The data presented in Horvat et al.'s (2003) study also revealed middle-class parents were far more likely to have an exclusive social group of professionals located within their interpersonal networks as compared to working-class and poor parents. For example, almost two-thirds of middle-class parents reported knowing a lawyer, in contrast to only a third of the working-class, and no more than 14% of the poor.

Horvat et al. (2003) argued that network disparities are clearly connected to the way problems are dealt with in school. Middle-class parents tend to react collectively; or as individuals with the knowledge they have a network to turn to if the problem is not rectified in a manner pleasing to both parties. Working-class and poor single white parents tend to handle problems individually and if the problem is not rectified there is very little concrete support from outside networks. In short, the configuration of parental networks and their relation to the school vary considerably by class (Horvat et al., 2003).

Parents without social networks comprised of other parents are at a disadvantage when it comes to helping their children with school related issues. They are forced to rely on their own educational experiences and on information sent home through newsletters or bulletins for making decisions or choices dealing with their child's education (Sheldon, 2002).

### *School Social Capital*

In the early years of a child's formal education, families are the starting place for the development of social capital for young people. Parent involvement in their child's education can generate social capital as children advance through the educational system. Parents can play an important part in communicating education expectations and future opportunities. This may be accomplished by establishing and reinforcing norms of desired behavior and achievement, and

by offering support and guidance, all of which can lead to higher levels of academic success (Crosne, 2004).

Schools are no longer seen as a place where students merely receive an education through standardized curricula. The school is a primary site of social interaction; therefore, the school is a main source of social capital for children (Harris, Duncan, & Boisjoly, 2002; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999). Educational research has demonstrated a positive school environment has a definite affect on children who come from a low-SES family (Coleman, 1966; Jackson, 2003; McBride, Bae, & Blatchford, 2003)

In a national longitudinal study of adolescents in grades 7-12, Crosne (2004) found social institutions like schools can complement what is happening in the family circle. The school provided learning opportunities and a social environment that offered chances for social interaction. The study also provided evidence of overlap between social capital among parents and their children. The emotional quality of the parent-adolescent affiliation was an important factor in academic achievement over time. Close ties between parents and their children were shown to facilitate the transmission of high expectations and elevated levels of parental aspirations (Crosne, 2004).

In summary, the time a parent spends with his or her child during and outside of school has been shown to have an impact on the amount of social capital present. The creation of social capital can take on a number of different forms. The networks parents establish with other parents or groups are another form of valuable social capital. These associations have been shown to provide parents with a means to understand school-related issues. Without these networks, parents are left to rely on their own understanding or experiences, most of which are not good. Finally, parents play a key part in communicating the importance of school and future

opportunities to their children. According to scholars, this communication needs to be present early and often. Reinforcing the expected norms and giving children guidance have all been shown to lead to greater academic success and expectations (Downer & Pianta, 2006).

### *The Limits and Consequences of Coleman's Theory of Social Capital*

It is important to point out that although Coleman's theory has been highly influential, it is consonant with white, middle class values and reflects a bias toward two-parent families and idealized parent-child relationships. He does not recognize the advantages that white, middle class families have because they know how to create social networks and use those networks to access a great deal of social capital. For example, Coleman (1987) described the significant absence of adults as a structural deficiency in social capital within the family. According to Coleman the single-parent family is the most noticeable part of structural deficiency in contemporary families.

Given the influence of Coleman's ideas, it is not surprising a large majority of adults in the United States tend to look upon low-income people in a negative stance (Bullock & Limbert, 2003; Lott, 2001; Lott & Bullock, 2001). Harsh stereotypes and labels have been placed on low-income parents especially when it comes to relationships with their children. Low-income parents are stereotyped as not caring about their children's education, or not being competent enough to help their child with homework. Low-income parents are also characterized as not placing a high value on education or as inadequate nurturers or caregivers (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Horvat et al., 2003; Lott, 2001) Images such as these are prominent in the media, legislative debates, and within public bureaucracies that regulate the lives of low-income families (Lott, 2001). The model presented by Coleman (1998) fails to confirm the many positive actions single parents and low-income families perform that are important to a child's well



being. For example, single and low-income parents may spend the evening playing with their children or visiting family instead of reading or helping them with their homework, yet these activities are often left out of the “involvement” construct that has been traditionally valued by researchers and professional educators (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006).

### *Discussion of Empirical Research*

This review of the empirical research mainly focused on the relevant literature related to social networks and aspirations single mothers have for their children. Several background factors were examined as they pertained to low SES single mothers who have children enrolled and attending school in rural communities and the effect of poverty on a child’s education. These issues are significant to the examination of the literature and the role they have in understanding the situations single mothers and their children face throughout their lives. The discussion of the empirical research is organized around three central themes: (1) welfare legislation, (2) parents’ social networks and, (3) parents’ aspirations for children.

#### *Welfare-to-Work Legislation and Single Mothers*

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA, P.L. 104-93) welfare reform legislation carried with it the suggestion Americans would see a decline in the number of households living in poverty and who are dependent on government benefits. The objective of the legislation was to reduce the number of people on the welfare rolls. Programs were developed to help people receiving welfare benefits find employment, understand the process to collect child support, and to provide two-parent families with a support system. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF) replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and several other welfare programs. The

purpose of TANF is to provide time-limited support to help families and promotes work, responsibility, and self-sufficiency.

One misleading notion of TANF, however, is it encourages single low-income women to believe the only path out of poverty is through marriage. Unwed young mothers are encouraged to find a good man and marry him. This is evident in several provisions included within the act. For example, TANF provisions require mothers to maintain a relationship with biological fathers even if they have no desire to continue a formal relationship. Another provision within the act requires mothers to help government officials identify and locate the father of their children if they plan to collect TANF benefits. A number of other provisions and guidelines discourage mothers from having children out-of-wedlock through the use of rewards and incentives. One way this is accomplished is by offering states bonuses to interfere in the decision-making process of unmarried pregnant young women. State officials are encouraged to talk with these women about options for their unborn babies, many of which include relinquishing their parental rights at birth; pressure to marry or offering long-term contraceptive options. In the end, TANF policies support marriage, a reduction in children born to unwed mothers, and the creation of two-parent families. TANF policies send a clear message to unmarried mothers their marital status is more important than the desire to help them escape poverty (Mink, 2002).

At the passage of PRWORA, the United States economy was experiencing unprecedented levels of growth, and with bi-partisan support everyone had reason to believe there would be reductions in the level of poverty. Optimism existed with the passage of PRWORA there would be an increase in the number of welfare-reliant participants joining the workforce. Work-based self-sufficiency meant women could meet the needs of their children and rely less on the government in the areas of Food Stamps, housing assistance, Medicare, TANF, and childcare

subsidies (London et al., 2004a). Although the prerequisites sounded clear-cut, the realistic difficulties of work and responsibilities within the family, especially in the case of low-income, single-mother families, have often been ignored (Ciabattari, 2007). There are families living in the United States today who are off welfare but not nearly out of poverty, whose lives are still plagued by hardships and economic deprivation. In comparison to middle-class parents, low-income single mothers face demanding commitments of juggling work with having the responsibilities of taking care of their families with fewer monetary assets, fewer viable skills, and less reliable domestic resources (Ciabattari, 2007).

The number of recipients receiving welfare assistance during the past ten years has declined and over the same period a large number of women in single mother-headed families have found employment. Whether they joined the workforce because they wanted to, had to, or were forced to, nearly all-working mothers face problems produced from their dual role of mother and provider. Merging work and motherhood can be a daunting task; however, it is likely to be even more so for working-poor mothers, many of whom have entered the workforce after years of relying on public assistance (London et al., 2004a). Nonetheless, research has demonstrated that some poor single mothers have managed this task quite well. For example, Weiss, et al., (2003) interviewed 20 low-income working mothers, and learned how these mothers found ways to engage in a variety of social activities to develop networks that supported involvement in their children's daily lives. Overseeing and managing a complex social support network was viewed as a key component of low-income mothers' maternal strategies, which involved relying on friends and family, building partnerships within their households, and establishing a culture conducive to learning in the home.

A few mothers Weiss, et al (2003) interviewed relied on friends and/or family for help transporting their children to and from school, asked them to give daily updates on how their children behaved at school and at home while they were at work, and heavily depended on them to act as liaisons between the school/community and home. One mother who worked in a local daycare found help for her child's homework within the community from a neighbor who was a former teacher. Mothers also described using their workplace as a means to access information and advice across class lines. A mother who worked as a beautician talked to her clients who held professional occupations about their assessment of the school her children attended. Several low-income single mothers viewed work as a place where they could garner support and child development advice. One mother took her daughter to work with her while cleaning houses so she could hear polite conversations between married couples. She wanted her daughter to be exposed to the way middle-class people converse.

A longitudinal study (London et al., 2004a) in Cleveland and Philadelphia examined the work-family tradeoffs of 46 women who had recently left welfare for paid employment. The research team found going to work brought these women short-term and modest increases in household income. Many of the women in the study talked about being able to model important values and behaviors to their children through consistent work patterns. Extreme exhaustion, long hours, low-pay, lack of quality childcare, little family interaction, and nonstandard hours were the tradeoffs for modeling appropriate behaviors. The study found substantial evidence that welfare-to-work transitions were simultaneously beneficial and costly to the women involved (London et al., 2004a).

Welfare-recipient mothers affected by the passage of PRWORA were further faced with the challenge of changing their lives in order to survive. Many of these women were directed

toward “work first” programs to obtain experience in the job sector, with usual placements in the low-paying service sector. Most low-income single mothers express a strong work ethic and a desire to find a job where they can be successful in performing the required tasks. According to Gwendolyn Mink (2001),

If we believe in women’s equality, we should promote policies to ensure that all women have the rights and resources not only to be fairly rewarded in the labor market but also to decide how to balance market work and family needs. Poor women who are compelled into the labor market because middle class women (and men) think it’s good for them are not equal; they are pawns in the white, middle class feminist struggle against domesticity.  
(p. 6)

What researchers have found is most low-income single women have strong family and work values, however lack the social resources to achieve stability in their work and family (Ciabattari, 2007; Edin, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Most women were never directed towards higher paying jobs in the private sector. Seasonal, part-time, and low-wage jobs with few opportunities for advancement have created a system where women continue to depend on government supports (Blalock et al., 2004). A growing body of evidence suggests that social capital can help lessen the menacing effects that many low-income women battle, especially in the workforce (Brown & Lichter, 2004; Lichter & Johnson, 2007; Putnam, 2000).

Many women entering the workforce for the first time lack the resources and knowledge to deal with the challenges associated with finding a decent paying job. Acquiring new approaches for helping low-income working mothers attain capital and information is vital for their future and for the well-being of their children (Blalock et al., 2004; Lichter & McLaughlin, 1997). In a series of surveys Johnson, Bienenstock, & Farrell (2000) conducted of unemployed

single white and black women in Los Angeles found that two-thirds landed their job because of a relationship they had with someone from outside of their own neighborhood. These studies present reliable proof that social capital matters because networks, if they are across-the-board, have the ability to connect people with possible economic opportunities, and offer a foundation for obtaining quality information (Putnam, 2000).

### *Poverty and Children*

In 2006, 13 million children in the United States under the age of 18 were living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Given such a high poverty rate, the consequences of growing up poor on a child's well-being and future success has emerged as an important topic in education. According to Putnam (2000) child development is "powerfully shaped by social capital" (p. 297). During the elementary school years, children undertake significant developmental transformations. Their thought process becomes more logical, the way they look at the world grows more cultured and worldly, and their ability to acquire and process material flourishes (Caspe, Lopez, & Wolos, 2006/2007).

Innumerable reports, books, and studies have shown a strong relationship exists between child poverty and various measures of child achievement, health, and the way in which children behave (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Prince & Howard, 2002; Prince, Pepper, & Brocato, 2006). The quality of a child's home environment is an important indicator of future outcome in school (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Parents are the first teachers of their children, yet children living in poverty are not likely to get as much support either during the years before and after preschool (Prince & Howard, 2002; Prince et al., 2006).

Parenting challenges for low-income single mothers are compounded when social support is limited or nonexistent (Campbell-Grossman, Hudson, Keating-Lefler, & Fleck, 2005). These

constraints are a result of everyday stressors that developed from lack of emotional, informational, appraisal, and tangible support systems. Putnam (2000) found “states with disproportionately large numbers of poorly educated adults and low-income single-parent families tend not to have as many vibrant civic communities as do states where residents have the economic luxury and practical skills to participate” (p. 297). According to Hudson, Elek, Westfall, Grabua, & Fleck (1999), single mothers often find themselves battling personal barriers that can negatively affect their skills as a mother. Feelings of low self-esteem, depression, isolation, and fears they are not adequate mothers are examples of stressors some mothers develop as a result of not having sufficient resources. Not having access to appropriate social support places single mothers in a seriously susceptible position (Wood, 2003).

Community psychologists have regularly reported that child abuse rates are substantially higher in neighborhoods where a strong sense of cohesion is not present. In these neighborhoods, parents are far less likely to ask for help from fellow neighbors. Also, the concept of watching each other’s child or even allowing their children to play with children within the neighborhood was less likely to happen. In addition, children who live in neighborhoods with low crime rates were three times as likely as children from neighborhoods with high levels of crime to find a parent at home after school (Putnam, 2000). Children who are poor often live in environments where fear, anxiety, chaos, and unpredictability are part of their daily lives (Prince & Howard, 2002). Studies have shown high quality early childhood education settings and interventions lead to better cognitive skills and social interactions, higher graduation rates, and lower rates of violence and delinquency (Evans & English, 2002; Prince et al., 2006; Weiss et al., 2003).

For many children growing up in poverty, however, safety is a real issue. Children living in poor households face the dangerous reality of merely getting to and from school safely. A number of poor mothers promote aggressive behavior in their children as a way of survival.

Children living in poor households are exposed to the constant pressure and fighting associated with conflicts over money. Financial hardships can lead to violent and threatening acts toward children living in the home (Bower, 1994). Those children who receive positive and caring reassurances from their parents during the early stages of their lives tend to develop more successful relationships later in life.

Prince and Howard (2002) found economic hardships influence how parents interact with their children, and as the hardships intensify, parents become less nurturing and more inconsistent. Additionally, the harmful costs of poverty for children seem to deepen the longer they live in deprived environments. As compared with other children, those growing up in poverty tend to have higher rates of health problems beginning within the first years of their lives. These children tend to enter kindergarten with fewer reading skills and are more likely to have socio-emotional and behavior problems (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2007; Seccombe, 2002). In addition, aspects of the parent-child relationship, in particular maternal sensitivity during parent-child play interactions, are especially strong predictors of children's academic competence in kindergarten and first grade, even after accounting for factors such as maternal education (Downer & Pianta, 2006; Pianta & Harbers, 1996; Sameroff, Seifer, Baldwin, & Baldwin, 1993). Therefore, not only is poverty a powerful predictor of children's academic achievement, it is also an indicator highly associated with the care and well being of children. President George H.W. Bush and government leaders realized there was a crisis within early childhood programs, both at home and as children from poverty stricken homes entered school, and if left untouched would continue to worsen.

In 1989, President George H.W. Bush met with all 50 governors to discuss the future of the American education system. Considerable emphasis was placed on the importance of early



childhood education and the impact it has on future school performance. A major goal that emerged from the conference was by the year 2000 all children would come to school ready to learn (North Central Regional Education Laboratory, 1994). That goal has still not been met for millions of American children (Prince & Howard, 2002).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has mandated elementary schools provide parents with the tools they need to provide for their children's education at home, communicate on a regular basis with families about their child's progress, make available family workshops, and provide opportunities for parents to become engaged in leadership activities at school (Caspé et al., 2006/2007). While these changes provide practical guidelines to help parents support their child's education, they are not enough to help overcome every obstacle (Thompson & Barnes, 2007). Real progress requires coordinated efforts to reduce inequities in areas such as housing, social services, mental and medical health services, dental health services, and after school and summer enrichment opportunities (Books, 2004; Rothstein, 2004). Even though families find it difficult to provide the aforementioned services for their children they still find ways to overcome some inequities in order to provide for their children.

Children from low-income and working poor families have shown the ability to overcome lack of economic resources in their home to achieve academically and socially (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004). Families who experienced high levels of confidence and social support have demonstrated the ability to function with surprising resilience. Low-income single women who have a sense of resiliency are those with family rules applied to their children, and who celebrated family traditions and had ties to the community that enabled them to achieve certain objectives. According to Orthner et al. (2004), when high levels of optimism and collective efficacy are present, children do better in school and are more likely

to attain higher education. In order for schools to help children from single low-income mother households it is imperative they gain a greater understanding of the strengths present within their family structure.

### *Parents' Social Networks and Community Involvement*

The idea that community involvement has a function in the education of children in the United States is not a new way of thinking. Since Dewey's (1915/1991) notion of community schools early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to calls for community control from parents and community protesters in the mid to late 1960s, involvement from parents within the community has been a major topic in the realm of educational reform (Sanders, 2003). John Dewey (1915/1991) captured the essence of what community support for education should look like,

What the best and wisest parents wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our democracy. All that society has accomplished for itself is put, through the agency of the school, at the disposal of its future members. Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself.

(p. 7)

As is apparent from this short account, parental involvement is not a notion that goes away when the child enters the school doors. It has been generally accepted the importance of parents and school, with the help of the community and school, to develop partnerships with each other, including active involvement in their child's education. According to Putnam (2000), children tend to thrive in U.S. states where there is a high level of trust between residents, where residents socialize with friends, and where civic participation is high.

Research has suggested schools and other agencies can play a pivotal role in finding ways to bridge and link the development of social capital with low-income families (Putnam, 2000; Terrion, 2006). Terrion (2006) interviewed parents and community stakeholders in a school-based family support program. He found participants in this school benefited from the connections made during activities Terrion called “building community for parents and family” (p. 162). Parents in this school were encouraged to participate in community-based activities initiated by parents. Parents were encouraged to become more involved in the community by attending morning coffee and mother’s groups. One mother told the interviewer,

I also got to know more parents in the school, because I’m from outside of the school area and because of my circumstances...I didn’t know any other parents, so now I know other parents...we share some of the things that are going on in our lives. (p. 164)

This example illustrates how schools can establish connections with parents and how parents can use these connections to build social capital to gain access to important resources.

#### *Teachers’ and Parents’ Beliefs about Involvement in Children’s Education*

As school populations increase and become more diversified, it is imperative for schools and teachers to redefine the definitions of parent involvement to fit a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Children entering elementary school for the first time are expected to possess certain skills necessary for them to be successful. Often not being schooled at home, not having the opportunity to attend preschool, or not being exposed to the daily function of a school setting causes many low-income children to start kindergarten behind other children (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). If teachers see these children from a deficit perspective, they might begin to unintentionally drive parents away from schools and not value these children for the rich wealth of socio-cultural knowledge and experiences they have to offer. Teachers often interpret low

involvement and lack of parental participation as a lack of interest, however, social, language, and cultural differences are seldom regarded as a validation for limited family involvement (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Souto-Manning & Swick (2006) argued, “education cannot continue to be guided by definitions of parent involvement that may not include so many children and families of rich and complex socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (p. 190).

It is important for educators to learn to visualize examples of parent involvement that value diversity and disprove cultural deficit models. Considering low-income students’ interests, culture, and background, and recognizing their experiences as a resource are useful in the social context of the school (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). By recognizing and being conscious of the different cultures that our kids and parents come from has the potential to ultimately improve the overall education of all children.

In a study of parental engagement, educational researchers Henderson and Berla (1994) discovered parents are most likely to become involved in schools if they understand they are supposed to be actively involved, if they feel competent of making useful contributions, and if they feel the school and their children want them to be connected and involved with the daily activities associated with school. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995,1997) came to similar conclusions. They found parents’ involvement in their child’s education is motivated by two belief systems: role construction for involvement and sense of efficacy for assisting their child in being successful in school. Parental role construction consists of a set of beliefs and responsibilities about their child’s educational outcomes and simultaneous principles about the role parents should take in achieving the outcomes expected for their child.

Parental sense of self-efficacy involves the belief their child will or will not be successful in school based upon the amount of personal interaction the child receives from the parent

(Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). A parent with high self-efficacy who believes his or her actions will have a positive impact on their child will work through difficulties in order to turn them into successful outcomes. For example, if a mother believes helping her child with homework will make a difference, she is more likely to become involved. If she believes her presence at parent-teacher conferences makes no difference then she is more likely to avoid them. Parents who believe their presence will make a difference for their child are more likely to engage in activities than those parents who have doubt about how their involvement might help their child learn or be successful. Self-efficacy and role construction are also connected. A parent with a lofty sense of self-efficacy is likely to obtain support from this belief for a more vigorous role construction. Likewise, a parent with low outcome expectations shared with a passive role construction may lead to little or no involvement in their child's education and social life (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

### *Role Construction*

What do parents believe about the role they play within their children's educational setting? Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) defined role constructions as "Sets of expectations held by groups for the behavior of individual members, or sets of behaviors characteristic of individuals within a group" (p. 9). In addition, the more a group and its members agree on the roles of individuals and members within the group, the group will notice a greater sense of stability and group dynamics. Equally, when groups see roles as being vague and ambiguous, the groups, or individual, dynamic status has a chance of turning into dissatisfaction (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983). Groups to which parents belong hold certain expectations for the type of involvement in their child's education. Expectations within the group might be very similar and in turn help guide parents' beliefs and expectations. If positive parental involvement is the norm

of the group, parents are more likely to become involved in educational experiences regardless of their socioeconomic status (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Epstein and Dauber (1991) reported where all parties were in agreement on parental involvement, participation in school programs were more robust than in those schools where such agreement was missing. On the contrary, if the groups to which a parent belongs have little or no expectations from their parents in their children's education, parents will most likely choose to not become actively involved.

Because role construction is shaped and molded by the standard of conduct or performance expected by social groups and by individual personal beliefs, it is therefore constructed socially (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). School-related experiences parents and groups share over years help mold their perceptions and observations about appropriate involvement in their children's education. These include involvement with school related activities, past and present personal experiences, and ongoing communication with teachers and other parents. Role constructions are not permanently fixed. Because they are socially constructed, they are subject to change (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

Low-income single mothers have on numerous occasions told investigators about their experience of not being taken seriously by administrators and teachers when they supply information about their children that is opposite to the opinion administrators have already formed (Lott, 2001). For example, Polakow (1993) reported in her study of low-income single mothers, how one mother had a very difficult time obtaining assistance for her daughter and was dismissed by teachers and administrators, who insisted she consider special education services. In a study of low-income parents whose children were enrolled in Head Start parents frequently talked about not knowing how to communicate with teachers, how to set up a meeting to volunteer in the classroom, or how to initiate a positive relationship with the school and the

teacher. These are usually not the fears or worries that confront middle-class parents (Webster-Stratton, 1997).

### *Parents Aspirations for Children*

The idea that parental involvement has an encouraging and positive effect on how well students perform in schools have many educators working diligently to increase parent involvement. A meta-analysis comparing the relationship between parental involvement and students' academic achievement concluded that parents' aspirations/expectations for their children's educational achievement has a strong relationship with students' academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001). McCarron & Inkelas (2006) also found a positive relationship between parental involvement and the level of education aspirations.

