



CELEBRATING 10 YEARS with STORIES

My name is Jenna and I am a foster youth. I am you.

At 10 my dad died in a terrible accident. At 15, I entered foster care because my mom lost her job and turned to drinking and cocaine as comfort. In the three year span between 15 and 18, I was shuffled between three foster homes and two group homes. I went to 4 different high schools, never staying in one long enough to make any true friends or join any clubs. I rarely knew anyone for longer than 6 months, that instability made it difficult to function socially.

When I was 16, I met my CASA volunteer Dot for the first time. I was living in my third foster home and she would visit me there. At first I didn't like her. I thought she would leave me like everyone else after a short time, so I wasn't interested in talking to her or telling her anything about myself. But Dot was different. She kept coming to see me just like she said she would, every two weeks. After awhile, I started to trust her and confide in her like I used to with my mom before she started doing drugs. Dot gave me the support and structure I so badly needed.

Before my 17th birthday, Dot stated talking to me about what I would do if I had to live on my own. We talked about college and working and what I wanted to do. My mother was long gone and I had no other real family that I knew of. My foster families were nice, but I knew that after I turned 18, I wasn't their problem anymore, which meant I would be on my own – aged-out of the foster care system. Luckily, I had Dot to help prepare me for life on my own.

Dot had always encouraged me to do well in school and graduate from high school. When she could, she would check my homework and help me with projects. Dot always said that education was the first step for me to succeed. Thankfully I listened to her and was able to, "by the skin of my teeth," as Dot would say, graduate from high school.

But Dot didn't stop there. She talked to me about what I wanted to do, what kinds of options I had and made me think about how I would take care of myself. She brought me information about college, trade schools, the military and made me think about my future in a way I never had. She even showed me how to apply for scholarships and encouraged me to stay in foster care past my 18th birthday, so I could receive additional help and money towards college.

I knew that there was little room for me to make errors, test the waters or find out who I was. My decisions regarding my own life had to be well thought out and planned in advance because I had no family that would pick me up if I failed. But I did have a CASA. Dot showed me the tools

I needed to make decisions and plan for my future. She gave me the courage to live on my own simply because she believed in me. I do not know what would have happened to me without her.

With Dot's encouragement, I stayed in foster care. I am living in independent housing and attending trade school. I want to be an electrician, just like my dad was. Because of Dot, I know what it takes to be an adult. I have a long way to go but at least I have the comfort of knowing that someone is looking out for me.

Jenna's story is just one among the 700 children who are in the foster care system in Atlantic and Cape May Counties. There are still many more children, who have stories like Jenna's, that need a helping hand. Will you help lift up their voice? To donate or volunteer please call (609) 601-7800 or visit www.atlanticcapecasa.org.