I am from growing up in a double wide trailer planted firmly on the Baptist Bible College, where I learned that although people claim to be Christians and worship the Lord, their actions spoke louder than their words. My bedroom was transformed into a classroom where my stuffed animals were lined up along the wall, harshly graded for their grammatical errors, and strictly disciplined when needed.

I am from cartwheels between thorn bushes, bee stings, magic potions created from pine leaves, elephant ears, water, dirt, poison ivy, and goldfish the size of the sun.

I am from waking in the night to a dark shadow hovering in my door frame, pulling the covers over my head, and remembering nothing the next morning. I am from being held down against my will, being spit on, and hurled insults that left only pain, confusion and tears.

I am from teachers that cared and never ceased to believe in me…until middle school.

I am from the musty odor of cigarettes in a stolen car, racing along back roads with the windows down, flying over the steep inclines to catch air and feel the drop in my stomach as I downed the last of the alcohol I managed to purchase at the raw age of sixteen.

I am from the flash of red and blue, the dreaded noise of the shrill siren, unable to walk the line, the clunk of metal on metal imprisoning me to keep everyone else safe. I am from walking the floor, the terror of seemingly endless confinement, and cowering in fear from the others nothing like me.

I am from institutions where escape was impossible, from dashed hopes and dreams, from a blurb in USA Today, a feature on Primetime Live, and a rejected offer to appear on Oprah…from shameful secrets in national news, shielding my face and hiding my self-inflicted wounds afterwards to conceal my identity.

I am from high school, where everyone breathed a sigh of relief when I didn’t show up for weeks at a time, and surely elated when I never returned. I am from three college degrees after they said I’d never amount to anything.

I am from three divorces, menacing threats, a year-long domestic violence order, a hard-fought and hard-won custody battle, sorrows drowned in a bottle and a heart hardened against the future.

I am from inner strength that took over when there was nothing left, a voice commanding me to make a difference, a heart that overflows with empathy, and a path that is my destiny.