An increasing number of studies have suggested educators should not work alone when it comes to promoting young children's academic success (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001). In data collected from 220 parents whose children attended three Chicago public elementary schools, Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman (2007) found 42% of the parents surveyed felt they had a significant affect on the outcome of their child's education. The findings also revealed parents felt it was vital for their children to hear them talk about the influence education can have on their futures. These parents praised their children, reinforced positive behaviors, and talked with their children on a regular basis about the importance of excelling in school. In contrast to what many educators believe, Schorr and Schorr (1989) argued "poor and minority parents often have a high regard for education, and view it as the most promising means to improve their children's futures" (p. 228). Similarly, in a study of 154 urban poor and working class adults, Fine and Weis (1998) found all of them stressed the importance of education. Many participants expressed

the importance education has in the lives of their children and understood the opportunities education presented for their careers and those of their children.

Policymakers and the mainstream press like to paint the picture welfare use cuts across generations and those families who receive government assistance tend to have lower standards than those who do not rely on the government. This type of speculation often takes the position that welfare assistance is generational. That is, those who currently receive welfare grew up in households with welfare recipients, and those who received welfare as a child will grow up and receive it as an adult (Rank & Cheng, 1995). According to the welfare model perspective, parents who use welfare are less concerned about the education of their children and less motivated to move from welfare to work. The idea is their children will see welfare is available and will learn firsthand the benefits of receiving assistance without work. From this perspective, dependency on welfare is culturally learned behavior children gain knowledge of at a young age from their parents and from their surroundings. They learn early in life it is socially acceptable to rely on public assistance, leave school early, and have children before marriage (Anderson, 1990; Hill & Ponza, 1990; Rank & Cheng, 1995).

Data collected by Sweet, Bumpass, and Call (1988) from the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), a nationally representative sample of 13,017 households, collected between March 1987 and May 1988, found those who were receiving welfare benefits at the time did not grow up in households that depended on public assistance; roughly 1 out of 4 recipients or 25% were raised in households that used welfare. However, data analysis did reveal if an individual grew up in a family receiving public assistance, he or she was likely to request assistance in adulthood. The authors concluded the data did not reveal or



support the belief of generational welfare discussed in the preceding study. The reason had very little to do with welfare, rather it dealt with economic status.

A large proportion of children who grew up in families receiving welfare generally were living in low-income residences. Parents were constrained financially; therefore opportunities and resources available for their children were limited. Lack of opportunities and resources have detrimental consequences on the child's ability to acquire capital of any kind. The effects of growing up with a lack of social capital tend to follow children through adulthood. The likelihood of needing public assistance at some point in adulthood is considerably higher for these children (Rank & Cheng, 1995). The data did not reveal parents who received welfare or who lacked a high means of social capital had lower expectations for their children or they would become part of an intergenerational process.

#### *Summary*

This review of the empirical literature focused on three areas: (1) welfare legislation, (2) parents' social networks and, (3) parent's aspirations for children. Unfortunately, the review of the empirical research revealed very little about how low-SES single mothers support their children's education or the aspirations they have for them. In fact, most of the empirical research was very one-sided and painted low-income parents in a negative light. Knowing such information would greatly enhance understanding of single low-SES women. By being able to recognize the different strengths and experiences parents have can help educators support the needs and aspirations these parents have for their children. Furthermore, understanding the background of low-SES single women has the potential to help administrators gain a new understanding into how these exceptional women generate sense out of events in their lives.

## CHAPTER 3

### Research Design and Methodology

A qualitative, narrative inquiry design (2002) was employed to study how low socioeconomic status (SES) single mothers with elementary school aged children described the aspirations and support systems they have for their children. The study took a narrative inquiry approach to data collection using an emergent design. An emergent design was chosen to allow the design to unfold or emerge as new paths of discovery deepen or as the situation changes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). The next sections describe the research design, narrative inquiry, research site, researcher positionality, participant selection, data collection methods, data analysis, research quality, a summary with a timeline, and references.

#### *Research Design*

A qualitative, narrative inquiry method was chosen because it enabled me to study the selected issues in great detail and enormous depth (Riessman, 1993). Narrative inquiry is a unique form of qualitative inquiry. Researchers involved in narrative inquiry do their work by politely encroaching on the lives of the participants and asking them to help us learn something through the stories told. Narrative researchers approach qualitative inquiry in this manner with the expectation the stories told and recorded will help benefit or contribute to the basic knowledge of human life. The essence of narrative inquiry is the researcher making an effort to obtain information from a deeply human, real, sincere, and respectful relationship to the participant about important and meaningful characteristics of the participant's lived life (Josselson, 2007). Narrative inquiry was appropriate for this study because it allowed me as the researcher to be in a situation where I had the opportunity to help a group of single low-SES women tell their stories. For these women, who are often silenced and not taken seriously by

mainstream educators, they were in a position to construct a counter narrative about the aspirations they have for their school-age children. This group of women was given the chance to create meaning of their lives instead of having the dominant group fabricate it for them.

As Patton (1990) pointed out, qualitative methods enable the researcher to approach fieldwork without the constraints of predetermined categories of analysis. Lack of constraints allow for openness, richness, and detail of qualitative inquiry. Qualitative methods give researchers an ability to attain detailed accounts of people and cases in a much smaller setting. This allows for a better understanding of the case or situation being studied (Patton, 1990). Merriam (1998) stated a goal of the qualitative researcher is to understand the meaning people construct for themselves and their world. Using qualitative data gives researchers the ability to describe and take the reader into the time and place of the observations so they have a better understanding of what it was like to have been there. They capture and help tell the story of someone else's experiences of the world in their own words (Patton, 2002).

### *Narrative Inquiry*

Narrative inquiry is set in human stories of experiences (Webster & Mertova, 2007). It provides researchers with context to a particular action or event through which they can carry out an investigation of the ways that people experience the world as told through their stories. Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding the experiences of participants through negotiating relationships between the researcher and participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The researcher who becomes involved in narrative inquiry is interested in finding out the significance of a specific event or situation for the person who had it, and gives an account of the event through a story (Kramp, 2003). It is through the use of stories, either told or read by us or told and read to us that we experience the power of narrative (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

A narrative may be in written or oral form and may be obtained or heard during a formal or informal conversation, fieldwork, or interview. Narrative is a way of coming to understand a person's actions, of arranging events and objects in a manner that can be understood, and being able to see the implications of events over time (Chase, 2005). In the process of conducting a narrative, the narrator's point of view is told as the story unfolds. A narrative is different from a case study because people are invited to share their stories in the narrative process rather than being asked to participate in a case study (Patton, 2002). Each story is a unique account of human action and event that expresses emotions, thoughts, and interpretations (Chase, 2005). Therefore, this approach to qualitative inquiry fit well within the research questions and objectives for the study. The four women who participated in this study have a unique story or event in their life that educators need to hear if they are to understand how these exceptional women generate sense out of events in their lives.

#### *Research Site*<sup>1</sup>

The research site for this study was the small rural town of Hillsdale, Kansas. Hillsdale is a small blue-collar community with approximately 1,306 residents located in Hills County in southeastern Kansas. Hillsdale consists of the following ethnic groups: White Non-Hispanic (93%), American Indian and Alaska Native (3%), African American (1%), Hispanic (1%), and Other (2%) (Idcide, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Hillsdale was chosen for the study because it has a high percentage of single white women who are the head of the household with no husband present. Approximately 25.8% of families in Hillsdale consist of a female head of household, no husband present, and with related children less than 18 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Hillsdale is primarily a Caucasian

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<sup>1</sup>Hillsdale, Hillsdale Elementary School, Hillsdale USD 100, Hills County, John Curtain, Rock Hills, and Blue Hills are all pseudonyms.

community with less than 7% of its population consisting of Hispanic, African-American, or other racial/ethnic minority (Idcide, 2008; Kansas State Department of Education, 2008c). The median household earnings (dollars) for male full-time, year-round workers was \$21,490 compared to female full-time, year-round workers at \$19,261. Both figures are significantly lower when compared to the median household earnings in the state of Kansas, which for males is \$35,104 and for females is \$25,249 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Hills County is 647 square miles of sandstone hills and valleys. The western part lies at the edge of the Rock Hills. Most of the county lies within the Blue Hills, a wide expanse of hills with narrow ridges separating vast valleys from the prairie and woods. The diverse landscape of Hills County is sometimes referred to as “the Kansas Ozarks” (Kansas State Library, 2007). From a peak of about 12,000 people in the early twentieth century, the population of Hills County has fallen more than 65% to its current population of 3,953 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). A lack of industry in the county contributes to the population’s high mobility and to the steady decline in residents. Of the county’s estimated 3,953 persons, approximately 14.4% are living in poverty. The median house hold income is \$30,674 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The main sources of income for Hills County are agriculture, oil, and tourism. The area has always been prime pastureland, and the economy is heavily dependent on cattle ranching. Tourism initiatives, such as the Yellow Brick Road and the Hollow Project located in Hillsdale, have provided a boost to the local economy (Kansas State Library, 2007). As a result of these initiatives and efforts from John Curtain, area landowner and television personality, the Hillsdale business community manages to survive (Wood, 2008).

Hillsdale, which became the county seat of Hillsdale County in 1875, is the largest city in the county. The town is comprised of 1.7 square miles and has a population of 1,306 with a

median age of 43 (Idcide, 2008). The town of Hillsdale's drop in population has been less severe, from just over 2,000 in the 1950s to 1,306 today. The nearest metropolitan cities are Wichita and Tulsa, Oklahoma, both approximately 80 miles away. The closest interstate highway, I-35, is 70 miles to the west, and I-70 is more than 190 miles to the north. With the rerouting of two major highways, which at one time went through downtown Hillsdale, the town is even more isolated. The change to the highway system brought less truck traffic to Hillsdale's Main Street; and has further stifled the local economy (Idcide, 2008; Kansas State Library, 2007). Hillsdale was a relatively prosperous town well into the 1970s, with five grocery stores, three new-car dealerships, and several dry goods merchants. But in the mid-1980s, as the impact of falling oil and cattle prices was felt, Hillsdale's retail stores began to close. Today there is one small grocery store, one convenient store, and no car dealerships or clothing stores. Where once stood eight healthy oil company offices, only one remains alive and active today (Wood, 2008).

#### *Hillsdale Unified School District 100*

Hillsdale USD 100 is comprised of 44 faculty and staff. There are 37 certified employees serving 383 students in 2 attendance centers. Approximately 49% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged and those numbers are increasing (Kansas State Department of Education, 2008b). Nonetheless, the district continues to perform well on state assessments and has met AYP benchmarks for all groups. The four mothers who agreed to participate in the study all have children enrolled in Hillsdale Elementary School.

Hillsdale Elementary School (HES) is one of two schools in the district and has a full-time enrollment of 200 students comprised of 104 females and 96 males (Kansas State Department of Education, 2008a). Ten percent or 20 students represent all racial and ethnic minorities. Thirty-eight or 19% of HES students qualify and receive special education services

for a variety of disabilities. HES's enrollment consists of the following ethnic groups: White (90%), African American (2%), Other (7%), and Hispanic (.47%). Approximately 51% of the students attending HES meet the socioeconomic status qualifying them for free/reduced lunches (Kansas State Department of Education, 2008b). The school has a total of 22 staff and faculty members with 16 being certified and 8 non-certified.

### *Researcher Positionality*

My professional and personal experiences working with single low-SES mothers have led my interest in this study. As a child, I grew up in a family with four brothers, a father, and a mother who was in and out of the house. My parents worked very hard to provide essential needs for their children. We did not live the life of a middle class family, and at certain times relied on assistance from the government for help. My family, during the time I lived at home, fell within the low-income classification. I have worked very hard throughout my life to be in the position that I am in today, which is a middle class white male who is financially stable. This position did not come without struggles and certain hardships as I progressed through life. My own experiences have led to my desire to hear the stories about the aspirations low-SES single mothers have for their school-age children. I believe low-SES single women have an important story to be heard and I believe their stories can challenge the stereotypes that certain educators and researchers have construed about them. I came to this study believing low-SES mothers have aspirations and dreams for their children that are not being heard by certain individuals in education who have the power to influence public attitudes and set directions for public policy. I have had the opportunity to listen and speak with low-SES mothers concerning a broad array of social and educational issues while serving in my fifth year in a public school administrative position. During the course of these conversations, talk of the future and aspirations for their

children consumed the discussion. A large percentage of low-SES parents with whom I have had conversations talked about the struggles they faced even before their children headed out the door for school. Clothing, transportation, money, fighting among siblings, and fatigue were common obstacles. Not one time in my career has a mother told me she wanted her child to be suspended from school, to be treated unfairly, to learn lessons the hard way, to fail, or to be expelled from school.

Through direct conversations and meetings with single low-SES mothers, I have come to understand they face a multitude of challenges. Over the course of these conversations, I gained a new appreciation and understanding about their aspirations and the desires they have for their children. My experiences as a teacher, coach, parent, and administrator informed my interest in this topic. Through a narrative inquiry process, the stories of these mothers were reconstructed as they unfolded.

I chose Hillsdale, Kansas as the research site knowing that my position as a middle-class white male in an administrative position would have less influence over the participants. I believed being an outsider to the community would lessen the direct impact my professional position might have on the outcome of the study. My role as the researcher was to create an environment that was safe and secure for the participants. I took into account the issues of power and balance during the course of interviews (Kramp, 2003).

My role in this type of research was that of an active participant rather than an objective bystander. As the researcher, I realized the participants had a story to be told, and to enhance personal and social growth was one of the purposes of narrative inquiry (Kramp, 2003). Composing field texts rich in context and being alert to what the participants did and said as part of their ongoing experience was a way I reduced bias. Participants were asked to review recorded



data regularly. Having the participants review the transcripts and field notes on a regular basis was another check and balance for reducing researcher bias (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### *Participant Selection*

Through the use of purposeful sampling, the plan was to select a maximum of 10 and a minimum of 4 mothers to participate in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Hillsdale elementary school staff, 34 individuals met the four criteria established to identify participants for the study: (a) single mother, (b) low-SES: free lunch status, (c) children enrolled in and attending Hillsdale Elementary School, and (d) Caucasian.

Each of the mothers was sent a letter of invitation asking her if she would be willing to participate (see Appendix A). The letter outlined the following specifics about the study: purpose, explanation of procedures, comforts/discomforts, benefits, confidentiality, and contact information. Based on the number of responses, I purposefully set out to select a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 10 to participate in the study. Participants were selected based on established criteria and order of response to the letter.

One type of purposeful sampling used during this study is referred to as “snowball, chain, or network” sampling. According to Merriam (1998), this is perhaps the most common form of purposeful sampling. Snowball, chain, or network sampling involves asking each participant or group of participants to refer the researcher to potential participants. For this study, low-SES single mothers were asked to think of other low-SES single mothers who might have a compelling story to be heard. As a result of snowball sampling one mother recommended a person who agreed to participate in the study. Initially five women agreed to participate, but one dropped out before the study was complete, therefore the narratives of four women are included.

### *Data Collection Methods*

The use of an emergent design allowed for the design to remain flexible during the course of the study. I used two strategies consistent with qualitative research to collect data, semi-structured narrative interviews and narrative picturing/visualization. Narrative interviews and picturing/visualization with the women took place between May 2009 and February 2010.

#### *Narrative Interviews*

Participants were asked to participate in a minimum of one, in-depth semi-structured interview. As stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) the interviews served as a “conversation with a purpose.” This type of interview allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant’s lived experiences through the stories that emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). I began the interview with a limited set of questions, and allowed for new questions to be brought up during the interview as a result of how the interviewee answered previous questions. Open-ended questions were used for their ability to take the conversation from dichotomous inquiries to an in-depth dialogue (Patton, 2002). It was important for me to develop rapport with the interviewee to allow for the true story to develop (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Patton, 2002; Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Five interview questions were developed that focused on low-SES single mothers’ aspirations and the support systems they have for their children. In-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted and lasted from 45-minutes to 2-hours. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with five single low-SES mothers who volunteered to participate. Time, place, and degree of formality were taken into consideration. Narrative interview protocols can be found in Appendix B. The emergent nature of the narrative design allowed for the exact number of interviews to be extended as additional data was collected. All four women

participated in more than one face-to-face interview, excluding the narrative picturing component. I met with three of the mothers on three separate occasions, as further data was needed to complete their narratives. The fourth mother and I met on two separate occasions as a follow-up to the initial interview.

### *Narrative Picturing/Visualization*

The slogan “a picture is worth a thousand words” is a reminder that everyday people think of and view the world through “pictures,” and pictures created through their imagination or through the use of technology can potentially affect them behaviorally and emotionally (Simpson & Barker, 2007). Narrative picturing is defined by Simpson and Barker (2007) as, “The discrete manipulation of visual memories as a qualitative research method” (p.35). Narrative picturing enables the participant to bring phenomena alive through self-engagement, thereby allowing his or her private thoughts, feelings, and experiences, lived or fantasized, to be spontaneously created. This process has the potential to lead to improved description of the phenomena (Stuhlmiller & Thorsen, 1997). Stuhlmiller and Thorsen (1997) described two different modes of narrative picturing:

1. *Moving pictures*: This approach is required when the researcher is concerned with sequential progression surrounding the phenomena. Here, persons visualized a series of pictures, frame by frame.
2. *Snapshot picturing*: Here the researcher is concerned to explore instances of a specific phenomenon. This mode allows the researcher to ask specific questions relating to each picture.

For this study, I used snapshot picturing (Stuhlmiller and Thorsen (1997)). I gave each participant a disposable camera and asked her to use the camera to capture instances or occasions

of specific experiences over the course of a one-week period that were meaningful to them. The emphasis of this activity was to capture memories, through pictures, as a way of enabling the participants to begin to articulate a more in-depth form of narrative from which fundamental meaning(s) might emerge (Simpson & Barker, 2007). Three out of the four participants completed the narrative picturing process.

The premise of constructing reality through narrative picturing occurs in six steps (Stuhlmiller & Thorsen, 1997):

1. *Select*: Researcher selects the narrative picturing mode or combination based on the research question.
2. *Direct*: Researcher directs the participant away from dialogue toward a pictorial monologue by using simple and clear instructions. The intent is to allow the participant to move freely by him or herself as guided by his or her own thoughts and feelings.
3. *Picturing*: Requires space and quiet. The researcher does not collaborate or interfere with the participant while he or she is picturing.
4. *Narrating*: In the snapshot mode, each picture is narrated after it has been pictured. Narration involves asking the viewer to describe in detail what he or she has taken a “snapshot” of.
5. *Explore*: After narration is complete, the participant is asked about the picturing experience. This has the possibility to provide further exploration of the topic or research questions. The researcher can ask the participant interview questions to probe their meanings of the pictures.

6. *Debrief*: Allow time for debriefing so that you can assure that the participant is safely at the conclusion of the session and that a means for follow-up is available, if necessary. (p.147)

Narrative picturing/visualization offers an original and imaginative approach to gaining in-depth memories within qualitative research interviews (Simpson & Barker, 2007). The use of narrative picturing/visualization as a research method brought the phenomena alive through the process of self-engagement, thereby leading to a greater description of the story being told (Stuhlmiller & Thorsen, 1997). Appendix C explains the process the three participants engaged in during the narrative picturing/ visualization phase of the study.

#### *Data Analysis*

An electronic device was used to record all interviews. Interviews were listened to, transcribed, and listened to again. Careful attention was given to each story as the narrator's stories were pieced together (Clandinin, 2007). Special attention was paid to the language used by the mothers throughout the interviews and during the transcription and listening segment (Riessman, 1993). The narrator's language was used to construct the stories told. Detailed attention to each of the stories was vital for the true story to be constructed (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Riessman, 1993).

When it came to understanding the stories heard during the interviews; a narrator-listener relationship was established. This is a method of listening to the narrator's voice and stories. Rather than discovering different themes across interviews, those conducting narrative research start out by paying close attention to the voices within each narrative (Chase, 2005). Stories were read, listened to, reread and listened to again until particular themes within each narrative emerged and become clear. At this point, I constructed each individual story by doing what

Kramp (2003) calls “narrative analysis.” The researcher is at the point in analysis where he or she is responsible for constructing each individual story in a way that brings meaning and an order not apparent in the data by itself. During the construction phase, I integrated the themes that emerged within each story into a storied analysis.

By retelling the story, the researcher is returning the story to the participants. The researcher sets the stage, frames the time, and relates the events, happenings, and experience, conveying a sense of meaning and significance. The researcher reconfigures individual themes by embedding them with the stories told. Narrative inquiry is personal in nature and why narrators were continuously asked to read the story during the re-storying process to check for commonality and understanding. The process of re-storying was accomplished through a number of different methods including: electronic communication, correspondence via telephone conversations, and through personal trips to the narrators’ house. The process of analyzing the narrative always began and ended with the one who’s story was told (Kramp, 2003).

According to Stuhlmiller and Thorsen (1997), as with any other form of qualitative research methods, the analysis of data collected through the use of narrative picturing/ visualization “remains in the hands of the investigator” (p. 147). In their original work Stuhlmiller and Thorsen (1997) identified four stages used to analyze the data obtained from photographs. In the first stage the pictures were examined as a whole to gain a deeper understanding of the images. As the researcher, I focused on the pictures to see if I could describe certain aspects of the “experience.” During the second stage, I focused on “thematic” analysis. I looked for commonalities and differences across the pictures. During the third stage of analysis, I looked for an example to serve as a pattern or model for something that could have a particular meaning. During the fourth, and final stage, the participants and I constructed a

narrative that illustrated the phenomenon in its entirety. With three of the four narrators, the picture narrative was used with the oral narrative and helped identify common themes that emerged during both processes. I cross-referenced the pictures with the oral transcriptions to help develop the “whole” story. Key pictures are embedded within the narratives to help bring the participant’s story to the forefront.

### *Research Quality*

In narrative inquiry, the arrangement of a story and its quality as a research data source do not come without expressed concerns (Polkinghorne, 2007). In establishing the integrity of the methodology of narrative inquiry, the benefits cannot be viewed without consideration of the risks involved. There is consensus in the literature it is not appropriate to judge narrative research with the same standards as those applied to more traditional qualitative and quantitative research methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 2007; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative inquiry is more concerned with individual truths people have to tell than identifying comprehensive and replicated facts (Webster & Mertova, 2007). This section describes the role of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability as I applied them to this narrative inquiry.

Credibility was achieved through a series of member checking. Member checking is a process of having the data, interpretations, and conclusions validated with those from whom the data was collected. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985) member checking is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility. Member checking can be done daily in the course of the investigation and is both formal and informal. The four mothers whose stories are included were given the opportunity to look over the data to make sure that what was reconstructed was an accurate representation. Through a series of individual phone calls, emails, and formal face-to-

face meetings the four mothers and I constructed and reconstructed the narratives. All four took an active role throughout the entire narrative process. The four mothers did more than just look at the data. They were active throughout the entire process analyzing, communicating, editing, and commenting on the entire story as it unfolded. For example, one of the mothers preferred emails as the main source of communication after the initial interviews. After every new section she was given the opportunity to read and make comments on what I had written. Dialogue was open, honest, and efficient until the final story had been constructed. I worked with all four mothers to construct a story that represented their thoughts, actions, and feelings. This process is called intentionality, that is, what the narrator intended to say is actually the way it is presented.

