

**Ruvín Munden**  
**CCYJ Breakfast**  
**May 13, 2009**

Good morning everyone. I appreciate you gathering today to address the important and pressing issue of at-risk youth. As I talk I encourage each of you to ask yourselves *why...why* is it that this was allowed to happen. How were these things allowed to happen...and more importantly, what are we going to do about changing it for others?

My name is Ruvín Munden and I'm very much a different person now than from the history of my former years. The great majority of my life's story illustrates some of the failings of our child welfare & criminal justice systems.

As children my brother David and I grew up together in a low-income housing development in West Seattle. Early home life was marked by an absent father involved in various illicit activities and an emotionally and physically abusive mother who struggled with mental health issues. The cruelties my brother and I experienced as children ranged from the more obvious to the most bizarre.

The abuses ranged from being beaten all over my body as a means of control, to being forced to drink urine and eat canned cat food as forms of discipline. Once our mother was so enraged that she spanked my brother's hand with a kitchen knife cutting across three of his fingers. He was told to tell the hospital that he did it helping in the kitchen; today he has a scar that lines up evenly when he brings his fingers together.

My behavior in grade school got me in trouble with school counselors and eventually landed me on Ritalin for ADHD. When I was about eight a stepfather entered into our lives; he thought he could hit me like my mother did. In my mind at that age it was ok for my mother to do so, but definitely not for him. At age 11 I began running away from home to live in neighborhood newspaper bins; my brother soon followed.

One time I ran away after my mother bit me three times on the back drawing blood. A friend's mother called CPS; I told the caseworker what happened and she instructed me to get into her car. She told me she would take care of it. The caseworker drove me straight home and sat me down in front of my mother and insisted I tell my mother what I had told her. I was absolutely terrified; I said I had lied and that a dog and did it. I was left in my mother's care that day, only to run away hours later.

CPS continued to be involved through friends' parents and would always return us home despite our complaints of the abuses. It didn't take long for me to view CPS as the enemy. Eventually they stopped bringing us home and we were placed into the state's care. My brother and I were separated in the system for about 2 years and not allowed to know of each other's whereabouts. We ended up finding each other about 2 years later on accident on the streets while we were both on the run from the state. We haven't been separated since.

While in the State's care I was shuffled between various foster and receiving homes throughout the Seattle area. Many nights were spent sleeping on the lobby couch of the DSHS waiting room and being given McDonald's coupons to eat. By age 12 I was placed into a temporary 90 day group home and left there for 2 years.

While in this group home I began acting out by hitting staff. The staff thought they were teaching me a lesson by pressing assault charges on me. I interpreted being arrested as proof of not deserving love. I felt tossed away and denied when they had me arrested and locked up.

The juvenile detention center would release me back to myself and I would go straight to the streets where I felt safe and in control. I began to hate society as a whole and felt unnoticed and unwanted. Law enforcements and agencies would continue to return me to DSHS when I would run from them. Eventually DSHS gave up on me and stopped returning me to its care, leaving me to the streets.

At age 19 I got a girl pregnant. We got married, rented an apartment, and had four children together. Though I now had a place to live, I continued to fiercely run the streets—even sleeping outside for days at a time. Anything loving, caring, or nurturing was foreign to me and viewed as a threat. I learned to hide in my environment like a chameleon. Authorities or anyone representing "society" was seen as the enemy, and I relied on no one.

Due to living conditions typical of drug addiction, DSHS became involved in my new family. All four of our children were removed from our custody and placed into an out-of-family adoption. I felt like the hostile forces of the state were attacking me again. As far I could understand DSHS was just a different kind of parole officer.

My kids weren't placed with my brother, who had managed to turn his life around. He was married, employed, and successfully raising three children of his own, but the state put my children with someone else. There was no chance at reunification, and our rights were terminated. Neither the mother nor I have had visitation since. This bleak picture in its due course came to be the defining force in shaping an image of myself that would in the end bring me to a place of utter hopelessness, despair, and isolation.

I've been clean for over seven years now and out of trouble with the law for even longer. In that time I have received a Bachelor's degree in Public Administration from Seattle University where I graduated with honors, started a career in child welfare doing Advocacy & Community Engagement for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Puget Sound, and have recently bought a house.

My graduate school goals include joint degrees in law and policy which will enable me to further advocate for at-risk youth. I also get to sit as an appointed member to the King County Alcohol and Substance Abuse Administrative Board where I get to affect policy concerning access to recovery for youth and adults.

I feel like I've lived two lives; so much has happened in such a short time. I've been abused and have abused, been prescribed drugs and have self-prescribed; been homeless as a child and have owned a home; have never seen the inside of a high school as a student and now have a college degree with a chance at law school;

I was removed from my mother's care and have had children removed from mine; was the child of an incarcerated parent and also have been the incarcerated parent; I've been imprisoned as an offender and have worked with imprisoned offenders; have gone from supporting myself through criminal enterprises to being financially autonomous and gainfully employed.

I have gone from feeling completely miserable and purposeless to living a life filled with great joy, meaning, and purpose. I know what has worked for me, and I believe it is what will work for others. A feeling of empathy from people I could relate to humanized me and made me feel noticed; receiving an education was equally important in helping to empower me to face the world as a different person.

We need policies which will likewise acknowledge and empower our youth and service providers; not ones which are disempowering and marginalize them. Youth at-risk deserve to be nurtured into well-developed productive members of society with the same chances of happiness and utility as everyone else. This is that the work the Center seeks to do.

You have a chance here today to be a part of great change and to support an organization which helps lead the charge in seeing to it that others after me don't have to go to the same ends that I had to. A child shouldn't have to wait until they're twenty-nine years old before someone's willing to listen or help. Once a child's innocence is robbed from them through abuse or neglect there can be no turning back, they are changed forever.

My innocence was stolen from me at very young age. I hope you will carry with you today the remembrance of the blamed, tossed aside, and forgotten youth out there on the streets now. Please continue to do what you can to fight for our youth and give them a fair chance at a better life; I know that a lot of you already do. Thank you all for your time, your public service, and your support of the Center.