

A Diamond In the Rough



On a crisp winter evening in New York City, Elementz of Life spent some time with a golden California girl. This young woman, Harmony Star Dust, told us a

story that wasn't all pretty. She shared parts of her life as if she were reading from a book, stopping sometimes to remember certain details. Yet, the gaps in her memory are proof that life's trauma can—and do—shock us into forgetting things.

At age 30, she is not ashamed of her life. She's educated and speaks clearly. She has a polished appearance, but life in the sex industry has definitely left its mark on her; a rawness that some people who have lived hard lives acquire. Her body language seems to relay the message, "I got this." She knows when to laugh and when to tap her nails on the table to ease her nervousness. Looking at her, she

does not appear to be anything like the person whose life she is describing. "You can't argue with someone's experience," says Harmony. Born in Venice Beach, CA, Harmony spent the early years of her life surrounded by musicians, artists and unconventional people. After her parents' divorce, she was raised by her mother. Harmony describes her home life as chaotic – at one point having to share a two-bedroom home with her mother and a sibling, as well as a psychic and a drug dealer. She admits that her mother, a drug addict, wasn't always available to provide solid parenting. As a child, she often had to tag along as her mom sold handmade crafts on the beach in order to cover the family's expenses.



If that wasn't bad enough, Harmony was molested at a young age by two college-aged women while she visited her father in Chicago. This trauma was the first in a long line of sexual abuse that Harmony would experience at the hands of older men, family members, and even her first boyfriend, who raped her.

Like many sexually abused children, Harmony's identity and sense of self-worth became twisted. She constantly felt ashamed because she thought she was doing something to attract the very people who were hurting her. Her self-hatred led her to the beginnings of a destructive path. She confesses, "I started drinking alcohol and smoking weed at

13. Around the same time, I was running the streets and shoplifting." As her wild-child life spiraled downward, so did her grades in school. Whereas before the rape school had been an escape from all the turmoil in her life, she now began to fail classes and her relationship with her mom went downhill. "After being kicked out of school, and running away from home, I lived in a group home for a while," she recalls. The stay at the group home seemed to turn Harmony's life around. Her therapy sessions taught her that life had a purpose, but it was up to her to fulfill it. She went back to school and improved her grades, eventually making it into college where she decided to major in Psychology.

About a year into college, Harmony found herself in yet another abusive relationship. Like all the others, this relationship trapped her with feelings of depression and low self-esteem, and resulted in her being \$35,000 in debt. She was only 19 and supporting herself and her boyfriend on a part-time teacher's assistant salary. Even as her credit cards were maxed out and she was overwhelmed with bills, the black hole swallowing her up kept getting bigger and bigger.

It was during a conversation with a college classmate, that the idea of stripping to make money came up. Her boyfriend, who had begun dating other girls even though he was still living with Harmony, was OK with the idea. In April 1996, she auditioned, totally nude, to the strains of "Purple Rain" by Prince, and was offered a job on the spot. Harmony took the stage name Monique. But her double life didn't end with the name.

She spent her days juggling school work and a day job, then spent nights learning a new world of moves for the strip club. "By the time I quit, I was known for my pole work," she says. Night after night, Harmony would work the poles, make lots of money but still cry herself to sleep.

Despite the psychological drain of her profession as a stripper, Harmony began to develop a relationship with God. Because of her hard work and determination in school, she was able to transfer to UCLA. In 1998, she started attending the Oasis Christian Center and soon the long process of healing began. Not only did Harmony discover her own personal value, but she discovered she was able to forgive—the people who had wronged her, and herself.

One night as she was driving to work, Harmony was listening to Kirk Franklin's music. His message was so powerful and seemed so personally directed to her that she went to work and told the club manager she would no longer work as a stripper. The days of having to beat off men who tried to disrespect



her were over. She would not have to endure any more nights filled with lap and table dances. Her dreams of a normal life would become reality.

Two years later, Harmony graduated college with honors with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology. She was in a happy relationship with a man she met at church, who would later become her husband. After graduation, she decided to take some time off – auditioning for acting parts and volunteering. She volunteered at an orphanage in Mozambique for a month and realized that she could use her experiences to give back to others who were in the same position she had once been in.

Harmony went back to school for her Master's degree in Social Work, but found herself thinking about the situations that lead a lot of women to the sex industry—domestic violence, sexual assault, drug addictions. While waiting for her husband at the airport one night, she fished some postcards out of her purse, and wrote a friendly note on the back of each. She then left those cards on the windshields of cars parked in the strippers' parking spaces at a nearby strip club. This small gesture was the humble beginnings of "Treasures Out of Darkness," a volunteer organization Harmony founded.

"We just want to provide women with other life alternatives," Harmony says. Armed with nothing but church volunteers, "goodie bags," (gift bags filled with donated cosmetics and resource hotlines) and memories, Harmony set out to strip clubs in Los Angeles and Las Vegas in order to let strippers know that God loved

them. "God will never waste a hurt," she says, describing Treasures as a 24/7 support group for women in the sex industry. In fact, several of the current volunteers are former strippers. The organization's mission is to help these women recognize their self-worth through prayer, testimony, and the Word of God.

"Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, suffering, and hard times...Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!"
Romans 8.35a, 39b, CEV



"One of the things that get people caught up in a cycle of shame is not talking about being abused," says Harmony. "Tell someone you feel safe with. Keep going from person to person to person until you find someone." Her organization gives these women the opportunity to have someone safe to talk to. Treasures receives hundreds of calls and e-mails each year from women who are desperate to talk to someone about how their lives are affected by working in the sex industry.

Until recently, Harmony worked full-time as a social worker for a Los Angeles family services agency. She has now been happily married for over four years but admits her life is still filled with many challenges. Her relationship with her mother is still strained but Harmony says it's improving in its own way. She is certain that God's spirit is most powerful, and is the reason why she finds peace in her mission to help others and share her life's testimony.

With her warm, open smile Harmony reflects her advice to young women: "Find the truth in God's Word to replace every lie you've been told. Take ownership of your situation and your life. That's a key step towards healing and recovery. Start the journey with God! Lay your concerns and troubles out to God. Nothing takes away the love of God." ✨

For more information about Treasures Out Of Darkness, log onto www.iamatreasure.com or telephone (323) 937-9525.