Confirmability was achieved through transcribing, listening, and re-listening to the data collected through semi-structured interview, field notes, and participant documents.

Dependability in narrative inquiry was achieved through the trustworthiness of the field notes, reflexive journals, documents and transcripts. Enhancing personal and social growth is one of the purposes of this narrative inquiry (Polkinghorne, 2007).

According to Kezer (2003) researchers can develop trust with their participants by describing one's own perspective—also known as reflexivity. One way to achieve reflexivity is through journaling. A detailed reflexive journal was kept throughout the entire narrative process. I made it a priority to self reflect after the conclusion of every face-to-face interview and phone conversation. Writing notes and self-reflections helped me as I started to construct the stories. The journals allowed me to become closer and more in touch with the four participants. I thought about what each had said, how she said it, and visualized what she really meant during the interviews. There were many times I left the interview and started to think about what was said and had more questions for the participants. The reflexive journal allowed me to open up and



become one with the participants. Reflexive journaling helped open lines of communication as they were shared with the participants. Participants had an opportunity to read the journals and reflect upon what was recorded. Allowing the participants to read and reflect upon what was written led to a stronger sense of bonding between the participants and the researcher. The participants talked about a sense of caring and trust that developed between us when I shared my thoughts and stories with them (Mahoney, 2007). I informed them about keeping a journal and explained the journal was my way of making sense of their circumstances. It was my way of putting myself in their shoes. All four thanked me for wanting to work with them as the story unfolded. The journal helped add depth to the stories as I had a clearer picture for what these four women were describing.

Transferability in narrative inquiry involves providing sufficient information that a person considering application in another surrounding or environment can make the needed judgments of similarity. The events portrayed inside this narrative inquiry supply such richness and accounts of detail and ease of access that a person who reads the story should be able make applications in another location (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

#### *Protection of Human Participants*

One of my roles as researcher was to protect each of the participant's confidentiality and secure permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Wichita State University to insure protection of the participants' human rights (Josselson, 2007). Before the mothers participated in the study, they were required to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix D). The consent form was used to inform the four participants of the study's purpose and procedures, ask for voluntary participation, inform them they may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and insure them their identity and all data would be kept confidential.

### *Summary*

A qualitative narrative inquiry design (Patton, 2002) was used to conduct a study that captured how low-socio economic status (SES) single mothers with elementary school aged children described the aspirations and support systems they have for their children. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews and narrative picturing/visualization. Data was analyzed as the researcher integrated the themes that emerged within each story into a storied analysis.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Introduction to the Narratives*

The four women in this study identified themselves as single Caucasian mothers who were very proud of the lives they are living and providing for their children. The mothers ranged in age from 22 to 37. In order to protect their confidentiality, their real names have been replaced with pseudonyms: Carley, Amy, Allison, and Trish. They are quick to tell you they are not living a life of luxury and in fact are barely making enough money to keep the lights on and food on the table. With that being said, these mothers are very independent and take great pride in their children, their jobs, and the fact they have strong values and morals. The four women whose narratives are represented in this study volunteered to partake in my research met the qualifications set forth in earlier chapters. Each of these women has similar characteristics; however each one has a unique story to share and pass on to those of us in education, research, and the general public. These women's stories are powerful and touching in their own way. Additionally, each woman continues to fight the mainstream stereotypes that people in poverty are unwilling to work or to make an effort to be good parents.

From the beginning, the four women and I discussed the purpose of this study in great detail. A number of conversations revolved around how this is not my story and how together we would create a narrative told through the voices of both parties. We talked about how we would tell a story with the potential to change the way researchers and educators portray single women with children who are living in poverty. I eased the tension by starting every session with a background story about my own life. We talked about experiences the two of us had in common. I told them stories about my life very few people have ever heard. I wanted them to feel

comfortable with opening up to me and with being completely honest in their accounts. By the end of my story, I could tell they felt more at ease and ready to divulge about their personal lives.

As a co-creator of the story, I asked them to tell me everything about themselves and their lives. We talked about their childhood, the years they attended school, and life after high school until the present. Each of the women was very grateful to play a part in the research study and thanked me for taking an interest in them for who they were as individuals.

As mentioned previously, while conducting this study, I acknowledged the biases I brought to this study as the researcher. I carry my beliefs, passions, and experiences with me as a White middle class male who grew up in a working class family. I shared my own stories about growing up in a family with four boys and how my dad drove a gravel truck and was only home about three to four hours a day. My mother struggled to keep four boys on task and basically raised us on her own. We talked about how I saw my dad work all the time, however; we spent very little time together during my childhood. I talked with them about how my mom was a good mother, but had issues of her own (i.e., drug abuse, mental disorders).

My parents provided us with the basic essentials necessary in life. We did not wear fancy or name brand clothes or shoes. We did not go out to eat on a regular basis nor did we have extra money to purchase material items. We did have food on the table every night and we did have electricity and heat. We lived from paycheck to paycheck. My parents yelled and screamed and the television was the center of our conversations. I can still hear them shouting, “Johnny turn up the television!” As far as we knew, our daily routines were normal.

I shared my story with my participants because I wanted them to know I shared some of the same frustrations, joys, and problems they currently or have experienced at one time in their lives. I hoped by being honest with them they would share their stories without hesitation or

feeling shame about what they have experienced. I did not want them to look at me as a white middle class male who has had everything given to him on a silver platter.

It was important for the participants to understand where I came from and how I got to where I am at in life. I truly believe my present status in society could have intimidated them if I had gone into the study without sharing a little bit about myself and where I came from. Time and time again I explained the importance of the study and how they had the opportunity to share their stories with the world of education, research, and society. I reiterated the importance of how the story was theirs and that together we would create a story that tells the world the challenges and enjoyment of being a single mother raising children in a culture that likes to misinform the general public about women living in poverty.

Each narrative begins with a vignette that introduces each mother. The narratives are divided into themes that emerged from the individual interviews. Each story is unique in its own way yet similar in the experiences each has faced being a single mother with children enrolled in and attending school in grades K-6. I have worked very hard to make sure the stories you are about to read are told through their eyes. The rest of this chapter is devoted to Carley's narrative; the narratives of Amy, Allison, and Trish are included in chapters 5-7, respectively. Each of the stories you are about to read has been jointly created through a combined effort of the researcher and the participant.

### *Carley's Narrative*

*He was new to town and every girl in south central Kansas had to have him for themselves. Living in a small town you don't see very many guys wearing big city garments and driving a car out of a James Bond movie. I knew from the first time that I laid my eyes upon him that he would be mine. I grew up in what most people would call a two-parent household even though my father was never at home. My mom worked very hard to make sure that my brother and I had the best of everything. We wore the latest clothes, had the best toys and material items that you could imagine. My mom made it a priority to be at all of our social activities. She would rearrange her schedule so that she could get off of work to attend my ballgames or music concerts. My mom taught me lessons about life that I didn't understand until the day that my boyfriend, the father of my children, woke up and told me to, "Get my fucking bags packed and get out of my house." This was the guy that I had to have when I was 19-years old and the guy who fathered our two boys. It is amazing how life can turn upside down in a matter of seconds.*

Carley, 37 years of age, is a white, single mother of 11-year-old twin boys living in Hillsdale, Kansas. We had our first face-to-face interview on October 24, 2009. It was a cool October afternoon and I remember introducing myself to Carley as she answered the door. She was dressed in jeans and a plain colored t-shirt. The t-shirt was slightly loose and not tucked in her jeans. It looked like she had been up all night and that she had not been to sleep in quite sometime. Her eyes were droopy and the dark circles that accompanied them were very visible. Her brownish hair was not fixed nor was it messy. It was put up in a half-bun, half ponytail. Her make-up was subtle and if she had not worked the day before I have serious doubts she would have put on make-up for the interview. At around 150 pounds her five foot eight inch frame

looks strong but you can tell that she might be malnourished. The lack of sleep and long hours from work are starting to take a toll on what used to be a very attractive physique.

Carley is a very caring and loving mother and takes great pride in the fact that she works very hard to make sure her two boys have the basic essentials in life. Carley did not grow up in a life of poverty and never thought the words “homeless” or “state assistance” would enter her vocabulary. She had adapted to a life of the middle class and had a certain level of comfort she enjoyed along with her boyfriend and two boys. They did not worry about how much a piece of meat cost at the grocery store or the price of a ticket at the movie theatre. If they wanted to go out on the town for a night, a weekend, or for however long they wanted to be gone, money was no problem. Mike, Carley’s boyfriend and the father of her boys, had a high-paying job with the railroad. Money was no object and whatever Carley and the boys wanted in life they received.

It was on a beautiful autumn morning when Carley woke up to hear Mike, her boyfriend and the father of her boys, tell her to pack her bags and “don’t let the door hit you in the ass!” Standing there in shock and astonishment the comfortable life Carley and her boys were living had taken an unusual turn, one for the worse. Thoughts of anger and fear raced through Carley’s mind as she was on the threshold of becoming homeless. Carley had not worked since the boys were born and had relied on Mike to take care of her and the twins. She did not have money in a savings account nor did she own the house where they were living. To make matters worse her mom and stepdad lived five hours away and Mike wanted her out by the end of the day. With no money and nowhere to go Carley was now in a very precarious situation with what seemed like no way out.

Carley’s narrative revolved around six domains: (a) her experiences of growing up in a two-parent middle class family and her mother’s ability to hide or keep secret spousal abuse; (b)

her descent from love and companionship to being destitute in a blink of an eye; (c) learning to live on her own for the first time; (d) her observations and insight about the challenges and opportunities of raising twin boys along on a minimal income; (e) her aspirations and dreams that she has for her children; and (f) her insight on how the local school can help single mothers.

Carley's story does not contain aspects from the narrative picturing component. She did not have the time to complete the narrative picturing component due to unforeseen circumstances beyond her control. Carley's story illustrates the challenges of a single mother who continues to fight the mainstream media's perception that individuals living in poverty have no desire to improve their lives and they do not have what it takes to be good parents. Carley's story is an example of how perseverance can overcome pessimism and cynical attitudes. I conclude Carley's narrative with her observations and final thoughts about being a single mother living in poverty and what we as researchers should be aware of from her perspective.

#### *White Middle Class Background and Family*

There were very few times in my early childhood that my mother didn't have the money or means to put food on the table. Actually, my mother was very generous towards my younger brother and me. We grew up in a two-parent household in south central Kansas. The town that we grew up in had a population of around 2,500 and was the picture perfect place to raise a family. On the outside we were the perfect family. My mom worked 40 hours a week for a well-known oil company in Oklahoma and my father held down a fulltime job. We lived in a very nice house on the side of town that would be considered upper to middle class.

My mom and dad did a great job of hiding what went on behind closed doors from their neighbors and the rest of our little community. My mother was 18 years old when she found out that she was pregnant with me and my father was now in a position that he had very little control



over. He and my mother ended up marrying each other after they found out about the pregnancy. I know that my father didn't want to marry my mother at that time in his life, however, it was the early 1970's and it was seen as a taboo to live and have a child with someone who you were not married. The marriage between my parents didn't start out the way that my father would have wanted for it and I believe that is why he was so abusive towards my mother. I can remember on a number of occasions when my mother would come home crying or wake up screaming because of what my father put her through. I remember lying in bed with my mother one night when my father came home and broke her nose while she was pregnant with my brother. I really never understood why a man who proclaimed to love my mother would ever commit such a heinous act. After every beating and assault my mom would pack our bags and leave for a day or two. She would tell us that this was the "last time that your father will ever lay his hands on us," however; we knew that dad would apologize and that mom would go back to him "one more time."

It wasn't until I was 16 that my mom finally closed the chapter on the excessive physical and mental abuse that my father had put her through from before I was born. Twenty-one years have passed since my mother told my father "enough is enough." I remember that day being one of the happiest days of my life. It felt like 50 pounds of pressure had been lifted off of my shoulders—I was elated! The man who had beat the hell out of my mother for the past 16 years could now find somebody else to make miserable. My mom could finally live the life that she deserved. A life without hiding bruises, without fear, and without pain. We were free from all the anger and hatred that had filtered throughout our house for so long.

My mother grew up in the town that my brother and I were born and raised. She was the popular one in high school. She was the homecoming queen her senior year and head cheerleader

all the way through middle and high school. Everyone in our little town knew my mother and wanted to be her best friend when she was in school. My mother was very social during high school and continued to be when she graduated. She was a member of the local country club, played in a women's golf league, and hung out with the ladies at least twice a week for some sort of social activity. A person would think that my mother had a number of friends with whom she could reveal the terrible beatings that happened within our house on a weekly basis. My mother was social, but hid a lot from the world. My mother was not the kind of person who would divulge family secrets. The community and even her best friends knew little, if anything about what happened after 5:00 p.m.

From 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. my mother worked five days a week. She drove 40 miles a day to work so that she could provide for us kids. I thought that we had bundles of money growing up but found out later on in life that my mom only made \$10 an hour. Ten dollars an hour back in the early 80's and 90's was above minimum wage, however; it was not the kind of money that I thought that we had. My mom did a great job of making us think that we had more money than we actually did have at any given time.

Looking back at life I now understand the sacrifices that my mother made for me. My mom really valued the time that she had with my brother and me. She always found time to sit down with us every night to ask us how our day went. My mom had a way about her that made us feel like we were kings and queens. I remember waiting by the door for my mom to get home from work so that we could sit down and have some mother/daughter time. My mom was a special lady and made us feel the same way. She always knew when things were not going well and always had the right words to make us feel better. My mom never missed an activity that we were participating in whether it was a school or community activity. She always made us feel

that whatever we did was really important. I know that it wasn't easy for her to be available at all of our activities, but somehow she always managed be right in the middle of whatever we were doing.

From designer clothes to nice cars my mom worked really hard to make sure that we had those items. I was part of the popular group when I was in high school. I look back now and think, "Gosh, I don't want to be one of those uppity people." My mom, without the presence of my father, worked her ass off to keep that status up for my brother and I. I didn't understand the types of sacrifices that my mother made for us growing up. I don't know if it was because I was so naïve or just didn't want to face reality. It wasn't until later in life that I finally realized the important lessons that my mother taught me during those emotional years that I like to refer to as "childhood." My father was here, yet he was gone. My mother was here, yet she was involved! I often sit back and wonder what life would have been like if both would have been "here" and "involved." I wonder if the next fifteen to twenty years of my life would have turned out different.

#### *Carley's Descent From Love and Companionship to Being Destitute in A Blink of An Eye*

At the time that I met my boys' father my mom had just married my stepdad and moved to South America. Life is an amazing game of choices and sacrifices. My stepdad, who is also named Mike, was a teacher at the high school in the community in which we lived. He was the special education resource room director and I was one of his teacher's aides. I told him about this amazing woman who fought for everything that she had in life and how she was willing to sacrifice her own life for that of her kids. He was intrigued by this woman and asked if she was single. I told him that I had a personal relationship with her and that I could introduce him to her if he would like.

Mike, the man who eventually became my stepdad, and my mom hit it off from day one. They were a perfect match and enjoyed doing the same things in life (i.e., golf, cards, casino, traveling). Two years after introducing Mike to my mother they got married and moved to South America. Mike was offered a principal's position for Conoco Phillips in Peru, South America. The only constant that I have ever had in my life was now on the verge of moving from Kansas to Peru, South America. Looking back now I realize that I had huge abandonment issues after my mom moved and that is why I latched onto who would eventually become the father of my boys. I really never loved him—I just didn't want to be alone!

He had a nice car, was buff, was new to town, and every girl in town wanted him, but he wanted me! There was a certain piece of me that kept telling me to stay away from him, but he wanted me and I was drawn to that attraction. I was 20 years old, my mother had just moved out of the country, and I needed someone to call my own. My mother had always been there for me growing up and I now found myself confused and lost or as most people call it, "I was in love!"

Mike and I started dating when I was 20, we had the twins when I was 24 and separated when I was 27 years old. Mike was the nicest and most gentle man that I had ever been around during the four years before I found out that I was pregnant. Life as we knew it was turned upside down when we found out that we were going to have kids. We were living in Oklahoma at this time and I was managing a housing development for developmentally disabled adults and Mike was working for the railroad. We both had really good jobs, good friends who we did things with, and were getting along like most young adults our same age. We went out on dates, even though we were living together, and really enjoyed the time spent together. We lived every day as if it would be our last day together. We had no worries in life and the thought of having kids or worrying about where we would get the money for our next meal never came up during

our conversations. I knew that Mike was filling a void in my life that came about from my mom moving and my dad never being involved or interested. We were on the road to success and never looked back.

I will never forget the day that I told Mike I was pregnant. Mike grew up in a very devout Catholic family. His mother spent a considerable amount of time in the convent and was as conservative as they come. I bet that I took three to five home pregnancy tests before I would accept the fact that they all kept coming back positive. I was so nervous and didn't know how Mike would handle the news. We had never really talked about having kids or a family. Our conversations usually revolved around what we'd eat for dinner or where we would go on the weekend. I knew that Mike would either be excited about the news or that he would be on the opposite end of the spectrum.

It was a Tuesday evening and I knew that Mike would be home from work within the hour. I had everything planned down to the very second that I would tell him the great news. Mike arrived home and the evening went as planned. The moment came for me to tell him that I had taken numerous home pregnancy tests and that all of the tests came back positive. Surprisingly, Mike accepted the news better than I had anticipated and showed a little excitement when I told him the news. We talked with our friends and got a few names of family doctors in our area. We found a doctor who was accepting new patients and we set up an appointment.

At our first appointment, the doctor did all of the routine checks and said that everything seemed to be progressing well. It wasn't until our second, or maybe third, appointment that the doctor dropped a bombshell on the two of us. He informed me that he had found possible cancer in my uterus. The doctor continued to inform me that this type of cancer has a tendency to progress at a more rapid pace during pregnancy and that Mike and I really needed to consider an

abortion as an option. I left the doctor's office with a feeling in my stomach that I used to get when my father got on one of his rampages and beat on my mom. It had been a while since I felt like this and the thoughts of having an abortion were lying heavy on my heart. Two weeks later we went back to the doctor and found out that not only were we having a baby boy, but also I was pregnant with two identical twins. I knew at that point that I could not and would not have an abortion. Not only was there a possibility that I had cancer [Carley found out later that she did not have cancer after all], I am pregnant with twins, and Mike is Catholic. Mike just knew that we would be a happy family and that God would help us through the difficult days that were before us.

The day had finally arrived and Mike was kind enough to give me a ride to the hospital. Mike dropped me off at the hospital and said that he would be right back. The boys were born on my grandfather's birthday and their father was nowhere to be seen. Mike showed up at the hospital the next day totally wasted. He dropped me off at the hospital and went on a 24-hour dope and alcohol spree with another woman. My day started with labor pains and turned into some more growing pains. I am sitting in the hospital with two beautiful boys while their father is out tearing up the town with a two-bit whore and a bottle of alcohol. All I can think of is how Mike kept telling me how we were going to be one big happy family—when in reality it didn't get any better!

Four years went by from when the boys were born and we were living in Arkansas. The boys were attending a very prestigious preschool program and I was a stay at home mother. Mike was still working for the railroad and things had actually improved from that miserable day that I was in the hospital giving birth while Mike was out doing his own thing. We had a beautiful house on the lake, a two-car garage, boats, motorcycles, good friends who we spent time with,

and money in the bank. The boys were happy, I was happy, and I thought that Mike was happy. The boys were still in bed the day that their father woke up and told me to get “my fat ass out of his house!” He told me that he didn’t like me, never has liked me and to “get out!” Thoughts of fear and anger flooded my mind when Mike finished his diatribe. How could this man be so evil and wicked towards the lady who has put up with so much of his shit? I lay in a hospital bed and gave birth to the two best things that have ever been in his life and he is telling me to “pack my shit and get my fat ass out of his house!” At first I wanted to cry and then I wanted to beat him until he told me that he was just kidding.

Mike wasn’t kidding and I didn’t know what to do next. I called my mom on the phone; she and my stepdad were now living in Kansas, and told her what had transpired. My mom, as usual, took care of the situation and within three days we had rented a U-haul and I was back in Kansas. My grandmother found me a place to live in Hillsdale, Kansas and took care of paying the rent and turning on the utilities. It had been four years since I last had a job. Mike had been the breadwinner for the past four years and I didn’t have to worry about making money to pay bills. My life had been turned upside down in a matter of minutes. Just three days before I was living in a nice house on the lake, staying home with my boys, and not a worry going through my head.

#### *Carley’s Fall From Grace: Learning to Live on Her Own*

It wasn’t until I got everything unpacked and settled that things started to make sense. It was at that point that I realized that I would need to get a job, find someone to watch the boys while I worked, and provide food for my kids. Panic was starting to set in and I was on the verge of a mental breakdown. Reality had finally set in! I started looking for a job about two weeks after moving to Hillsdale. Hillsdale is not a very large community and jobs were not bountiful. I

knew that I couldn't afford to drive out of town for a job and I knew that I couldn't afford to be selective with the few jobs that were available in Hillsdale. A month after being "swept off of my feet" and settling into my new house I was offered a job in Hillsdale. The local floral shop had an opening for a general laborer and I was eager to prove that I could do the work. It didn't take me long to figure out that manual labor was not my cup of tea. Keep in mind that I hadn't worked for four years and that this was the first manual labor job of my life. I was used to being the one in charge and telling other people what to do for the day. My previous jobs never required me to work in the cold or with my hands. I remember showing up to work on my first day and saying to myself "this place is full of really nasty people." I was not used to working with people who didn't bathe on a regular basis or who had no concept of hygiene. My new co-workers were dirty, grungy people who cussed like sailors and talked about how they smoked pot and how drunk they got the night before. I remember one lady coming back from lunch talking about giving a man a sexual act in the parking lot.

I guess that I had been sheltered from those things in life and was not used to being around that type of social setting. I couldn't believe that people talked or behaved in such manners. I made it until noon and called my mother. She talked me into hanging in there and to not give up hope. I did what my mom asked and clocked out at 2:00 o'clock on my first day of work and never returned. I moved to Hillsdale in October and it wasn't until January that I got a decent job in "name" only. In reality it paid \$8.00 an hour. I remember getting my first paycheck and thinking, "Wow \$1,000 dollars." I thought that I had won the lottery and was doing well. That was until I started paying the bills. Once again I realized that things were not as good as what they appeared and that I would need to secure some extra income to make ends meet.



I don't know how I ended up in the Social Rehabilitation Services (SRS) office, but I do remember it being one of the most terrible and humiliating things that I have ever been through in life. Keep in mind that I have been kicked out of my house, gave birth to my kids, watched my father beat on my mom, and am ranking SRS within the top four devastating events in my life.

I had to go to the welfare office for the first time ever in my life! I couldn't make it on my own and felt like a failure. I took great pride in the fact that my mother worked her whole life and that her dad, my grandfather, worked up until the day that he died. I did not want to rely on the state of Kansas to give me money to put food on the table or money for daycare assistance. I had no other choice and this about killed me—literally!

I think the reason this was so hard for me to accept is because everyone in my family had always worked. We were not brought-up taking handouts or relying on other people to provide for our family. I always thought that people who were using food stamps were lazy and didn't deserve to receive assistance. It was very shocking coming from what we had in Arkansas; a house on the lake, two-car garage, boats, and food in the pantry to standing in line at the welfare office.

