

Nicole

Look at Me

I'm twenty-one years old and was born in Silver City, New Mexico. I live in Tucson with my mom and my dad. I have a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter. I'm five feet and four inches tall, two hundred and forty pounds. My hair is medium—long, naturally brown, but it is usually dyed red. I have green eyes and light skin.

If I were to classify my style in high school, it would be “chola,” a gangster—bandanas, dark make-up, baggy clothes. I only wore three bandana colors—black, brown, or blue. I wore Dickey shirts and pants, really baggy and falling off. Dickey is a gangster name brand of clothes. I wore lots of jewelry—big hoop earrings, bracelets, and rings. I have three tattoos. The one on my hand is three dots, which translates to “mi vida loca.” It stands for “my crazy life.” On my chest I have 2 Tru. That stands for being a gangster girl—too true to the game. I also have my daughter's name on my back.

My Parents and Family

My mom and dad are very strong-willed people. They were heavily into drugs, but for the last six years they have been clean. We were living in Apache Junction, Arizona, eleven years ago when my mom started beauty college. That's also when they got really bad into using drugs. Both of my parents graduated from high school and had some trade schooling. When I was a sophomore, my dad got his commercial

driver's license. My mom is a licensed hair stylist.

My mom got busted for writing bad checks. When she got arrested, she was in the Florence jail overnight, and it scared her. That's when they decided to stop the drugs and move to Tucson. My dad has not had contact with the court system.

No one in my family that I look up to has attended college. No one older than me has been to college. My cousin, who is younger, is in his third year at the university. My parents wanted the world for me. They wanted me to have everything they didn't have and do what they didn't do. It was hard listening to a bunch of hypocrites telling me my life was supposed to be a certain way when they were going in the opposite direction. It left me feeling torn a lot of times.

I have a younger sister who I feel I helped raise. We are six and a half years apart. When my sister was born, I really didn't like her. I had been the baby for so long that it was hard for me to accept her. Before I knew it, I was taking care of her. There were times my mom would get so high, or she would be locked in her room. Many times I slept at my aunt's house. I'd come home in the morning, and I'd be there long enough to make sure Debbie was awake. I'd get her ready for school, get her something to eat, and get myself ready.

I was angry and full of hate as a kid. I only loved my sister. I loved her so much. I don't want to say that my parents neglected me. I was a spoiled kid. I got pretty much whatever I wanted. Maybe they thought that buying me things made them good parents. Our family was so torn apart by alcohol and

drugs, parties, and everyone trying to be better than everyone else. It was a horrible environment for a kid.

My family got violent when they were drinking. I can't even count the times I saw my tios [uncles] beating up on my tias [aunts] or brothers going at it—my cousins, my dad and my uncle fighting. It was bad!

School

When I started school we were living in San Manuel, Arizona. I pretty much knew everybody there. My mom was involved with the preschool. My memories from that time are really good.

In the third grade I was such a geek. I was a short, fat little Mexican girl with bottle-cap glasses and short, kinky hair. I remember standing at the classroom door with my parents, and everybody was looking at me. That had to be my first feeling of alienation. The teacher welcomed me in, and everybody was staring. As soon as I sat down, the kid next to me made a farting noise. Everyone started laughing. I got so scared—I just put my head down and cried. That was so horrible. I finally made a friend and school was great, especially science class.

In elementary school, my fourth-grade teacher's name was Ms. Fernandez, and she thought the world of me. She used to give us Squiggles. It was a blank piece of paper with a dark, thick line on it. We had to make something out of the line and write a story about our picture. One time she made what looked like a bird's wing, and the kids drew ducks and chickens. I drew a girl in the city wearing high heels, and her hair was blowing in the wind. I was so creative, and Ms. Fernandez wrote me nice notes. It was empowering to say to the kids, "Hey, look what I can do."

When I was eight a scary thing happened in our school. Mr. Mata, a teacher's aide, would always bring in Lisa Frank stickers, stationery, pencils, and erasers. One day he had me sit on his lap and he says, "Give me some sugar." I wasn't sure what he was talking about. He turned his head and stuck out his cheek. I kissed his cheek and didn't think nothing of it. I told my friend Tanya and asked, "Was I not supposed to?" A month later I found out that he had been molesting some of the kids. That was a scary thing.

