

# I Was Almost A School Shooter (Ted Talk)

Aaron Stark

Jun 26, 2018

After growing up in painful, abusive conditions, Aaron Stark was on his way to an atrocity, until simple acts of kindness changed his life forever. What is causing the rise of violence and are our current fears and solutions just making it worse?

My name is Aaron stark. I am 39 years old with 4 children, 2 cats, one dog, and a beautiful wife. I am a stay at home dad; my wife is the breadwinner of the family. I am a comic book fan, a pop culture junkie, and a lover of the sciences. I have more knowledge about superheros, pro wrestling, and comedy than anyone really has a right to. After growing up in very abusive and violent circumstances followed by over a decade if personal recovery, I am now a happy family man.

I recently shred a very personal story of my triumph over my past, and it has changed my life forever. My mission is to let people know that no matter how dark it may seem, there is light coming. We really are not alone.

---

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azRl1dI-Cts>

---

I was almost a school shooter.

In 1996, Denver, Colorado, as a student in North High, in a moment of pain and anger, I almost committed a terrible atrocity.

Growing up, I learned early on there was a strange comfort and calmness in darkness. I was always the new kid. My family was very violent and aggressive, drug-addicted parents. We were moving from place to place a lot. Went to 30 or 40 different schools. Always seemed to be the going to a new school every other week. You woke up at 4 o'clock in the morning by some cops to run across the country to get away from them and then end up at a school I'd only be at for a couple weeks and then have to do it all again a couple days later. I was the perpetual new kid.

And since I also had such an unstable household, wasn't helped by the fact that I smelled really bad because I never had a shower or didn't really have any clean clothes. So I never really had any, all my clothes were dirty and torn. I had a weight problem. I was smart. I liked comic books at a time when kids didn't really like people who liked comic books that much. So every time I went to a new school, there was a whole new set of bullies.

They'd do things like walk up to me and shoot me with a harpoon like I was a whale or dunk food on my head because they said I was too fat.

But the bullying wasn't just at school.

It happened at home a lot, too.

I was told I was worthless by just about everybody in my life.

And when you're told you're worthless enough, you will believe it.

Then you're going to do everything you can to make everybody else agree with it, too.

And so I did.

I wrapped that darkness around me like a blanket and used it as a shield.

It would keep the few that would agree with me close, but it kept everybody else away.

I always had heard in life that there was good people and bad people.

I must be one of the bad people, so I guess I would have to just do what I was supposed to do.

So I got really aggressive.

12, 13 years old, I got really into heavy metal music, and I was the mosh pit when I went to concerts.

The abuse just never seemed to stop.

I got into cutting around 14 or 15 because I figured that there was all this extreme emotion going on in my life I had absolutely no control over.

I had to find some way to find control over something, so I took to cutting myself.

I still have the scars to this day.

15, 16 years old, I ended up homeless.

My parents had long ago kicked me out because I didn't want to deal with their drunken fighting anymore, so I was living on the streets.

I had thought I had pushed all my other friends away too, shoved them all away by lying to them or stealing from them.

doing everything that my family taught me how to react to everybody, which was the complete wrong way of how to react.

But I had no idea.

I was just going on what I was taught.

Finally, 16 years old, I'm sitting in my best friend's shed, who I thought I had already pushed away to by stealing from him and lying from him, laying in this shed with the roof wide open, rain pouring down on me into a dunny grace chair that was covered in cobwebs and dirt, hadn't been touched in months.

And I'm sitting there with my arm covered in blood, knowing that If I didn't do something, I was going to kill myself soon.

So I did the only thing I could think of to do.

Grabbed a phone book and I called social services.

So when I went to social services, sadly they didn't just bring me in there.

They also took my mom in there too, who happened to be one of the largest sources of my pain growing up.

And since she had spent her entire life running from place to place and dealing with social workers and police officers, she knew exactly what to say to get them to believe that I was just making it all up.

It was all just an act.

I was just doing it for attention.

Then they sent me home with her.