I remember the first time going to the local SRS office. I put on some nice clothes and make-up and headed out the door. I walked into the SRS office for the very first time and was astounded. I remember thinking to myself, "Oh my God, these people are in house shoes and have on sweatpants with holes in them." I felt very helpless for one of the very first times in my life. It was an event in my life that I will never forget. I will never forget that moment for a couple of reasons: one, it was at that point in my life that I realized that I was one of "those" people. I was standing in the same line with the very same people whom I am judging and making fun of and two, they didn't know what I had been through for me to end up in that line

on that day and I didn't know the circumstances that brought them to be in the same building and line that I was standing in next to them on that cold January morning. That tragic event turned out to be a very humbling event later in life. I promised myself, a few months down the road, that I would no longer be so judgmental and hypocritical of people whom I do not know or understand what they have been through. While living in Arkansas I had a friend and confidant in Mike. My best and closest friend was no longer a part of my life.

Not only did I leave my house and best friend for the past seven years behind in Arkansas, but I also left every other social aspect of my life. I knew nobody when we moved to Hillsdale. My brother and sister-in-law lived here, but we were not really close at the time that I moved here. My mom and stepdad lived in Hillsdale, but they had their own life and problems. I know that I can ask my mom and stepdad for help if I really need something. My brother and sister-in-law will watch the kids for me if it is a life and death situation. Other than them, I really don't have people whom I can turn to when I need a shoulder to cry on or an ear to bend.

I have lived in Hillsdale since the year 2000 and I still don't have a friend who I can call on and ask them to watch the kids for an hour or help feed the dog. I live my life around work and my kids. Other than that, I am pretty much alienated from the rest of the world. I think some of it stems from the fact that people with kids my age are quite a bit younger than I am. I was 24 years old when I had the twins...not 16, 17, or 18 like most kids today. I truly believe that the difference in age has a lot to do with why I don't have a group of people whom I can hang out with or establish a professional relationship. I am too old to run with the single people and don't have a husband to hang out with the married crowd. It is really difficult to find your place in either social group. Not knowing who you are and where you fit in does create some challenges raising the boys on my own as a single mother.

## *Challenges and Opportunities of Raising Twin Boys on A Limited Income*

The challenge of raising two boys on my own is what drives me to do what has to be done. You have to overcome the obstacles and do whatever it takes to accomplish your dreams and goals. You have to do what you have to do! That is why I went and applied for food stamps and daycare assistance. That is why I quit my 8:00 to 4:00 job at the conservation office in Hillsdale and took a job as a dealer at the casino in Oklahoma. That is why I went to work at 7:00 p.m. and got off of work at 3:00 a.m. I didn't have a choice—that was a challenge! Raising the boys has never been a challenge or an issue! If I had a choice about where I could work, what my hours would be, and where my kids would go while I was at work—then life would be easy.

I chose to quit my 8:00 to 4:00 p.m. job in Hillsdale for a job working as a dealer in Oklahoma. My shift started at 7:00 p.m. and ended at 3:00 a.m. I had to leave by 5:30 p.m. in order to be at work on time. I would get home around 4:00 or 4:30 in the morning and stay awake until it was time to get the boys ready for school. I did have some time in the evening to cook a meal for the kids and to help them with homework. The boys go to bed at night around 9:00 p.m. I went to work every day feeling guilty about leaving them with a babysitter or with my mom and stepdad. I had an opportunity to work the day shift at the casino. That was not an option. The dealer on the day shift started out at \$6 an hour plus tips. The daytime dealers average around \$10 to \$12 an hour—which is better than what I was making at the conservation office in Hillsdale. Ten to twelve dollars an hour is not very much money by the time that you pay for gas and daycare. I could make more money working the night shift and that is what I chose. I averaged around \$30 an hour working the night shift. We finally had a good income and money in the bank, but at what expense?

I did to my kids what my boys' father did to me. He thought that he had to work and provide for the family. He was gone all the time making money. I was doing the same thing that Mike did during the time that we lived with him. I remember my boy coming up to me one day and saying, "Mom you are making money and we have nice things but you don't spend any time with us—mom you don't have time for us anymore." It wasn't that they were not going to the park or the movies or that they were not doing things, it was that they were not doing them with me. I couldn't stop what I was doing because we had to pay the bills, buy food, put gas in the car, and purchase the essentials.

There has never been a time in my life when I have thought about quitting my job and going on welfare fulltime. It would be easier from a physical point, but it would tear me up from a mental standpoint. My boys are 11 years old and are old enough to understand that you go to work and make money. How do you explain to your kids that it is acceptable to stay at home when other kids parents are working? I can't! I want my kids to understand hard work and responsibility. Those two values are very important to me and I want them to be characteristics that my kids also value.

#### *Carley's Aspirations and Dreams For Her Children*

What are my dreams and aspirations for my two boys now that they are 11 years old? I remember watching *Doogie Howser*, a television show back in the early 90's, and wishing that my two little boys would grow up to be a big time doctor. There is something about being able to say, "My kids are doctors." It has always been intriguing to me for them to become a doctor. I now realize that the reality of becoming a doctor or lawyer will not happen for my kids. To tell the truth, I just want them to be responsible, happy adults.

My youngest twin, Mitch, has always said that he wants to be a cop when he grows up. I know that cops don't make a huge amount of money and that their responsibilities are enormous. My boys don't have to be in the most popular professions or hang out with the right people for me to love them with all of my heart. Being a cop is not a profession where Mitch will make a lot of money or where he will become a well-known person for the job that he performs. The one thing that Mitch will learn about being a cop is that it is a very honorable profession. To me, that is what I want for Mitch. I want him to be happy and honorable. I want him to know that his mother has worked for everything that he has and that she will continue to do whatever it takes to help him become a cop.

My oldest son, Talon, has always dreamed of playing professional football. Talon wants to be seen on Sundays playing in the National Football League (NFL) making millions of dollars. I encourage him to follow his dreams and to work hard during his little league football practices and games. Talon doesn't realize how many kids graduate from high school and go onto college to play football. He really doesn't realize the number of collegiate athletes who continue their careers at the next level. I don't have the heart to tell him that he would have better odds winning the lottery than playing in the NFL. My boys have already been through so much heartache and grief that I will encourage and be their biggest cheerleader no matter what direction they want to pursue in life.

Graduating from high school and going to college are very important goals that I have for Talon and Mitch. Both boys will graduate from high school even if I have to go to school with them everyday. They know that graduating from high school is very important in my eyes and their grandparents' eyes. Their father dropped out of high school and is a very successful individual. I have a major fear that the boys will look at what their dad has accomplished and

think that they can do the same thing without a high school diploma. They are old enough now to understand that they are a year older than other classmates. I held Talon back a year when he was in Kindergarten and he has resentment about that to this day. I have a fear that when they turn 18 that they will drop out of high school. All I can do at this point is to be supportive and let them know that I am here for them.

When the boys graduate from high school, going to college is something that I would like for my boys to pursue, however, if they find a profession that does not require college or vocational training then I will be okay with that. I can't even imagine how much it will cost for them to go to college seven years from now. I understand that the cost of obtaining an education after high school is something that I will not be able to help Talon or Mitch with. We barely make enough money as it is and that is why it is important for them to take their schooling serious. If they want to go to college and further their education then sacrifices need to be made on my part. I want my kids to know that I was there for them—like my mom. I want them to know that I will be there. These are my dreams for them. Other than to support them and to back them I really don't know how to make their dreams come to fruition. I assume that the boys and I will have to rely on filling out scholarships and financial aid to pay for college.

I can't really say that I know the steps involved in helping my kids look for scholarships and the process of filling out financial aid applications. I guess that when the time comes I will ask the high school guidance counselor if he or she would be willing to help. I don't remember looking into college or financial aid when I was a senior in high school. I guess that the guidance counselor would be the person who could help us with that chapter when we cross that bridge. I would ask my mom or dad for advice, but I don't know if they will be around when the day comes. Maybe I should start asking those questions now. I would hate to think that my kids

would be eligible for college or vocational training and they missed out on the opportunity because I didn't know how to help them access those resources. This makes me wonder why my high school didn't work with us when we were freshmen or seniors learn how to select a college or how to access scholarships.

I do remember the high school guidance counselor calling in a select group of students when I was in high school. They said that he was just talking with them about their ACT scores and what they meant to them as individuals. I know for a fact that he didn't call me into his office to go over my ACT score. Did I miss out on an opportunity? Will my kids miss that same opportunity? These are questions that I need to look into before Talon and Mitch become seniors. By the time that they become seniors it might be too late! I hope that Hillsdale K-12 is not treating people differently because of who they are or whom they know. Based on my experiences with the teachers and administration in grades K-6 I don't believe that this is happening.

I don't have friends my age nor do I have a lot of friends whom I can call for support. Hillsdale is not a very large community and I don't know if there are other resources out there that could help me when it comes to working with my kids. I read the Hillsdale newspaper every week and have noticed on different occasions that certain activities are being offered. I thought about taking a painting class once until it dawned on me that I would need a babysitter. I would like to attend different adult activities offered by the school, but I can't show up with my kids and expect someone else to keep track of them while I played basketball or took a cooking class. I know that these activities would be a great way for me to meet other adults, but it always comes back to "who will take care of my kids?" It isn't that I don't want to meet other adults or that I enjoy being alone every weekend. I would love to be able to pick up the phone and call on a

friend to watch the kids if I needed to run to town. I often dream that my kids will find a good wife or mate who they can learn to become best friends with. I have strong desires for my kids to grow up and have friends, real friends, who they can go out on dates with, have cookouts or just hang out with and enjoy each other's company. I don't have these types of relationships and I often wonder if this has a negative effect on Talon and Mitch.

*Carley's Insight on How the School Can Help Single Mothers*

Could the school offer more or do things different? I don't want to talk bad about the Hillsdale school district. They have been very awesome to work with as a single parent. There are things that the teachers or administration could do different that could help me as a single mother. I can't call the casino and tell them that I will be late because one of my boys got into trouble. The casino would tell me to be at work when my shift starts or to come pick up my last paycheck. I think that there are times that the school and teachers think that I can just take off of work and come up to the school at their beck and call. This is not the case. I have tried explaining this to one or two teachers, but I think that they thought that I was just making excuses. It would be helpful if the teacher would take into account everything that I go through on a daily basis. They don't know what time I go into work or what time I get off of work. I could march my happy butt down to the school whenever they called to take care of something that could be addressed on my day off. This would require me waking up to answer the phone, getting dressed, driving down to the school, talking with the teacher and/or administrator, and then driving back home. Have you ever tried going back to sleep in the middle of the day after learning that your child has been in a fight or just got into trouble at school? It is not an easy thing to do! I don't get called down to the school very often and my kids are not troublemakers. I



have tried asking the teacher, on those occasions, if this is something that could be handled over the phone. Once again, you can just tell that they think that you are making excuses.

My time is important and I want to spend as much of it as possible with my children. I would attend parent teacher conferences or school activities offered through the school if they were at times that I could attend without giving up two or three hours that I have to spend with my kids. I just want people to know that I do care about my kids and will rearrange my schedule to be at their school plays or musicals. I don't judge people until I have walked a mile in their shoes. I never in a million years thought that I would do some of the things that I have done for my kids. I would hope that the teachers and administrators who are involved with my kids would appreciate what we go through. I know that it is hard not to judge. I have learned my lesson since that first day that I walked into the SRS office. When a kid comes in smelling like a wood stove or is dirty or is stealing food out of another kid's lunch box maybe it is not because they are lazy or a thief. Maybe it is because they are hungry or it is the only way that they can keep warm. I just wish that everybody would understand and appreciate where they have been and where they are now. Sometimes teachers and other parents are too quick to judge other kids. I know that my kids were not invited to certain events because of who they were. I have struggled in decisions that I have made and I hope that by listening to my story that you might be able to look at people differently.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Amy's Narrative*

*Growing up was a job for me - it was not what most children my age would consider a childhood. My parents were always on the move during the better part of my life. I can remember coming home from school and wondering where the U-haul that was parked in our drive way would take us today. Every day was a new adventure and I was not sure what to think of it or to expect.*

*I didn't have a lot of friends during the years that were spent attending elementary school because my mom and dad(s) liked to move around. Some people referred to us as "traveling gypsies." I don't know if we moved around a lot because we were avoiding bill collectors or if it was because we were following jobs. Whatever the case, it was an adventure filled with very few affectionate, and a ton of dreadful, memories that are still haunting my life 26 years later.*

*I put my pants on one leg at a time knowing that my job at the local nursing home awaits. I am so tired of getting up between 4:00 and 4:30 every morning. I often wonder what it would be like to sleep in till 7:00 a.m. I go to work every day knowing that my kids will not see me again until they get home from school. It is not fair that my kids are forced to wake up so early. Most kids their age are still in bed dreaming about what they are going to eat when they wake up while my kids are in the car on their way to the babysitter. By the time the sun rises my kids have been up for almost two hours. They know that mom would like to let them sleep in; however, they also understand why mom has to leave so early. I have dreams of going back to college, getting a nursing degree, and providing a better life for my family. I can't wait for that day to arrive! I want to be the one who takes my kids to school, kiss them on the cheek, and give them positive*

*words of encouragement as they run towards the school doors. My job as a nurse's aide does not allow for that happen.*

Amy, 26 years of age, is a white, single mother of three children, Breen 3 (preschool), Jake 4 (kindergarten) and Mandy 6 (first grade). Amy and her children have lived in Hillsdale, Kansas for the past four years. Amy is a slender young lady with brown eyes and brown shoulder length hair. She is approximately 5 feet 7 inches in height and takes great pride in her appearance. Amy and I had our first face-to-face interview on May 22, 2009. She and I met on two separate occasions and during both formal meetings Amy's appearance was very professional. She wore a nice pair of jeans and a button-up shirt, and her hair and make-up were fixed. I was very impressed with both the appearance of Amy and her house.

Amy lives in a little two-bedroom duplex apartment on the northwest corner of Hillsdale. At first glance, it would be easy for a person to judge those individuals living in one of the five duplexes. The duplexes are not very appealing from the outside and are in need of some repair and tender loving care. Some of the duplexes are missing screens on their windows, storm doors are kicked in or are ripped off the hinges, and trash is blowing and spread out across the yards.

I remember stepping out of my truck on the day of the first scheduled interview thinking, "I wonder what the inside of her house looks like?" It didn't take long for me to find out! I was totally surprised about the inside appearance and remember feeling like a complete jerk when the interview was over. Here I am trying to help those living in poverty put an end to the myths that they do not care and enjoy living in filth and I am still judging them for how things appear on the outside. I walked into Amy's house already imagining the worse and could not wait for the interview to be over.

Amy greeted me at the door with a warm smile and a firm handshake. She was not ashamed, nor should she be, about the appearance of her house from the outside. Amy knew what she had was hers and she was working her tail off to provide for her three kids. Here I am standing on her front porch judging her for how things look from the outside and she is standing there ready to invite me into her life.

Amy's narrative revolved around seven domains: (a) her experiences of living a life on the move and filled with domestic abuse; (b) her frustrations of juggling three children, work, and school at the same time; (c) her feeling that she can not ask for help or of not knowing where to go to for help with her son Jake and his frustrations; (d) her experiences with work; (e) her relationship and experience with the school; (f) her efforts of putting the past behind her and starting over within the community; and (g) her aspirations and dreams that she has for her children. Amy's story is another inspiring example of how a single mother can beat the odds, overcome obstacles, and provide a life for her three kids. Amy and her children do not live a life that is full of luxury. Their two-bedroom duplex is in disrepair, and they do not have satellite television, a cell phone, or a house equipped with new furniture. Amy's kids do not wear the name brand clothes that other kids in their class wear. Amy works very hard to provide for her children and is not ashamed to admit they wear secondhand clothes. She is not a mother who lets other people keep her from pursuing what she believes is best for her kids nor does she listen to the cynics who tell her to quit and just give up. I conclude Amy's narrative with her observations and final thoughts about being a single mother living in poverty and what researchers and educators could learn from her perspective.

*Life on The Move Filled with Domestic Violence Along the Way*

My mom enjoyed having a male partner in the house and really didn't mind if he worked or was abusive. My mom and my real dad were married for a very brief amount of time and divorced when I was five years old. I don't have very many fond memories of my mom and real dad during that time. I can remember them always fighting and getting into arguments during the time that they were together. Life in our house was not very appealing and I couldn't wait to find a way out.

My real dad was a severe alcoholic and oftentimes took me with him on his drinking binges. I can remember my dad waking up early in the morning and opening a beer or a bottle of whiskey. He would go to bed late at night drunk and wake up early in the morning ready to pick up where he left off. My dad, grandfather, and I would spend countless hours driving around in his old pick-up truck while they drank and fought with whoever got in their way. I was destined to end up living the same type of lifestyle. It was all I knew from an early age. My dad died a few years ago when he was in his forties. It was a combination of alcohol, drugs, and too many late nights that took the life from my dad at such an early age.

As I stated earlier, my mom and dad divorced when I was five and it wasn't long before my mother found another gentleman to fill the void in her life. My mother re-married when I was seven years old to who we will call Ken. Ken was in the house, but was not in the house. He would show up when it was beneficial for him to be around. My mom didn't do a very good job of picking men to become her husband. Ken had some of the same characteristics as those that my real dad had in his toolbox. Ken liked to drink huge amounts of alcohol, chase women, and beat my mother whenever he felt the need. My mother's marriage to Ken lasted for about fourteen years before the two of them decided that a divorce was imminent. Ken and my mother

divorced and it wasn't long before my mother married for the third time in fourteen, nineteen years.

My mother married Jason and has been with him for the past seven years. I think that my mom has finally met the man of her dreams. Jason is a nice guy who treats my mom the way that she deserves to be treated. My mom and Jason lived in Hillsdale for a couple of years after getting married and now live in Texas. I am happy for my mom and wish her the best of luck. I hope that one day I too can find a guy who will make me happy and help me make all of my dreams come true. My ability to pick guys who are good people is questionable. Just look at my first husband and you will understand what I am talking about.

High school was a terrible experience for me. I was not the popular person who hung out with the right crowd. My mom and stepdad both worked and we had money to go shopping for new clothes, to buy pizza on the weekends, and to see the latest movies. It wasn't that money was the reason for my bad experience. My classmates were stuck up, arrogant, self-centered jerks and by the time that my senior year came around I was fed up with Hillsdale and the school. I couldn't wait for my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday so that I could march my happy butt into the principal's office to sign myself out of high school. My 18<sup>th</sup> birthday arrived and I was officially a high school drop out.

I met the kids' father while attending school in Hillsdale. He was the perfect guy for me. We both had the same things in common—we liked to drink, do drugs, and party. He was very supportive of my decision to drop out of high school. I dropped out of high school and the very next day we moved to a city about 50 miles west of Hillsdale. We didn't have any friends or family in West City. We had been there a few times in the past and really liked the city. Two months after moving to West City I found out that I was pregnant. It was an exciting time for the

two of us—we were about to be parents! We weren't scared or concerned about having a child. I enrolled in the West City alternative school and finished my high school diploma. Mandy was born; we are both working and partying every night and weekend. Life was good and we were ready to conquer the world. This was the happiest that I had been in a long time and I didn't want the days to end.

We lived in West City for about two years before we moved to California for a brief stint. My mom and stepdad were living in California at this time and we were feeling adventurous. We left Kansas behind and moved to California. California was not what we expected and after a short four-month layover we moved to Oklahoma. Jeff's, my husband, family lived in a town about an hour southwest of Hillsdale, Kansas. I guess this is where my life started to take a turn for the worse. The happy life that I had been living for the past two years was about to start looking like my childhood.

Jeff and I moved to Jonestown, Oklahoma in the spring of 2005 and life was never the same for the two of us again. Our marriage and relationship turned into something that I was not prepared to handle. It was like someone had replaced the guy that I had known for the past three years with someone who was the complete opposite. Both of us were working and making really good money. So money was not the issue. Jeff began to drink and use drugs every day. He was no longer confined to drinking on the weekends like I was accustomed to. Alcohol and drugs were becoming a vital part of his life. It was like the kids and I were no longer the most important aspect of Jeff's life. He had allowed drugs and alcohol to replace the three kids and me. Every day was turning into a new adventure in our house. Jeff was drinking more and now to a point in his life where he was becoming abusive towards me. This [Figure 5-1] is a picture of a bottle of alcohol and cigarettes. Jeff let drugs and alcohol consume his life and lost reality of

where his priorities should be—his wife and kids. I wanted my former husband to come back—fast!



Figure 5-1. Bottle of alcohol and cigarettes.

It got to a point where I was afraid to come home from work. I knew that Jeff had been drinking all day and night and that he was becoming more abusive. The demons that haunted my childhood were now starting to haunt my young adult life. I feared for the life of my children and for me. I was alone in a new city and had nowhere to turn. My mom and stepdad lived in California and I had nobody. Jeff had his family and friends, but they were not mine! Days would go by before Jeff would come home and when he came home things were not any better. Drinking, abuse, and loneliness were consuming my life and I knew that the demons had to be put to rest.

I divorced Jeff after two very long and challenging years. I packed my suitcases, loaded the car, and moved my children to the only place that I knew—Hillsdale. I could have stayed in Jonestown, but it was not my home. Jeff, his friends, and parents would have made my life miserable. I went from a two-income environment to welfare overnight. I moved in with my



sister until I could find a place of my own and a job. The state of Kansas provided me with food and cash assistance while I looked for a job and house. About a month after moving back to Hillsdale I secured a job with the local nursing home. I took a class to become certified to distribute medications. I have worked at the nursing home since moving back to Hillsdale in 2007. It is not the best job around but it does help me pay the bills and provide for my children. My children and I don't have the best life, but it sure beats the life that we were living just three years earlier. The demons that once ruled my life have been put to rest.

### *Frustrations of Juggling Three Children, Work, and School*

I will be the first to admit that it would be easier raising my three children if the kids' father were around. This year I have three children attending school and it is very difficult finding the time to work with all three of them at once. All of them want me to designate a certain amount of my time with them and only with them. It is extremely hard! I love spending time with my kids and will do anything for them.

The simple task of sitting down and trying to read a book with Mandy, my oldest child, is a chore and eventually turns into a three-ring circus. Sitting down and reading a book together is not an option within my house. If I sit down with Mandy it doesn't take long before the other two are crawling on my lap asking me to play with them. I have to stop what I am doing with Mandy and acknowledge that the other two are present; otherwise, they will just cling to me until I stop doing what I am doing. By the time that I get Jake and Breen, my two youngest, occupied with toys or a movie, Mandy is no longer in the mood to read with mom. Mandy doesn't understand that the other two need me as much as she does. She is only six and already gets very frustrated with me for not spending time with her—this is very tough!

I don't like the feeling of being helpless, which is what I feel sometimes, when things don't go the way that I planned or thought that they would turn out. Finding the time to be with all three of my kids at the same time is like working a second job. I am a good mother and I do find time to read to my kids. I do this by devoting every second of my life towards them. More times than not I feel like they don't get the kind of help and attention that they deserve. My kids are the most important things in my life and that is why it is so disheartening when I see my kids look at me with that look of disappointment when I tell them that I can't watch a show with them or that I don't have time to take them to the park. It is not like I have a social life and that I spend all of my extra time hanging out with friends or family. I don't have a social life, I don't go to parties, I don't have a group of friends, and I don't mistreat my children. My kids are my life and I wouldn't have it any other way. I don't try to pretend to be someone who I am not! I am a mother first, a teacher second, and friend in the end.

