



ME FACING LIFE
CYNTOIA'S STORY

A film by Daniel Birman

Cyntoia Brown was an average teenager in an American town. But a series of bad decisions led the 16-year-old into a situation that ended with her killing a man who had picked her up for sex. She was sentenced to life in a Tennessee prison and will serve a minimum of 51 years. This film challenges our assumptions about violence and explores how factors such as biology and family history can doom some young people from the start.

FROM THE FILMMAKERS



A 16-year-old girl committed murder in August of 2004. Three days later, I was on a plane from Los Angeles to Nashville to meet her. I knew that I wanted to produce a documentary that centered on youth violence, and while I was not sure that this was the right story, I knew that I was heading in the right direction. I was introduced to Cyntoia's story through Dr. William Bernet, a prominent juvenile forensic psychiatrist at Vanderbilt University, and by Kathy Evans, an attorney who worked in the Juvenile Public Defender's office at the time.

Initially, I was not terribly sympathetic to the idea of Cyntoia Brown and her story because it was just so similar to the daily news grind – another youth becoming violent through drugs and prostitution. Then I heard my own voice ignoring the obvious flaw in my thinking...a 16-year-old girl facing murder charges...there had to be more to the story. Then, when I met Cyntoia, there was no question. This film had to be made. I knew that it was going to take time to get to the bottom of her story to answer a very basic question: Why did this happen? So began a six-year journey for me.

There were several challenges, and the first was access. I was a Los Angeles producer entering a Nashville story. It was essential to gain the trust of the juvenile justice system, the prison system, and most importantly, Cyntoia's family.

It took time for Cyntoia's adoptive mother to allow me in; her plate was pretty full. She ultimately agreed, as did her birth mother and maternal grandmother. Now they had to contend with a documentarian at their doorsteps. Unfortunately, I was unable to include Cyntoia's adoptive father because he was not interested in participating. I do think the audience would have wanted to know more about their relationship.

Access to the juvenile justice system, the sheriff's department, and the juvenile judge presented another potential challenge. The sheriff's department held Cyntoia pending her murder trial, and the sheriff agreed to allow access provided that my documentary would actually attempt to explain why this happened. I also had to gain the trust of Cyntoia's criminal attorneys and the District Attorney. Later, the criminal court judge allowed me to observe the entire process from the moment the trial started to its end.

Most important, I had to gain Cyntoia's trust; she needed to be comfortable with being challenged on camera about every aspect of her life. I made only one promise – that I would ask intelligent questions and look for the buried issues that might shed light on youth violence. By participating, Cyntoia would have a purpose. She could help prevent others from going down the same path.

I was fortunate to have been able to work with Cyntoia on many occasions. And each time I interviewed her I gained new insight. I had a breakthrough interview with Cyntoia just after she had an emotional breakdown, during which she cut off most of her hair and shaved her eyebrows. It was a difficult interview, and I went home thinking that the interview was a failure. Two years later, when I looked at those tapes again, I realized that I had the most important interview of all. I'd captured Cyntoia's profound epiphany on tape, which was one of the last pieces of the puzzle that I needed to help put the bigger picture together. During the interview she explored insightful similarities in some of the abusive men in her life. Upon reflection, my own difficulty with what she told me caused me to miss just how important the interview was.

Piecing together Cyntoia's fragmented past was just a part of the story. In the course of the six years, I uncovered three generations of violence against women in her maternal line, beginning with her grandmother, Joan.

My motivation to continue for six years was my stubborn insistence that we would be able to present this story to an audience, and that they would get it. I did not know if any network would want the story because of its in-your-face nature. I was thankful to have the opportunity to present the story on *Independent Lens*. The project especially works for me because of the strength of Cyntoia's interviews; she is captivating. This 16-year-old girl had a seventh grade education and an IQ over 140, and she clearly articulated her thoughts, often with humor. But the sad reality is that she never really had a chance.

I made a conscious choice to avoid taking-on the story of Johnny Allen and the murder per se. The reason was simple – Mr. Allen is not here to defend himself and it would not serve the purpose even if he was here. This story is about what happened to a young girl up to the point of that awful night. I met some of Mr. Allen's family during the trial. They sat next to me in the courtroom due to where the court officer allowed me to place the camera. I had a brief discussion with them and let them know what I was doing. They supported the idea, especially when I told them that I was not doing a story about the murder or about Mr. Allen.

