

# Blossom or Weed?





**Written by Shannon Choate**

It was the first day of school. Excited children ran in every direction, anxious to catch up with friends after the long summer break. School buses were lined up like a long, yellow train as children file out. Some kids were smiling for pictures, wearing colorful clothing and new backpacks. Others were terrified, clinging to a leg.

Danny's mom hurriedly walked him to his assigned classroom, kissed the top of his head, and turned to leave, "Make sure you get on the #12 bus after school. If I'm not home, Janice will be there to let you in." Janice was the old lady who lived next door in the apartment complex. Danny spent many nights at Janice's when Mom



was 'out' all night. Danny nodded and she rushed off. He wished Janice brought him...at least she would've stood with him until the bell rang.

Danny watched as children filled the hallways. He spotted familiar faces from the complex, the nerves began to settle, but Joey was who he most wanted to find in the crowd. Finally, he saw Jillian, Joey's older sister, who towered above the kids walking toward him. Just as relieved to see Danny, Joey pretended not to be nervous, and dismissed Jillian. She wasn't leaving until they stood still and smiled for the camera. The best buddies gave full teeth grins and Jillian seemed satisfied. She attempted to sound stern

to hide her emotions, "See you later, punks. You guys have fun now because it only gets harder." Jillian was 14 years older than Joey, and was more of a mother than a sister.

Jillian and Joey lived with their single mother who worked tirelessly to make ends meet. Their military father was killed during a training exercise when Joey was a toddler. Joey never knew his father, but their mom kept his memory alive with pictures and loving stories.

Danny's mom had no loving tales of his father. She didn't have pictures to show him, and always changed the subject when he asked about him. His mother's tone implied the subject was taboo, and Danny kept his curiosity at bay.

Danny's mom couldn't afford interactive daycare or preschool therefore, the crowded classroom and playground nearly gave Danny a sensory overload. With Joey by his side, Danny learned to interact with others. However, he struggled in the classroom. Even though Danny's teacher was dedicated to helping little ones learn their shapes, letters, and numbers with her positive energy, she couldn't show enough individual attention to meet his needs.

Jillian was usually waiting for them at the bus stop after school. One day, Danny asked Joey, "How come your sister is always picking you up?"

"Because mom says that's her job. My mom gives her 10 bucks a week to watch me after school and help me with my homework. It sucks because I don't get any money and I have to take out all the trash!"

"At least Jillian plays with you sometimes... she's fun when she's not being bossy. I have to go to Janice's...she's nice, but too old to play."

Danny struggled academically, trailing behind other children his age. By age 11, school officials recommended Danny be held back to repeat the 6th grade. Knowing she wouldn't be around to help build Danny's educational foundation, his mother agreed.

Joey easily maintained the average level for his age and advanced on to junior high. Danny had to adapt to elementary school life without his best friend. The social aspect was a breeze...he was older and quickly became the leader of his clan on the playground. However, he continued to struggle in class. Some kids noticed and would occasionally make fun of him. They were cruel. The teasing of his learning disabilities sometimes bled into making fun of his appearance. His mother's income wasn't enough for living expenses, let alone material or cosmetic luxuries. Therefore, buying booze and cigarettes took priority over braces for Danny's teeth and fashionable clothing. He grew angry and resentful. Danny soon learned to remain silent in the classroom, and handle business on the playground. After



delivering a few bloody noses and black eyes, the bullies no longer made fun of Danny's worn out shoes.

To combat academic challenges, Danny developed a coping mechanism by acting out in class. He learned more defiance and disruption in the classroom, led to less bullying or humiliation on the playground. However, Danny's success was short-lived when the teacher sent him to the Principal's Office.

The school sent Danny home with a letter describing his behavior. The letter



enraged his mother, and for the first time the verbal abuse escalated to physical violence. Janice heard the screams and cries from next door and pleaded, "Let him stay with me for a couple days until you cool off." Janice kept Danny out of school until the bruising and red marks disappeared from his face. Although Danny felt safe and cared for with Janice, despair and anger

became his dominate traits.