I know that as the kids get older and become more involved in school and social activities that things will continue to become more hectic and even more difficult. Jake, my four-year-old son already makes comments about how it is not fair to only have a mother. The kids' father is not part of their lives. He lives about two hours south of Hillsdale in Oklahoma. He hasn't taken an active role in their lives since the day that I decided to leave him. The kids talk to their father on the phone every once in a while, however, it is not the same as seeing him.

#### *Where To Go For Help*

Jake really misses not having a father figure in the house. He was only a baby when his father and I separated so he really never knew his dad. He is getting old enough now where he realizes that mom can't do things with him that other kids his age are doing with their father. I try to play football and catch baseball with him but he gets mad when I don't catch the ball or

when I throw it over his head. He blames me for being a “girl” and runs off when he has had enough. How do you tell him that the same thing would happen if dad were playing catch with him? I know that it is not the same as playing catch with dad and that he needs to establish a relationship with a male figure.

It really saddens me when he makes those comments at such a young age. I understand that life would be easier if there was another person in the house who could help read, cook, clean, play and pay the bills. It is not that I don't recognize the 500-pound pink elephant standing in the living room. I realize Jake's frustration, but don't know how to help him deal with his anger and emotions. It disturbs me when they blame mom for not being able to do things that other kids are doing with their fathers. It is hard because they think that it is my fault! I don't want to, nor will I, tell them that their father is the one who is mostly to blame for our way of life.

### *Off To Work and Struggling to Survive*

It is 4:00 in the morning and the alarm clock is going off. I would hit the snooze button but what good would that do? I know that within the next hour the kids will need to be dressed and ready to go to the babysitter. I can't be late for work or the boss might tell me to go back home and to sign up for unemployment. I feel like I just went to bed and that there can be no way that it is already time to get up. My body is telling me that I need more rest but my mind knows that I need my job.

I just can't comprehend where my evening goes. I put the kids to bed around 9:00 p.m. and cleaned the house for over an hour. It was around eleven when I finished doing the dishes and picking up the house. I know that I was in bed before midnight. I would go to bed before midnight if I could, but by the time I get done helping with homework, feeding and bathing the

kids it is already nine or ten at night. I keep telling myself that life will get better and I will have a job in the future that doesn't require me to be there by 5:30 in the morning.

I wake up every morning around 4:30 to send my kids off to daycare at 5:25 a.m. to make \$9.50 an hour. If I show up to work on time during the two-week pay period my boss will pay me an extra dollar an hour. The job doesn't come with outstanding benefits. I get a week of vacation, 10 sick days a year and health insurance—if you can afford it! I am not in a position where I can pay over \$700 dollars a month for family health insurance. I can't even afford to pay for single coverage. My kids have health insurance through Medicaid. I would say that I am a pretty healthy young lady. My immune system must be really strong. I don't ever get sick or have to miss work because of illness. I don't know what I would do if I ever got sick. I don't have insurance nor do I have someone who could watch the kids for me if I couldn't take care of them due to illness. I guess that I could ask my mother to watch the kids or to help with bills if I was in a position where I couldn't provide or care for my kids. I don't know if she would help, maybe, maybe not. My younger sister has burned my mom a couple of times and she really doesn't like to help either of us now that we are adults. I really hope that my kids can find a decent paying job when they get older so that they don't have to worry about daycare, food, health insurance, and support when they find a good person to marry and have a family of their own.

I often wonder what it will feel like to have a job that has benefits and will allow me to spend more time at home with my kids. My kids have suffered due to me working at the nursing home. I can't imagine being three, four, and six years old getting up before 5:00 in the morning and going to the babysitter an hour or two before the sun even starts to crest the horizon. It is very difficult leaving them at the babysitter so early in the morning knowing that they have to

stay awake for an hour or go to sleep for that short amount of time before they board the bus for school. How can this be good for such young kids? Not only has this been heavy on my heart, but not knowing if I will have a job in the future has been keeping me up at night.

I wouldn't say that the economy has anything to do with my hours being cut from 80 hours every two weeks to 72 hours every two weeks. Our boss tells us it is because we don't have as many residents as we had a year ago. The loss of income really puts an enormous burden on my shoulders. I know that it is only \$152 dollars a month, but that is the difference between having satellite television, a cell phone, or paying the utilities. Of course we will not go without paying the utilities. I wasn't raised that way and I will not start. Maybe there will be an influx in residents sometime soon so that my kids and I can have the small things in life. A person would be amazed at how those small things can really bring enjoyment and pleasure to a person. It has been a struggle over the past few months making enough money to buy school supplies, winter coats, and the extra items that my kids really enjoy. We are not as bad off as some people are but we sure do struggle to survive! I guess that you have to give up certain things at some point in life in order to receive at a later time.

#### *Relationship and Experience with School*

The school system has been really good to work with since my three have started attending. All three of my kids are attending school this year in Hillsdale. Mandy is in first grade, Jake is in kindergarten, and Breen is in preschool. I didn't receive a lot of extra help during the time that I was in school and really didn't enjoy my school experience. I don't want my kids to have the same frustrations that I had while I was enrolled in school. The teachers and administration didn't really care about me when I was a student. They always blamed me for my

problems and had no desire to understand where I was coming from. Maybe that is the reason that I dropped out of school my senior year and decided to move from Hillsdale.

As far as I can tell, the teachers and administration really care about my kids and have a strong desire to help them feel good about themselves. I know that I can contact the school, at any time, when I have a problem or concern. There have been times that I wish the teachers had talked with me about a problem earlier or in different circumstances. Sometimes it is not all right or okay to talk with me about a problem that one of my kids is having around other parents. I don't like it when they stop me outside the school or talk with me at the grocery store about an incident that happened at school. It feels weird and is very awkward when they approach me outside of school. I never know what to expect and sometimes go to extreme measures to avoid my kids' teachers outside of school. There have been too many times where one of their teachers have cornered me outside of school and I guess that I am now afraid to talk with them, good or bad, about my children.

I think that my kids' teachers know that I work at the local nursing home as a med aide. I have told them that I can be reached during the day on my cell phone or at the number that was provided during enrollment. I make every effort to be available for my kids, the school, and for their teachers. Maybe I should do a better job of communicating my expectations with the school. Maybe I should tell their teachers that I don't want them approaching me outside of school about issues. It isn't that I don't want to know what is going on with my kids or the school. I work very strange hours and don't have a lot of free time to spend with my kids. It just feels like they are taking away from the little time that I do have with my kids when they stop me to express a concern. I can't recall them ever stopping me to tell me positive stories or reports about my kids—that would feel good!

I want to be involved in my children's education and will work with my kids to make sure that they have the opportunity to do and have more than I had growing up. My sister is the only person in Hillsdale whom I have who can help me with my kids and their schooling. My sister, at first, was very supportive of me and I could ask her to do about anything for me. She is starting to get a little bit older, 22 years old, and is becoming less reliable. I can't blame her for not wanting to help me out all the time. She will pick the kids up from school or watch them if one is sick on certain occasions. Other than my sister, I really don't have anyone who can help me with my kids. I don't have time to form relationships with the other parents within my kids' classes. I show up for their activities, parent teacher conferences, and that is about all I can allot. My kids and I have attended a few high school basketball games—that was an awkward experience.

#### *Trying to Escape Her Past*

People in Hillsdale have a hard time forgetting and forgiving. I dropped out of school during my senior year and moved to a town about 50 miles west of Hillsdale. I got pregnant and had a rough spell for about six years during that time. Since then, I have soul-searched, grown up, and figured out what I want to do with my life. I don't drink, do drugs, and whore around. I can't say that was the case six years ago. I am finding out that Hillsdale is a tough place to meet and make friends. I know that people still look at me as the kid who used drugs and dropped out of school. I can see them pointing at me and talking about me at school events. I wish that they knew what I have gone through and what I am doing to rectify past mistakes. I am not the same kid as I was six to ten years ago. I am a completely different person, and maybe one day people in Hillsdale will see who I have evolved into. Perhaps that is why I try so hard to provide for my kids. That could be the reason why I work the hours that I do and why I will not let my kids go

down the same path that I did over the course of my life. It is possible that one day I will find a person or a group of friends who will see me for who I am. Until then I will continue to work with my kids, their teachers, and towards improving our lives here in Hillsdale, Kansas.

*Amy's Aspirations and Dreams For Her Children*

Getting up between 4:00 and 5:00 in the morning is not what I like to do nor is it something that I like putting my children through. It is very difficult and lingers on me every day. My kids know that it is something that has to be done. Sure, it is really hard on them and they don't like getting up so early in the morning. It is a part of our life! They just know that it is something that we have to do in order to survive. They know that I have to go to work and that mom would like to be the one who drops them off at school in the morning. They know that if mom does not go to work that we will not have enough money to buy food or pay the bills. We do it, we don't like it, but it is who we are!

I don't want my kids to go through the same challenges or struggles with their kids that we have been through. I want my kids to go to high school and to graduate with their class. I want them to be happy and to enjoy the time that they spend in school. I didn't enjoy going to high school and didn't have an opportunity to attend college. I made some decisions in life that I am paying for now. I am trying to make the best out of some bad situations. I have enrolled in classes and will work towards becoming a certified nurse. This [Figure 5-2] is a picture of an area hospital. I took that picture to show where I want to be working in two to three years. It is important for me graduate from college with an associate's degree in nursing. I want to show my kids that it is possible to go back to college. I want my kids to have a better life than what I had. I want them to know that it is okay to make mistakes. I want them to know that I will do whatever I can to make all of their dreams come true.





Figure 5-2. Outside sign of area hospital.

It is very important for me that my kids have a circle of friends whom they can rely on when they are my age. I don't have a single person whom I can say is a true friend. My sister and mother have been there for me at times, but it is not the same. I want my kids to find someone who can make them happy and who can become their best friend in life. It really hurts when my son, Jake, blames me for not being able to do things with him that other people do with their kids. I want my kids to be in a position where they have time to help their kids when they have homework or want mom or dad to play catch, football, or baseball.

My kids deserve a better life than what I had growing up and a better one than what I have provided. I work hard for everything that we have and there is nothing wrong with that. My kids understand the meaning of hard work and loyalty. I don't want my kids to worry about where their next meal will come from or where they will get the money to pay for the heating bill. I have a strong desire for my kids to go to college and to enjoy the experience. I know that they will need to make good grades in school and to excel in sports to go onto college. I don't have the finances to send three kids through college. I took a picture of the Junior college football stadium [see Figure 5-3] because I know that scholarships and financial aid will be

important as my kids start to think about life after high school. I know that the high school counselor can help them with the financial aid forms.



Figure 5-3. Area junior college football stadium.

I want my girls to become a nurse. My two girls enjoy helping people and I can see them following in my footsteps. However, Mandy, my first grader, really likes her teacher and is talking about becoming a teacher when she grows up. It doesn't matter to me whether they become a nurse, teacher, or a social worker. I just want my kids to have a job that pays well and is respectable. I will support them in whatever endeavor they pursue in life. They know that an education is really important and I will continue to stress the importance of staying in school and pursuing an education after high school.

#### *My Personal Reflection*

I walked into Amy's house to find a very clean, cozy, and attractive little cottage. Her house was different on the inside than what it looked like from the outside and at that point I knew exactly what it meant to be a hypocrite. I had already made up my mind about the type of person Amy was even before the first words were exchanged. I was acting just like some of those people who I disliked growing up. I don't know why we think that it is acceptable to judge

people based on their outside appearance or by where they live or by what they drive. Amy is a perfect example of what being a mother is all about. She works very hard to provide for her children and to spend every spare second with them. Even if she does not have time, Amy still tries to find moments to teach or work with her kids. Amy does not regret the decisions she made early in her life nor does she make excuses for what she has done. She accepts full responsibility for her mistakes and understands the importance of relating these lessons to her children. Amy wants her kids to live a full life, one absent of adversity. She does not want her kids to be like her. She wants them to go onto college, have fun, enjoy life, and find someone who can make them happy. Amy wants educators, researchers, and the general public to understand the difficult situations she has been through during her life and to respect her for who she is—not for the mistakes she made when she was young or for the appearance of her house and car. Amy would like for people to get to know her before they judge her and her kids. Just because a person drives a nice car and lives in a perfect house does not mean they are better than the person down the road or across the street.

## CHAPTER 6

### *Allison's Narrative*

*To have a drink or not? That is the question that runs through my mind every single second that I am awake. I love my children and do not want them to go through the same difficulties that I faced during my childhood and still struggle with as an adult. I started drinking when I was around 12 years old. It started out as a way for me to open up and feel good about myself around others. I had to do something to fit in around others. My parents were like bullfrogs in a country pond. They jumped from one lily pad to the other, from one pond to the next until they found one that was unoccupied or that they liked for the time being. As a result of the numerous moves I ended up attending over fifteen schools from kindergarten until the year I graduated in 1992. The sad thing is that I didn't even like the taste of alcohol when I was twelve years old.*

*Alcohol was my relaxant and I was starting to rely on it more and more as I went through life. By the time I was a freshman in high school I could drink a twelve pack of beer or a pint of whiskey before I started to feel a buzz. All of my fears and monsters that haunted me during the day disappeared when I cracked a beer or uncorked a bottle of whiskey. A counselor later told me that drinking was my way of escaping and that I didn't need alcohol to feel better about myself or who I am. I tried telling myself, on numerous occasions, that what I heard from that counselor was true and that I could function without the help of a bottle in my right hand. How I wish I could get these evil thoughts out of my mind. How I wish that my kids will grow up without the need to self-medicate. How I wish that my kids will understand why I do the things that I do in life! It has been 23 years since I was first introduced to alcohol and I still don't like*

*the way it tastes. I pray every day that God will help me do what is best for my kids and that they will turn out different than I have.*

Allison, 35 years of age, is a single, white mother of three children, Karson 10 (fifth grade), Sam 12 (seventh grade) and Evie 16 (tenth grade). Allison and her three kids have called Hillsdale, Kansas home for the past six years. Six years is the longest time Allison has ever lived in one city. Allison is of medium build with brown hair that extends down to the middle of her back. She is approximately 5 feet 6 inches in height and is very modest in dress. Allison's appearance underwent a dramatic change from the first time we sat down and talked until I reconnected with her six months after the initial interview. Allison and I talked briefly about what had happened between our initial interviews and the six-month layoff. She spoke about having a relapse with alcohol; however, did not go into great detail. I could tell she was not proud of where she had been during that time period nor did she have a strong desire to elaborate on the topic.

I first met Allison on July 2, 2009 at the local café in Hillsdale, Kansas. Allison was very excited and could not wait to participate in my research study. The first interview lasted about an hour and was well worth the four-hour roundtrip drive. I remember thinking about how brave and positive Allison was and how much respect I have for the battles she has fought and the challenges she has overcome. I later wrote in my journal, "I can't wait to transcribe the interview and to talk with her again. I really hope that she can continue to beat the odds and keep a positive outlook on life!"

Allison was very upbeat and excited about the events going on in her life during our first interview. Her kids were involved in summer baseball and softball; she was working as a waitress and had been sober for a couple of months. She looked and talked like a person who

knew exactly what she wanted for her kids. Her enthusiasm was contagious! I was excited to work with Allison as we worked together to tell her story.

Six months went by before I was able to reestablish communication with Allison. I had two phone numbers: one was a landline and the other was a cell phone number. Neither one was productive. The landline was always busy and the cell phone kept going to voicemail. I left what seemed like a thousand messages on the cell phone and never once received a return call. Frustration was starting to set in and I was a phone call away from removing Allison from the study. I decided to try the landline one more time. I remember telling myself that this phone call would be just like the others and that I was wasting my time. The phone rang and Allison answered!

After numerous phone calls, cancellations, and no shows Allison and I were finally able to sit down and finish the narrative picturing portion of the research study in early January 2010. Allison was not the same person who I met with on that sunny day in July. She looked really tired and had lost the enthusiasm that was present during our first interview. Allison revealed that the past six months had been very difficult.

Allison's narrative revolved around four domains: (a) her life on the move; (b) her effort to settle down and battle the past; and (c) her determination to remake her life; and (d) aspirations and dreams for her children. Allison does not want people to feel sorry for her misfortune. She wants people to understand what she and her kids have been through in life. Allison recognizes the mistakes she has made and understands the consequences and effects her decisions have had on her and her kids. Allison does not try to hide or cover up the blunders in her life. She takes full responsibility for everything that has happened to her and does not blame others. Allison's story is an example of how people can overcome hurdles, but also experience

setbacks. Allison will continue to fight, work hard, and never give up on the dreams she has for herself and her kids. I conclude Allison's narrative with her observations and final thoughts about being a single mother living in poverty and what researchers and educators could learn from her perspective.

### *Life on The Move*

It wasn't until I graduated from high school that I realized moving from one town to another was not normal. To say that my family moved around a lot during my life would be an understatement. We moved on average about once or twice every year. My parents treated moving like a game. My two brothers, my sister and I would come home from school to find a moving truck in the yard or driveway and my parents would corral us kids to tell us the rules. What I mean is they would give us a pep talk and challenge us to load the truck in a certain amount of time. We got really good at coming home, packing our belongings, and loading them in a truck in no time at all. I can remember thinking that moving is fun and that if it was a real game that nobody on earth would come close to packing their whole house and outbuildings in less time than our family.

We didn't know that mom and dad were running from the landlord, bill collectors, and local merchants who they owed money. We just knew that come tomorrow morning we would be leaving everything behind. We knew that when the sun rose and the clock struck 8:05 A.M. that we would be enrolled in a new school and that the life we knew before would start all over again. The thought of attending a new school or moving to a new town might scare certain people. I grew to love attending new schools and making new friends. I saw it as an opportunity to escape. After a while my new friends were no longer new and it didn't take them long to catch onto how my parents operated.

My mom and dad are good people and I love them to death. My mom is what those in the medical profession call bi-polar and my dad is an opportunist. My mom is a certified nurse's aide (CNA). I don't know if my mom ever worked at the same job for more than two or three months. She held down a job like we held down a house—not very long! My mom, bless her heart, is a very nice lady and then she isn't. I believe my mother's medical condition is the main reason why she had a difficult time staying employed. On the other side of my mother stands my dad. My dad was good with his hands and could do about anything that he put his mind to. Not only was my dad very good working with his hands but he also had a good mind.

Upon moving to a new town, my dad would find a job working as a carpenter, mechanic, or doing odd and end jobs. He didn't bring home a lot of money working for others. My dad was not someone who made it rich by being a capitalist. My father made what little money we did have by being an opportunist. My father was always looking for a way to get out of work. Our day came when I was fourteen. We were living in a small town in central Oklahoma when my dad hurt his back at work. He was working for a small manufacturing company in Oklahoma when my dad hurt his back. This was the opportunity my dad had been looking for from the time he started working. Dad was now what the state and government classify as being disabled.

Dad was disabled, drawing social security and received a hefty worker compensation settlement. For the first time in my parents' life they had money in their pockets and didn't have to worry about work! We lived high on the hog for a couple of years before the majority of the money was gone. That exuberant feeling didn't last for long and like all good things in life it came to a screeching halt.

As I said earlier, my dad was a very clever individual. I don't understand how he did it or how he knew when the bill collectors or the landlord were on their way to our house. I think dad



had a crystal ball and could see into the future. My dad used what was left of the settlement to purchase a house. For the first time in our life we finally owned something and I thought that we were on the verge of making a drastic move. For the first time in my life I thought that my parents were ready to settle down. Feelings of fear, joy, anxiousness, and panic ran through my head all at the same time. I was happy and yet sad all at the same time. For the past 14 years my family had moved over and over again. I can remember moving for the very first time when I was around five. How would I like living in a town for more than a year? Would people like me after they got to know my family for whom we really are? How would I react to problems knowing that I no longer have an ace up my sleeve?

Moving had always been my safety net. I knew that I could act crazy and silly and that people would think that I was cool. After a while my acting and faking would get old and I would grow tired. The one thing that I could always rely on was my dad. When I thought my life was about over my dad stepped in and took care of me. I remember coming home from school one day and saw the most beautiful thing that a 14-year-old girl could ever imagine sitting in her driveway—a moving truck! My dad had done it again. He saved me from the horrible feelings that had consumed my mind and body every since he had bought the house. We packed the u-haul and were on our way again. From this time forward, my parents would buy a house and sell it about 9 months later. My dad would find a house that needed a little work, fix it up a little bit, and sell it for a little more than what he had purchased it for.

Some of my fondest childhood memories occurred during the summer. We knew that our summer vacation would be spent camping at the lake. We didn't have a particular lake where we stayed every summer; however, we knew that dad would put the house on the market months before summer. This allowed for plenty of time for the house to be sold before we were out of

school. My parents seemed to transform into different people when we slipped away from civilization. The yelling and screaming that occurred on a daily basis disappeared. I can only recall one instance when my parents fought in front of us kids. My parents fought, it was mostly verbal, and it happened behind closed doors.

We lived in tents, bathed in primitive bathhouses and enjoyed every minute that we spent together. Just the fact that I was away from people who knew me and the every day tasks of going to school is what made our time together memorable. I cherished the time that our family spent together sitting around the campfires at night and the walks that we took around the park. We were new people who lived life without fear of being evicted or answering the door to see the local policeman asking for mom or dad. I couldn't wait for summer to arrive and dreaded the day that dad said we needed to pack up the tent. What he was really saying was, "It is time to find a new place to live." I knew that it was just a matter of time before I would have to introduce myself to others and that I would have to put on the fake smile for another year. I remember telling myself that maybe this year, house, town, and school would turn out better than the previous. This [Figure 6-1] is a picture of the American flag. I remember taking the picture of the flag because it represents America and the American dream. The time my family and I spent at the lake during the summer months made me feel like we were living in a "dream" world. We could put our past and worries behind and dream about what the future held. We were living the American dream!



Figure 6-1. American flag.

I started drinking alcohol when I was in seventh grade. My parents drank in front of us and smoked marijuana. My dad was an alcoholic and was not opposed to us drinking. Alcohol was my escape from the realities that surrounded and consumed my life. Alcohol allowed me to be a different person. Alcohol made it easier for me to act crazy, silly, and to talk freely around my peers. I started out drinking on the weekends and ended up drinking seven days a week. I didn't care for the taste of beer, but liked the results! I was drowning in the presence of those around me and nobody seemed to care. At 14 years of age I was already an alcoholic and had nobody to turn to with my problems!

*Escaping An Abusive Marriage, Abandoned by God, and Battling The Past*

He was 23 years old and I was 17. I met him at the local church in one of the many towns that we called home during my school years. He was the youth group pastor and I fell head over heels in love with his humor, values, looks, and the respect that he had for me as an individual. We started dating shortly after my family moved to a little town of about 2,000 people in central Kansas. It was my junior year in high school and I had met the man of my dreams and had found God.

Martin, my future husband, had a gift or power that made me feel safe and secure every second I was in his company. It was a different type of security, one that I hadn't felt for a long, long time. I longed for a person who I could be myself around without feeling like I needed a drink of alcohol to be someone who I didn't like. We shared a special bond that was unbreakable and I knew that we were meant to be together for the rest of our lives. Martin and I dated during my junior and senior year of high school and got married the day before I graduated. I was 18 years old and was living a childhood dream. The man of my dreams came into my life, romanced me, proposed to me, and for the first time in my life provided me with stability. I just knew that we would have two or three kids and live in our little house for the rest of our life.