I was doing good in school. There is nothing more exciting than coming home with that first report card with the teacher's comments about how well I was doing and the potential I have. When you're a kid, you see that you can conquer anything. There is no fear to what you can do. It is great.

Middle school was good. I was in student council, track, drama—my grades had to be high to be in all of those activities. That summer, before high school, I started getting high more often and partying. Guys started coming more and more into the picture.

I went to San Manuel High, and that was my turning point. High school was a completely different world. I had so much trouble. One girl in particular, her name was Rosa Morales, and she started dating my best friend. I loved him so much. Not love, like in I was in love with him, but love like I cared for him. He lived across the street, and I was always over there with his sister. He started going out with Rosa in our freshman year. One of Rosa's friends saw us walking home together and told her that we were holding hands. It made me mad that Gabe pulled his stops away from me to keep Rosa happy.

That's when I let my mouth get into it. Instead of Rosa coming to me, she had this girl who looked like she was six feet tall fight me. When she got me on the ground, Rosa and another friend came in and jumped

me. It was horrible. I could not contain my feelings anymore. The cops were called on me so many times for going after her at school.

We had I don't know how many mediations between the principal, the vice principal, and a counselor. Rosa would sit there with her letterman jacket on (she was a junior when I was a freshman) and say, "I don't know what her issue is." She made up lies and finally I just said, "Screw it!" I was in so much trouble at school, I just stopped caring. My grades were trash. I wasn't looking for support. Whenever someone came along with encouraging words, I didn't want to hear them.

My parents were upset. I can't remember them saying anything or being positive. Right before I dropped out I started using acid and smoking crack. Acid is a hallucinogen. (It's a liquid that I would drop into my eyes.) In my sophomore year, I started hanging around with a girl whose brother was affiliated with the Eastside Brown Pride.

I had two groups: my elementary-school friends, who actually felt some emotion for me and cared about what I was doing, and then I had my homies, who were asking me to go out, get into trouble, and get high. After I started hanging out with the gang guys, it came to a point where my best friends, Mason and Charlotte, told me, "It's them or us." Charlotte was head of the National Junior Honor Society, and Mason's parents were strict. Their parents didn't want them hanging around with a troublemaker known for being affiliated with gangs and known for being high. They were not going to have it.

Hanging Out and Dropping Out

My friend Joanne and two older guys were part of the gang. One night they were at my house, and we had been drinking. My

mother came out of her room and said it was time for them to go. They split, but I let them come through my bedroom window. Our intention was to have sex, but I couldn't because my mom was in the next room. I felt uncomfortable and paranoid. When I went into the hallway, my mom was standing right there. "What the hell are you doing? Who is in your room?" I said, "Nobody's in my room."

As my mom came toward me, I tried to block her and she pushed me. When she opened the door, she busted Joanne and the guy having sex. She kicked them out of the house. My dad was working out of town. My sister was spending the night at a friend's house. It was horrible. That morning my mother called her mom and her sister. They came over and called me every name in the book. My mom said it didn't feel good to hear some neighbor lady call me a whore and a slut.

The next day when my mom took me to school, I didn't stay at school. I ditched and went to a friend's house. I got so high! I smoked crack, I did acid, I smoked weed, I took pills. I didn't even know what pills I took. They could have given me arsenic and I would never have known. I didn't know my mom had called my dad and told him everything. When I came home, my room had been ransacked. Everything, everything from my dresser drawers and closet was on the floor. She found crack pipes, weed pipes. She found money that I had hidden away.

That night I wound up going to Palo Verde, the mental institution in Tucson. The cops were called, and I was taken in. I was so high! I was out of it, and I threatened to kill myself. I came from a small town, and everybody knew what was going on. I was so embarrassed. My mom caught me with guys in my room. Then I was in Palo Verde. How the hell was I supposed to go back to school?

I tried two times to finish school, but I guess I didn't have the dedication. I went back to high school twice and ended up dropping out. After dropping out, my parents and I came to the conclusion that it would be better if I left. I moved to New Mexico to live with my grandparents. The third time I was in Tucson and on probation and got my GED.