And as they sent me home with her, she turned to me and she said, next time you should do a better job and I'll buy you the razor blades.

My heart just got ripped out of me that point, completely.

That darkness that I've been staring at for so long, I just ran headlong into it.

I had nothing left to live for.

I literally had nothing to lose.

And when you have nothing to lose, you can do anything.

And that is a terrifying thought.

I decided that my act of doing something was I was going to express my extreme anger and rage by getting a gun.

I was going to attack either my school or a mall food court.

It really didn't matter to me which one.

It wasn't about the people.

It was about the largest amount of damage in the shortest amount of time with the least amount of security.

Both those places were the right targets.

So I wish I had a better story about actually getting a gun, but that was actually really rather business-like.

There was some \*\*\*\* kids near my school.

That was back in the mid-90s when gangs were still a rather major problem in North Denver schools.

This kid had seen me.

He knew me from my family.

He'd sold drugs to them before.

And he knew that I wasn't really in school.

I was just always at school.

So he knew I wasn't a narc or anything like that.

But didn't know him anything more than a first name.

But that didn't really take anything more than that.

I knew that they had access to guns.

They talked about it all the time.

So I went up to him and said, hey, can you get me a gun? Sure, get me an ounce.

All right, give me 3 days.

That was it.

I was waiting to get myself a gun so I could kill a lot of people.

But thankfully, I wasn't alone in that darkness.

That best friend who had saved me, who I was sleeping in his shed, he saw the place that I was in.

Even though I had stolen from him and lied to him and took in his belongings and ruined it all, he didn't care.

He still brought me in and showed me acts of kindness.

Just simple acts.

It wasn't the kind of overbearing kindness where they come to you and they say, is there anything I can do to you? Is there a program I can get you in? Is there something I can do to make you better? How can I help you? It was literally just sitting down next to me, hey, Would you like a meal? Let's watch a movie.

Treat me like it was a Tuesday.

Treat me like I was a person.

And when someone treats you like you're a person, when you don't even feel like you're human, it'll change your entire world.

And it did to me.

He stopped me with his acts of kindness from committing that atrocity that day.

If you see someone who's in that spot that needs that love, give it to them.

Love the ones you feel deserve it the least, because they need it the most.

It'll help you just as much as it helps them.

We're in a really big, dangerous spot right now with this trend of arming the teachers and looking out for the kids who might be the threat in schools and maybe turning them into the FBI.

What's that going to do to a kid who's in the position that I was in 25 years ago, who's alone and depressed and abused and is just sitting there hurting and someone thinks that they're a threat? So it's turned into the FBI and one month of pain turns into a lifetime of legal trouble because one person thought he was going to be a problem.

Instead of looking at that kid like he's a threat, look at him like he might be a friend.

Look at him like you might be able to bring him into your fold.

Show him that it's just a Tuesday.

Show him that he's worth it.

Show him that he can exist in this pain, even though it's intense, that at the end of it there is light at the end of the tunnel.

I found my light.

Now I'm a happy family man.

I have a father of four.

My wife and my daughter are in the audience today.

And even bigger than that, even bigger than that, the friend who saved my life, he's in the audience today too, because friendship doesn't have to really die.

We have to give love to the people who we think deserve it the least.

Thank you.

## **Appendix: How being human saved my life**

In this heart-wrenching and deeply moving talk, Aaron Stark tells of how close he came to ending it all, and how the simple humanity of a friend changed the course

of his life. Mr. Stark talks about how powerful it can be to show that humanity to others, and how deeply powerful it can be to just “be human.” Aaron Stark was almost a school shooter. As a dark and destructive teen, Stark almost committed a terrible attack. Today he is a happy father of four, and wants to do all he can to help anyone on that path to find a way into the light again, and to see that they matter.

