

## Cary Williams overcame abuse and anguish on way to NFL

**Adopted by his cousin, offered a scholarship by a school he'd never heard of and plucked by the Ravens, Williams found his way**

By [Kevin Van Valkenburg](#), The Baltimore Sun

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The Ravens locker room, even on the quietest of days, is a churning, bubbling storm of music and voices. Most of the time, it feels as chaotic as a busy train station, as crowded and lively as a food market. A high-stakes game of bean bag toss in the middle of the room fuels perpetual shouting and arguing. Terrell Suggs' frequently leaves movies blaring on the Blu-ray player set up in his locker, but he ignores the dialogue to rib his teammates, or the media, with his booming voice. Terrence Cody has music thumping from his iPod speakers so frequently, his teammates dubbed the area surrounding his locker as "Patterson Park," and Cody responded by writing those words on a piece of athletic tape, then slapping it on the wall above his locker.

But in a corner of the room, in an area near the showers that is partially removed from the daily clamor of professional football, you can typically find cornerback Cary Williams sitting by himself, tapping away on his white iPhone. He's a happy person, but he doesn't smile a lot. It's taken him years to feel comfortable talking about himself. He isn't shy, but he doesn't open up to many people. The scars of his childhood healed a long time ago, but the memory of how he got them still occasionally lingers.

If you ask the right questions, though, Williams will tell you his life story. You have to lean in close to hear it, because the chaos of an NFL locker room doesn't pause, or quiet down, and offer up an environment that welcomes deep reflection. When Williams talks about how he arrived at this moment, how he became a starting cornerback on a playoff team that has a real chance to make it to the Super Bowl, it's not just a story about an late-round draft pick from a Division II school who defied the odds and became an unlikely NFL success story. It's also a gesture of faith. It requires a measure of vulnerability.

Because it's the most important story Cary Williams can ever tell.

### **'They're not existing anymore'**

Liberty City — the Miami neighborhood where Williams was born and raised — is about as far removed from the glitz and glamour of South Beach as you can possible get. It's reputation as one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the entire United States is well earned. Violent crime was the backdrop for

much of Williams' childhood. Poverty and drugs were almost impossible to escape. People would argue in the streets, someone would get killed, a funeral would be held, and a few days later, the cycle would repeat itself. Gunshots were sprinkled throughout the soundtrack of Williams' childhood.

"People would get shot a lot," Williams said. "A lot of my teammates growing up, they're not existing anymore. They're dead."

Williams' father, Cary Williams Sr., was determined to do whatever it would take to keep his two sons alive, to keep them from joining a gang, but the burden was enormous. Both father and son agree on this much, even to this day. Williams' mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia when her two sons were very young, and Williams estimates he and his younger brother Ronald lived with her for no more than 10 months throughout their lives. They would visit her every time she checked into a mental hospital, always hoping and praying that this time, someone would help her get better. Those prayers were never answered.

"Every time she'd have one of her spells, she'd go into the mental asylum," Williams said. "That was the majority of my life. We'd go to different mental asylums and see her when she wasn't in the best condition. I felt like I didn't have a mother to a degree, because we didn't have a mother-son relationship. I loved her, but we were never able to sit down and have a real conversation, a heart-to-heart. It hurts me every single day when I think about it."

Cary Williams Sr. will admit, right up front, that he struggled to keep his head above water as a single father. He was confused, overwhelmed, and occasionally angry. He was too proud, he says now, to ask for help. At some point, he told himself the most important thing he could do for his sons was keep them away from drugs, and keep them alive. He had been a high school track star growing up in Dade County in the 1970s, and Cary and his brother never tired of hearing the neighborhood urban legend about the day their father outran a car in a street race. Sports, Williams Sr. believed, provided the only chance he had.

"I wasn't a perfect parent, but I always put my sons first," Williams said. "Cary was such a competitive kid, even when he was 5-years old. I always had him play with kids older than him because you could just look at him and see he had that fire burning inside him."

Sports were structured. Sports were simple. Williams and his brother were enrolled in the local football league at an early age, and he has distinct memories of pretending to be Ray Lewis during a game with his friends. The economic realities of Williams' life were far more complicated. They frequently had to move because they fell behind on rent. At one point, Williams remembers his father having to ride a bike everywhere because he no longer had a car. He and Ronald were expected to make their own dinners because there was never a time in Williams' childhood that he can recall when his father wasn't working at least two jobs. He worked as a security guard for various hotels, and, for a time, at the Miami Herald newspaper. There were plenty of nights when Williams Sr. would beg his bosses at the hotel's front desk to let his two boys sleep in an empty room while he worked, because otherwise, he'd have to

leave them alone at home.

