

A FIRST PERSON STORY OF EDUCATION HOPE AND SUPPORT

How Education Helped Me Build a Future Beyond Foster Care

One former foster youth shares how school became a place of safety, direction, and possibility

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Barnaby at graduation after continuing his education while working and building an independent life

At sixteen, I did not know exactly where my life would lead. I only knew that education gave me somewhere to go.

School Became My Way Forward

When I was sixteen, I was living in a group home. The adults around me often spoke about my future, but from where I stood, the future felt less like a plan and more like a question. Where would I live? How would I support myself? Who would I call when I did not know what to do?

Those questions are familiar to many teenagers in foster care. Other students may be thinking about homecoming, sports, or where they want to spend the summer. A young person in care may also be thinking about court dates, case plans, a possible move, or what will happen when services end. It is difficult to imagine college when so much of your energy goes toward getting through the present.

For me, school created a different kind of space. My circumstances did not disappear when I opened a textbook, but they no longer controlled every part of my attention. In class, effort led somewhere. An assignment had a deadline. A course had a finish line. Credit by credit, I could see proof that I was moving forward.

I began taking online college courses through Great Falls College Montana State University while I was still in the group home. I was only sixteen, and I did not have every step mapped out. Starting mattered more than having a perfect plan. Each completed course made the next one feel possible.

Growing Up While Continuing College

I later transferred to Montana State University in Bozeman. Then COVID changed the world, and it changed my plans. At eighteen, I moved to the Grand Canyon and transferred to an online program so I could continue my degree while working full time. I finished my Bachelor of Science in General Business by carrying school with me through change rather than waiting for life to become easier.

That period taught me what perseverance actually looks like. It is not a speech or a single brave decision. Sometimes it is logging into class after a long shift. Sometimes it is asking for help when you would rather pretend you understand. Sometimes it is completing one assignment while worrying about money, housing, work, and everything else adulthood has placed in front of you.

After earning my bachelor's degree, I worked as a server on a cruise ship in Hawaii and began my first MBA. Later, after finishing that degree and saving money, I moved to Nashville, Tennessee, to continue building my career. I returned to school for a Master of Science in Operations Management. Now I am beginning the next stage of my education through doctoral study in organizational leadership and business.

The degrees matter to me, but the deeper achievement is that I kept choosing a future I could not always see. Every course represented time when I could have stopped and chose to continue instead.

The Support Behind Every Next Step

No young person succeeds entirely alone. I worked hard, but support helped turn that work into progress. Programs such as Education and Training Voucher funding can help eligible young people who have experienced foster care manage education-related costs as they pursue college or other approved training. Depending on eligibility and program requirements, students may be able to continue their education full time or part time while building a life outside the system.

Financial support matters because tuition is only one part of being a student. Transportation, books, technology, housing, food, and everyday emergencies can pull attention away from school. Knowing that assistance may be available can give a student room to focus, remain enrolled, and recover when life does not go according to plan.

The human support matters just as much. Reach Higher Montana and other education, foster youth, campus, and community organizations can help students understand options, complete applications, locate resources, and make decisions that may feel overwhelming. A caring caseworker, teacher, mentor, counselor, financial aid professional, employer, or friend can become the person who helps a young person take the next step.



Today, Barnaby continues building a life shaped by learning, work, and the decision to keep moving forward

What I Want Young People to Know

If you are in foster care or preparing to age out, you may feel as though every important decision has arrived at once. You may also have learned to rely only on yourself because adults or systems have disappointed you before. I understand why accepting help can feel uncomfortable. Still, asking what support is available is an act of ownership over your future.

You do not need to know your entire career path before you begin. You can start with one application, one conversation, or one class. You can change direction. You can attend full time or explore part-time options when that better fits your circumstances. Your path does not need to resemble anyone else's to be meaningful.

How Caring Adults Can Help

Adults often underestimate the power of sharing one useful piece of information at the right time. If you know a teenager in foster care or a young adult who has aged out, tell them about ETV funding and organizations that support educational planning. Do more than hand them a website. Sit beside them while they read the requirements. Help them gather documents, write down deadlines, prepare questions, and follow up when the process becomes confusing.

Encouragement should also leave room for the young person's own goals. Listen before offering a plan. College may be the right route for one student, while technical training, an apprenticeship, or another credential may fit someone else. Respecting that choice helps young people see education as something they own rather than another decision being made for them.

Most of all, stay present after the first application is submitted. Support is especially valuable when a class becomes difficult, a work schedule changes, or an unexpected bill threatens to interrupt school. Consistent adults help students understand that a setback is a problem to solve, not proof that they do not belong.

My Past Is Part of My Story

Foster care is part of my story, but it is not the limit of my story. The group home, the uncertainty, the moves, the long workdays, and the difficult seasons all shaped me. They did not get to decide what I was capable of becoming.

Education gave me a place to direct my determination. Support programs and caring people reminded me that independence does not mean isolation. I learned that strength includes accepting help, asking questions, and returning to the work after disappointment.

To the young person reading this, I hope you will give yourself permission to imagine more than survival. Your first step may feel small, and your journey may take longer than expected. Take the step anyway. There are people and organizations ready to help you understand your options and keep going.

To the adults reading this, please be one of those people. Share the resources. Make the introduction. Follow up. Believe in a young person before they have enough evidence to believe in themselves.

**My story began in foster care, but education helped me
write what came next.**

Learn more about educational opportunities and student support at reachhighermontana.org