

# Statement of Antwone Fisher

FORMER FOSTER CHILD FROM THE STATE OF OHIO

Finance Committee Hearing: Hearings to examine the Antwone Fisher story  
as a case study for child welfare.

Tuesday, April 23, 2013

Chairman Baucus, Ranking Member Hatch, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today.

My name is Antwone Fisher and I was born August 3, 1959 in an Ohio correctional facility for girls. My mother, Eva Mae Fisher, entered the State of Ohio's Cuyahoga foster care system at age thirteen after her mother's death and her father was deemed unreliable. Incarcerated and pregnant with me, my father, twenty-three year old Edward Elkins, was shot and killed two months before my birth.

Upon my birth, I was immediately placed into foster care in the home of a single, caring woman named Ms. Nelly Strange. I was to remain in this home until my mother was released from incarceration and appeared to claim me. After two years in this foster home my birth mother never appeared to claim me. The bond between my foster mother and me naturally grew. Child welfare felt that the attachment that flourished between my foster mother and me was so great that it would be far too traumatic for me if my birth mother were to appear to claim me. Thus, at age two, I was transferred to the foster home of the Reverend Connie and Queen Ester Pack. My birth mother never came to claim me.

Eventually, there were three other foster children in this home and across the twelve years I spent there we endured the harshest, physical, psychological and sexual abuse one might imagine. Though our foster parents would never describe themselves as such, they were relentlessly cruel people. At age fourteen I was removed from their home a sad, fatalistic teen who felt he could communicate his feeling best through violence; after all violence had been customary in my life and I thought it was a natural part of life.

I was placed in an orphanage and required to engage in psychological therapy. In my childhood record I was described as "a walking pressure cooker" and it was felt that I should receive therapy to help me work out my feelings, fears and concerns to avoid me exploding in an unprotected environment. I approached these therapy sessions with the bleak outlook I had of life in general; no prospect of change or hope. In fact, I was unaware that all I had endured was unusual, because it was all that I knew. After six months at the orphanage I was sent to a reform school in Western Pennsylvania called George Junior Republic, (GJR). There I stayed until I graduated High School at age seventeen. I was proud to have earned several certificates from the vocational school there at George Junior. I was sure that I would be able to use them to land a job one day. Although George Junior Republic was a reform school, I did enjoy being there because for the first

time in my life I felt safe and that I wasn't singled out for special ridicule, hatred or abuse. There was peace for me there and I've come to believe that there are some children who arrive at a place early in their childhood where they'd prefer not to live in a traditional family or group home setting. I appreciated the structure of the GJR because my life before GJR felt out of control. GJR was in a rural setting. There were animals and hiking trails. Despite it being a place to penalize errant boys, it was a therapeutic place for me where I had a chance to rest; a break before more troubled days that were yet to come.

Certainly, foster kids would not prefer a reform school, but rather the kind of place that is solely designed to offer them therapy and prepare them for life. I'm thinking of a kind of school for children who arrive at this perceptual place that I had arrived at by the time I turned ten years old, not an orphanage, but a learning and residential facility place that would prepare the young people for the hard realities of adulthood, but still allow them to flourish and enjoy their childhood.

The day after graduation, a man that I had never met came to GJR from my home state of Ohio and told me that he was and had been my social worker during the time that I was at GJR, and that he had come to drive me back to Cleveland, Ohio. I gathered my things and loaded them in his vehicle and we headed west across the Pennsylvania State line, toward my hometown of Cleveland. On the drive this social worker explained to me that I was being emancipated and that the state of Ohio was no longer going to be responsible for me. He went on to say that I had to plan for myself from now on. He reminded me that I would be turning eighteen in a matter of months and as far as the law was concerned, I would be an adult. My mind was reeling. I can't put into words in this statement the absolute despair that washed over me, and depression fell heavy as this social worker left me at a men's shelter with my belongings and a total of sixty dollars. I don't think that a child should have to spend his entire childhood in foster care just because the birth parents can't get themselves together or can't bear the shame of it being said that they gave their children away. The children should be offered the opportunity to be adopted early in life no matter how ashamed or horrified the birth parents might feel.

There on the street I ran into other foster children and orphans I had known during my time in foster care. As it turned out, we had all graduated and were turning eighteen or had already turned eighteen. There we were on the street and in the world alone wondering how we were going to fend for ourselves. I tried using the certificates of hours completed I had earned while at GJR to help gain employment, but because every certificate read that it was issued by the Juvenile Justice Department of Mercer County Pennsylvania, everyone would say that they didn't want to hire me because the certificates lead them to believe that I was a trouble maker, causing some business owners to say, "I don't need any trouble around hear." I realized that the certificates were useless in helping me gain work.