Cyntoia Brown received a life sentence. Her freedom will come when it's too late for her to become a productive member of society. Meanwhile, she is currently one of 30 inmates working toward an associate's degree through a program at David Lipscomb University in Tennessee.

My hope is that one person's story, produced in-depth and over time, will help to change our view of and approach to juvenile justice – and that this film will spark honest discussions about important issues relating to youth violence.

Thank you for taking the time to watch *Me Facing Life: Cyntoia's Story*.

– Daniel H. Birman, Director, *Me Facing Life: Cyntoia's Story*



THE FILM

What's the right thing to do when a teenager gets into serious trouble? Who is responsible when a young person goes down a path of delinquent behavior? Is it right to throw a life away by imprisoning a young person for life? These are some of the thorny questions raised in *Me Facing Life: Cyntoia's Story*, a film about a young woman sentenced to life in prison for killing a man when she was 16 years old. The film takes us into the family background and experiences of Cyntoia Brown, presenting the many factors that, for better or worse, play a role in forming a child's character and personality.

The Tennessee juvenile justice system granted the filmmaker access to Cyntoia from the time shortly after her arrest through her criminal trial. As the film opens, Dr. William Bernet, the forensic psychiatrist who performed a psychiatric evaluation, describes Cyntoia's life as a series of bad situations. Born to a teenage mother who drank heavily, she spent her first year-and-a-half moving around among different homes and caretakers. Ultimately, the Brown family, who knew Cyntoia's mother, gave Cyntoia a home. Her stepmother, Ellenette, seems to have been a loving and devoted parent; her stepfather, however, was tougher, where she says he sometimes disciplined her by hitting her because he "felt like it." By age ten she began experiencing sexual abuse at the hands of a series of boys and men, a few of whom were relatives. Asked why she never told anyone about it, she explained that she felt what she was doing was "dumb" and was concerned that people would think of her that way.

On the witness stand, Cyntoia testified that on the night she committed the offense, she had been at a motel doing drugs and having sex with Cutthroat, a drug dealer who had been forcing her into sex for two weeks. He threatened her this night, and sent her out to prostitute for money or face the consequences. Her first – and only – customer that night was Johnny Allen. She testified that he took Cyntoia to his house, where she became frightened after he showed her his guns, and when he reached over the side of the bed

for something, she panicked and shot him. Cyntoia was arrested, and admitted her crime when the police questioned her. But when Dr. Bernet evaluated her understanding of her Miranda rights, it's clear that Cyntoia did not realize that she could remain silent, and that she was swayed by what she perceived as promises by the police to help her get a lighter sentence.

In addition to Cyntoia's unfortunate life experiences, the film explores her genetic background. At the transfer hearing to decide whether Cyntoia could be tried as an adult, Gina, her biological mother, reveals a family history of psychiatric problems and suicides. Gina herself has attempted suicide, has been raped, and admitted to sometimes having homicidal feelings. The relationship between Gina and her own mother, Joan Warren, is marked by tension and conflict, quite evident when they meet for a brief visit. Joan tells how, at a young age, she married a man she then rejected and whose friend raped her in revenge. The family pattern of abuse goes back three generations, and Joan's assessment is that "the genetics are strong."

The decision resulting from the transfer hearing was that Cyntoia would be tried as an adult. She was charged with three counts: first degree murder, felony murder, and aggravated robbery. Her murder trial lasted five days, the jury found her guilty on all three counts and she is sentenced to life in prison. Cyntoia had already spent two years in prison since her arrest; now she faced the rest of her life behind bars. Both Gina and Ellenette express remorse for the way things turned out, and each blames herself for failing Cyntoia. An anguished Ellenette asks, "Where was I when all this was happening to her?"

In a poignant letter from prison, Cyntoia exhibited a mature self-awareness and expressed regrets about the secrecy that guided her life. She recognizes the role she played in the unfortunate circumstances of her upbringing, and strikes a hopeful note about her new-found power as a woman in charge of her life.



Photo credit: Daniel H. Birman

INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN *ME FACING LIFE: CYNTOIA'S STORY*

Ellenette Brown – Cyntoia's adoptive mother
 Dr. William Bernet – Forensic psychiatrist, Vanderbilt University
 Georgina Mitchell (Gina) – Cyntoia's biological mother
 Joan Warren – Gina's mother
 Jeff Burks – Assistant District Attorney, Davidson County, Tennessee
 Dr. Astrid H. Heger – Executive Director, Violence Intervention Program, USC Medical Center

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Juvenile Justice in the U.S.