By junior high, Danny emotionally detached from his mother. He preferred to stay with Janice most nights, and she'd gently urge him to work harder in school. "Be a good boy, Danny, and do your homework." If he felt she nagged him too much, he'd go home to his mom's empty apartment. He'd usually reappear at Janice's doorstep when he smelled her delicious cooking. Spaghetti was his favorite, and she served comfort foods often. She knew Danny had little peace in his young life and felt her freshly baked cookies could sweeten a sour mood.

Joey was a grade ahead of him but remained Danny's best bud. As the boys grew into teenagers and started high school, they saw less and less of each other. With each change of season, there was another type of ball to throw, catch, or bounce. Joey's mom made sure he and Jillian were always involved in after school sports to help instill commitment and responsibility. Team sports and the athletic community gave Joey new positive role models and mentors afterschool which had a profound influence on him. His athletic ability and



insatiable appetite for competition compelled him to maintain good grades. In stark contrast, Danny had none of the support, eligible grades, nor the passion for sports that Joey possessed. Although, he rarely missed a chance to watch Joey play.

If brooding and emotional detachment were a team sport, Danny would be MVP. He learned very young not to show any vulnerabilities. He was exceptionally good at this façade, remaining aloof to most. Instead of identifying a struggling student or emotionally abused youth, most adults see Danny as uncooperative and confrontational. Janice was the only adult in Danny's life that spoke to him in a loving, gentle tone.

Danny learned stealth mode was his key to survival. During the worst of his mother's intoxicated rages, he'd stay out of sight until she passed out. He applied the same tactics at school, by being discreet. Teachers wouldn't send him to the Principal or Dean's Office if they aren't aware of what he's doing. Danny might not have been able to solve a mathematical equation, or throw a ball extreme distances, but he knew how to blend in and avoid detection.

Tragedy struck during Danny's freshman year in high school. Sirens blared throughout the apartment complex. Danny watched as EMT's rush to Janice's apartment with a gurney in tow. Frantic, Danny shoves his way through a wall of curious neighbors.

"Move! She needs me... I have to help her!" Danny pleaded with the emergency service workers to let him in the apartment, to no avail. Within minutes, they emerged with Janice laying on the gurney. A paramedic is talking on his radio,



"Be advised, she's not responsive..." Danny called out "Janice! It's me, Danny...please be ok!" He was half praying; half willing her to look up at him. He walked in stride with the gurney, grasped her hand in his, but was careful to stay out of the civil servants' way. As they lifted the gurney into the ambulance, Janice squeezed Danny's hand and without opening her eyes she said softly, "Be a good

boy, Danny.” Danny stood, staring at nothing long after the ambulance was out of sight, and the siren faded.

After Janice died, Danny became more reclusive. Joey was too engulfed in his sports and activities to notice Danny stopped coming to watch his games. Danny preferred to stay home alone, smoke weed, and play video games. Only when his mom was home, Danny felt an urge to leave the solitude of his room, and Joey would see him sitting in the stands next to Jillian.

Danny spent more time in the Dean’s Office than the classroom. Truancy and failing grades on Danny’s report cards reflected his cavalier attitude. While Joey excelled in school and athletic achievement, Danny was labeled as an out of control juvenile and sent to a school for troubled youth. Without realizing it at the time, Danny lost



another life advocate. Just as he watched Janice disappear behind the ambulance doors, his best friend, Joey faded into a childhood memory.

At the continuation school, Danny found himself surrounded by equally unmotivated youth. More over-crowded than his prior

school, it was easy to blend in. It didn’t take long for Danny to meet a couple of guys who also preferred playing video games and smoking hash over completing homework assignments. His mother’s stash was easy pickings, as she was often too doped up to notice the vodka isn’t as strong when diluted with water. Stealing alcohol and petty cash from his mom escalated to stealing items from unsuspecting neighbors. All proceeds funded an increasing substance addiction. Danny decided the street life was more glamorous than going to school. He dropped out before the second semester.