Meanwhile, I was still in an environment complete with drug dealers, drug attics, street hustlers, pimps, prostitutes and indeed, murders; all ruthless and waiting for us, the new crop of foster kids that hits the street every graduation season, having nowhere to go and no one to protect them. I found protection in a man named Butch, an unsavory fellow who procured women for sex, and sold drugs. I felt him a godsend as I watched one former foster care alumni of mine turn to prostitution, drug dealing, pickpocketing and other nefarious activities. There were lessons on an array of ways to make money- all through illegal and or immoral acts. This and more is what was taught to us, the new arrivals to this brutal street life.

I was told that I had the makings of a “world-class pimp.” As shy and naïve as I was, I found it difficult even to look in the direction of the women who worked under Butch’s employ. Butch hired me and I was given the easy task of keeping an eye on the women, running errands, holding large sums of his money, and from time to time he would have me carry his gun in my waist band at the small of my back. Eventually I left the area and went off on my own. I ate what I could find, and slept where I felt that I could be safe. This was the horrible summer my best and only friend at the time was murdered. There is no way that I can adequately convey the cold, desperate situation I felt and knew was my reality. I feel that the reason a great number of former foster children eventually land in prisons is because the children are not explained that they will have to plan for their adult lives ahead of time or be told of how to avoid unscrupulous situations and people who may lead them down a path of dire circumstances and consequences. Perhaps an ongoing conversation about preparing for a future much in the same way that many traditional families discuss college education for their children might help foster youth understand that there will come a time when they will be responsible for their decisions and be empowered to think about a future. Of course resources that are readily available now about that kind of preparation should be part of a foster youth “curriculum,” so that the young people learn how to prepare. This information should be available as early as ten years old, possibly the age at which it begins to become more difficult to be adopted.

I remained homeless throughout the summer and beyond. Winter came and I was still out on the streets constantly searching for food and stealing it when I felt I had no choice, panhandling, running and hiding from predators, bullies, and every situation that would bring me in contact with the shady people and the police. Dehydrated, hungry, desperate and lonely, I found myself resting my eyes and muscles, never fully sleeping because I was afraid of what would happen to me if I fell asleep and left myself more vulnerable. I rested outdoors in the cold parks, corridors and allies where I felt were safe. I avoided coming in contact with other homeless people. I spent my nights napping and my days searching for something to eat.

One evening two days before Christmas, I was walking along a sidewalk that I had walked along many times before, but this time my eyes fell upon a poster that read, “Join the Navy and See the World.” I walked inside the recruiters’ office and said that I wanted to join the Navy. I was told that if I returned after the New Year that they would see if I qualified to join the Navy. It was two days before Christmas and most of the city was closed down. I explained to the recruiters that my situation was desperate and I was at my wits end, that I had never been in trouble with the law and I had my high school diploma with me and presented it to them, careful not to reveal the vocation certificates that I had received while at GJR.

I was given an aptitude test and with my diploma I qualified to join the Navy. With compassion for my situation, a recruiter bought me a meal and paid for a hotel room for me to spend the night. This was the first night that I felt safe enough to fall asleep, but I could not sleep. I spent that night washing months of dirt from my body, practicing how to present myself when the recruiters returned that morning to collect me. Before I knew it, there was a knock at the door, and a recruiter was there to take me to the Federal building where I would complete more tests and a physical examination, after which I was given order to report to Naval Recruit Training Station Great Lakes, Illinois. That night was the first night of eleven years of Naval service for me.

While in the Navy I filled up on self-esteem and confidence. I grew into a responsible man; one

who was depended on in the United States Navy. I benefited from the Navy's structure and the mentorship of senior members as well as my contemporaries. The Navy was a place to rest; that protected environment that social workers were concerned about when I was fourteen. After a while, the Navy became more than a place to rest; it became a home for me where I knew my existence in the world was useful. I received some long overdue psychological therapy from a Navy Psychiatrist who advised that one day I should look for my real family. The U.S. Navy is not a social service organization, but it does the nation a great social service by shaping young men and women into good and strong, patriotic citizens and then returns them to their communities, making those communities and indeed, the nation, better. I was honorably discharged and I settled in Los Angeles, California. A few years later I began thinking of my time with the Navy psychiatrist and his advice to one day look for my true family.

I ordered an Ohio Bell telephone book and after a few minutes of calculation where in the city of Cleveland, Ohio my family might be, I chose a phone number and that number happened to be the phone number of my father's sister. I learned that they all lived in the same neighborhood that I grew up in when I was in foster care. I had an uncle who lived only two streets over and I went to elementary school with his children, my cousins. My father's family expressed that if they had known that I existed they would have taken me. I returned to Los Angeles with my story and wrote a book and a screenplay about my growing up, with my time in Naval service as the story's backdrop.