Who is a Juvenile?

The juvenile justice system is the legal system that handles cases involving youth, generally between the ages of 10 and 18. Under federal law, a juvenile is anyone age 17 and under. Each state, however, can determine the upper age; for some the cutoff age is 16, and in some states it is as low as 14, meaning anyone above that age is considered an adult. Having a separate system for youth offenders is based on the notion that youth are fundamentally different from adults, both in their ability to understand and accept responsibility for their actions and in their potential for rehabilitation. The juvenile justice system is meant to safeguard the rights of young offenders, to protect them from dangers they could face in adult prisons, and to offer them a chance to change their behavior rather than facing the prospect of a long prison sentence.

Juvenile Case Process

1. Typically, after a youth is arrested, a decision is made as to whether the youth should be detained and charged, released, or transferred to another youth welfare program. This decision is based on the existence of a prior record, the severity of the offense, and information from individuals associated with the youth.
2. If there is enough information to try the youth, the next decision is whether the case should be heard formally or informally. Approximately 50 percent of juvenile cases are heard informally, and most of these are dismissed.
3. If a formal hearing is deemed necessary, a decision is made whether to hear the case in juvenile or criminal court, a decision generally made by the prosecutor. Although most cases involving juveniles are under the jurisdiction of juvenile court, some states require especially egregious offenses to be tried in criminal court.
4. The prosecutor files one of two petitions: a delinquency petition asks the judge to adjudicate a case in a formal hearing where the allegations are presented, along with any psychological or other evaluations, and a disposition plan is proposed; a waiver petition asks the juvenile court to waive its jurisdiction so the youth can be tried in criminal court.

Trying Juveniles as Adults

Prior to the 1900s, young offenders over the age of seven were imprisoned with adults. The beginning of the twentieth century saw a shift in society's attitude toward child offenders from one focused on punishment to one favoring rehabilitation. This new perspective led to a reform of youth incarceration and the establishment of a juvenile justice system separate from the adult system. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, juvenile crime rose sharply and a "get tough on crime" movement took hold. The 1974 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act was amended to include provisions that would allow states to try juveniles as adults for some violent crimes and weapons violations, and legislatures across the country passed laws that reflected this aggressive campaign against juvenile criminals.

Changes in laws to allow juveniles to be tried as adults have been controversial, and a debate over how to deal with young offenders continues today. Are they individuals whose intellectual competencies are not yet fully formed and who therefore are not responsible for their actions and deserving of another chance, or are they serious criminals, intent on harm, and fully cognizant of the consequences of their behavior? When it comes to violent crimes, these two perspectives have resulted in opposing arguments about trying juveniles in adult criminal court.

Pro

- Perpetrators should be held responsible for their actions, because the end result of a violent crime is the same no matter who commits it.
- Harsh sentencing acts as a deterrent to youth considering committing a crime, and teaches a lesson about how you will be treated if you commit a crime.
- Kids today are more sophisticated at a young age; they know how to use violent weapons and understand what killing means.

Con

- Children don't have the intellectual or moral capacity to understand the consequences of their actions and shouldn't be treated as adults.
- The juvenile prison system can help kids turn their lives around; in the long run, successful rehabilitation is better for society than releasing someone who has spent their early adult life in an adult prison, because the recidivism rate for someone released from a juvenile prison is far lower than for someone coming out of an adult facility.
- Adults who provide guns used by young people in violent crimes should be held at least as accountable as the young people themselves.



Generally, those on the pro side are more focused on the crime itself and the harm inflicted on victims and on society, while those on the con side look at the developmental stage of the offender as the main consideration. There is no clear line that marks the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood. Developmental psychologists agree that the period between the ages of 12 and 17 is a transitional one, and that adolescents are still in a formative stage of development. Developmental research indicates that children 12 and under lack the maturity and competence to stand trial, while most individuals older than 16 are not that different from adults when it comes to understanding and participating in the trial process. It is the gray area in the years between age 12 and 16 that calls for an individualized assessment of an offender's maturity level in determining whether to transfer a young person to criminal court.