Within a year, Danny was arrested for felony robbery, possession for sales, and under the influence. The judge considered his behavioral history and sentenced

him to 3 years in the California Youth Authority (CYA). Being incarcerated with more sophisticated, criminal-minded teens gave Danny an accelerated education in criminal activity. However, his *Juvey* education came at the cost of *all* his trust and innocence. It was stolen by a bigger, meaner kid with raging hormones, and no regard for human emotion. Danny fell victim to a sadistic predator, who thrived on inflicting pain, violence, and control over unsuspecting *new fish* who were unfortunate enough to be his cellmate.

Nothing is worse than a snitch in custody, and even first offenders know the term '*Snitches get stitches.*' Danny sought no help from authorities for fear the beatings and rapes would be more severe. He remained silent. Just as when school administrators sent home the first letter years ago...Danny retreated into personal isolation, fraught with despair, fear, and extreme anger. However, this time there weren't any sweet old ladies waiting next door with fresh baked cookies to help ease his woes or calm his rage.

Danny found solace and companionship in joining a gang. His new brothers referred to him as Froggy and embraced him when he proved to be an asset to the group. Danny's brooding and stealthy characteristics were valuable traits to have in custody. The guards and juvenile counselors were the perceived enemies.

Danny implemented his skills of manipulation with discretion and was able to hustle the guards without getting caught. As a show of allegiance and brotherhood, Danny



tattooed "Froggy" and the gang initials on his neck. He earned his *bones* and the respect of gang's hierarchy by conforming easily to gang style prison politics and showing defiance to the guards. Being accepted by his gang brothers meant Danny was protected from further rape and assault, but it meant he must do what the



shot callers ordered him to do, no matter the risk. Danny would do just about anything to prevent another savage assault on his dignity. Since Danny was masterful at remaining undetected, he was usually ordered to transport or smuggle drugs from the Visiting area.

Danny was a legal adult by the time he re-entered society. He moved back in with his mother, who was still dependent on a daily menu of drugs and alcohol. However, Danny was no longer his mother's troubled little kid. He was Froggy--a hardened, bitter young man, full of resentment. He blamed his mother for a tough life. It didn't take long before Danny revealed how desensitized he had become to



violence. His time incarcerated amplified a level of hostility towards his mother which was 2<sup>nd</sup> only to an extreme contempt for law enforcement.

The living arrangement was toxic for both Danny and his mother. Her income barely paid the rent, and she began to feel Danny wasn't contributing enough to household expenses. One night his mom drank some liquid courage and lashed out at Danny in a wave of angry intoxication, "Get out of my house! Don't come back until you can

buy your own cigarettes!" Danny saw red and became Froggy, the gang-banger in an instant. Years of hate and resentment boiled over and Danny began beating his mother. He didn't stop the assault until she lay limp and lifeless on the dirty kitchen floor. Unshaken at the sight of his handywork, Danny stepped over her body, rooted through her purse looking for cash, and left his boyhood home forever.

Danny didn't kill his mother, and she was able to describe to authorities what he'd done. He was soon arrested. As a legal adult, with a criminal history...he was sentenced to 15 years to life for numerous probation violations and attempted murder.

Once again, Danny stepped off of a bus. However, this time he's not a neglected, innocent little boy...he was a convicted felon stepping off a prisoner transport bus. He walked in a single file line with other inmates, shackled in leg irons and waist chains. They were surrounded by officers, giving verbal commands, some of whom were armed, pointing a rifle from a tower above. The inmates were directed inside a long hallway where more officers waited to remove restraints and begin strip-searching the new arrivals. It is neither pleasant for the inmates, nor the officers who must conduct visual searches of other men's rectum and genital areas, but it is a necessary process. Danny had become accustomed to routine strip searches and spreads his cheeks without hesitation.



Like the other inmates, Danny stared straight ahead, avoided eye contact with the officers, yet followed their orders. He knows a prison receiving area is not an ideal place to display defiance while standing stark naked.

