

Dreaming Big And Making It Happen

By Lyssa Trujillo

How to begin?! This year has been one surprise after another! But perhaps I should back up and start from the beginning. What has made this past year so spectacular is that it was just the opposite of what I've known: manipulation, malnutrition, homelessness, inconsistency (with where I lived and with whom I've lived). As a child, I never knew where I was going to sleep or if there would be food to eat.

Sadly, this scenario wasn't too different when I emancipated from the foster care system at age 18 and first lived on my own. I pulled away from the people who were there to support me. I borrowed gas money from friends and didn't know how I was going to pay them back. I didn't eat because that money was for bills and I was too proud to ask for help. I decided that I wasn't going to let irresponsible adults let me down. Consequently, I led myself somewhere I never wanted to go.

Where did the change happen? A couple years back I began to trust those who continuously told me they believed in me, were supportive, and could help me help myself, even through all my stumbling. Every time I needed help, the same people were there: Minh Ngo and Priya Mistry from the SVCF YES Scholarship, my YES and ILP (Independent Living Skills Program) mentors Darcy Cabral, Karen Eul, and Sonja House. Whether I needed help understanding how to enforce my rights, writing my personal statement for UCSC, or preparing for a job or internship interview, I could always count on them to encourage me to strive for my best. I could tell that they were genuinely excited to celebrate all the milestones that have led me to my success today. It feels so good to know that there are people in my life that care about me and whom I can count on.

So where am I today? I have gone from prospectively losing myself in an uncertain future to successfully achieving my life dreams. In February, I was accepted to transfer to UC Santa Cruz and am now working very hard to earn my bachelor's degree in Psychology from the school of

my dreams. In March, I was interviewed as one of the three finalists from De Anza Community College for the UCSC Karl S. Pister Scholarship and was awarded the honor in May. In April, I was accepted to participate in the six-week Washington DC summer internship for Congresswoman Woolsey through the Congressional Coalition on Adoption. This was my chance to make a difference and advocate for **much-needed** change in the foster care system in which I grew up. How did I feel? As though I was living someone else's life!

Thursday, June 1, I got on a plane to DC, not really sure what to feel. The first two weeks were filled with extreme amounts of site-seeing (from The National Mall, Library of Congress, Air and Space Museum, to Dorothy's ruby slippers from the Wizard of Oz). I was a walking sponge for my surroundings. I experienced the scariest thunder and lightening storms of my life! Thirteen inches of rainfall in two days that led to flooding in the Metro; changing my normal commute of 45 minutes to an hour and a half! I faced one of my fears (heights and falling) on a rickety, old, wooden rollercoaster in Pennsylvania. I went to Ocean City, a beach in Maryland; paddle-boated in the Potomac River Tidal Basin; and generally explored DC and Georgetown. All in all, I had an adventure, and that's just the stuff OUTSIDE of work!

Friday morning I arrived at Georgetown University around 1:30 am. That day we dressed in our best and had an orientation in Russell, a congressional building on the Senate side of the Capitol. There we received some basic Capitol Hill edict and the expectations of us representing not only our congress member, CCAI, or our state, but also as foster youth from all over the nation. After the weekend we all took a Georgetown shuttle bus to a Metro stop and went to work.

It was intense! Learning all the idiosyncrasies that made a congressional office flow was interesting. Everything I did helped someone else. My responsibilities consisted of answering phones, sorting/distributing



Lyssa Trujillo, SVCF YES™ Scholar attending UC Santa Cruz, participated in a D.C. internship with congresswoman Lynn Woolsey for foster care reform.

mail & faxes, reporting constituent views, writing constituent response letters, supply errands, attending briefings and writing memos, making flag and tour requests, and my favorite duty—giving tours of the Capitol Building. I loved walking around the Capitol everyday; that is definitely something I miss. Even though the humidity gave me the worst stomachache I've ever endured, I loved the weather.

The biggest lessons I learned weren't about our country's inner-workings, they were about myself.

Lesson One: I learned that I want to be heard.

Lesson Two: I want my opinions and life experiences to be able to help others.

Lesson Three: I realized that the only person that can oppress my voice is me.

Lesson Four: Regardless of where I am, I know I have a support group.

Lesson Five: I am no longer a victim but an empowered leader who can make the changes to help others in the foster care system, including my brother and sister.

Lesson Six: Dream big and make it happen!

I'm checking off my wish list: getting accepted to UCSC; working on foster care reform in DC; feeling good about myself and proud of my accomplishments; and my latest goal is to study abroad and see the world! I honestly can say that I never thought I would be where I am. The drive which has kept me moving has really been knowing that my actions could help my siblings, or other youth that are still in the system, realize that they have options, supporters, and a future. I still can't believe all that has happened just this year! I now have a future that I look forward to, not dread. ✨