CYNTOIA'S RISK FACTORS: A SUMMARY

As the film describes Cyntoia's early life and upbringing, a number of factors emerge as having possible influence on her later behavior. Here is a brief discussion of each of these factors and how they might have shaped her life. Using Cyntoia's experience as a template for at-risk children, it is worth considering the possible interventions that might have helped Cyntoia and that might forestall the development of antisocial, delinquent, or criminal behavior in others.

Genetic Inheritance

Genetic makeup is not the sole determinant of an individual's behavior or potential, but genetic factors can influence such things as brain function and hormone levels, which in turn may affect a child's behavior. While genes alone do not determine the eventual outcomes for an individual, their role in producing certain behaviors can shape social interactions and other environmental situations for the individual, in both beneficial and detrimental ways. Because numerous members of Cyntoia's biological family suffered from manic depression and other psychiatric problems, watchfulness for signs of these conditions in Cyntoia would have been in order.

Prenatal Environment

Eating a balanced diet and refraining from consumption of alcohol and other harmful substances, along with regular medical checkups, are vitally important for the health of the mother and normal fetal development. Babies whose mothers drink heavily during pregnancy risk developing fetal alcohol syndrome, which can lead to a variety of physical abnormalities, as well as behavioral and emotional problems without any developmental or physical deficiencies. Intervention by a friend or family member, along with a referral to a health clinic, might have kept Cyntoia's mother from drinking heavily while pregnant, and perhaps prevented some of Cyntoia's difficult early behavior.

Inconsistent Caregivers in Infancy & Early Childhood

For their emotional and psychological wellbeing, infants need to develop strong attachment to another human being. This person is usually the infant's main caretaker and in most cases – but not all – it is the mother. Frequently moving among different caretakers in the early years of life is a serious impediment to the consistent, positive interaction that is the basis for developing trust and forming healthy emotional relationships with others. Cyntoia's numerous moves between caretakers in her early life, coupled with the knowledge that her mother had abandoned her, made for an emotional fragility.

Physical and Sexual Abuse in Childhood

Both kinds of abuse are recognized as risk factors for later delinquent or criminal behavior. These factors often occur in an environment of parental alcoholism or a lack of parental supervision. To escape such mistreatment, and the negative atmosphere created by abusive circumstances, a young person may run away and subsequently become involved in delinquent behavior such as drug use or prostitution. Concerned adults who recognized the signs of abuse and reported suspected abuse might have helped free Cyntoia from becoming involved in abusive situations.

Some Warning Signs of Child Abuse

- Nervousness around adults
- Aggression toward adults or other children
- Inability to stay awake or to concentrate for extended periods
- Sudden, dramatic changes in personality or activities
- Unnatural interest in sex
- Frequent or unexplained bruises or injuries
- Low self-esteem
- Poor hygiene



Photo credit: Daniel H. Birman

A GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is an umbrella term describing the range of effects that can occur in an individual whose mother drank alcohol during pregnancy. The spectrum of conditions includes fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), fetal alcohol effects (FAE), alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder (ARND), and alcohol-related birth defects (ARBD).

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is a serious mental illness characterized by pervasive instability in moods, interpersonal relationships, self-image, and behavior, which often disrupts family and work life, long-term planning, and the individual's sense of self-identity.

Depression is defined as feelings of intense sadness, including feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness lasting for days to weeks, impeding normal functioning.

Suicidality refers to the condition of being suicidal; that is, planning or attempting to take one's own life.

Juvenile sentencing laws refer to each state's own juvenile justice laws and sentencing guidelines. Each state has its own cutoff age for defining a juvenile, and all states allow juveniles to be tried in criminal court under some circumstances.

First degree murder is defined as killing another person with malice aforethought; that is, either deliberately and intentionally or recklessly with extreme disregard for human life, and killing with premeditation (i.e., with planning or deliberation).

Felony murder is a rule of criminal statutes stating that any death that occurs during the commission of a felony (including arson, rape or other sexual offenses, burglary, robbery, or kidnapping) is first degree murder, and that all participants in that felony or attempted felony can be charged with, and found guilty of, murder.

