



## Not a Foster Care Statistic

"I started out my life in state care, and then spent ten years with my biological family before being returned to the state. I was abused at home, bullied, and not expected to amount to much as a foster kid. My father was a drug addict and my stepfather continually abused my siblings and me. Neither of my parents graduated 8<sup>th</sup> grade and no one in my family ever finished college. Yet, I did not want to be just another foster care statistic. I also wanted other kids to know that there is another option. Life doesn't have to be what you thought it was going to be. You have to want better. You can't wallow in self-pity. You have to want to get out of it."

Ashley is well on her way to blazing a trail for many to follow. She is about to obtain an associate degree from State Fair Community College and is headed toward a goal of obtaining a masters in social work. She says she will definitely "walk" across the graduation ceremony platform because she has people who believe in her, have supported her, and will be watching. At age 18, Ashley accepted an invitation from her nurse practitioner to attend a church service. She didn't like it at first but kept going. Slowly, over the next 13 years, her nurse practitioner's church, Community United Methodist, has become the family she never had. Ashley says the unconditional love she received opened up her heart and moved her past anger toward God for allowing her abusive childhood. "I was stubborn, but God was with me. I look back at times I should have died. 5 years ago I rolled my car 7 times and was trapped but made it out. I overdosed and was in a coma. Shouldn't have made it, but did." Three years ago, Ashley accepted Christ and was baptized. She says these have been the best years of her life since opening herself to the love of Christ and experiencing life in God's will.

Ashley's church referred her to Love INC for help learning practical life skills. "When I aged out of foster care at 18, I got my own apartment but was not prepared to manage finances. I did not know how to balance a checkbook and used cash for everything. This often became a problem when I needed records of my spending and had none. Once I had to pay a car payment twice because I could not prove I had already paid it." Ashley enrolled in Love INC's Extra Mile 16-week, high accountability money management program and learned some much needed financial basics like opening a bank account, using a debit card, and tracking her spending. "But, it was a lot to take in and I did not take it seriously enough. I wasn't ready to listen to advice about getting into an apartment I couldn't afford." A year later, Ashley asked if she could take the course again and now feels that the principles she has learned will be a part of her life forever. "I now know where my money is going and, for the first time, have saved enough for a large purchase." Ashley is excited to be able to pay cash for a set of much needed tires for her car. She is also thrilled about the amount of debt she has reduced and the sense of stability she has gained.

Ashley says, "Many mamas have stepped up to raise me." She believes that the value others have placed on her has helped her value herself and her future. "I made a promise to myself to not have kids unless married and in a stable relationship. And with a college degree. I'm also learning to be thankful for my job. There are good parts and hard parts, but I am thankful and going to stick with it.

Love INC is helping Ashley get into an income-based housing program that will make completing college without debt more feasible. Her Extra Mile coaches and church family will be there to cheer her on toward her goal of a professional career helping kids who grew up like she did. Already we are encouraging her to tell her story as many need the hope it brings. Ashley agrees and would like to write a book this year. When asked what she would like to call it, she said "Hope in the Face of Adversity"!