"He always kept us in the latest sports gear, and we'd shop at thrift stores for clothes," Williams said. "He would say 'Nothing is going to be given to us, so you can't take anything for granted.' That helped me in sports and it helped me in life. He was a good guy, and he wasn't stupid. It just so happened that it was too hard for him to do those things for us."

### **Hurt, but saved**

Williams can't remember exactly when his father started abusing him and his brother. The passage of time has sanded down the rough edges of his memories. His father had always been a stern disciplinarian, someone who struggled to control his temper. But at some point, roughly around the time Williams was 9 years old and Ronald was 7, the hitting started to get worse. Williams, a A-student who was enrolled in several gifted programs, started to lash out. He felt like he didn't have anyone he could talk to. His grades plummeted, and he no longer wanted to play sports. One night, he and his brother decided they were going to run away. They spent the night sleeping in a park on one of the coldest nights of the year in Florida.

"My dad wasn't a bad person," Williams said. "He just handled things the wrong way."

It might have continued, but a middle school counselor noticed a series of bruises and cuts on 10-year-old Ronald Williams' body. He was taken to the hospital to be examined, and one of the cuts was so deep you could see the white part of the muscle. When the hospital examined Cary Williams, there was blood soaking through his clothes from a cut on his leg.

Williams isn't sure what would have happened if his cousin, Calvin Golson, hadn't been clued into the situation by someone in the Florida Department of Children and Families. Golson was 25 at the time, and he had never been particularly close with Cary and Ronald because of the age difference. But he was an ordained minister, and he had a job as a social worker. He felt like God had called upon him to offer Cary and Ronald safe harbor. He immediately petitioned a judge to grant him full custody.

"The decision was never tough," Golson said. "I tried not to cry when I saw how beat up they were. They were keeping it hidden. ... Those kids were being beaten to death."

### **A father gone astray**

Cary Williams Sr. has a different view of the way everything unfolded, as you might expect. He admits he got physical with his sons. He admits he made a lot of mistakes as a parent. He does not believe they should have been taken away from him.

"I'm still highly angry," Williams Sr. says. "I still get highly upset sometimes. I felt like, because I was a single father and I wasn't out there running drugs, that the system would help me. I feel like the system

let me down. I wasn't asking for much. They had shelter. They had clothes on their back. I was trying to look at the big picture. Looking at only one aspect of the situation instead of seeing what was going on in my neighborhood made me feel like I was an animal. There are people out there using drugs, using women, and you come take my kids? I'm not proud of the way I had to discipline those boys. If I did it over again, I would do things differently. But I did what I had to do to keep them above ground."

It would be a tidy end to this story if Williams' life was suddenly perfect after Golson and his wife became his adoptive parents. But hurt and anger would linger for years in Williams' life.

"The transition was hard," Williams said. "There was a time when I was a rebel, when I didn't want to listen to Calvin because he wasn't my father. I thank God they never wavered, that they always felt like we were special kids. They could have given us back to the government, and they didn't. They cared enough to take us into their own home, even though they were a newlywed couple who had been together for all of three months. They stuck with us and were patient, and they didn't have to do that."

Family counseling, and weekly treks to the African Methodist Episcopal Church on Sundays, helped heal some of Williams' emotional wounds. Whatever rage remained, he tried to channel into sports.

"He was such a good baseball player, people started calling him Junior after Ken Griffey Jr.," Golson said. "When he was 13 years old, he ended up playing on a baseball team for 16-year-olds. People were always saying 'This kid is going to go to the majors!' He was a great basketball player as well, but he always told people he was going to play in the NFL."

Williams' skills as a cornerback were obvious when he got to high school. He grew to be 6-foot-1, and he was fast and could change directions gracefully, but attending three different high schools in three years scared away a lot of recruiters. After his junior year, he was caught using a false address so he could attend a better public school in Coral Gables, and was told he needed to return to Chaminade High School Hollywood, Fla. Even then, it was a long trip.

"I had to take a bus at 5:30 a.m. just to catch another bus so I could go get to school," he said.

His senior year, no one would throw the ball to his side of the field, and he had only one interception. Florida State defensive coordinator Chuck Amato told Golson he really wanted to offer Williams a scholarship, but he'd just received a commitment from Antonio Cromartie, and didn't have another that he could offer. Williams said his father, who he had intermittent contact with, talked him out of accepting a scholarship offer to N.C. State, convinced the University of Miami would eventually show interest. Miami never made an offer.

