

# Coping with the Past

Senior Tina Harding reflects on family tragedy involving her 6-year-old brother

Just three days before Christmas in 2007, the Hardings were living at home together, a family. Senior Tina Harding was just nine years old when her family filed for bankruptcy. Her dad was very abusive - he overdosed on a lot of prescription drugs and drank a lot, and her mom had multiple mental disorders; she suffered from depression and bipolar disorder. Harding's family didn't have enough money to pay for her medication. Her mom worked the night shift at Target and her dad worked with computers, but went in drunk one day and quit.

"A few days before Christmas, my dad came home and told us that we were completely bankrupt. We all tried to sit together and be positive, but we knew that everything was about to go downhill," Harding said.

The next morning, Harding's life took a turn for the worst.

"I woke up to my mom killing my 6-year-old brother. She had slit his throat with a 13-inch-kitchen knife, and had then turned the knife on herself. My brother woke me up screaming. When she noticed that I was there, she turned around and came after me. I ran away and got my dad, then called the police," Harding said. "I couldn't believe that it was happening- I thought that it was all a dream. I couldn't process it fast enough to realize what had just happened."

The police came and took Harding's mom and her brother to Underwood Memorial Hospital in Woodbury. Her brother was still alive when he arrived, but died just an hour after. Her dad stayed with her throughout all of this.

"I was too young to realize how terrible of a person he was," Harding said. "He was extremely verbally and physically abusive to my mom, as well as to me and my brother."

The news of the mother from Philadelphia killing her six-year-old son was all over the Philadelphia news for a month.

"I couldn't go anywhere in public without people staring at me," Harding said. "It was a weird fame. I would walk through the mall and everyone would stare at me like, 'that's the girl.'"

The police had to investigate what had happened, and since Harding's dad wasn't allowed to have custody of her and

her mom had gone to prison, she was placed in foster care.

"My foster parents were really nice," Harding said. "I was so lucky to have such good foster parents, and on the first shot. I lived with them for about two and a half years, and they actually had been planning to adopt me."

Harding's foster family had another foster child, whose biological mother became friends with her foster mother. After that, her foster mother started drinking and doing drugs, and even cheated on her foster father, causing her foster parents to split up.

"Everything started going really bad- I knew that I had to get out of there," Harding said. "I just had nowhere to go."

Harding learned that her aunt and uncle in Florida had wanted to adopt her, so she moved down to Florida and they adopted her the summer after seventh grade.

"The transition was difficult and different, but I've come to realize that it's a good different," Harding said.

"My freshman year of high school, I joined color guard, which changed my

life. It gave me hope, and something that I loved to do, and it showed me that even though life sucks, you just have to get through it."

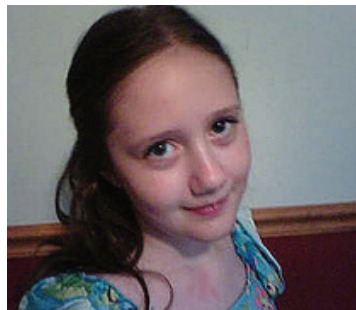
For Harding, everything finally turned around. According to her, she occasionally still speaks to her mother, who had been sentenced to 22 years in prison. She must serve about 85 percent of that sentence - approximately 18 years, eight and a half months - before she is eligible for parole. She must also serve 5 years supervised parole after her prison term, although she received credit for 1,412 days that were served in custody.

When initially charged with murder, Harding's mother pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity. In September of the following year, though, she pleaded guilty to aggravated manslaughter, acknowledging that in December of 2007, she was suicidal on the day of her son's murder.

"When she killed my brother, she wasn't herself," Harding said. "In some ways I forgive her, but in some ways I don't. On one hand, she did almost ruin my life, but on the other hand, if she didn't, I wouldn't be where I am now, and who knows what my life would've been like. I could've been on the streets." *Story by Alexa Kravitz*

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Tina Harding's father, Christian Harding, and her 6-year-old brother, Jarod. Photo courtesy of nj.com, as provided by the Harding family



Tina Harding at 9 years old. Photo courtesy of nj.com, as provided by the Harding family

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