Life was as I thought it would be during the first two weeks of our marriage. Martin was kind, gentle, and very compassionate during the beginning. It wasn't long after he put the ring on my finger and said that he would be with me 'til death do us part that he turned into a different man. The mental and physical abuse lasted for almost five years before I had all that I could handle. I am embarrassed to admit that it took five long years before I knew that what Martin was putting me through was not normal. I thought that it was okay for him to come home from work and slap me around.

Martin lived and breathed the Old Testament and truly believed that I should wait on him hand and foot. He had the attitude that I belonged to him and that I should do as he wished. He was a devout Christian and I was his subordinate wife. I thought that it had to be something that I was doing wrong. I tried my hardest to be a better wife. I worked extra hard to clean the house; have supper ready for him when he came home from work. It appeared the harder I tried to be a better wife the more abusive he became. I was lost and was on the verge of a severe mental breakdown. I became angry with God and asked him for help. I couldn't understand why my

God would let someone who proclaimed to be a holy person beat me from one side of my body to the other. I screamed out for help from God and got nowhere. I took this picture [Figure 6-2] because it reminded me of my God. The same God that I cursed and reached out for during the time that Martin physically and mentally abused my mind and body.



Figure 6-2. Front view of United Methodist Church in Hillsdale, Kansas.

After five years of physical abuse and a lifestyle where I tended to the orders and demands of the person who I loved—it was over. There was a gentleman who lived down the block from our house who I had started to confide with about what was happening within our household. The day that Martin threatened to kill our three-year-old daughter was the day that I knew that our distorted marriage was over. I remember being scared yet relieved all at the same time. I had no clue where my two girls and I would go or how we would get there. All I knew was that I had to protect my girls and for that to happen we would have to get as far away from Martin as possible. We had no money, friends, or vehicle to escape the misery that had saturated our lives for so long.

I remember Gene, the man down the street, talking about moving to Texas during one of our last conversations. While Martin was at work I packed all of our belongings into plastic sacks and duffle bags and called upon Gene for help. I remember being so scared and still angry with God as I packed my belongings and walked towards Gene's house. I was beaten, broke, and scared. All I ever wanted to do was be a good wife for Martin. I did everything that he asked, when he asked, and how he asked for them to be done. I didn't want to leave, but I had no choice. God hadn't answered my prayers and there were many! What will I do if Gene tells me that he can't help? Where will we go and how will we survive?

Gene was at home and he was a little surprised to see me standing on his front porch. I explained how Martin had threatened to kill my three-year old and how I needed his help. Gene agreed to help me leave Martin and put the girls and I up with some friends of his in a neighboring community. A week after leaving Martin, Gene, the girls, and I moved to Corpus Christi, Texas. It was Gene's idea to move to Texas. He thought that for us to be safe that we needed to put some distance between Martin and us.

Martin wasn't very happy when he came home and figured out that we had moved out. We had been in Texas for about four months when I answered the door and was confronted by the local police. They informed me that I had less than a week to get the girls back to Kansas. Martin was the father of my girls and he was not pleased that I moved out in the first place and for me to take his girls to Texas was a major blow to his character. He was the kind of person who had to be in charge and that was extremely difficult if the kids were 800 miles away.

The state of Kansas ordered me to move back to Kansas until custody for the kids could be settled. I really didn't want to be thrown in jail so Gene and I felt compelled to follow the orders of the court. We moved to Dodge City, Kansas, I filed for divorce and received full

custody of the kids. Gene and I were married a week after my divorce was finalized. For the first time in almost six years I finally felt free to do as I pleased. I didn't have to worry about pleasing the man that I loved or have to worry about not living up to Martin's expectations. Gene didn't treat me like a piece of property and didn't expect unrealistic measures to be performed.

We moved three to four times during our first year of marriage. We weren't running from bill collectors or from the landlords. Looking back I think that I was still running from the bad memories that I had built up inside of me from the years of abuse. I knew that Gene was a great guy and that he truly loved me for who I was. Gene and I had one boy together and enjoyed each other's company. Even though we enjoyed each other's company I still had this feeling of unrest in the back of my mind. I was still angry with Martin, God, and most men in general. I tried to put these feelings of anger behind me but for some reason I couldn't. Gene started to drink more and more alcohol and it wasn't long before he turned into the person who I was trying to forget. I had been sober for almost seven years. I drank in middle and high school to fit in. I met Martin and quit when I turned my life over to God. I am angry with God, Gene is drinking all the time, and I now find myself fighting the temptation to have a drink. I knew that if I gave into the temptation that I would turn into the alcoholic that I didn't like.

I left Gene in 2003 and moved to the town that my two girls and one son have called home ever since. We have lived in Hillsdale, Kansas for the last seven years. Seven years is the longest that I have ever lived in one place. I don't want my kids to go through the same things that I faced as a child. We moved from place to place from the time that I entered school until the day that I entered school as a junior. It was rough moving every three to four months. I started drinking as a way to cope with the feelings appeared when I was in junior high. My kids deserve more out of their life than what I had growing up as a youngster. I don't want my kids to come

home from school not knowing whether we will be moving or staying in the current town. My kids have developed relationships with their friends that I never had the opportunity to experience. My kids enjoy living in Hillsdale and I will not strip that simple joy from their lives like my parents did to my family. I took the picture of Main Street [Figure 6-3] because it signifies the simplicity I want my kids to experience. I will do everything in my power to make sure that my kids have the chance to live in one town, not 15 or 20, and graduate from Hillsdale. They will know what it is like to tell someone that they started and graduated from the same school district. I don't have enough fingers or toes to count the number of schools that I attended from the time that I started in kindergarten and graduated as a senior. This might not sound like a lot to most people but it is very important for me!



Figure 6-3. Picture of downtown Hillsdale, Kansas.

I ended up in Hillsdale via my sister. My sister has lived in Hillsdale for almost 10 years. She and I have always been really close and she knew that Gene and I were struggling with our marriage. She said that I could move in with her and her husband until I could find a place to live. I took my sister up on her offer and moved to Hillsdale. The only regret that I have is that I couldn't bring the three kids with me. The kids stayed with Gene for almost two and a half years before I was in a position where I felt like I could take care of them. My sister didn't have



enough room in her house for four of us and I knew that I couldn't continue to live with Gene or I would end up drinking again. I wanted to be with my kids and Gene but I also wanted to live a life free from alcohol.

Gene promised that he would take good care of the kids and that he would give them back to me as soon as I was able to provide for them. Gene is a good father and he really loves our kids. I can't sit here and say that he is not a good man or that he doesn't care about the kids. He understood my reason for needing to get away and has always supported my efforts. Two and a half years after leaving Gene I was in a position where I could take care of the kids. Housing and jobs are always difficult to secure in a small town and that is why it took so long for me to get my kids back from Gene. I found out that landlords find it very difficult renting to people with multiple kids. They are even more apprehensive to rent their house to a single mother with three kids. I don't say that I can blame them for being uneasy considering what I know from my own life experiences.

#### *Determined to Remake Her Life*

I was very fortunate to come into acquaintance with a landlord who understood my circumstances and was willing to take a risk by renting his five-bedroom house to me. He took the time to understand my story and gave me a good break on the house. I later found out that the same house had been rented for twice the amount that he charged my family. My kids and I have lived in the same house since moving to Hillsdale in 2003.

I have had numerous odd and end jobs since moving to Hillsdale. I didn't attend college after graduating from high school; therefore I have no specialized training to help me secure a job that pays more than minimum wage. I really can't say that I have enjoyed all of my jobs. I get up and go to work every day because that is what I want my kids to see. I don't want them to

think that it is acceptable to sit at home and depend on someone else to take care of you. I qualify for state assistance and have chosen to avoid going down that route. I could go to the social service office and sign up for food and cash assistance, but have a real problem asking someone else to help provide for my children when I can work. There is nothing that prevents me from working. I have a good mind and have the physical attributes to perform the jobs that are available in Hillsdale. I would love to have a job that pays more than minimum wage, has benefits, and understands when I need to take off to care for my kids.

During my first two years in Hillsdale I worked at the local nursing home. My job was an entry-level position and required me to do whatever tasks the registered and certified nurses did not want to perform. The work was back breaking and very labor intensive. The hours rotated from evenings to mornings on a two-week basis. You really never knew what days or hours you would be required to work. It was very difficult for me because I missed the majority of my oldest daughter's activities. It never failed that I would be scheduled to work on the night that she had a game or school activity planned. I tried to get off or work my schedule so that I could attend, but so did everyone else. My immediate supervisor was not very compassionate when it came to working with me whenever a situation arose that involved my children. I don't know what I would have done if my sister didn't live in town. On several different occasions the school would call me at work and I would tell them to call or contact my sister. I knew that the nursing home would fire me if I asked to take off to run down to the school. The shift supervisor told me to choose between my job and my children. I know deep down in my heart that my children should come first but I also know that without a steady income that we would be living on the street. There were many nights that I stayed up and cried myself to sleep because I felt like I let

my children down. What could I do? I asked myself that question on a number of different occasions.

My sister was always willing to help me out when I couldn't take off work. She works at the school as a teacher's aide and has been a savior. My sister is my liaison between the school and home. The administration and teachers go to her if there is a problem with my kids and she communicates the messages to me. It hurts that the nursing home made me choose between my job and my kids.

As stated earlier, I worked at the nursing home for about two years. I have worked at about every part-time and full-time business in Hillsdale. Every job that I have maintained has been an entry level, minimum wage position that required me to be away from my kids. I wish that my supervisors understood what it is like to have three school-aged children. Maybe they do, maybe they don't care! I talk with my kids about the importance of getting a good education and pursuing a college degree. I want my kids to be in a position where they are not afraid to ask their boss if they can take off early to attend their child's ballgame. I want them to be in a position where they are seen as a valuable component of the company. I want them to find a job where they can take a phone call from the school without worrying about being fired. I haven't had a job where I could do any of that without looking over my shoulder. I have missed out on so much of my children's lives because I work and have supervisors who don't respect the work that I perform. I feel that every job and supervisor whom I have worked for don't appreciate me as a worker. They have told me that anybody could perform my job and if I want to take the day off to be with my kids then they can replace me within ten minutes. I would love to be the one that the school calls when there is a problem or concern with my kids. I want to be the one that

the teachers approach when my kids do something extraordinary. I feel like I have lost a piece of my family because I opted to work instead of relying on the state to provide for my children.

*Allison's Aspirations and Dreams For Her Children*

My children are the love of my life. I have been through hell and back and have survived. My three kids mean the world to me and I will fistfight the devil if that's what it takes to make sure that my kids have the opportunity to graduate from high school. When I am not at work I spend every waking moment with my kids. I don't have a lot of people who I hang out with. I don't have what most ladies call a "girlfriend" who I hang out with or call on the phone. My kids are my best friends and I want to spend all of my free time doing things with them.

It is really important for me that my kids receive a quality education. The education that they receive while attending school in Hillsdale will determine their future. If they receive a quality education then they will have a better chance of receiving college scholarships. My job is to make sure that they attend school and make good grades. Even though I am not available to drop what I am doing to run down to the school does not mean that I don't play an active role in the education that my kids receive. I talk to my sister every day to see how my kids are doing.

Over the course of the past year I have established a system for communicating with the school. They know that I can't leave work to take care of minor situations that occur. We have worked out a system where they send home messages with my sister. If that doesn't take care of the situation they know that they can call my sister and she will come in to talk with the teacher or administration to come up with a solution. Most of the time the note or meeting with my sister took care of the problem. They know that if the note and/or meeting don't work that I will come in on my day off. There's no question that I have high expectations of my kids and they understand that not going to college is not an option.

I don't have any regrets for how my life turned out. I graduated from high school, got married, and had three kids before I even had a chance to explore life. Do I wish that my parents would have given me more guidance or had higher expectations for me? My parents' main goal or dream for us was that we graduate from high school, move out as soon as possible, and find someone to take care of us so that they were no longer responsible. Going to college was not an option. I never really thought that going to college was something that I could obtain. Life for me once I graduated from high school consisted of being a mom. It wasn't about going to college or getting a job. My job was to be the best wife in the world and a mother.

Going to college is my one and only dream that I have for my children. It might sound as though I am obsessed with my kids going to college. I am not obsessed—my kids see how hard I have to work and know that we struggle to pay our bills on a job that pays minimum wage. I don't want my kids to settle for mediocrity. It is important for me that my kids dream big and strive to be better off than the life that we currently live. I want them to have things when they grow up. We don't have a lot of money or material possessions. We can't even afford to go out on a date to the movies or out to eat. They know that we can't afford to do the things that their friends get to do with their families. They come home and talk about how a kid in their class is going on a ski trip over spring break or how a kid in their class went to Tulsa, Oklahoma over the weekend and spent the entire time shopping at the mall. Those things are not an option that we have in our family. For one thing, our old car barely makes it up and down the streets here in Hillsdale. I couldn't imagine driving it on a 150 mile round trip excursion.

I want my kids to be ready for raising kids. I was 20 years old when my first daughter was born. I was young, dumb, and not ready for kids. I want my kids to be able to explore, enjoy, and be in a financial position where they can provide for a their family. I want my kids to break

the cycle that has developed within my family—graduate, get married, have kids, and work for peanuts. I want to break that cycle with my kids; I want them to be something—to have big dreams!

My oldest daughter asks me all the time, “Mom why do you have to work so hard?” I tell her that someone has to work so that we can pay the bills and she will say, “I’m going to be like you when I grow up. I’m going to work hard and even if I am rich I am still going to work because people should work and prove to themselves and everyone else that they’re not lazy!” It’s important to my kids that they receive a good education. My kids know what awaits them if they don’t pay attention in school and go onto receive a college or tech degree. My son tells me every day that he wished that I didn’t have to work. He tells me how he plans to go to college, get a good job, and how I will live with him and never have to work another day in my life.

One thing that I do for my kids is talk with them about their dreams and aspirations on a daily basis. I learned a technique from a counselor when I was a kid, which I use with all three of my kids. Every day I write their goals on a piece of paper and put them in a place where they will see them before they head to school. My 16-year old daughter, Evie, wants to be a plastic surgeon. I wrote plastic surgeon on a piece of paper and pinned it on the ceiling above her bed. Every night before she goes to bed and every morning when she wakes up it is the first and last thing that she sees before she heads out the door for school. Karson, my 10-year old son and Sam my 12-year old daughter, change their mind every day on what they want to be when they grow up. One day Karson wants to be a professional bull rider and the next a teacher. Sam goes back and forth between being a hairstylist and a counselor. That is all right, we just update their card every time they decide to pursue a new career. Whatever they decide to do in life is fine with me. I want them to believe in whatever their dreams are and for them to know that I believe in them.

My dreams for my kids are big and I will do whatever it takes to make sure that they have every opportunity to chase and conquer whatever they set out to be in life.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Trish's Narrative*

*It is hard being a single mother with four kids; however, that is no excuse to give up on life. Being a single mother is not something that I wanted for my life when I met Edward. I was not anticipating the drugs, cheating, and excuses that came from being with him for twelve years. We both made choices during the twelve years that we were together that could have had a different impact upon our relationship. I could have been more stringent or assertive with Edward. Edward could have been a whole lot more compassionate and understanding. I was the one who chose to leave everything that we had built behind. I thought that I could move in with my mom and dad and that he would come running to me within a day or two. As the days went by my heart began to break into a million little pieces and I knew that Edward had moved on without our four kids and the person who he had shared his bed with for the past twelve years. It was at that point in time that I had a choice to make. I knew that I could raise the white flag and give up on life or that I could put on the boxing gloves and go to fight for my four kids. I chose the latter and haven't looked back!*

Trish, 40 years of age, is a white, single mother of four children, David 16 (tenth grade), Dan 11 (sixth grade), Mary 10 (fifth grade), and Jaden who is 2-years old. Jaden was born after Trish and Edward, father of all four kids, separated. Trish and Edward have been separated for a little over five years. Trish and her kids have lived in Hillsdale their entire life. Trish was born in Hillsdale in 1969 and attended elementary school until second grade when her family moved to a small town twenty miles west of Hillsdale. Trish is roughly 5 feet 5 inches in height and is a country girl from beginning to end. She dresses in blue jeans, t-shirt, and boots. Her brown hair is straight and extends beyond her shoulders. Trish is very proud of her country upbringing and



is a country kid at heart. Trish is about as humble as they come. I first met Trish on October 4, 2009 at the local high school in Hillsdale, Kansas. We met on four different occasions during the research process. Trish is very upbeat and lively and her attitude about life and her energy was contagious. I left every meeting feeling like I could accomplish and achieve my wildest dreams. Her outlook on life is amazing and very positive. As the story began to evolve and grow in form our relationship changed from one of researcher/participant to partner/storytellers.

Trish's narrative revolved around seven domains: (a) her strong family upbringing; (b) her ability to interact and socialize with individuals; and (c) her inclination to support and encourage her four children; (d) decisions she made after graduating from high school; (e) her relationship with Edward; (f) her perceptions and memories of school; and (g) her dreams and aspirations for her children. Trish was raised in a family with very little money. Her mom and dad worked hard for everything that they had. Trish is very thankful for the life lessons she learned during her childhood and understands life is full of choices. She has chosen to live by the set of values and principles taught to her and her siblings while growing up on the family farm. Her parents taught her about honesty, hard work, and doing unto people as you would want them to do unto you. Trish and her kids might not live a life of luxury; however, they do live a life centered on a solid set of values.

### *Strong Family Upbringing*

We were poor and didn't even know it! Those eight words have stuck with me throughout my entire life. My mom and dad didn't have a lot of money or fancy furniture. What we did have though was good memories! I don't need a bank account that is overflowing with money or a BMW to make me feel good about myself. It would be awesome to be able to walk

into the grocery store and buy whatever I put into the shopping cart. I cut coupons out of the Sunday paper and am very conscientious when it comes to spending money.

I grew up on a small farm about twenty miles west of Hillsdale, Kansas. My mom and dad worked their fingers to the bones for a gentleman who owned a dairy farm. Working on a dairy farm is not easy work. It was a job and my parents were good workers and very thankful for the work. Working on a dairy farm requires getting up before the sun comes up and getting home after the sun goes down. My parents worked seven days a week and averaged around 10 to 12 hours of work per day. My mom and dad were very supportive and active when it came to my brother, sister, and myself even though they worked long hours every day of the week. They never let their work get in the way of helping us with schooling or attending a school or community activity. My mom and dad made it a priority to spend time with us kids. They were always present at my ballgames, school functions, and church events. Monetarily we were poor! We didn't have a bucket to piss in or a dog to beat. What we did have was a strong family who valued the time that we had together.

We were involved in everything that you could imagine. Some of my fondest memories took place during the summer months. My brother, sister, and me were very active in 4-H and spent numerous hours attending county fairs during the summer. It didn't matter what aspect of 4-H—we were involved! There were around 20-30 kids who participated in our chapter. We went everywhere together and took care of each other. If my parents couldn't take us to a meeting or contest another parent from our chapter would volunteer to step in and help out. We were like a small family, a support group for one another. I sure miss those days! We had a blast being around each other.

Back in those days money really didn't matter, nor did it have the label attached to it like it does in today's society. Some of my best childhood friends were some of the wealthiest in the county. They were very rich and accepted me for who I was and not from where I came. They treated me like one of them and not as an outsider. Things were a lot simpler back when I was young. I still talk to some of my childhood friends. Some of them have kids in the same grade as my kids. We don't have the same type of relationships as we did back when we were young. Somehow or somewhere along the way we went off in different directions.

I wouldn't change one aspect of my childhood. I had two parents who loved me to death. I was blessed with a younger brother and sister who looked up to me for advice and acceptance. We were poor yet we were rich! My parents expected their three kids to treat people with respect, to be honest with others and themselves, and to be proud of who they are as individuals. My mom and dad expected us kids to graduate from high school and to do more with their lives than what they did with theirs. They were proud of what they had accomplished, but they, like most parents, wanted more for their children than what they had. My parents were everything that a kid could ask for—they were kind, loving, supportive, disciplined, and encouraging. What more could a person desire or expect! We were rich in every sense of the word and didn't know it—or maybe we did!

#### *Ability to Interact and Socialize with Individuals*

Growing up I had these fabulous relationships with kids and adults. No matter what I needed to do or where I needed to go I could always rely on someone from within my circle of friends to help. I knew that a phone call or a verbal request for help would produce three or four families who would lend a helping hand. No matter how big or how small we helped each other

out. My mom and dad were surrogate parents for my 4-H friends. We were a really tight knit group that treated each other like family.

As I got older the relationships I formed with my 4-H friends and family slowly disappeared. A few of my friendships carried over through high school and continue today. I have always considered myself to be a people person and have never viewed making friends as a chore. I am a people person and enjoy being around people who I know and those who I have just met! I feel really comfortable talking and listening to people.

Since graduating from high school in 1988 I have worked off and on at every convenient store and restaurant in Hillsdale. My personality is a great fit for the type of work that I have performed. I like being around people and people like being around me! I am a person who others feel really comfortable divulging their problems. People tell me all the time, "You have a way of making me feel like I have known you all of my life."

I have met some wonderful people during my time working at the local convenient stores and restaurants. As the years have passed some of these people have become my dearest and closest friends. I have an extensive network of friends who I rely upon when times get tough at home or when I don't have a job. I have a handful of friends who I will trust with my life. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't see someone or somebody from my past or present that I couldn't rely upon for help. I can pick up the telephone right now and call fifteen or twenty people who would stop what they are doing to help me out. I don't worry about getting my kids to school or securing transportation for them when their little league football game is not in Hillsdale and my car is not working. People in Hillsdale are always telling me that Dan, my eleven year old, can hitch a ride with them or that Mary can go home with them after school. I feel really blessed to have good friends that I can trust to treat my kids like they are their own. I

treat people like I would want to be treated. Maybe that is why people are willing to treat me as an equal.

### *Trish's Determination to Support and Encourage Her Four Children*

I will do anything that needs to be done to make sure that my kids are in a position to accomplish their wildest dreams! My mom and dad were very supportive of their three kids and worked hard to provide for us. They made personal sacrifices to ensure that we had food on the table and clothes on our backs. I can't recall a time when my parents put themselves ahead of us kids. If there was extra money left at the end of the week or month they didn't use it to purchase items for themselves. My brother, sister, and me were the most important things in my parents' lives. I love my mom and dad for the personal sacrifices that they made for their kids.

My mom and dad are still a big part in my life. My four kids and I have lived with my parents for the past six years. At forty years old, I never thought that I would still be living with my parents. I had big dreams and thought that I knew what I wanted to do with my life after graduating from high school. I would go to college, graduate, get a good job, and find the man who I would spend the rest of my life with. I had dreams of taking care of my mom and dad when they were no longer in a position where they could work. I had big dreams of raising my kids in a two-parent family, one similar to my childhood. My dream started out as I had fantasized before the wheels fell off.

### *Life After High School*

I graduated from high school in 1988 and attended the local junior college on a band scholarship. My parents had high expectations when it came to obtaining an education. All of their kids would graduate from high school. Dropping out of high school was not an option nor was it a choice that we had. We were not required to attend school after graduation. After we

received our high school diploma we were in charge of making decisions that would impact our adult lives. My parents encouraged us to attend college, but again, it was our choice at that point.

