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**Finding Princess Tiana**

The room is filled with commotion from the students. The therapist invites the group to be seated and quiet down. The still standing students begin to pull chairs from a stack, as there aren't enough. The noise level begins to diminish, but there is still racket from a boy acting out. "Who has something for the group?" the therapist asks. A half dozen hands go up. Among the group of teens is a beautiful, 16-year-old Mulatto girl. Her hair is in a bun on top of her head resembling a young, Princess Tiana with no make-up. With her hand raised, she waits patiently while the other girl's issues are discussed one-by-one amongst the members of the group.

Natalie was placed in this residential treatment program after years of angry outbursts and refusing to comply with rules. The last straw was when her mom discovered her daughter's secret online activities. Natalie was engaging in inappropriate communication with unknown individuals, and even more disturbing is these individuals were asking her to send nude pictures of herself.

Natalie grew up in Mississippi with her adopted mom, and younger sister. Watching comedies, eating Italian food, and wearing comfortable clothes are some of her favorite things. She prides herself on being able to cook a "mean" hamburger, and the simplest things make her laugh. She has been playing tennis since she was 10 years old and dreams of going Pro one day. As a National Junior Tennis player, she played in tournaments all over the south and northeast, and lived in West Palm Beach, Florida to pursue this passion. Describing herself before coming to treatment in a simplistic way she says, "I was a really shy girl with low self-esteem", and attributes this low self-esteem to "negative behaviors and dwelling on the negative things people would say."

 Not having a dad in her life, Natalie admits that she craved male attention, and one of the ways she found it was through the computer and cell phone. Dr. Edward Kruk, Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of British Columbia, specializing in child and family policy reports on fatherless daughters, "Girls manifest an object [hunger](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/appetite) for males, and in experiencing the emotional loss of their fathers egocentrically as a rejection of them, become susceptible to exploitation by men" (Kruk).

Natalie was drawn into the underbelly of the internet as young as 11 years old (Figure 1). There are many dangers on the internet that are just a click away for any teen with access. However, emotional issues present makes a child even more susceptible to these hazards, which made Natalie a prime target. According to FBI Special Agent Peter A. Gulotta Jr, "The kids who are most vulnerable to online predators are those who are already troubled and who don't have a good relationship with a trusted adult" (Starr).

Figure 1: Internet Predator

Source: iStorya.net. 2014. Web. 16 Apr. 2015.

 In an attempt to fill the void of acceptance she felt, she began looking for it from anyone that would give it to her. Although she longed for attention, she admits to feeling intense pressure to join in to these sexual chat rooms. She says, "I remember thinking I can just turn this [computer/cell phone] off." In the end, it made her feel used and worthless, and the shame she felt kept her from telling anyone what was going on. She didn't turn it off, and instead the sexting (sending sexually explicit photographs or messages) began to take place with kids from her school. It wasn't long before things progressed from virtual to physical. There is debate whether sexting leads to earlier sex for teens. Jeff Temple, from the department of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Texas Medical Branch, collected data to address this issue. He concluded, "Students who sent sexts were the most likely to have sex in the following year" (Park). This was certainly the case for Natalie. A certain reputation began to form, which led her to be taken advantage of and ultimately sexually abused. She firmly believes now, "Sexting is dangerous, completely dangerous" (Figure 2) and acknowledges the damage it has caused her self-worth.

After patiently waiting, the therapist calls on Natalie to speak. She talks about an incident the night before during which she confronted a couple of girls as a higher stage, the program classifies the students based on their progression through the program in stages, for breaking the norms (rules). The girls were angry with her for "calling them out", and said some nasty things to her in return. She describes the conflict she feels between, "trying to keep the group safe, and not wanting to be crapped on for doing it." A now emotional Natalie, asks the group to tell her, "What am I doing wrong? What can I do better? Sorry, I didn't mean to cry, it just came out."

Figure 2: Sexting is Dangerous

Source: Danger of Sexting. 01 Sept 2011. Web. 16 Apr. 2015.

Natalie is working to heal the damage that culminated with her unbridled internet usage, as well as working to discover who she is. Most people experience the fear of not being accepted, but for girls without a father or father figure, best selling author, Dr. Steve Perry says, "They often make the huge mistake of allowing others to define them" ('Daddyless Daughters': How Growing Up Without a Father Affects a Woman's Standards and Choices). For now she may still waver when someone like these girls challenges her.

Natalie has been in the program for 14 months, and it's been difficult for her to be away from her family. However, the relationships she has created in the program have helped her to heal and start to buildup her self-worth based on healthy communication and boundaries. She has connected with other girls through similar interests and building a bond through going through "hard stuff" together.

Natalie might leave the program at the end of the school year, having a much different perspective on life, better understanding of herself and her value, and a much brighter future ahead of her. The quest for self just may be a never-ending journey for us all. Dr. Gail Brenner, a psychologist with 20 years experience, says of recognizing yourself, "You will know when you get there, even if for an instant. You let go of conflict and confusion. You are lovingly present with things just as they are. Your personal needs and wants fade in importance, and you find yourself being effortlessly generous and available. With a full and open heart, you let the conditioned patterns and tendencies that have defined you wind down. They are old news, anyway, and don't serve a purpose anymore."

Natalie hasn't lost sight of her aspirations of being a Tennis Pro, and although she has some anxiety about going to college, she will be leaving the program with some healthy coping skills. Perhaps owning her own spa or restaurant is in her future, but for now she's taking it one day at a time and looks forward to reuniting with her mom and sister. Her mom has stuck by her through it all. She says, "My mom saved my life. I'm starting to see it."

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