Danny's mugshot displayed nothing more than empty eyes and a booking number. He didn't pay attention to who the officers were, only to what they told him to do in order to complete the process quickly. Finally, his last name and booking number is called and Danny entered an office to answer personal classification questions.



Without looking up from reading Danny's file, the officer instructed him to sit in the chair provided. Danny obeyed and waited silently to be asked the usual questions. However, the muscular cop behind the desk seemed to scour Danny's file. He thought to himself '...this guy must be a rookie. Only newbies try that hard.' Danny focused

on the officer who stared intently on his file. The man seemed too physically fit and militant to have a desk job.

Suddenly, as if he'd heard Danny's thoughts...the man behind the desk looked up from the file and stared into Danny's eyes. The corners of his mouth began forming upward into a huge smile. It took a minute for Danny to realize he was staring back into familiar, friendly eyes. The boy had grown older... the athlete became an officer...but, the heart was the same... it was Joey.

Even the prison atmosphere couldn't keep the tears from flowing down both their faces.

## Reflection

How did these two boys from the same housing complex and grade schools end up living such different lives? What if Danny had a *Jillian* to help him with homework after school? What if Danny's mother involved him more in after school sports? What if Janice had lived to see Danny graduate from high school?

I am reminded of the words of an Elvis Presley song which detailed the plight of a young man born in a Chicago ghetto.

*"People, don't you understand the child needs a helping hand or he'll grow to be an angry young man some day? Take a look at you and me. Are we too blind to see? Do we simply turn our heads, and look the other way?"*

On some level these words haunt and convict me. What am I doing to prevent this outcome? What are you doing? What could we do together?



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## Meet the Author

Shannon Choate has worked in Law Enforcement for over 20 years. She has witnessed and been part of intervention programs as a Peace Officer assigned to a correctional facility. Here are Shannon's final thoughts about the importance of **PREVENTION** to keep youth from becoming a part of the prison system.

"We've all known a *Danny* growing up. The name, race, gender, and details of neglect might be different...but the tragedy remains the same. The heartbreaking reality is Danny, who became Froggy-the convicted felon...was **PREVENTABLE**.

I have spent the last 22 years studying, training, and working as a sworn Peace Officer in corrections. Throughout my years of service, I've worked with male and female inmates of various classifications and security levels; from 1st offenders--terrified to close their eyes at night... to the institutionalized CDCR *Lifers*, whose only ambitions are to hustle and manipulate.

As a correctional officer, I'm trained to disassociate myself from civilian life. I must remain unemotional and impartial, yet show empathy at the same time, no matter the inmates' crimes or personal history. Although not impossible, such a task has proven difficult, as I am not a robot. I have emotions and weaknesses. I do get scared. I do get angry. I do cry. At times, I'm bewildered at how a human being chooses to have so little value for human life.

I've been in the same room with what seemed to be the Devil himself, and held my breath until I was outside the cell to prevent the evil from entering my lungs. As dramatic and irrational as it sounds, a *secure* cell is as necessary and comforting to some, as it is lonely and isolating for the inmate.

Prison overcrowding and climbing recidivism rates are not only a politician's problem to solve... It is a combined parental, societal, & communal failure to recognize, acknowledge, and prevent a struggling child from chronic neglect *before* he grew into a criminal.

The 'R' part of CDCR (California Dept. of Corrections and Rehabilitation) is a fancy word for 'clean-up' of a societal mess. Very few of the adults who end up in the system, will truly benefit from the programs available to them. Perhaps it's time to make fundamental changes, learn from our mistakes, and try a new approach. Rehabilitation should not be the focus.

We need to start sooner. Engaging, educating, and mentoring youth could mean the difference between becoming an adult, free to live life as desired ... as opposed to being locked up and supervised by an officer like me.

Parents, teachers, mentors, community... **ALL** share in the responsibility to protect & educate our youth.

## **PREVENTION is KEY!"**

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