

Student finds success after foster care

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By **LESLEY DWYER, correspondent**



Luella Nichols says her favorite part of living on her own outside of the foster care system is the freedom. (Photo by Leslie Dwyer)

In most ways Luella Nicholas is a typical college student. She lives in a studio apartment, has textbooks scattered throughout her car and sustains herself mostly on pizza. The difference is that at only 19 years old, Nicholas is solely responsible for herself and has life experience to trump most adults.

She has witnessed domestic violence and was a victim herself. She's dealt with police officers and social workers. She's seen the menacing effects of drugs and alcohol on her loved ones. And she once met a boy who made her say, "My story isn't that bad."

The boy had watched his mother get stabbed and was stabbed himself trying to defend her. Nicholas met him in a foster home. She can't remember exactly how many homes she lived in but thinks it was six or seven.

Her biological father was imprisoned for molesting two children when Nicholas was just a year old. His release date is 2026. She was raised by an abusive stepfather and a mother who accepted the abuse against herself and her children. At 12 years old, Nicholas was placed in foster care. But both despite and because of her circumstances, she now feels ready to succeed.

Nicholas' struggles have matured her into a tough and determined young woman. And because she stayed in the foster care system through age 18, her education up to a bachelor's degree is paid for by the state. She is also given a monthly stipend of \$1,256 until she turns 23. Pell grants help pay for textbooks and fees.

In addition, the Sarasota Housing Authority subsidizes her rent through a program called SRQ Class. The two-year rental subsidy is a joint venture between the city, county, housing authority and YMCA. They carved out 10 "super-preference" HUD section 8 vouchers to target unaccompanied homeless youths in the community.

"They're hanging on by their fingernails trying to stay in school and do the right thing," said Bill Russell, President and CEO of the Sarasota Housing Authority. "They can easily fall through the cracks and become someone who is really dependent on government programs, which we're trying to prevent."

Nicholas paid \$50 of her \$650 rent for the first year and now pays \$250 in her second year. She also receives life skills training on everything from budgeting to putting out a grease fire.

Moving around

Nicholas was still a little girl expecting to reunite with her family when she was shuffled in and out of the first few shelters and foster homes. Hearing about case plans from social workers, she assumed each box would get checked and she'd be headed home soon.

But as she moved from shelters to family foster homes and then on to group homes, her case plan was never completed. And Nicholas had grown into a teenager who understood a family reunion was not in her future.

She moved every eight months on average. Sometimes because of room availability, but Nicholas freely admits that more often it was because of her own behavioral issues.

"I was still going through therapy, so I still had baggage. I would get into arguments with some of the foster parents," she said. "It was just in my nature because of how I grew up. I didn't want to listen to authorities at home."

With a general lack of trust, guidance and support, Nicholas is not an unusual case. Only five out of the 120 foster home families in Sarasota, Manatee and DeSoto counties will take teenagers.

"The frustration we have is that people have this aversion to teenagers because of the word teenager," said Lucia Branton, director of media and external affairs for the Safe Children Coalition.

Branton wishes more foster parents could see past the bad behaviors to the hurt, angry children hiding underneath.

"There's nothing in Luella that would be different from our community kids, other than that she's had to endure trauma at a young age," she said.

Focusing on school

Once in foster care, Nicholas made school her outlet. The last F she ever received was in sixth grade. She started earning A's. And once enrolled in high school at the Sarasota Military Academy, she took off.

Nicholas took all honors classes, was the number one state raider and became a leader to lower classmen. But all the while she continued to struggle within the foster care system until she says something "just clicked" during her sophomore year.

"I got to see a part of who I was, and who I wanted to become was really important to me," Nicholas said. "I'm the only person in my family to graduate high school. I don't want to be just the average person. I want to stand out."

And in doing so, Nicholas is defying bleak statistics: Less than 3 percent of foster children graduate college.

Nicholas is taking 15 credits a semester at State College of Florida, with a 3.5 grade point average. She's still deciding on a major but has narrowed it down to either nursing or law enforcement. She has also worked her way up to assistant manager at Papa John's.

And while responsible for herself, Nicholas is not alone. She's been working with Branton for 10 years, is still in touch with her guardian ad litem and recently went horseback riding with one of her former foster families. She has turned friends into family and has also forgiven her mother, who she still sees a couple times a month.

Between short-term plans of earning a degree and long-term plans of having her own children one day, Nicholas wants to travel and have fun.

"I want to go out and have that fun to replace what was taken," she said.

And she wanted to speak directly to those foster children who are still navigating the rules of an overwhelming system without any freedom to make decisions for themselves.

"Stick through it. There were so many times where I just wanted to get out. But it's totally worth it now that I'm at the end."