

On the Road to Achieving Independence and Personal Success:

Ashley's Story

Ashley's story of resilience and success is the kind of story that makes long days and hard work worth it for social workers, parents, teachers and others who work with youth in care.

Ability to Accept Help

But, why Ashley? How was she able to thrive and move forward when others experience challenges and struggles? In this situation, it seems like there was a particularly good match between Ashley's own motivation to make it and that of the staff of Marathon County Social Services Department to empower her to succeed.

"Not all of the kids I work with are willing to accept the help we're offering. But Ashley does," says Carrie Schjoth, Ashley's independent living worker. "I always tell her, 'Ashley, you're making me look good!'"

Even at age 21, Ashley still reaches out to Carrie and others in the Department, although Carrie also says that, "the less I hear from her, the better I know she's doing."

Aside from personal determination, Carrie says that there were a couple of other factors

that contributed to Ashley's success. "She was never into the drug and alcohol scene. It just wasn't an issue," she says.

Ashley didn't have any other support system to speak of except the Department, and she realized that their resources were assets that were very beneficial.

Ultimate Motivation

But what contributed most to Ashley's success was her daughter Melissa.*

"My daughter has always been my inspiration and, because of her, I have wanted to continue my career after high school," says Ashley.

"I look forward to one day having a job in the human services field."



Ashley, on the Journey Home Bus Tour

Carrie concurs about both Ashley's motivation and her chosen field. "She'll do well there. She has the perspective of having been in the system that not all other workers have."

The Beginning of Ashley's Journey in Foster Care

Ashley was 14 when she first entered the foster care system. She was an only child who

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lived at various times with both her mom, who had mental health issues, and her dad and his wife. Ultimately, she wasn't able to live with either parent.

She says that she liked her first foster home, a single mom and her daughters. But when she was 15, she became pregnant and, for a variety of reasons, she wasn't able to stay in that foster home. She moved to a second home where she had her daughter and they stayed there until Ashley turned 18.

Support and Resources from Marathon County

While Ashley did a fine job as a single mother and high school student, it was after high school when she really blossomed. Ashley was able to get a job, get an apartment, have her daughter move in with her, get a car, get a driver's license and graduate with an associate's degree from North Central Technical College.

But Ashley admits that she couldn't have done this without the support of Carrie and the others at Marathon County and it's clear how much they care for her.

When Ashley's ongoing worker was transferring the case to Carrie, she made sure to tell Carrie to look out for Ashley.

And once during a staff meeting with some news that was less than uplifting, Carrie asked the supervisor if she could change the topic to some good news about Ashley, which brightened up the meeting.

Carrie taught Ashley to drive, but because of liability issues, Ashley had to get her own car

and insurance.

"She needed her license," says Carrie. "It was not practical to be using public transportation when she had a child in daycare and she was in college."

Carrie goes on to say, "As a county employee,

"My daughter has always been my inspiration, and because of her, I have wanted to continue my career after high school"

I was not allowed to let Ashley drive my vehicle, so in order for me to be able to assist her with learning to drive, she had to have the car and it had to be registered and insured. That's a huge expense for

someone just starting out but again, Ashley found a way to make it happen. I drove Ashley's car to the DMV and then was able to teach her how to drive after that."

Carrie also talks about another employee at Marathon County (who didn't know Ashley) who was particularly good with resumes and having that person help Ashley with her resume.

When it was time for Ashley to get her first apartment—shortly after she graduated from high school—it was Carrie who went with Ashley to help her with the lease.

"I didn't want her to get raked over the coals," Carrie says, "So I asked if it was okay if I explained the situation." As it turned out, however, the landlord was a "super nice guy" and worked with Ashley and Carrie.

Ashley ended up moving from that apartment after her first year there because it wasn't in the best neighborhood.

But even two years later, the landlord remembered that there was a need for

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housing for young adults aging out of the foster care system and he became involved with a church that was looking for ways to help the community.

It's likely that Ashley didn't set out to be an ambassador to help other kids, but by being such a model tenant, she did just that. And the landlord, for his part, was part of the greater community effort that most kids who have aged out of the foster care system desperately need.

Giving Back

Beyond her busy schedule of school, work, parenting and daycare, Ashley has also found time to volunteer with Marathon County's Community Advisory Panel. One of the ideas that the panel came up with in 2012 was to have a "Journey Bus Tour" event, where community participants boarded a bus to learn first-hand about the foster care process through the eyes of a child.

The bus took participants to such places as child services, court, Child Advocacy Center, and the Family Resource Center, while people who work in the system talk about their roles. Carrie remembers Ashley saying, "This is something I want to do," and Ashley talked about what foster care is like from the perspective of a youth who was in the system.

Ashley would have also liked to have applied for some of the foster care internships and other opportunities throughout the U.S., but she knew it would have been too hard with a young child and there was no way she would leave Melissa for the summer.

A Parent's Love

"I was never worried about Melissa landing in the system. Never. Ashley would always

Ashley's Advice to Foster Parents and Youth in the Child Welfare System

- ◆ Always follow your dreams, because if you apply everything you have, you will truly go far.
- ◆ Remember to give children possibilities and choices. Don't push them too much.
- ◆ Social workers should offer support or guidance whenever possible and always try and allow children to make their own decisions whenever possible.
- ◆ Social workers should also be open and honest with the children they work with.

protect her first," says Carrie. "Just because you're young doesn't make you a bad parent and, in this case, it might even make her a better parent. Ashley always reported if Melissa got hurt—just minor bumps and bruises—and I would tell her, 'You don't need to do that. Melissa has never been removed from your care.'"

When you talk to Ashley, you expect that the story will leave you in tears. Except you soon realize that she's mature, calm and sounds like most any other mother. She is who she is and does what she does because she wants the best for her child, just like parents have been doing for ages.

"I want Melissa to never be afraid to reach for whatever opportunities she wants," says Ashley. "I want her to find success in whatever area she pursues and know that I am always here for her."



**Name has been changed for privacy.*