Gangster Girl

I jumped into the Eastside Brown Pride when I was fourteen. At the time there wasn't any girls in the gang. It was all guys, and the girls that hung around were known as the bitches of Brown Pride. It basically meant they were the girls who slept from guy to guy. At that time, that wasn't who I was. I was not going to sleep with a guy I considered a friend.

One day we were outside the leader's house smoking and getting high. I was, like, "Jump me in." He looked at me and said, "You're stupid!" I said, "No, jump me in."

"Girl, do you know what we're going to do to you?"

"I don't care," I said.

He stood up and out of nowhere I got brave enough to hit him. I hit him! That's how bad I wanted to be part of the gang and be known as strong enough to be one of the guys. After I hit him, he hit me back and so did everyone else.

For a girl, there is two ways to get into a gang. The guys can pull a train on the girl—she sleeps with all of the guys, one right after another. Or, they can jump the girl in by beating her up for as long as they want. I didn't cry. I had a busted lip and a bruise on my back from the punches. I knew that if I hit the ground, I knew they would start kicking and stomping. I tried to stay on my feet as long as I could. I left them all in astonishment. That's where I got 2 Tru. They told me I was too true for the game

because I took the jump like a man and didn't cry.

Drug Use

I have used heroin, methamphetamines, marijuana, cocaine, acid, and angel dust. The first time I smoked weed I was thirteen and it was horrible. It was with my mom. My mom always said, "If you are going to get high, you're going to do it with me." That way she would know that I was okay. She got me a joint and I smoked it. It wasn't the best parenting choice, but she was already distracted with being high. One mistake led to another. The following year I tried meth.

I went to school high, and there was nothing to do except to make fun of other people. I think the teachers knew. How could they not know? They just never did anything about it. My family pretty much stopped caring about me. I would go to my home boy's pad and knock at his window. That's where I hung out. The guys were older than me. Mike was eighteen. Tony was twenty-two. Some of the guys were my age.

It hurt my parents when I moved back to New Mexico and had my daughter. I had family there calling my grandparents in Tucson, telling them that I looked like crap. I lost so much weight and had bags under my eyes. They didn't know where I was living. There were many times I made my grandparents sick. Once my mom got so sick she thought she was having a heart attack. She was so worried about me, and I drove them crazy. I used drugs every day. It got so bad that I could do an eight-ball of meth a day. That is a lot of meth!

Arrested Twice

I was fourteen years old when I was first arrested. I was in Phoenix with my cousin, who was four years older than me. We were

with a bunch of guys in a park, drinking and getting high. Of course, the cops came and the guys ran. I took off running, but I didn't know where I was going. It was after midnight and there was a curfew. Not only was I busted with curfew, which is automatic community service, but I was busted with under the influence of alcohol and a controlled substance—marijuana is considered a controlled substance.

They detained me, read me my rights, and took me to juvenile hall. They put me into a big conference room. It was really cold, really bright, and all I could do was sit at the table and wait. I was alone and waited about eight hours until my cousin's mom came for me. Believe me, my aunt was not happy. I thought she was going to kill me. My parents never knew about the incident. My aunt and I took care of it. I was in Phoenix for the summer, and I had three weeks to get everything done.

My next arrest, at age twenty, was for receiving and transporting a stolen vehicle, possession of methamphetamines, drug paraphernalia, harboring a runaway, and driving without a license. I didn't know the vehicle was stolen. One day my cousin and I were somewhere, and she asked if I would give some kids a ride. One was a runaway, and I didn't know it.

I had been up for a week on meth. I should have told her I was too high to drive, but I went ahead. She had a rental car, and I remember driving around Santa Clara. I saw one of the sheriff's Blazers come up behind me. I was high and paranoid, so I took a quick turn. Before I knew it, three patrol cars were behind me. The cops had their guns out, and they made me throw the keys out of the vehicle. They arrested me. I asked them, "Why did you stop me?" An officer said, "This vehicle was reported stolen." My cousin had rented the car in Las Cruces, and she hadn't taken it back or made any

payments, so the company reported it as stolen.