After watching the news coverage of the Parkland school shootings, Stark wrote an open letter “I was almost a school shooter.” This was sent to local news 9KUSA in Denver, and was the feature story on Next with Kyle Clark. This story gained national attention and over 17 million views in a very short time, which propelled him into a life of activism for mental wellness awareness. He has been featured on ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, MSNBC, and also wrote his own article in the Washington Post. This was followed by his viral TEDx talk “I Was Almost a School Shooter” that currently has over 14 million views and is shown in schools, colleges, universities, and all the way up to the Dept. Of Education.

---

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrtIhDaKkwQ>

---

On the night of my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, I was planning on committing suicide. I was going to end my life with an overdose. I had gotten a bunch of cocaine that I stole from my mom. I had gotten a bunch of pills also from her.

She was a walking medicine cabinet and I bought a bunch of LSD off the streets and my plan was to spend the day as normal as possible, and then go to that field behind the restaurant Casa Bonita and end my life.

You guys are all from Colorado, probably, or a lot of you are.

You probably know Casa Bonita, but if you don't, it's a big pink Mexican restaurant with cliff divers and a guy in a gorilla suit, and they have this big village inside of it, and it really is like that.

They did an episode on South Park.

That restaurant really is like that.

But behind there, back in the 90s, there was a field and in that field, if you laid in it, there was a little dip, and you couldn't see yours from the street.

So if you're walking by, it didn't look like there was a body there and up to 19 years old, I had reached a point in my personal depression and pain and a lifetime of abuse and degradation for my family, for myself, and from the world in general, that I was just tired.

I was tired of being a burden.

I was tired of being a monster to myself and everybody else.

I was tired of being the problem that everybody else had to solve.

So I was going to end my life.

But in that day, I was trying to act like everything was normal.  
I'd had interventions in the past, I had people come and try to stop me because of my depression before, and I didn't want any of that.  
I wanted to be as normal as possible.  
So I went to my friend's house, trying to act like a regular day.  
I went to my buddy Mike's house.  
Mike was my best friend at that time.  
He was the best source of good in my life, and he was the place where I was kind of my safe home base.  
So I would go to his house and hang out all the time.  
He was a very social person.  
Mike had a social circle of his own.  
One of these people is this girl named Amber.  
Amber was really always really nice to me.  
She was Mike's friend.  
She was his contact.  
We would always go hang out.  
She was super friendly, super kind.  
We'll walk over to a house, watch movies, listen to music, hang out.  
So I show up to Mike's house with all the drugs in my pocket, and he tells me, hey, we're going to go kick it at Amber's today.  
I'm thinking, great.  
That's a great last day.  
I'm going to go spend it with two of my favorite people, and then I'm going to go to that field, and I'm going to end my life and I feel like it's a good way to end my whole existence.  
Then I get there, and that wasn't how it happened at all.  
I walked into a surprise birthday party for me.  
Ako walked into about 14 people singing happy birthday and Amber had baked a blueberry peach pie and there was a bunch of decorations up and I walked past him and dropped all my drugs in the toilet and that was the last time in my life I ever tried to kill myself.  
But you know what's really amazing about that story is when we left Mike's house, there was no party waiting for me.  
We left Mike's house and he called ahead.  
He said, hey, I got Aaron in the car and it's his birthday today and Amber already had the friends over.  
She already made the pie.  
But they were a bunch of artist friends.  
They got together, they made a bunch of decorations, they threw it up really quick.  
I walked into a fundamentally life-changing experience to alter me to the very core of my existence.

Then my friend put up in five minutes because a buddy was having a party. Because she decided to treat me like I was a human.

At a time when I felt absolutely inhuman, she treated me with kindness and humanity.

Now, I came out with my story in 2018, and I told the world about how my own life of pain and abuse had led me down a path of destruction and almost caused me to commit a terrible attack and thanks to me coming out with my story in 2018, I've had the honor of going around to conferences, and seminars and various events across the country to speak to different audiences about how to talk to that kid in the dark.

When I'm talking conferences, I don't mean audiences like this, which is great, but this is more of a celebrity thing.

I mean more like law enforcement conferences, talking to the FBI for two hours, talking to their threat assessment teams about how can I deal with that kid in the dark and how can I deal with depression and what do they want from me when I go there? I was almost a school shooter in my previous TED Talk.