Williams picked Fordham University from the offers that remained, but it was never a great fit. Frustration and bitterness from his childhood bubbled up every time a coach barked at him. It opened up old scars he thought had faded. He was clearly one of the most talented players on the team, but he got in a petty argument during practice one day with an assistant coach over why he had to take his

helmet off on a freezing cold day. Fordham suspended him, and at the end of the year decided his attitude was so toxic they booted him off the team.

"It was a good learning experience for me because I had to learn to shut my mouth, regardless of how I felt about the situation," Williams said. "I was one of those guys who didn't care about anyone's feelings but my own, and it was just a selfish attitude."

### **Football exile**

He moved home to Florida, and moved back in with the Golsons. He struggled with depression, and eventually took a job working for DirectTV. He worked with the company for nearly a year, taking calls in the call center or going out in the field and installing satellite dishes. Williams might be the only cornerback in the NFL who has not only installed the league's Sunday Ticket package at a customer's house, but also appeared on that same satellite dish years later.

"It was a humbling experience," Williams said. "It was not one of the best situations for me. I wasn't in the best shape mentally. It was a hard transition. I knew in my heart of hearts, the negative stuff wasn't me. That wasn't a part of my personality I wanted to show. I knew I had to change. I was a hurt kid, trying to deal with a lot of stuff. But I knew it wasn't my destiny to be sitting at home working for DirectTV."

Washburn, a tiny Division II school in Topeka, Kansas, threw him a lifeline. They called and offered him a scholarship on the condition that he redshirt his first year, and he accepted it sight unseen. He knew it was the last chance he was going get to be the football player he wanted to be. He spent two years dominating the competition, intercepting virtually "every pass" thrown his way (he picked off 11 in two years). He left some of that pent-up anger on the football field in Topeka.

Kansas University invited him to attend their Pro Day, and after a strong showing, the Tennessee Titans took a flyer on him in the seventh round with the 229th pick. He spent a season and a half in the NFL's version of limbo, bouncing back and forth between the practice squad and the active roster. The Ravens director of pro personnel, Vince Newsome, had always been a fan of Williams size and speed, and he figured at the very least, Williams could be a good special teams player. The Ravens snatched him off the Titans practice squad, intrigued by the prospect of molding him further.

"I didn't even know the Ravens were interested in me," Williams said. "In Tennessee, I had been off the squad, on the squad, then back off, and for them to come in and give me an opportunity was crazy. The day they called, my phone was off. I went to pick it up and saw I had like 12 missed calls."

### **Letting it go**

He kept his head down in Baltimore, worked hard in the weight room and in practice. John Harbaugh told a reporter how impressed he was with how willing Williams was to take advice from the coaches.

Williams called Calvin and Trina constantly to remind them how thankful he was that they came into his life, and to check in their two biological kids, Calvin Jr. and Aryana, who he considered his younger siblings. He didn't share his story with very many people, but one day, he was sitting by himself in the locker room when Ray Lewis walked across the locker room and sat down next to him. They had never really exchanged more than a few pleasantries. Williams kept thinking about the times when he was a kid, pretending to be Ray in the park with his friends.

Lewis wanted Williams to know something. He too had been physically abused as a child. By his step father. And there was a time when he was hurt and angry, but putting his faith in God helped go away.

"I told him 'All that pain you have, build up your pain to be a better man,'" Lewis said. "Don't build up your pain and let your frustrations come out. That's the testimony. I didn't have the blueprint. My dad didn't give it to me. The only blueprint I had was God's work. That's the lesson you can always carry with you."

During the lockout, Williams traveled to Georgia to speak with his father. They've kept in touch over the years, but their relationship has been understandably complicated. At one point, earlier in his life, Williams had told his father he hated him, and, justified as those words may have been, he wanted to forgive.

"I had to forgive him for what he did," Williams said. "I had to forgive myself too."

He let go of the last bit of anger still inside him. A few months later, he got dressed in the locker room of M&T Bank Stadium and prepared to play the Pittsburgh Steelers as a starting NFL cornerback. When he ran onto the field, Calvin and Trina swelled with pride. They fought back tears as they watched their son — who came to them as a broken boy, so many years ago.

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Cary Williams

Born Dec. 23, 1984 in Hollywood, Fla.

6-foot-1, 182 pounds

3rd year as a pro

Selected in the 7th round (229 overall) of the 2008 draft by the Tennessee Titans

Signed from the Titans' practice squad Nov. 24, 2009

Started his first NFL game shortly after joining the Ravens and played in five games total, making eight tackles

Appeared in 13 games and made six tackles in 2010

Started every game this season, making 78 tackles and defending 18 passes