I was living on the streets, jumping from home to home. Money wasn't an issue. I was always around people who were willing to give me what I needed, or I stole. I stole anything from clothes to food. I'd make money by going with my home boys and breaking into people's houses. We'd steal televisions, DVD players, jewelry—stuff like that. We'd take the things to a drug dealer or a pawn shop.

I've been arrested twice and have been in jail. I told my parents that I was in jail overnight, but I was in for four months. In jail I played spades all day. For a while I was in a holding tank and had a cellmate. She was out of it, though. She was a tweaker—she used to shoot up, stay up all of the time, and do hard-core drugs. We smoked pot and had drugs. One of the trustees, a cellmate who has a little more freedom, would bring the stuff in.

Sentencing and Probation

Out of a thirteen year sentence, I ended up getting two-and-a-half years of probation. I actually think it was kind of lenient. On the day of my sentencing, the judge told me to attend Narcotics Anonymous. By the time I started probation, I was already clean. My officer didn't see the need for me to go to any type of counseling. If they had sent me right to a rehab place, it may have made a bigger impact on my life.

I had to get my GED within the first year of being on probation. If I complied with everything, in fourteen months I could be off probation. In December, my officer will petition to the court in New Mexico. If I violate or make one mistake, my officer will send me back to New Mexico. I'd go back into the court system and likely face prison time.

My officer is really a good guy. That coming from me, it's sincere. I like him. He's always been real cool with me, but he's been stern. He made me understand that from day one he was not going to play with me. He wasn't going to be the kind of officer who would violate and violate me and just make me do community service. If I messed up once, that's it. He is done with me. I felt that was fair enough.

The worst part of being on probation is he can come to my house whenever he wants to. What sucks about that is that it's not really my house. I live with my family. Not only is he coming to check up on me, he is invading their privacy, their home. He can come in and check the refrigerator and make sure there is no alcohol. Whether it's mine or not, it's not supposed to be there. I can't go out and take a drink. Who knows, he could be there. Or he can show up at my work whenever he wants. That can be kind of stressful. I don't like someone looking over my shoulder. My dad is a hunter—all of his rifles, bullets, and hunting knives had to be taken out of the house.

Probation has kept me going straight. I could have chosen to mess up any time I wanted. It is all based on one decision—my choice. Knowing that he is there looking over my shoulder all of the time. I don't want to have a bottle of wine or tequila in my house and him come in and say, "Back to New Mexico you go." I'd end up in the system all over again.

Finding a Job

Finding a good job without a GED was impossible. I think I applied just about everywhere. When I marked "no" in the high school diploma space on the employment application, Wal-Mart wouldn't even hire me, and Wal-Mart isn't that great a place to work. I applied at a Wendy's and

was surprised that they gave me a math test. I would be dealing with money and had to know how to count. If someone doesn't know basic math or can't speak proper English or deal with customers why would they want to hire you?

My first real job was working at KFC in Silver City, New Mexico. I also worked at Pizza Hut and Burger King. There is a lot of responsibility in any job, but there is no point in doing a job when the pay is not there. I would stand at KFC all day and take customers' orders and pass their chicken. Then I'd have to stay to sweep and mop the lobby, and clean the counters and the fryers. All for \$5.25 an hour? It's not worth it. There was no overtime pay, no benefits.

Now I work in the deli of a Tucson supermarket. I take care of the customers, I prepare food, and I slice meats and cheeses. I've been there nine months, and I love my job. The pay is great. They started me off at \$7.75. After six months I got a raise to \$8.75 an hour. Anything over forty hours is time-and-a-half. I get holiday pay, and on Sundays I get a fifty-cent premium. Not only that but I get benefits—vision, dental, health. After a year I can get life insurance and start a 401K.

Out of Jail

After I got out of jail, I ran into an old friend. I told her everything that happened and said, "I just want to be saved." She's a real religious woman, but she's no dummy, either. She knew what I meant. I wanted to get out of using drugs. They were killing me. I was killing myself. I wasn't looking for a religious saving but a way to get out of my environment. I wanted to save my life.