Aggravated robbery is the taking of money or goods in another's possession from his or her person or immediate presence by force or intimidation



Photo credit: Daniel H. Birman

TOPICS AND ISSUES RELEVANT TO ME FACING LIFE: CYNTOIA'S STORY

A screening of *Me Facing Life: Cyntoia's Story* can be used to spark interest in any of the following topics and inspire both individual and community action. In planning a screening, consider finding speakers, panelists, or discussion leaders who have expertise in one or more of the following areas:

- Human development (prenatal, early childhood, adolescent)
- Parenting practices
- Teenage parenthood
- Borderline personality disorder
- Risk factors for delinquent behavior
- Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)
- Depression & suicidality
- Working with at-risk children and youth
- Child abuse and neglect
- Sexual assault
- Juvenile justice
- Juvenile sentencing laws

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. What is your opinion of Cyntoia? Was she a product of the circumstances of her life? Did she have control over the choices she made (for example, keeping her sexual abuse a secret from her mother or her association with Cutthroat)? Explain your position.
2. Discuss what you learned about the role of genetics and heredity and how they influence behavior. Talk about the power environment has on a child versus inherited characteristics.
3. In terms of Cyntoia's life with her adoptive family and her other childhood experiences, what information is missing? What else would be helpful to know in order to understand Cyntoia's behavior?
4. Cyntoia and Ellenette, her adoptive mother, characterize their relationship somewhat differently. What are some possible explanations for these differences?
5. Discuss your reaction to Cyntoia's report about early exposure to sex and sexual abuse (starting at age 10) and how it went unrecognized for a long time. How could that be?
6. Both Ellenette and Gina, Cyntoia's biological mother, blame themselves for Cyntoia's troubles. Are they both to blame? How much blame is it fair to assign to each one? Could either one of them ever have prevented Cyntoia from engaging in the destructive behavior that ultimately led to her incarceration? If so, how?
7. Describe how the film impacts the way you think about young people who commit crimes. Do the circumstances of a young person's upbringing excuse delinquent or criminal behavior? Explain.

8. The film raises some serious questions about risk factors that can affect a young person's behavior. Several of these factors were present for Cyntoia; among them her mother's drinking during pregnancy and the lack of a stable caretaking arrangement in her early life. Are there ways our society can mitigate these risks and provide a better outcome for children from troubled backgrounds?
 9. The film also asks questions about how to handle young people who commit serious crimes. Is incarceration the answer, or should a young person be given a second chance? Where do you come down on this issue?
 10. Discuss Cyntoia's self-awareness and the insights she expressed in her letter from prison.
 11. Do you want to address what young people should consider as ways to avoid the problems that Cyntoia encountered in her life?
5. Learn how you can help a young person become a productive adult. Each year, about 30,000 teens "age out" of the foster care system and need to make their own way in the world. Start a scholarship fund in your community or through your place of worship to help pay for higher education or job training for one or more youth. Organize a group of volunteers to collect household goods and help a young person set up a new apartment. Consult the Charity Guide website (<http://charityguide.org/volunteer/fewhours/age-out.htm>) for additional ideas on what you can do.
 6. Volunteer to be a big brother or big sister to an at-risk child. Visit Big Brothers Big Sisters (www.bbbs.org) to find an agency in your area. Find out about other opportunities for mentoring an at-risk child at this Charity Guide webpage: <http://charityguide.org/volunteer/fewhours/mentoring.htm>
 7. Consider becoming a foster parent. The website for the National Foster Parent Association (<http://www.nfpainc.org/>) lists the basic requirements and steps involved, along with other tools and resources needed to become a foster parent.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Investigate volunteer opportunities with a child abuse hotline or with local Child Protective Services. For information visit the Childhelp website at <http://www.childhelp.org/pages/about>. The site also provides guidance on what to do if you suspect a case of child abuse.
2. Reach out to a parent you know who may be struggling. Offering simple support such as occasional babysitting, sharing a meal, or just a friendly ear can help to relieve that parent's stress. Likewise, offer your friendship to a child you know who seems to need some kindness and support. Such things as a friendly smile and an occasional card are small gestures but can be very important to an emotionally fragile child.
3. If your school district or faith group sponsors parenting programs, find out how you can be involved. If no program exists, work with others to start one that offers classes and resources to parents. With sufficient interest, your community may want to participate in the Creating Parenting-Rich Communities Initiative of the Child Welfare League of America. See <http://www.cwla.org/parenting/cprc.htm> for more information.
4. What are the laws in your state concerning juvenile crime? Do you consider the laws to be fair, or do you think they should be changed? Find this information at <http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/statebystate/>.