If you haven't seen it, like she said before, that was my first story that I told on stage.

So what do they want from me when they bring me out there? They don't want to talk about the details that I might have done, or the attack I might have planned, or the victims that might have happened.

They want to find out, how can I reach that kid in the dark and show him that he's human? How can I find a way to touch that kid in the dark and remind him that he's okay and he can make it? And the people that are asking me this, again, remember, that's a normal conversation to have.

But think that the people that are having it are these officers and these agents and these people with badges and titles and guns and full body suits of armor and titles longer than my name that are asking me to find out how can I be human.

It's such a powerful thing, that humanity.

After one of these conferences, I had the honor of standing in.

We've finished the conference and everybody's having this big poker night, okay? And there's poker tables everywhere and everybody's doing this raffle thing.

So you play the poker, you win the raffle games, you get the prize, all right? And the people playing this, these are all the law enforcements of this town, all the school administrators, all the SROs, all the federal agents, FBI, again, people with badges and guns who will handle all the criminals, a safe room for people walking in for sure.

So these people are walking around having their time and I had just finished my speech and this gentleman walks up to me and he looks like, if you think in your head what an old grizzled cowboy from the Old West looks like, that's what this guy was.

looked like he'd just walked in off the Old West, just came in from the saloon.

He looked like he had walked down 50,000 miles of Rd.

and seen some stuff that no one's ever going to want to see and heard some things that he'll never tell anybody in his life and this gentleman walks up to me and he's got tears in his eyes and he comes up to me stuttering.

He says, sir, I just have to say, I just have to say and I say, sir, it's okay.

I can tell this man doesn't want a hug.

He's not a hugger.

So I put my hand on his shoulder and I said, sir, it's going to be all right and he starts opening up to me and he says, son, I have to say, my son, he committed suicide last year.

My partner, he committed suicide three years ago, and I deal with those demons all the time.

I'm always fighting against him and I saw him look up, and I saw him do math in his head.

As he looked around this room of all of his peers, people that have seen him on the job for 30, 40 years, that have never seen him access these emotions, have never seen a tear come to this man's eye, and he's about to cry.

in front of all of his peers and I see him do the math in his head and fight against the fear that he has.

He probably doesn't have fear about anything in his life.

He's stared down guns and criminals and gangs, and he has fear in a room full of all of his peers because he's accessing a part of his humanity he's never touched and I see him do the math in his head and he does.

He pushes through and he starts to cry and we stood there for 20 minutes in this room full of crying.

Two people that from the outside will be entirely different worlds.

I might even be one of the suspects he has to handle someday.

But for just that minute, just that little bit of time, shared humanity saved the day. Humanity is so powerful.

Being human is so powerful that those friends that I told you about that saved my life with that blueberry peach pie, Amber, she's sitting in the audience with you guys right now today.

You want to hear something really cool? You want to hear something really cool before the show? Guess what she walked up and handed me? A blueberry peach pie.

She baked it and brought it to me for free.

People have told me, talking about this story, that somehow I'm brave.

I always bristle at that, because bravery is acting in the face of fear.

I'm not afraid of any of my life. I've owned it. I hated myself for so long. I can't be judged by anybody anymore. I judge myself too much. So I'm not afraid of my life.

But that man who stood there in that room of his peers and opened up that emotion, that was bravery. That was fighting in the face of fear.

If I could inspire him to talk when I'm not afraid of my own life, what can he inspire if he talks? What can the next person inspire if they open up and show that they're

powerful and can be open up and access those emotions? What can happen if we all decide that we can be human? Thank you.

I would like — Amber, you want to come up on stage and say hi? This is the friend that saved my life.

The Ted K Archive

Aaron Stark

I Was Almost A School Shooter (Ted Talk)

Jun 26, 2018

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azR1dI-Cts>>

This video has gotten 15 and a half million views as of 2026.

**[www.thetedkarchive.com](http://www.thetedkarchive.com)**