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Sacramento boy who ran from his old life focuses on the future

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Tre'von Lyle burst through the front door of his Oak Park home that frigid January night, barefoot, in his cotton pajamas.

"I didn't even think about where I was going," he said softly, with a faraway smile. "I just knew I had to leave, and I ran."

He was running, he said, from screams and false accusations and beatings that left welts and bruises on his undersized body. He was running toward his future.

Nearly two years later, Tre'von has a new life in the Land Park home of one of his principals at Sacramento Charter High School, PK Diffenbaugh.

Diffenbaugh and his wife, Vanessa, recently became the youth's legal guardians, and he is as much a part of their family as the couple's two toddlers, Graciela and Miles. Tre'von is 16, a student with many friends and aspirations of going to college and becoming an actor.

Someday, perhaps, Tre'von will play himself in his own life story.

It began in the Bay Area, where he lived with a mother who, for a time, she acknowledged, was addicted to drugs and alcohol.

The family moved to Sacramento when Tre'von was 5, and he has lived in the capital city ever since, toggling between his mother's and father's homes.

"I experienced a lot," he said of his younger years. "Good times, bad times." His mother, he said, gave him too much freedom. While living with her, he hung out with the wrong people, was suspended from school and picked up for shoplifting.

He went to live with his father and stepmother at age 11. He had little freedom, he said. Tre'von, always a pleaser, did his best to make them proud, he said. But it seemed it was never good enough.

"I got accused of stealing food from my own house," he said, and he was required to do most of the cleaning and chores. He spent much of his free time alone in the backyard. Computers and video games were out of the question, he said. But worse than those things, he said, were the "whuppings," usually inflicted with a belt.

Tre'von's father, Sylvester Lyle, denied hurting the youth in any way. Lyle said he and his wife, Tonya, are strict disciplinarians, but never abusive. "We gave him structure," Lyle said. "I'm his blood father, and I love him. I try to make him a better person."

Police confirm an abuse report the night that Tre'von ran away. His stepmother was charged later with misdemeanor child abuse in the case, to which she pleaded no contest. His father never was charged with a crime.

Tre'von said he was dragged from bed to vacuum the living room that night. Without much thought, he said, he bolted. "I just unlocked the door and ran out," Tre'von said, and no one came after him.

"I realized I didn't have any shoes on," he recalled. "I kept looking back to see if anyone was trying to catch me, but no one was there. I was crying, but I felt free. It felt good."

It was around midnight. He passed a security guard getting off work at a gas station. An elderly woman stared at him from her car. A homeless man crossed his path.

No one offered help, so he ran to the safest place he could see, a fire station. He pounded on the door, and the firefighters inside welcomed him.

"They fed me ice cream, and asked me what was going on," Tre'von recalled. Through his tears, he told them he had run away, and showed them the angry marks on his arms. They called child protection authorities, and he ended up at the Children's Receiving Home.

A week or two after Tre'von landed there, PK Diffenbaugh got a telephone call at Sacramento High.

"I have one of your kids here at the receiving home, and he desperately wants to come to school," a social worker told him. "But we have no way to get him there."

Diffenbaugh did not hesitate.

"If you have a kid who wants to go to school that badly," he said, "you've got to make it happen."

So Diffenbaugh did. He began picking up Tre'von at the children's home in the morning, and bringing him back after he finished his principal's duties.

Diffenbaugh had known nothing of Tre'von's home life. At school, he saw him as a kid who excelled in class, was always in a hurry and usually had a smile on his face.

Conversations in the car were awkward at first, but the two gradually got comfortable with each other. "It was obvious to me that he was a great kid," Diffenbaugh said.

Diffenbaugh and his wife had reached out to wayward children before, but Tre'von's personality and his determination made him special, the couple thought.

So, after authorities decided that Tre'von would become a foster child rather than going to either his mother or father, the Diffenbaughs decided to petition to make him part of their family.

"My wife and I were not going to let him end up in a group home or in some random foster placement," PK

Diffenbaugh said.

Tre'von moved in with the Diffenbaughs on Valentine's Day 2007. They became his legal guardians in August.

He feels perfectly at home now, he said, although "at first, it was kind of strange living with the principal," and a few kids at school gave him a hard time.

The Diffenbaughs encouraged him to join sports teams and other activities, monitored his classwork and computer time, and expected him to make his bed and clean up after himself.

He started playing baseball and practicing martial arts and joined the yearbook staff. He continues to do well in school, with a grade-point average of better than 3.5. He has dreams of attending UCLA and becoming a famous actor.

"Of course, I would like him to study and read more and spend less time on the computer," PK Diffenbaugh said with a smile. "But we really haven't had any serious disciplinary problems. Tre'von is amazing."

Because Tre'von and his biological mother and father are reluctant to legally cut parental ties, adoption is not an option, the Diffenbaughs said.

"But he is very much a member of our family," said Vanessa Diffenbaugh, who wears a necklace with the names Tre'von, Graciela and Miles around her neck.

Tre'von maintains a relationship with his biological mother, Lawanda Williamson, and the Diffenbaughs consider her a friend.

"I'm so proud of Tre'von," said Williamson, who sees her son about once a week. "He makes me smile a lot.

"I'm very happy about his situation. Right now I feel that Tre'von can be anything he wants to be."

Tre'von is determined to build a good relationship with his father as well, he said, and has been spending more time with him recently.

"I think about my mom and dad every day," he said.

Yet he has no regrets about racing out into the winter chill nearly two years ago.

"I wouldn't be the person that I am today if I hadn't run away," he said. "Leaving that night changed my life."

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