I decided to accept the scholarship and attended the local junior college for two years. I really enjoyed the time that I spent attending college. It was more laid back than high school, which for me was not good. I had always been in a situation where someone or somebody kept me focused and on track. College was fun, fast, and different than what I had been accustomed to living. I didn't know how to handle this newfound freedom and it was not long before I began missing class. Before I knew what was happening everything came to a screeching halt. Life in the city was quite a bit different from living on the farm. I was now living on my own, working full-time, going to class, and figuring out how to deal with no structure. After two years and fifty-four credits later I became another statistic and dropped out of college.

#### *Relationship with Edward*

After dropping out I moved back to be closer to my mom and dad. I settled down in Hillsdale where I eventually met Edward, the father of my kids. I got a job working at the local wicker factory working forty hours a week. Life was good, I had money in my pocket, and was enjoying the time spent with Edward. Things were going so well that Edward and I decided to move in with each other. I was twenty-three years old, Edward was twenty-four and we were living the life. One year after moving in together we found out that I was pregnant. Edward was excited and couldn't wait for the baby to arrive. I was twenty-four years old when David was born. I continued to work up until the day that David was born. After David was born Edward and I decided that it would be best if I became a stay at home mother. Within the next six years Dan and Mary were born. Edward, the three kids, and I were happy as larks.

Edward worked for a local oil company as an oilfield pumper and was making excellent money. Edward made enough money that even after our Mary, our third child, was born I could still stay at home with the children. Edward went to work in the morning and was home in the evening. He was a good father. He played with the kids every night upon returning from work. Edward was everything that I ever wanted a husband and father to be. He treated his kids and me like my father treated his kids and my mom. As the years progressed we had our usual disagreements and fights. We didn't experience anything that most married couples haven't or will not go through. Twelve years into our relationship things became complicated. I was okay with Edward staying an hour or two after work while he drank beer with his fellow roughnecks. I was pretty lenient then with him, I knew that drinking beer with the guys was his way of relaxing and was his stress reliever.

Our relationship took a turn for the worse when Edward refused to come home after work to help me one October evening. At the time David was 11, Dan 6, and Mary were 4-years-old. Edward knew that I had a dentist's appointment scheduled to have eight of my teeth pulled. I had been having problems with my teeth for quite some time and the dentist recommended that I have eight teeth pulled. Edward couldn't, or wouldn't, take off work so I went to the dentist by myself. The dentist pulled my teeth and sent me home with pain medication. I just had eight teeth pulled, was responsible for taking care of three kids, and wasn't feeling very well. I called Edward on his cell phone and asked if he could come home and help take care of the kids while I slept. Edward refused to come home from work to help me out while I recovered. I was saddened by his refusal to help me out during a time when I needed him the most. It was at that time that I had no other choice than to call my mom and dad for help. They said to pack some clothes for the kids and myself and to come stay with them for a few days. I left a note for Edward

informing him of the situation and told him that I had every intention of returning as soon as I could take care of the kids on my own. Three days after having my teeth pulled Edward called me while I was at my parents and told me that I was not welcomed back in the house.

A two or three day stay with my parents has now turned into a five-year stint. A number of questions suddenly flooded my head. How do you tell your three children that dad doesn't want us to move back home? What will I do with my life? How will I support my kids? Why doesn't Edward want us to move back home? Where will we live? I haven't worked in over twelve years. I was mad, confused and torn in every direction. I thought that we had a good relationship. We didn't fight all the time. I did what he asked and when he asked. I was a good mother and wife and couldn't come to grips with why he didn't want us to move back home. It wasn't long before my two oldest kids started to become suspicious. They started to ask questions about dad and when could they go home and sleep in their own beds. I was raised to be honest with people no matter what situation you encounter. I sat the kids down and told them that daddy doesn't want us to live with him. I told them that we were going to be just fine and that we would be living with grandma and grandpa for a while.

It has been difficult adjusting over the course of the past six years. Edward and I had everything going for us. We had a nice three-bedroom house, two decent vehicles, common friends, and money to do the extras. The kids are just now starting to understand what I mean when I tell them, "We don't have the money to go see a movie" or that "I can't afford to take you shopping." There was time that Edward and I could take the kids to the movies or to mud runs. We enjoyed knowing that on Saturdays we could load the kids in the car and head out to the local mud run. It was something that we could do as a family. We would sit in our lawn chairs and watch the big monster trucks drag race against each other in a pit was filled with mud. We



were young, in love, and didn't mind sitting in the sun all day watching the trucks run up and down the track while we got sunburned. It was our time together and we cherished every moment.

We didn't have to worry about where the money would come from or how we would repay the loan. We had extra money and treated the kids and ourselves to a treat every once in a while. The kids were a little upset and disappointed shortly after moving in with my mom and dad. They knew that things would be different from what we had become accustomed to doing in the past. I worried about how my mom and dad would adjust to having little ones in the house. We knew that it would be different for them and for the four of us.

Edward and I still see each other every now and then. I still love him and will always have a place in my heart for him. He is not the same man who I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. Drugs and alcohol has consumed his life to a point where he doesn't want to be around his kids. I try my best to keep Edward informed about school and social activities that our kids are participating in on any given night. It hurts to see the looks on my kids' face when Edward promises to be at their games or school event and he never arrives. It is just tough! It is really hard for me to explain why their father doesn't want to be a part of their life.

There are days that I just want to run. Some days I just want to get in my car and drive as fast and as far away and hope that everything just disappears or takes care of itself. Deep down inside of me I understand that running away from the problem will not fix what has happened. I am one of those mothers who will encourage and support her kids no matter what. I am past the point of making excuses for Edward when the kids ask why he didn't keep his promise. There was a time that I would protect and make excuses for his false promises—not anymore!

Somewhere along the way Edward forgot what it means to be a real father. Maybe one of these days he will realize that his kids are more important than drugs or alcohol. Sometimes all you have is your family. My mom and dad always made my brother, sister, and me feel loved. At bedtime my mom and dad would give us kids a hug and a kiss. I try to instill in my kids that family is important!

### *Perceptions and Memories of School*

I feel very fortunate that my kids have the opportunity to attend Hillsdale Public Schools. The teachers and administration are very supportive and have been wonderful. They understand the struggles and challenges that I have been through in life. I don't feel like the school treats my kids as a number or dollar sign. My kids, even though we don't have money, are treated just like everyone else. The teachers have worked with me when I couldn't make it to meetings or scheduled conferences. I feel very comfortable giving the teachers a call or stopping by unannounced when my kids have had problems.

My kids have had some difficult periods during the time that they have attended Hillsdale. I am not one of those parents who put everything off and wait for the school to call me. I know, by experience, that I can give the principal a call and he will listen to what I have to say. I took a picture of the school [Figure 7-1] because the school has been good to work with. The principal has been very helpful in helping me identify resources for my kids. For example, my son was having a difficult time focusing and staying on task. The teachers and I were lost and couldn't figure out what to do to help him. I called the principal and we talked for over an hour about my son's situation. Our phone call turned into a meeting and before long the principal guided us in the right direction. From that day forward I have always felt very comfortable

talking with the principal. He has always been there for my kids and has always treated me like a human being.



Figure 7-1. Picture of local PK-6 school building.

In two years David will graduate and will, hopefully, go onto some type of post secondary training. He has brought home some literature on a diesel mechanic school in northern Kansas. I would assume that the high school counselor would talk with him about scholarships and financial aid. My band instructor was instrumental in me getting my scholarship to attend college. I guess that I need to set up a meeting with the high school counselor to see if there is something that I need to do for David. I would hate for him to miss out on scholarships or financial aid deadlines. I really don't know if the school has any type of meeting for parents. I would hate to assume that they do and find out later that my son missed out on a perfect opportunity. I really couldn't tell you what type of services the high school or elementary counselor offer or provide for my children. I know that we have two counselors and I could make

assumptions about how they could help my children. It would benefit me if they had some type of meeting at the first of the year explaining how they can assist families.

*Trish's Aspiration and Dreams For Her Children*

I want my kids to be better off than what we are now! I have all kinds of dreams and high aspirations when I think of my kids. My kids are the reason why I wake up in the morning and why I go to sleep at night. I can't wait to go to sleep so that I can wake up and see my kids in the morning. I would give up everything that I have in order for my kids to have more than what I have. I hope that my kids go to college, find a good job, have a happy family, and never have to go through the split up and the heartache that I have gone through. Nobody deserves to be treated like I have been treated...especially if you have kids.

I really hope that my kids find a good person to marry. We can sit here and talk about how important it is for them to go to college and get a good job. We can talk about the importance of making great money. I want all of that for my kids, but most of all I want them to be happy with the person who they call their husband or wife. My kids have seen more and have had more disappointments than most people will have in three lives. My kids deserve to be happy! I don't want my kids to explain to their kids why mom or dad didn't make it to their football game. I don't want my kids to call a family meeting to tell their three little ones that daddy is not coming home or that we can't go home and sleep in our own bed. Money can buy you a lot of material items, but it can't buy you the genuine feeling that comes with being happy. I would be happy if I owned a new house and a brand new car; however, I would be more content having a loving husband, my four kids, and living in a rental house. Money can buy you a lot of things, but it can't buy true love and happiness. I want my kids to experience true love and a life of eternal happiness.

My kids know that it is hard on me being a single mother. They know that I would love to have a house of our own. I would love to have a house like the one in this picture [Figure 7-2]. My mom and dad have been wonderful and I really appreciate everything that they have done for my family. It would be nice to have my own house, a place to call my own. I miss having my own bedroom and being able to come home after work to my recliner and my kitchen. I wouldn't be able to provide for my kids if it wasn't for the support of my mom and dad. Edward pays \$500 a month in child support for the four kids. I don't work and haven't worked since Jaden was born two years ago. Jaden is another story!



Figure 7-2. Picture of a house in Hillsdale, Kansas.

I qualify for state assistance but refuse to sign up for cash assistance. My kids are on the state's insurance program. I don't have anything against people who rely on the state for financial support. There are a number of people who are dependent on the state for survival and then there are people who take advantage of the system. I don't want to be looked upon as somebody who takes advantage of the system. I don't want my kids to think that it is okay to stay

at home when you can work. My kids come first and that is why I don't work. What Edward pays me in child support is enough to pay my car payment, my insurance, and allows me to give my mom and dad a little money to put towards food and bills. I don't need the money that the state has to offer. I will provide for my kids and will take care of them with the support systems that I have in place!

## CHAPTER 8

### *Conclusions and Implications*

This chapter includes the conclusions and implications from this narrative inquiry about the dreams, aspirations, and social networks that four low-SES single women have to support their children as they attend school in grades K-6. As noted in chapter 4, these women identified themselves as single White mothers who were very proud of the lives they are living and providing for their children. They are quick to tell you they are not living a life of luxury and in fact are barely making enough money to keep the lights on and food on the table. With that being said, these mothers are very independent and take great pride in their children, their jobs, and the fact they have strong values and morals. They all want their children to have better lives than they are currently living. Additionally, each woman continues to fight the mainstream stereotypes that people in poverty are unwilling to work or to make an effort to be good parents.

### *Conclusions*

In this chapter the findings of the research are examined through the theoretical framework of social capital and prior research reflected in the review of literature. In the past few years there has been increased interest in social capital in Pk-12 education and scholars have suggested that the presence of social capital can lead to increased success for school-aged children (Coleman, 1987; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). This research discuss the findings in relation to a) the social capital these women have access to in their homes, families, and communities; (b) involvement in their child's education that can generate social capital as their children advance through the educational system; (c) how social capital affects their dreams and aspirations for their children.

In this narrative inquiry four women have openly discussed the challenges, struggles, and joys of raising their children in a society that believes the findings put forth by self-professed experts on poverty like Ruby Payne (2003; Payne et al., 2001). The stories, recreated by the researcher and these four women, tell a different account. The stories put forth by the four women in this study show they have a very limited amount of social capital in the sense that Coleman is talking about, nonetheless; they have found ways to use their limited resources to manage everyday tasks and obstacles. These stories provide rich descriptions on the relationships that single mothers have with their children, school, and the community. In the next sections the findings of the research are examined through the theoretical framework of social capital (Coleman, 1987, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). The findings look at the theory of social capital through a new set of lenses.

#### *Social Capital in the Home, Family, and Community*

A premise of this study is that social capital in single parent families exists, however; it is not as prevalent as that found in two-parent families. In spite of this, these four women are managing to raise their children on their own, are finding time to care for, love, and provide for them despite the absence of a father figure present in the home. From Trish to Allison, all four were giddy and saddened when the subject of reading, playing, and/or spending quality time with their kids was broached. The concept of time brought tears and smiles to the faces of all four as the participants mentioned how valuable and important it is to spend time with their kids, yet in reality this is not always possible.

Coleman (1988) gives reasons to believe only certain types of families possess social capital. He asserted social capital is strongest in families where both parents are present and play an active role in the development of their children. Coleman's influence can be seen in research



that has concluded children benefit from the stability of the union found in two parent families (Otto & Atkinson, 1997). What Coleman (1987, 1988) says about social capital and two-parent families is true to a certain extent. Two-parent families do have more opportunities to connect with a greater abundance of people. They are in a better position to be available to help out at school and community events.

These four women do not have the abundance of social capital found in two-parent families largely because they labor at jobs that require them to work odd hours; punish and reprimand them for taking off work. Yet, each one of the women has vowed to put their children ahead of their personal interests. They are managing to find ways to raise their children on their own. Coleman (1987) views parents spending time with their children as being more important than having a successful job. Spending time with their children is an area where all four women are creating social capital. They feel it is important to devote time working and playing with their children instead of socializing with the neighbors or pursuing friendships. They could not work and rely solely on public assistance; however, which might allow for them to have more time to attend school events or make friends. This is not an option for any of them as long as they can physically get up every day and provide for their families. They do not expect nor would they accept a handout from the state when they know down in their hearts they can work. They have reluctantly accepted some forms of public assistance, however, a deep sense of pride and moral character gets in the way and keeps them from becoming stereotypical welfare recipients. Throughout the study, all four women stressed the importance of developing strong relationships with their children. Although all four have worked to build social capital within their own families, very few had a strong sense of family social capital during their childhoods.

### *Social Capital from Parents Growing Up*

With the exception of Trish, all of the women grew up in dysfunctional families, and encountered difficulties during their childhood that significantly affected their adult lives. Trish has fond memories of being raised in a two-parent close-knit family. According to Trish, they did not have a large amount of money; in fact they were poor. Even though Trish grew up without a lot of money, she had sources of social capital from the networks her family was engaged in, such as 4-H.

Carley, in contrast, grew up in a middle class two-parent family, which on the surface looked like a typical family. Her mom and dad had steady jobs and both worked forty hours a week. They lived on the wealthy side of the community and were well respected by their peers. Carley spoke about how her mother was very active within the community as a member of the local country club, involved in civic activities, and could always be seen at school functions. On the surface Carley's family seemed to have an abundance of social capital, but in reality they did not. They had many friends, were active in the community, attended school events, and yet her mother was hiding a huge secret, that of domestic abuse.

Amy and Allison's childhoods have several common themes that are very transparent. Both lived in two-parent families, yet their parents frequently relocated to different communities never calling any one place home for an extended amount of time, and neither one was enrolled in a school long enough to develop lifelong relationships with classmates. Both Amy and Allison have haunting memories of starting a new school and then being taken out the next day. Allison turned to alcohol as a way to cope with the stress involved with constantly moving and making new friends. Amy dealt with the pain by avoiding her parents at all costs and turned to questionable people to fill the void because she did not have a strong relationship with her mom,

dad, and eventually stepdad(s). Chaos and disarray were common occurrences during the course of Amy, Allison, and Carley's childhoods. Although the potential for social capital existed in all four women's childhoods, it was not until they married or entered long-term relationships they gained access to both economic and social capital.

### *Social Capital Gained (and Lost) Through Marriage and Relationships*

All women either married or entered into long-term relationships with men who initially provided them with access to social capital. All were living fairly comfortable lives raising their children until their worlds fell apart and they quickly lost much of the social capital they had gained. Carley and Mike, even though they were not married, for 7 years lived the lifestyle of typical middle class family. They lived in a house on the lake, and had the money and time to pursue costly recreational activities like boating with their children. Carley also benefited from the close relationships Mike formed at work. When Mike asked Carley to leave, she lost not only their relationship, but also the social capital that went with it. In many ways, Carley's relationship with Mike was similar to the relationship her father had with her mother. Mike was verbally abusive, used drugs, and in the end Carley was in a situation where the father of her children removed himself from the relationship. Carley, like the other women, went from relative wealth and comfort to welfare in a matter of minutes.

Amy ended up marrying her high school sweetheart believing she was going to spend the rest of her life with him. Amy also benefited from the relationships her husband had formed, and they had a lot of friends before they had kids. They spent a lot of time drinking and using drugs on most weekends, which was a high point for Amy as her socializing with friends would diminish as the years progressed. Jeff and Amy moved several times after their kids were born and their relationship fell apart. Jeff continued to party, socialize, and spend more time away

from Amy and with other individuals. It got to a point where Jeff's friends and family were not interested in having anything to do with her and she found herself alone.

Trish and Edward complemented each other. Trish had a strong set of family values and Edward loved his kids. They both enjoyed going out on dates, having family picnics at the mud-runs, and were very social. Edward had great relationships with his oil field work family and Trish met many people while working at convenient stores. They spent time together as a family, socialized with each other's friends, and took time to spend time together. After 12 years, Edward turned his back on her and their children. At the age of forty, Trish was forced to move in with her parents and as a result limiting her opportunities to socialize with friends and family.

Allison's relationships with two husbands did not fare much better. Allison's first husband was controlling, physically abusive, and dangerous. Her second husband drank and abused drugs; consequently, Allison felt impelled to end the marriage in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of alcoholism that haunted her in the past. She was forced to relocate to Hillsdale, find jobs, secure a house, and hope her immediate family members would serve as support systems. Upon relocating to Hillsdale, Allison was fortunate to find a landlord who was willing to take a risk and give her a break on the rent. As a result, she was in a position to start rebuilding her life. Even though immediate relationships with a husband or live-in have diminished, all four women have managed to build relationships within Hillsdale which has given them a certain amount of social capital.

*More Social Capital is Present in the Immediate Family than in the Community or at Work*

All four women have some social capital in their immediate families, and are able to depend on parents and/or siblings if they need help. For example, Trish depends upon her mom and dad for support, both social and monetary. Trish has not worked in almost two years and

depends on her parents for a place to live. Trish cannot afford to live on her own and wants to stay at home until her two year old is old enough to attend school. She could work; however, Trish would not have as much time to spend with her kids. Spending time with her children is more important at this point in her life than making extra money. Trish understands her parents are a big support for her and that she would be in a, “Heck of a mess” if it were not for them.

These women have less social capital at work or in the larger community, having few, if any, friends. Trish has an extensive network of friends; whereas Amy, Allison, and Carley are in situations where they have to devote more of their time toward work; therefore limiting the amount of time available to invest in relationships outside of their immediate families. All of the women talked about how they would like to have friends outside of their immediate families; however, they also spoke about the difficulties of spending time with friends while their children need their attention.

Another factor that has limited their ability to form new friendships is the type of work they perform. For Carley, Amy, and Allison, work was the place they had the least amount of social capital, being in entry level, minimum wage jobs with few benefits. Limited education and skills mean fewer choices when it comes to finding work, especially in a small town. In addition, Amy, Allison, and Carley have jobs that require them to work odd hours with very little flexibility and bosses who expect them to put their jobs ahead of friends and family. They could take off work to spend more time at school and social activities, but then they would be in a position where they would have to look for a new job or apply for unemployment. Up to this point, work has hampered their ability to form a variety of relationships, attend a number of their children’s school activities, and has caused them many heartaches and tears.

A major consequence of working long hours and erratic schedules is the time it takes these mothers away from their children. There are days that finding time to spend with their children is not possible. It is not from lack of trying or because they do not care. Allison, for example, was put in the impossible position of being forced to choose between her work and her children. She has to work in order to pay the bills to provide for her family's basic needs. There have been times when Allison feels like she has let her children down and has spent many nights crying herself to sleep because of the choices she has made over the course of her life. As Allison says, "I have been through hell and back and have survived." Allison is a survivor, and like all the women, wants the best for her kids.

*Social Capital from Caring For and Building Relationships With Their Kids*

Coleman's theory posits that two-parent families are in a better position to have the resources necessary for balancing work, school, and family. I found Coleman's statement to be a truthful representation—all four participants have fewer resources available than what is found in two-parent families. Being the sole provider for the family has limited the amount of interaction with friends and social activities, yet it does not make them less of a parent. Each one of the women has managed to create avenues that allow them to care for their kids. It is through these caring relationships they are fostering social capital with their children.

All four participants spoke about the challenges of being a single mother and how difficult it is finding time to read, play, and spend a large amount of time with their kids, which is consistent with prior research on resiliency and building social support with your kids (Orthner et al., 2004). For example, in spite of her work schedule, Carley has found a way to build relationships with her kids. She works the night shift at a casino in Oklahoma, but stays up upon

returning from work to fix her breakfast for her children before they head off for school. She is aware of the significance that an extra hour or two has on their social and physical well being.

Amy wants everyone to know that she tries to be a good mother and she regrets choices made early in her life. She does not proclaim to be perfect; however, Amy tries her best to find time to be a mother. She does this by making time to read with her children, watching television or playing games with them. Although there are days Amy falls short, she does her best to live her life around her children. She views herself as “a mother first, a teacher second, and friend in the end.”

Even without the presence of a father figure in the household all four women have good relationships with their children and view themselves as good mothers. They have demonstrated the presence of a man or father is not necessary to provide for their kids. All four talked about how there were times they could not manage their schedules to be with their kids. I could tell in their voices and by the look in their eyes how disheartening this was for them. All four of these women are very humble and care very deeply for their children. They do not make excuses for how their lives turned out and have no desire to place the blame on someone else. They do not pretend to be someone other than the mothers they are.

### *Summary*

As is apparent from their stories, there are challenges associated with being a single mother and raising children. The absence of a spouse, father, or companion has not stopped these four women from caring for and creating bonds with their children. Their conversations revolved around doing whatever it took to make sure their kids saw them as loving mothers who would sacrifice their own lives for their children. All four women take an active role in being a part of their children's lives.

### *School Involvement and Social Capital*

In the early years of a child's formal education, families are the starting place for the development of social capital for young people (Crosne, 2004). Coleman's theory on social capital does not recognize class differences in access to school social capital, but seems to presume that all children have equal access to valued resources if they make the right choices. Stanton-Salazar (1997) argues that for children to be successful in school they need to have access to relationships with institutional agents, and the ability to enter into those networks that interlace these relationships into groups. For them, making sense of this cultural system means they will need to decode the institution's cultural, linguistic, and social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Parent involvement in their child's education can generate social capital as children advance through the educational system, but learning how to ask the right questions and where to go for help are two critical pieces low SES parents need in order to tap into the cultural logic of the dominant group (Crosne, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

#### *Institutional Agents: Administrators, Counselors, and Teachers*

When asked about the type of relationship they have with the school all four were very complimentary towards the administration and district as a whole. However, their relationships with school institutional agents who could serve as sources of social capital were for the most part limited. For Trish, the elementary principal has been a valuable source of social capital. Trish has felt a close relationship with the principal from the first day she met him. The principal has proven to be a person who Trish is comfortable speaking with on the phone or in person about issues directly related to her or her children. Further, Trish has great respect for the principal's ability to make people feel like they are equal. Trish relies upon the principal for his capacity to provide her with resources and knowledge when dealing with teachers and her



children. The elementary principal has helped Trish set up meetings with teachers, provided her with resources, and has helped her make valuable connections within the school. None of the other women talked about having any kind of relationship with the principal.

