Sophia’s Story

Sophia Pederson grew up in a home that was financially insecure but rarely in outright poverty. Her parents are Cathryn Minello and George Pederson, who were married when she was born in 1989. Sophia is an only child. When Sophia was a toddler, her father George Pederson was accused of sexually abusing a young boy whose family they knew from church. He was charged, but the prosecution was later dropped when the victim and the family stopped cooperating with the prosecution. Cathryn and George had split up due to the strain, however, and George moved out of state. He was rarely involved in Sophia’s life after her 2nd birthday.

Cathryn never remarried. She remained a single mother throughout the remainder of Sophia’s childhood, working in the medical field as a phlebotomist. They lived in a single-wide trailer in a trailer park in rural East Baton Rouge Parish. Cathryn lived frugally, but on the rare occasions when Cathryn was between jobs, times were very difficult. In 1989, Cathryn filed for bankruptcy.

Sophia was a decent student through her early childhood, but was never able to fully be involved because she rarely had someone to drive her to things such as school clubs or sports. Except for socializing with the other kids in the trailer park, Sophia was relatively socially isolated. She had little supervision due to Cathryn’s work schedule. In her teen years, Sophia began binge drinking and using marijuana, usually with the other teenaged kids from the park. Her grades slipped and she dropped out of high school at 16.

Jared Hutchins was a boy who went to another high school in the parish and who often hung out with other kids at the trailer park, though he did not live there himself. He was from McComb, Mississippi, and was couch-surfing among his friends in rural EBR Parish, who he knew because one of his friends from McComb had moved here and Jared visited a lot. After high school, he came and visited again and just stayed. He was popular and charming, at least among Sophia’s social circle. Sophia and Jared started seeing each other off and on when she was a freshman in high school and he was 20 years old and not working.

When Sophia was 16 years old, she became pregnant by Jared Hutchins during an “on-again” part of their relationship. When she told Cathryn about it, her mother was very disappointed. She did not know that Sophia and Jared were sexually involved and was very concerned about the age difference. Sophia said that she would help with the baby, and Sophia continued to live at home while occasionally seeing Jared. When Sophia was still 16, Tamara was born. Cathryn attended the birth; Jared did not. He was back in McComb.

In 2006, when Sophia was 17 and Tamara less than one year old, she and Jared decided to get married. Cathryn gave her permission; they were married in the courthouse and Jared moved into the trailer with Cathryn, Sophia, and Tamara. Prior to the actual marriage, Jared and Sophia had never had a committed relationship to each other.

Shortly after moving in with the family, Jared started working as a stocker at the local grocery store. For the next 8 years he worked off and on at different jobs in the area. He would do well at work for a while, and then get caught stealing or being drunk on the job. He was prosecuted twice for theft and once for DUI. He completed a pre-trial intervention program for the first theft, and pled guilty to the second theft and the DUI. Cathryn helped Sophia get a job in the medical records department at the clinic where Cathryn worked when Sophia turned 18. She has worked in that same job since then.

In 2008, Sophia, Tamara, and Jared moved into a small rental house in rural EBR Parish. Without Cathryn’s steadying influence, Jared’s drinking got progressively worse and his employment less steady. Sophia matured out of her adolescent binge drinking and became a more responsible parent. Sophia and Jared became an increasingly tumultuous couple. She became pregnant with Britt in 2013. She is certain that Jared is the father.

Jared was at times verbally abusive, and they spent time separated on occasion. He left for good in 2015 and dropped out of contact. Sophia knows only that he went to stay with his friend Johnny, somewhere in the west of the state. He occasionally calls, often noticeably intoxicated, wanting to talk to the kids. Sophia does not allow him to talk to the children in that condition, though he sometimes calls in a better state and talks to the children. His phone number changes frequently, and she never knows his number until he calls with a new one.

Shortly after Jared left, Sophia started seeing Charles Blankenship, who she met when she was at a bar with her friends. He works at Kirk’s Has the Works in Baton Rouge and drives a tricked-out pickup truck. Tamara immediately did not like Charles, who was the first person she knew Sophia to be seeing after her father left. Tamara frequently asks Sophia if her father had called, or if she could call him. She has made it very clear that she misses Jared and idolizes him.

Since starting to see Charles, Sophia has increased her drinking, which she had rarely done before Jared left. She goes out with Charles frequently, often leaving Tamara in charge of the Britt. Charles moved in with Sophia two months before the removal, after about 6 months of seeing each other. Since then, there has been a lot of alcohol in the house and Sophia has been inattentive to the children, not noticing Britt’s slow development and ill health, and neglecting the household. Tamara’s attitude at school and at home has changed, and her grades have slipped. When Charles is not around, she often tells Sophia that she does not like him, though she has never previously said that he does anything inappropriate with her. As far as Sophia can tell, Charles mostly ignores the children, who seem to be doing fine.

During Sophia’s relationship with Charles, her relationship with Cathryn deteriorated, to the point where they rarely saw or talked to each other. Unbeknownst to Sophia, Tamara had kept up a telephone relationship with Cathryn during this time, and Cathryn often came to the house when Charles and Sophia were out and leaves before the two come home.

On the night before Tamara made the allegation of sexual abuse, Sophia and Charles had gone out to the same bar where they met. Tamara and Britt were left at home alone, but Cathryn came over while they were out. Sophia got very intoxicated at the bar. They got home around 2:00am and Sophia was already passed out. She does not remember getting home, or anything else before she woke up at 7:00am to her alarm. She got up and made sure Tamara got on the bus to school. Charles got up with her.