Every boxer's childhood is a sad one, save perhaps the rare guy like Gene Tunney. It is not a sport for the well adjusted or the well treated.

Successful boxers are spawned in dark places. They flourish, like mushrooms, despite the darkness. Victor Ortiz is one such child warrior.

Ortiz is not the first fighter to emerge from a hellish childhood nor will he be the last. In fact, in many ways, he is the norm. But the odd coalescence of a winning smile, willingness to speak of his sad past and all it has wrought and the stinging gift of punching power and the ability to use it has made him one of boxing's fastest rising prospects. Saturday night he will headline for the first time, taking on Marcos Rene Maidana on HBO's Boxing After Dark series. If things go well, as they seem likely to, it will be the beginning of one life but not the end of the other.

In a sport that has marginalized itself through years of self-abuse, it perhaps would be fitting that its next savior is a boy marginalized by two parents who abused and abandoned him while refusing to do what he has done. They quit.

He did not.

At seven years old, Ortiz came home one day to a poor home in Garden City, Kansas to find his mother gone, abandoning not only her husband but her three children. He was just a boy but his childhood ended that day, although it was already well destroyed.

"I came home and she was gone,'' Ortiz said. "Everything was gone. My little brother (Temo) was crying. I just sat down and watched a whole episode of Power Rangers. I never got to watch it all because I always had to go to the gym. My dad came in and asked me why I wasn't at the gym. I told him Mom didn't come home.

"I hated that lady. I drew her a card once with a little rose on it and I gave it to her. She just threw it down and said, 'What do I want that shit for?' That's when I picked up boxing. Then my Dad started screwing up, drinking.''

Who can understand exactly how a family falls apart? Certainly not a boy of 7 or 10 or even one today of 22. Who can understand all that leads to the kind of fractures that came when Ortiz's father snapped like a dry twig. As for many troubled kids, boxing became a refuge for Ortiz but it was often a violent one. Not long after his mother left, his father spiraled into bleary-eyed alcoholism, rising up it seemed only to beat one of his kids. Most often it was young Victor, who wanted only to sing in the school choir. His father beat him until he decided boxing was a wise course of action.

"I didn't want to box,'' Ortiz recalled. "I wanted to watch Power Rangers and sing in the school choir but if I went to the gym my father treated me nice. If I didn't, he smacked me around.''

He smacked him around even when he did go to the gym too but usually only when he lost a fight, which thankfully wasn't that often. The first time it happened Ortiz was 24-0 and came out on the wrong end of a decision that could have gone either way. His father didn't see it like that.

"My trainer (the late Ignacio "Bucky'' Avila, to whose 87-year-old wife Ortiz still makes a phone call after every fight), he was like a Dad to me. He told me it was all right but my Dad whipped my ass in front of the crowd. Smacked me around right in front of every body. The day I knew he left, that was a good day.''

The father couldn't take the pressure and so one day he just walked out too, abandoning three kids in a trailer with no electricity. Ortiz, 12 years old and adrift, lived there with his younger brother and older sister for three years, working in corn fields when he could, going to school, fighting, hiding the fact they were on their own until someone from social services finally found out. As with most of the troubles he's seen, fists were involved.

"They caught us because of me fighting in school,'' Ortiz recalled sheepishly. "I guess I had a lot of anger inside me.''

Wonder why?

Soon he was sent into foster care, living with a family he calls "lovely people but they weren't living the same lifestyle as me. They were stable, strong, loving, always hugging each other and I'm not into that.''

Although he credits the Ford family for helping him grow it is Bucky Avila who he believes saved him. More than that, he taught him a skill. He taught him how to fight, switching him from conventional style to southpaw for added power in his lead hand and directing him to a 141-20 amateur record.

By then his older sister, a young teen-aged mother herself, got custody of him and his younger brother, Temo, and moved them to Denver. For a while he trained in the gym of the old heavyweight contender Ron Lyle. An ex-con who made a life for himself in boxing who will always be remembered for the amount of times he knocked George Foreman down one night before Foreman finally stopped him, Lyle took him aside after he learned the kid's sad story and told him something Ortiz still remembers.

"Victor,'' Ortiz recalled him saying, "if I can come out of prison (he did seven years for second degree murder in a gang fight) to get to the top and fight Ali, there's no reason in hell you can't make it too.' He made me believe anything is possible.''

In boxing it often is. A life can be reclaimed from ashes by a sport that demands so much self-discipline from its practitioners. Maybe that's why Ortiz survived but there was something else going on too. Something Robert Garcia, a former fighter and trainer from Oxnad, Calif., saw in Ortiz when he was still an amateur.

They were all at a national tournament when Garcia realized Ortiz was using his per diem

money not to eat but to buy his younger brother a pair of shoes for school. When he later learned Ortiz had been evicted from their apartment in Denver, he talked him into making another fateful move. He left for California to continue his apprenticeship at Garcia's gym in Oxnard. It was there that he met a lawyer named Rolando Arellano, who would become his manager. Having once served in the same role for another deeply troubled kid who became a world champion and a huge money maker, Fernando Vargas, Arellano knew what he was getting into and he knew he needed help if Ortiz's skills were going to change his life.

There are far more skilled boxers than there are successful ones. Many things can derail a young man who starts life the way Ortiz did and because boxing has made itself a niche sport through it own endless self-abuse the road is even steeper to success. Fortunately for Ortiz beyond skill he also has Arellano and well-connected veteran fight manager Shelly Finkel handling his affairs; and through them Oscar De La Hoya's Golden Boy Promotions became intrigued by not only his boxing ability but his survival skills and his winning smile.

"I look at my whole life and I just want to do something big,'' Ortiz said... and he's getting close.

He nearly did it before in 2004 but lost in the Olympic Trials. His support group in California wanted him to stay amateur and wait for 2008, when he'd only have been 21, but he felt he'd already been supported too long by the Garcia family and Arellano and turned pro. Almost instantly he was a hit, attacking opponents with the kind of fury that comes only from dark places. That led to his only loss, a disqualification in his eighth fight for hitting on the break, but it didn't slow down his progress. After Golden Boy got involved, doors began to open and now HBO, the cable giant in boxing, seems to have adopted him as well.

At 24-1-1 with 19 knockouts, "Vicious'' Victor Ortiz is on his way to turning a nightmare into a dream. Some, including De La Hoya himself, have said he is the future of boxing for Golden Boy and perhaps he is but he saw too much too soon to listen too often to anyone with promises in their mouth.

"I listen to that stuff and it goes in this ear and I let it go out the other ear,'' Ortiz said. "I don't take anything for granted. I question myself a lot. The pressure of hearing 'you won't be nothing, you can't be nothing' gave me fuel to try and keep on a straight path.

"It's depressing at times. I won't lie to you. I sit down and cry sometimes but God put those obstacles in my way to help me. Everyone makes mistakes. My parents made very big ones but I ask myself, 'How can I complain?' My life is OK. With God's help I'll make a statement. I'll make something of myself.''

At that Victor Ortiz sat back and smiled. It was the brilliant, 1,000-watt smile if someone who has known the depths but chosen not to stay there. It was the kind of smile that sells as long as it is accompanied by the most important thing in boxing.

"You got to win,'' he said. "I understand that.''

One would imagine so.