Although Trish had access to social capital through her relationship with the principal, the other women had less social capital with school institutional agents. For example, Carley and Trish did not completely understand the counselor's role in helping their children learn about entrance exams, scholarships or financial assistance for college. Both of them are hopeful their children will qualify for scholarships or financial aid as a means for attending college. However, when asked if they know how to help their children fill out financial aid forms or scholarship applications they both had blank stares on their faces. Neither of them knew how to access resources for college or technical schools available within the high school. They thought the high school counselor's office might be a place to start inquiring; however, they were not certain the high school counselor was the person who could provide the information they sought. They remember their high school counselor talking with them about college and scholarships, but were not sure if the counselor still provided these services.

Trish was convinced she needed to contact the counselor's office to set up a meeting to discuss options for her oldest son as he prepares to graduate from high school. Trish said she would hate for him to miss out on scholarships or financial aid deadlines and planned on asking the counselor if meetings are scheduled for parents to attend and ask questions or receive information. Trish was embarrassed and upset that she was oblivious to the fact the high school and elementary had services available to help kids with more than getting to school on time and special education. Trish assumed the two counselors, high school and elementary, were working

with all kids and they would contact her about programs or services that would benefit her kids. She did not know how to be proactive in seeking out help and resources.

When it came to teachers, the mothers were very complimentary about the caring attitude certain teachers displayed towards their children. All women felt that the teachers treated their children as equals and that they did not look down upon them because of their class status. Carley felt there were times individual teachers had a feeling she was being dishonest or unreliable when she tried to explain why she could not attend a meeting or school activity. Carley has tried explaining to the teachers why she cannot be present at every meeting; however, she does not believe they take her seriously or that they are interested in what she has to say. Amy feels uncomfortable and embarrassed when teachers approach her about her children in public settings. Amy would prefer teachers call and set up a meeting or discuss the issue over the phone. Amy's reluctance to talk with teachers outside of school has limited her ability to stay abreast of school news, issues, and concerns, hence has affected her ability to access social capital within the school. These mothers also had limited sources of social networks in their families and community that could help their children with school-related issues.

#### *Absence of Extensive Social Networks at School but Presence of Coping and Adapting*

There is a belief that parents without social networks comprised of other parents are at a disadvantage when it comes to helping their children with school-related issues (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Sheldon, 2002; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Even though the four women do not have an extensive group of individuals within the community to call upon, through resilience and creativity all four mothers have found ways to be involved with their child's education. All four have developed a system to work with the school to keep the lines of communication open. A variety of family members and friends have been willing to serve as

liaisons, assistants, and co-workers when dealing with issues at school. None of the mothers is employed in a job that permits her to leave or be absent to attend to their children's school needs, such as parent-teacher conferences, after school activities, and even emergencies. However, their stories demonstrate how a small network of family or friends can work together to solve problems, keep each other abreast of school-related issues, and provide social support for each other. A large social network of parents would be helpful when dealing with school related issues; however, a sister, mother, father, or friend also works.

Of the four participants, Trish is the sole member who has a group of parents who have told her they will help her when she does not have the money or the resources to take her children to school, a ballgame, or to a school activity. Allison, Amy, and Carley have certain individuals within their family who they can call at certain times to help with school related matters. Allison has a sister working for Hillsdale K-6 as a teacher's aide, who has been very helpful when dealing with school related issues. Allison and her sister have worked out an arrangement with the school to deal with problems that arise. The administration and teachers know that Allison's sister is the person to contact if there is a problem. Not only does Allison's sister act as a liaison she also helps with getting her children to and from school. Her sister helps them with their homework and if time permits will give Allison an update on upcoming school events.

Amy can call her sister when she is not available, due to work, if the school needs her to come to a meeting or pick up the kids. Carley has relied on the assistance of her mother and stepfather to watch sick kids when they are sick and also to watch them when she attends parent teacher conferences. Other than her mother and stepfather, Carley is pretty much isolated from the world. She does not have anyone else she can rely upon for help.

*Social Capital and the Dreams and Aspirations These Mothers Have For Their Children*

According to Coleman (1987), the amount of social capital these women have and pass on to their children will affect their future choices and success in life. The emotional quality of the parent-adolescent affiliation is also an important factor in academic achievement over time. Close ties between parents and their children were shown to facilitate the transmission of high expectations and elevated levels of parental aspirations (Crosne, 2004). The relationships between these four mothers and their children were very tight and built around a sense of openness and trust. All four mothers spoke passionately when asked, “How important is it for your children to graduate from college?”

The dreams and aspirations these mothers have for their children and themselves are largely modest ones. They want their children to graduate from high school and then go on to college or pursue a vocation. Most of all they want their children to be happy and to form healthy relationships with friends and future mates.

For Carley, graduating from high school is the immediate goal she has for her boys. Pursuing a college degree depends largely on the boys securing financial aid and scholarships. Carley understands she will have little time to meet with school personnel to discuss post-secondary options if her job status stays the same. Therefore, as the boys get older, Carley will rely on them to take the initiative to communicate with the school about educational options. The absence of friends and steady communication with the school places Carley in a precarious situation. The boys’ father has been successful even though he dropped out of high school. Carley fears her boys will follow in their father’s path.

Amy started to cry when asked the same question about her children graduating from college. Amy still regrets dropping out of high school and also fears her kids will follow in her

footsteps. Amy really wants her kids to go through high school and to graduate with their class. She hopes they will build lasting relationships with their classmates, something she was unable to do. It is important to Amy for her kids to graduate from high school, find a decent paying job, and marry someone who can become their best friend in life. Amy has realistic goals for her children after they graduate from high school. Pursuing a post secondary education is something she hopes her children will pursue and it would please her if they did. As is evident in her picture of the junior college, she does not anticipate her children attending a prestigious university. Attending a junior college is an attainable goal her children can manage to achieve with help and support from the public school system. Whether her kids chose to find a job or attend the local junior college after graduating from high school; Amy will support their decisions. According to Amy, “My kids deserve a better life than what I had growing up and a better one than what I have provided.”

Allison has very high expectations for her children and she does not talk with them about merely graduating from high school. Allison talks with her children about life after college. Graduating from high school will happen and according to Allison her children will graduate because they understand the benefits of receiving a high school and college diploma. Through her daily reminders, they gained an understanding of the importance of receiving a quality education. Going to college is the one and only dream that Allison has for her children. Allison does not want her kids to settle for mediocrity. Allison wants her kids to dream big and strive to improve their position in life. Allison has a desire for her kids to secure a vocation that allows them to provide opportunities for their families to access social capital. It is important for Allison that her kids break the cycle that has developed within her family—graduate, get married, have kids, and work for peanuts.

Trish has all kinds of dreams and aspirations for her kids. Trish hopes her kids will go to college, find a good job, have a happy family, and never have to go through the heartache that she had suffered. As can be seen in the picture she took of the house, Trish is not dreaming beyond her needs. Trish has simple and unpretentious dreams for her children. The house in the picture is not a mansion. It is a simple ranch style house in Hillsdale, Kansas. There is nothing spectacular about the location or the appearance. Trish would like for her children to apply the lessons she learned during her childhood, such as trust, respect, values, caring, and love. She wants her kids to learn these lessons and apply them to their daily lives. She hopes all of her kids experience true love and a life of eternal happiness. She would give up everything that she has in order for her kids to have more than what she currently has. As Trish stated, "I hope that my kids go to college, find a good job, have a happy family, and never have to go through the split up and the heartache that I have gone through. Nobody deserves to be treated like I have been treated...especially if you have kids."

### *Summary*

All four women were very complementary of Hillsdale K-6 teachers and administration. They feel like the teachers and administration treat their kids and themselves as equals among other families. For two participants they lacked knowledge on how to access certain resources and help within the high school. The dreams and aspirations of the four women have for their children are very modest and attainable. All four want their kids to be happy and for them to have more than they currently possess. The four women dream of their kids graduating from high school, finding a good job, and settling down with someone who can make them happy.

### *Researcher as Social Capital*

For some of the women in this study, I served as a source of social capital. This is especially true when Trish and Allison talked about the dreams and aspirations they have for their children. They both would like for their children to have an opportunity to attend college and are very aware of the costs associated with college. I reassured Allison that the high school counselor could sit down with her and discuss post secondary options. We also talked about how the counselor could show her how to sign up for a financial aid number. She was not aware that Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms are now electronic and that she would need a FAFSA number. Allison and I had a great conversation that revolved around filling out the online application, applying for a FAFSA number, and how she should approach the high school counselor if she had additional questions. I also suggested she ask the counselor if she could use the school's computer lab to fill out the online forms. We talked about alternative options if the school refused to allow her to use one of their computers. We discovered the local library has Internet access and a public computer. Allison felt comfortable calling the school counselor to set up a meeting towards the end of our conversation.

Trish was fully aware of financial aid forms and entire the process involved with filling them out online and applying for a FAFSA number. However, she was not sure what type of services the high school counselor provided. I informed Trish the counselor usually meets with parents at the beginning of the school year to discuss their plan of study and in January to discuss scholarship opportunities. She was not aware the counselor sets up parent nights to discuss graduation requirements and post-secondary options. In addition, she was not sure how the high school counselor could help her children with options after they graduate. She assumed the high school counselor would help her kids, yet she did not know how or when they should expect to

receive guidance. I suggested to Trish that she set up a meeting with the counselor to discuss her son's future. We talked about scholarships and approximate deadlines and both agreed a meeting with the counselor would be beneficial.

After the second interview with Allison we talked quite extensively about how the school could help her provide for her children. I had to go back to my journal, since this is not reflected within her story. Allison was concerned about how she would be able to pay her bills and have enough money available to purchase winter coats for her children. I asked Allison if she had contacted the elementary counselor to see if the school had a fund to help parents purchase coats or if they had coats in storage. I told her when I served as an elementary and high school principal that we had individuals in the community who donated money to purchase school supplies for families who could not afford certain items. Also, I told her that she would be amazed by the number of coats and jackets the school collects throughout the course of a year. I told her that we used to keep a certain amount of unclaimed coats for this very reason. Another suggestion was to contact the local thrift store to see if they had a supply of winter coats. Allison admitted that she had not thought of contacting the thrift store or the school. She was relieved to know that the school might be an option and was very thankful for our conversation. Although none of the mothers has contacted me once they completed their portion of the study, they know they can call me if needed.

### *Implications*

This section will discuss the implications of the findings from this study. Considering the theoretical framework of social capital, this study focused on what low-SES single women had to about their dreams, aspirations, and social networks they have to support their children as they attend school in grades K-6. From their narratives, implications for teachers, administrators, and



counselors can be made: (a) First and foremost, school personnel need to do a better job of trying to understand the circumstances of low-SES single women and families; and (b) we need to be proactive and not assume that all parents and children are aware of the resources available within the public school system.

*Bridging the Knowledge Gap and Gaining A New Understanding*

There is a perception among some educators that low-SES women do not care about the education their children receive and they have a lack of interest in school in general (Lareau, 1989). Sometimes educators fail to understand the circumstances and situations people have to deal with on a daily basis. The four women in this study want to be involved in their child's education. There are times that circumstances beyond their control make this difficult if not impossible. Administrators need to do a better job of working with staff to educate them on the different social classes present within our school (Epstein, 2005; Epstein & Dauber, 1991).

This study suggests that low-SES parents do value their children's education. Sometimes there are occasions where the four women in this study did not have access to certain resources that could have helped them take an active part in school activities. Rather than accusing parents of not caring when they fail to attend a parent teacher conference or a scheduled meeting, educators need to investigate why the parent(s) failed to attend (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). As was evident by the four stories, all four women want to take an active role in their child's education. By searching for the reason why parents appear to be disinterested in their child's education, school personnel are in a position to bridge the knowledge gap.

The school in this study, arranged meeting and activities around the typical 9:00-5:00 work schedule and assumed that all parents can attend scheduled meeting during that period of

time. This proved to be a problem for three of the four women within this study. One participant talked about how she would attend a teacher meeting or a parent teacher conference if the school would work around her schedule. She does not have a job where she is available during the school day. She was not aware of the school hosting a parent-teacher meeting at 4:00 p.m. or on days she does not have to work. Another way schools could help single parents is by providing childcare during parent teacher conferences, school plays, or when school activities are scheduled. It is important for school personnel to be understanding of the needs parents have within their school and district. Especially when the needs could be the reason why parents are not participating in their child's school activities (Sheldon, 2002).

#### *School As A Source of Social Capital*

As is evident from the stories, the four women do not have an extensive group of friends or family members within the community or their workplace. Therefore, the school becomes an important source of social capital for these women as their children progress through school (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). For school personnel, they must be careful and not assume that all kids and parents are aware of the programs and resources the school has available. This is especially true for the school elementary and 7-12 counselor. The elementary counselor plays an important role in providing parents of elementary children resources on counseling, guidance, and how to access resources within the community. For example, elementary parents might not be aware of agreements schools have with area dentists, optometrists, and businesses within their communities. Likewise, the high school counselor can serve as a source of social capital for children and parents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). It is important for the high school counselor to set up a system where parents can access job and post secondary education literature. They can help educate parents on how to access literature that might help their child as he or she prepares to

pursue an education or job after graduation. Furthermore, the school counselor needs to consider the needs and desires of every individual student and work with them and their parents to create an open line of communication.

Creating an open line of communication does not stop with the counselor. Teachers and administrators also have a responsibility to be aware of the needs of every student within the school and classroom. The four women in this study spoke highly of the school administration and teaching staff. They were appreciative when teachers worked with them when their schedules did not allow for them to be at a meeting. They were complimentary toward those teachers and the administration when they allowed other individuals to take their place during disciplinary affairs. There were occasions when teachers made one of the mothers feel uneasy and embarrassed. As a result, the parent started avoiding her children's teachers and lost a valuable source of social capital in the process.

It is imperative for teachers and administrators to build relationships with children and parents, which ultimately will lead to a greater amount of social capital within the lives of those parents who already have a limited amount (Morgan & Sorensen, 1999; Sheldon, 2002). By gaining a better understanding of how low-SES single mothers live and what a typical day in their life looks like has the potential to bridge the knowledge gap that exists within the K-12 school setting. In addition, it is important for teachers, counselors, and administrators to remember and understand that there will be days when a child or a parent's needs will take precedence over their needs. School personnel need to be aware of how the women in this study spoke of how the teachers, counselors, and administration made them feel like they cared for them and their children. The caring attitude displayed by school personnel serves as source of

social capital for the parents and their children. Carley put it best when she was asked if the school could offer more or do things differently,

I don't judge people until I have walked a mile in their shoes. I never in a million years thought that I would do some of the things that I have done for my kids. I would hope that the teachers and administrators who are involved with my kids would appreciate what we go through. I know that it is hard not to judge. I have learned my lesson since that first day that I walked into the SRS office. When a kid comes in smelling like a wood stove or is dirty or is stealing food out of another kid's lunch box maybe it is not because they are lazy or a thief. Maybe it is because they are hungry or it is the only way that they can keep warm. I just wish that everybody would understand and appreciate where they have been and where they are now. Sometimes teachers and other parents are too quick to judge other kids. I know that my kids were not invited to certain events because of who they were. I have struggled in decisions that I have made and I hope that by listening to my story that you might be able to look at people differently.

By and large school personnel do a decent job of listening and providing resources for parents and their children. It is important for teachers, counselors, and administrators to invest more of their personal time to listen to the needs of every parent and child who walks through the school doors and into their lives.

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## APPENDIXES

## APPENDIX A

### Letter of Participant Invitation



*Department of Educational Leadership  
Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142*

Dear

My name is John Wyrick and I am a doctoral student at Wichita State University. For my dissertation research I am seeking single mothers whose children attend Sedan elementary school and qualify for the free lunch program. Your name was given to me by Scott Hills, the school's superintendent/K-6 principal as someone who might be interested in sharing how you support your child's education and what dreams and goals you have for your child(ren).

Your participation in this study would consist of an interview with me and taking pictures with a disposable camera that I will provide. I believe the information gathered during your participation has the potential to bring about change and to help educators gain a better understanding of single mothers. You will have the opportunity to share your story about the aspirations and support systems that you have for your children. Your story could have an impact on future policies and decisions at the local and/or state level.

Your stories and experiences as a single mother are highly valued. Your input is very important, and I would really appreciate it if you would consider being a part of this thrilling study. You have a unique story and/or event in your life that educators need to hear if they are to understand how exceptional women, like yourself, make sense out of events that happen in your lives. Any information collected from you in this study will be kept confidential. Once the study is complete, the findings will be made available to you. In addition, the final report of my study will be on file with Wichita State University. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call me at 620-862-5385 (home) or at 620-517-0051 (cell). I can also be reached by email at [wyrickstafford@gmail.com](mailto:wyrickstafford@gmail.com)

John J. Wyrick, Doctoral Student



## APPENDIX B

### Narrative Interview Protocols



WICHITA STATE  
UNIVERSITY

*Department of Educational Leadership  
Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142*

\* The information you disclose today is confidential and reports will not be attributed to you in any way, so that your confidentiality is assured. This was previously explained in the consent form you signed to volunteer as a participant in this study.

1. Can you describe some of the rewarding experiences and yet some of the challenges/frustrations of being involved in your child's education?
2. Describe the kind of relationship that you have with your child's school, teachers, mentors, administration, and counselors?
3. Can you tell me who else you go to that helps you support your child's education?
4. What are your chief hopes and dreams for your child's current and future education. Also, describe what motivates you to be a part of your child's education?
5. Describe what strategies you have or currently use to increase your opportunities to be highly involved in your child's education

## APPENDIX C



*Department of Educational Leadership  
Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142*

### *Narrative Picturing/Visualization Technique Directions (NPVT)*

#### \*Directions/Guidelines for using the NPVT:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this exciting research study. Your participation is very important and I can't tell thank you enough for agreeing to contribute your story, as I try to understand the lives and circumstances of single mothers with elementary-aged children. Your story is important and has the potential to help inform current and future policies and research.

I will provide you with a disposable camera to take a photo each time you notice something that fills your mind or captures your attention regarding your dreams for your children. It will be helpful if you carry the disposable camera with you for a period of five days. During the five-day period feel free to take as many pictures as you desire. At the end of the five days, please return the disposable camera to me in the self-addressed, postage-paid envelope. Upon receipt of the camera, I will have the pictures developed and will schedule a time to meet with you at your convenience to talk about what you photographed.

If you have any questions or need more information during the NPVT, please do not hesitate to call me at 620-862-5385 (home) or at 620-517-0051 (cell). I can also be reached by email at [wyrickstafford@gmail.com](mailto:wyrickstafford@gmail.com). Any identifying information used here is to remain confidential for your protection.

## APPENDIX D

### *Letter of Consent for Parent Participants*



*Department of Educational Leadership  
Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142*

**Purpose:** You are invited to participate in a Narrative Inquiry study into how single mothers with elementary school aged children who are receiving free lunches describe the aspirations and support systems they have for their children. I am conducting this research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctoral degree from Wichita State University.

The information generated from your participation has the potential to contribute to the needed literature on single mothers' profound experiences and the aspirations they have for their children's education. Narratives will be gathered from 4-10 single mothers with the desire to provide administrators, educators, policy makers, and citizens with insight into your lives that may guide school decisions.

**Participant Selection:** Participants will include low-SES single mothers residing in Hillsdale, Kansas who voluntarily chose to participate in the study. The narrative inquiry study will be comprised of 4-10 volunteer mothers meet the four criteria established to identify participants for the study: (a) single mother, (b) free lunch status, (c) have children enrolled in and attending Sedan Elementary School, and (d) Caucasian.

**Explanation of Procedures:** If you voluntarily decide to participate, you be asked to participate in a narrative interview and a narrative picturing/visualization project:

*A. Narrative interview:* A narrative interview is a face-to-face interview that will last approximately 45-60 minutes. I have a set of five questions that I will ask of you and we can add to the questions as we proceed through the interview.

*B. Snapshot Picturing:* You will be given a disposable camera and asked to take pictures of instances or occasions that trigger memories or portray aspirations that you have for your children over a one-week period.

**Discomfort/Risks:** Participation in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate. I will try my best to keep from asking you questions that might reveal aspects of your personal lives that could possibly trigger undesirable memories or that could lead to physical harm. Understand that their might be a time during the interview where a question

could cause you to have undesirable memories or thoughts of physical harm to yourself or others. At that time, I would like for you to let me know that the question is one that you do not feel comfortable answering. We can stop the interview at anytime and you are under no obligation to continue if so desired.

**Benefits:** Given the importance of parental aspirations for their children, the results of this study may help increase awareness, services, and policies for the public and educators. A full understanding of class and poverty is essential for educators, policy makers, parents, and students if they are to attain a deeper understanding of those living in poverty. One way to increase our understanding of the lives of people living in poverty and to counter stereotypes is to hear directly from individuals living in those circumstances. Capturing the stories of people will serve as a counter story to the dominant narrative about single mothers living in poverty in the U.S.

My study will seek to describe how low-socio economic status (SES) single mothers with elementary school aged children describe the aspirations and support systems they have for their children. My study has the potential to contribute to the needed literature on low-SES single mothers' profound experiences and the aspirations. Findings of this study may be shared in scholarly journals, other publications, or presented at state or national education conferences. My research will extend the existing known narrative inquiry research literature to include low-SES single mothers participating in narrative interviews and snapshot picturing.

**Confidentiality:** Any information obtained in this study in which you can be identified will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Your participation is voluntary. And in the event you decide not to participate that decision will not affect your future relations with Hillsdale Elementary School, Hillsdale, or Wichita State University. The data will be treated confidentially and none of the data will be personally identifiable. Your privacy will be protected and confidentiality of information guaranteed. Any data collected from you in this study will be aggregated and only available to me (the researcher) and my major professor. Your name will not appear in any report, publication, or presentation resulting from this study. Findings from this research may be presented at national conferences or published in scholarly journals. If this is the case your name will not be associated with the data, thus assuring confidentiality. By signing a copy of this form you are granting your permission to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

**Refusal/Withdrawal:** Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University, Hillsdale Elementary School and/or Hillsdale. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or fear of reprisal.

**Contact:** If you have any questions about this research, you can contact Dr. Jean Patterson at Box 142, 1845 Fairmount, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0142, phone 316-978-6392 or via email [jean.patterson@wichita.edu](mailto:jean.patterson@wichita.edu) or me at: John J. Wyrick, 304 E. Cherry St, Haviland KS, 67059, (620) 862-5385, [wyrickstafford@gmail.com](mailto:wyrickstafford@gmail.com). If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can

contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-000, and telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and you are one of 4-10 Hillsdale mothers who have voluntarily decided to participate. You will be given a copy of this signed consent form to keep.

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_