I got out of gangs in San Manuel, but got back into gangs in New Mexico. When someone is a gangster, it's you. It is who you are, not just the clothes you wear. It's

the way you talk, the accent in your voice, the way that you look at people. Sometimes now, even though I'm not doing that anymore, I catch myself because I'll talk with that, "What the . . . ?" tone of voice. When I see another girl looking at me, right away I'll straighten my shoulders and I'll stick out my chest. I'll start giving her dirty looks because she's looking at me. It comes from the attitude I had when I was affiliated with the gangs—you don't know me, you don't know who I am. Don't be looking at me.

Sex and Pregnancy

I began having sex at fourteen. I had an older girl cousin and my guy cousins. They are a bunch of "putos," man whores in English. They were sexually active with everyone in the community.

I had left my broken-up home because of the drugs and what I had done. I went to New Mexico and found Jorge. When we first got together, it was supposed to be a one-night stand. Those were my rules. I did not want a relationship, but then he started coming around more. We started going out, and he gave me the stability of someone being there, loving me, and for the first time someone seeing me for who I was. I trusted him with my heart and soul. There was so much depth and emotion to him. He was willing to open up to me and let me see. He was just like me. We built an emotional brick wall, and we'd protect ourselves from everyone. I won't let anyone see me cry or see me vulnerable. That was what we could do with each other.

I got pregnant when I was sixteen. I know it sounds stupid, but I was so excited. I was, "Oh, my God, I'm going to have a baby, someone that I can love and bring up in this world!" But when I lost it, it was no big thing either. It was, like, whatever.

I got pregnant again when I was nineteen; same man, and miscarried again. I knew I loved him, but I knew we were not going to be together much longer, and it scared me. Besides, I was so into getting high. I knew that if I got pregnant, I was going to have to stop getting high. It was not something I wanted to do at the time. I went three months' pregnant with that one and was only smoking weed.

Jorge was and wasn't excited about the pregnancy. He was excited, but yet he wasn't willing to get up and go to work. Would he have been a good father? Honestly, no. He was so wrapped up in himself. Back then, I would have said he'd be a great dad. Now I know he would not have been a good dad. He has only seen Leehsa twice. Once was when he was behind bars. Leehsa is two-and-a-half. He saw her for the first time after her second birthday, and he actually got to hold her. He called a month ago to let me know he is having another baby. He is going to be one of those stereotypical men that go out there, have babies, and not take care of them.

He was on parole and was in prison for over two years. He was sent to prison when I was eight months pregnant. He was on probation for commercial burglary and got busted. He left the county he was in. He was partying, getting high, getting drunk. I was here in Tucson, sick with preclampsia. He took it that I was going to leave him and that I didn't want to be with him anymore. That was an excuse to go out there and screw up completely. He and some guys broke into someone's house. As he was walking out with the DVD player, the cops were standing right there, busted him, and threw him in jail.

I have used birth control. The first time I had a Depovera shot, and that worked for a while. I think that's why I miscarried the very first time. I've used the pill. I got pregnant on the pill, but I think it was

because we had sex when I first started using the pill. They tell you not to, but of course I didn't listen. Now I'm on the Nuvia ring.

Being a Single Mother

I have to work all of the time. If I didn't have my parents, I don't know where I would be. There is no way I could pay rent and pay bills, buy Leesha diapers, clothes, and shoes. Every six months I have to buy her a completely new wardrobe. I don't get welfare benefits for her because I make too much at the supermarket. I make \$8.75 an hour. If I make a \$300 check, I get \$260. That goes to paying the babysitter, which is \$80 to \$100 dollars a week. I am constantly buying new aprons and shirts, plus my necessities.

I'm going through that whole crap with child support. I just had a DNA test done because Jorge's claiming he is not the father. Five years of being together, now he is not the dad! I'm doing this through DES [the Department of Economic Security]. When I was getting assistance for Leesha, the information about the father was automatically sent to the child support division. I've been working on this for over a year. Leesha's going to be eighteen and off to college before I hear anything from the DNA test.

Reflections and Insight

I was facing thirteen years in prison and that possibility scared me. There was more things that happened in that year, but when I was in jail for those four months, I had time to do nothing. With nothing to do, I would think a lot. I knew for the first time what my daughter meant to me. I didn't have my daughter at that time. A month after she was born, I called my mom and dad and asked if

they could come and get her. I knew I was messing up, getting high, and I knew I wasn't going to be able to take care of her.

