

I was homeschooled in Virginia from ages 5-17. Virginia's religious exemption statute enabled my parents to remove me and my eight younger siblings from school without any oversight, accountability, or educational standards. Although the statute requires the input of the pupil, I was never asked if I consented. My parents were allowed to sign on my behalf, silencing my voice before I was ever given a chance to use it.

I was denied a basic education, not because of any genuine religious conviction, but because my father wanted total control without governmental interference. In reality, he was not even religious. He merely used the religious exemption as a legal shield to avoid any scrutiny or responsibility.

My mother was forced to bear nine children in fourteen years and was in no way capable of giving us an education. She struggled with alcohol abuse and was completely overwhelmed, isolated, and unsupported. Our father was a violent and abusive man who believed he knew better than everyone else. He didn't value education beyond basic reading and math. Therefore, my siblings did not receive instruction in any subject beyond rudimentary instruction in these subjects. Instead, we were forced to do chores or work with my father on construction sites. My father believed in hard labor, not learning, and made sure we absorbed that lesson early.

In the 1990s, our father went to jail multiple times for chaining himself to the doors of abortion clinics as part of extremist anti-abortion protests. During these absences, my mother was left alone to care for a house full of babies and young children. It was far from an environment where any meaningful education could possibly endure.

We were kept isolated from society. All the people we knew in our neighborhood belonged to the same extremist church and chose to look the other way. When we expressed concern or pain, we were advised to speak to our priest—who was later convicted of sexual abuse. There were no mandated reporters, no teachers, no safe adults to intervene. There was nowhere for us to turn. Instead of receiving an education, I was forced to work—doing labor that no child should have to do. I would watch with tears in my eyes as the school bus picked up my neighbors each morning. I used to wish, with everything in me, that I could just be a normal kid. But I wasn't allowed that dream. As the oldest of nine, I carried responsibilities far beyond my years and had no escape from the isolation or control.

I had no choice but to escape home at 17. I left with nothing—no guidance, no support, not even the faintest clue how to survive in the world. I had no mentors, no structure, no one to help me figure out what to do next. I rebuilt my life from scratch by taking the lowest-paying, most dangerous jobs just to get by. Without an education or any preparation for adulthood, I had no access to real opportunities. Doors that would have led to safety, stability, and growth were simply never open to me.

The social isolation left me completely unequipped to navigate society. I was anxious, ashamed, and unsure of how to act around others. This vulnerability made me an easy target for exploitation. Employers took advantage of me and made me work long hours for little pay because they knew I was desperate and easy to manipulate. I had no idea what I was worth—because I had been taught my whole life that I was worth nothing. And I was never taught to stand up for myself. I was taught that my emotions and concerns were meaningless, and that I had to submit or face the consequences.

I was denied the right to an open future. My possibilities were stolen through years of educational neglect sanctioned by the state. Without mandated reporters or external checks, abuse ran rampant in our home. No one protected us. No one even knew we existed. And the damage is ongoing.

Now that we are all adults, none of us hold our parents' extreme Catholic beliefs. We never truly did. Our biological father fled to Ecuador after learning we intended to press charges for the abuse we endured. Our mother, still a fervent fundamentalist Catholic, believes she raised us perfectly and that we are now under Satan's persuasion. She does not acknowledge the harm she caused, nor the lives she damaged.

More than a few of us have required public assistance just to survive. We've faced poverty, mental health struggles, and lasting trauma. And all of this traces back to the religious exemption that allowed our parents to isolate and neglect us in the name of "religious freedom."

Had there been any adult with legal authority to intervene—someone who could objectively evaluate our situation and advocate for our best interest—our lives could have been drastically different. Instead, we were abandoned by the very systems meant to protect children, sacrificed on the altar of parental rights and unchecked religious privilege.

Our future was not lost—it was taken. Taken by laws that protected our parents' control over our rights instead of protecting children. We were denied a chance to grow, to learn, to live with dignity. That denial still shapes our lives today. We endured a stolen childhood, a stolen future—isolated, abused, and denied an education—all in the name of parental rights and religious freedom.

Signed,  
LZ