For additional outreach ideas, visit www.communitycinema.org. For local information, check the website for your area's PBS station.



Photo credit: Daniel H. Birman

RESOURCES

<http://nashvillecitypaper.com/content/city-voices/secours-her-facing-life> - This article provides more background on Cyntoia from one of her former teachers at Woodland Hills Juvenile Detention Center.

Juvenile Justice

<http://www.edjj.org/links/> - This resource list from the National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice contains links to a wide range of organizations, including crime prevention, substance abuse, and mental health agencies.

<http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/index.html> - Building Blocks for Youth is an initiative that seeks to reduce overrepresentation and disparate treatment of youth of color in the justice system and promote fair, rational, and effective juvenile justice policies.

<http://www.juvjustice.org/> - Coalition for Juvenile Justice is a national nonprofit association that gives voice to state-identified concerns and needs, and advises state and federal policymakers on juvenile justice matters.

<http://www.cywd.org/> - The Center for Young Women's Development (CYWD) is one of the first non-profits in the United States run and led entirely by young women. From the beginning, CYWD has organized young women who were the most marginalized in San Francisco – those in the street economies and the juvenile justice system – to design and deliver peer-to-peer education and support.

<http://www.cjny.org/> - The Community Justice Network for Youth enhances the capacity of state-based, juvenile justice coalitions to advocate for fair, equitable, and developmentally appropriate adjudication and treatment for all children, youth, and families involved in the juvenile justice system.

<http://www.njjn.org/> - The National Juvenile Justice Network enhances the capacity of state-based, juvenile justice coalitions to advocate for fair, equitable, and developmentally appropriate adjudication and treatment for all children, youth, and families involved in the juvenile justice system.

<http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/page.cfm?id=184> - This section of the Sentencing Project website focuses on research and advocacy for juvenile justice reform.

<http://www.cwla.org/programs/juvenilejustice/jjfacts.htm> - This site features facts and figures of child maltreatment and juvenile justice, from the Child Welfare League of America.

<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/186162.pdf> - "Child Delinquency: Early Intervention & Prevention" is a bulletin from the U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention that outlines early risk factors and promising intervention programs.

Child Welfare

<http://www.cwla.org> - The Child Welfare League of America is a coalition of hundreds of private and public agencies serving vulnerable children and families, especially children and youth who may have experienced abuse, neglect, family disruption, or a range of other factors that jeopardize their safety, permanence, or well-being.

<http://www.preventchildabuse.org/index.shtml> - Prevent Child Abuse America is a national advocacy group that builds awareness and provides education in the effort to prevent the abuse and neglect of our nation's children.

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/> - The Child Welfare Information Gateway promotes the safety, permanency, and wellbeing of children, youth, and families by connecting child welfare, adoption, and related professionals as well as the general public to information, resources, and tools covering topics on child welfare, child abuse and neglect, out-of-home care, adoption, and more.

<http://www.childhelp.org/pages/about> - Childhelp is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to helping victims of child abuse and neglect with an approach focusing on prevention, intervention, and treatment; they also operate a 24-hour hotline.

<http://www.nfpainc.org/> - The National Foster Parent Association is a nonprofit, volunteer organization whose mission is to support foster parents in achieving safety, permanence, and wellbeing for the children and youth in their care.

<http://www.adoptuskids.org/> - AdoptUsKids has a two-fold mission: to raise public awareness about the need for foster and adoptive families for children in the public child welfare system, and to assist U.S. States, Territories and Tribes to recruit and retain foster and adoptive families and connect them with children.

Mental Health / Alcohol Abuse

<http://www.nami.org> - National Alliance on Mental Illness is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness, through support services, education, advocacy, and research.

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov> - The mission of the National Institute of Mental Health is to transform the understanding and treatment of mental illnesses through basic and clinical research. The website provides a variety of information on public programs and mental health support services.

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fasd/index.html> - This section of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website provides comprehensive information on fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD).

<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/> - The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism website provides a broad range of information on alcohol-related issues, including use of alcohol by children and teens.





Photo credit: Daniel H. Birman

ME FACING LIFE: CYNTOIA'S STORY WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* IN MARCH 2011. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

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COMMUNITY CINEMA is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. COMMUNITY CINEMA works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more, visit <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema/>.