I said, "I can't spend thirteen years in prison." My daughter's dad was not around. I finally saw the hypocrite I was. There were so many times when I hated my parents for doing drugs and leaving me alone. I hated Leesha's dad for not being around—he was locked up. Many times I said, "I want the world for my baby. I want her to grow up with so many advantages. How was she going to have them if I wasn't there?"

I would say to others, "Be careful and don't be stupid." It's crazy because nobody thinks about the consequences of having unprotected sex. I didn't, especially when I was out there getting high. When I was high and having a good time, I would sleep with anyone I wanted. That's something I have to live with.

For the next six years, I have to go once every six months to get an HIV test. A partner I slept with was shooting up, and I didn't know that he had AIDS. A year and a half later, I come to find out that he was dying of AIDS. Thank God, it was after I had my daughter. I could go to the doctor six months from now and find out that I have AIDS. People don't think about diseases like syphilis. I've been reading about sexually transmitted disease. Chlamydia can get so bad it can kill a woman if it is untreated. If a woman is going to have sex, be protected. I'm not just talking about birth control, I'm talking about condoms. Those are the only things that will keep a barrier.

Turning Points

In 2003 I gave up my daughter. I was still in New Mexico and starting to get high again. I was back in with the gangs. On New Year's Eve a friend was murdered. Floyd was killed for \$3,000 worth of heroin. He was given a

hot dose because he used to shoot up—a hot dose is where they gave him a bunch of different pills to get high. I felt it was my fault. The guys told me they were going to do something to Floyd. I figured they'd steal his van or his gun. I didn't think they'd kill him.

They were in the bathroom and Floyd was tying up his arm, getting ready. The guys were making the dose. Someone handed him the syringe with the stuff in it. He just shoots it up, thinking it was the heroin. He had a lot of heroin on him and the guys were greedy.

I had been driving his van and holding his wallet. When the cops found his dead body in the van, they were suspicious. They suspected foul play because the van was ransacked, and they took fingerprints. My fingerprints were on his wallet and on the steering wheel. Before I knew it, I was hiding from the cops. I was so freaked out. The guy who fronted the heroin [that means they will give you a certain amount of drugs without being paid] was looking for me. The crime was linked to me. I could not sleep, started popping Valium. One day I took eight 80-milligram pills in a six-hour period. I started to overdose. I didn't know I was overdosing until someone walked into the bathroom and found me completely limp and foaming at the mouth.

Then I got arrested. I was in jail long enough see what I was doing to myself. All this happened eight months after Leesha was born. I missed her first birthday, I missed her first Christmas. That's something that I'll never be able to forgive myself for, because I should have been there. I was too busy getting high. I didn't see her start to walk, I didn't hear her first words. Those are supposed to be special times. I couldn't stop getting high, couldn't care, yet I said I loved her. In jail I had time to think, "How could I do this to my baby?" I don't want my baby to end up like me. I don't want her to hate

me the way I hated my mom at one time.

Wrap Up

I've seen those thirteen-year-old girls on Maury Povich's show saying they want to get pregnant. They say, "I'll sell drugs, if I have to." What I learned from selling drugs is that there is no money in it. You have to buy the product. And I don't care what anyone says, you are going to start using. Slowly but surely, the using gets worse and worse. People come to you with CDs and jewelry and stuff that isn't money. Stuff that can't be used to pay bills.

I'd worry about the cops coming into my house, trying to buy something from me. What's even scarier is you have to worry about the people you trust and let into your house. If you don't have your shit on you, they will break into your house, take your stuff, and leave you with nothing. They'll take your money, your pipes. There is more fear and heartache and trouble in selling drugs than to go get a job at Subway for minimum wage. At least you have your money and don't worry about some drug dealer coming to collect. Some people think they are going to make millions living a life of drugs, gangs, and sex. All it brings is fear, hate, and paranoia. It doesn't bring happiness. If you are having a hard time in school, keep looking up. As long as you believe in yourself, nobody can take that away. Push yourself no matter what.

