

Coming home: Teen thrives after stay in wilderness youth camps

By Cheri Harris

Once upon a time, Heather Cogar was a habitual runaway headed for disaster. But in what she sees as a real-life Cinderella story, her life has turned around so completely that she is now an honor student, an athlete and a recently crowned homecoming queen. And though she could be living on her own, she has decided to live in a home with family.

She credits her successes to the skills she learned at Eckerd Youth Alternatives programs, where she spent about three and a half years. The path that led her there was a bumpy one that began when at 14 years old she decided to report an aspect of her home life that was unsafe.

But from her point of view, the system's remedy for her troubles — bouncing her from foster home to foster home — seemed worse than the problems she had been dealing with.

Originally from Pasco County, Heather said one of the places she was sent to live in foster care was in the St. Petersburg area, about an hour and a half from home. "Being so, so far away from my mother, it killed me," she said. She was upset and cried every night.

She said being in foster care "feels like you're kidnapped and you have to find a way to get out."

"I was an angry person," Heather said.

After about six months in group homes and foster homes, she was returned to her mother — but about three months later, the same old issues resurfaced, and, again, Heather reported the problem.

But this time, Heather started

running away every chance she could, either going back to stay with her mother or a friend. In foster care, she said she was rude and disrespectful. She also surrounded herself with people who had bad habits. The message she heard: "Let's go have fun." She got into alcohol and drugs.

"I let myself go," she said. "I would do whatever I wanted; I was out of hand."

At this point, she said she did not trust anyone — from law enforcement to her caseworker — to help her. She thought the goal was simply to send her off somewhere so that no one would have to deal with her.

But lured by the prospect of being reunited with her mother and little brother soon, she agreed to go to what her case worker told her would be a new group home.

Off to camp

"We pull up in the middle of nowhere," Heather said, "and she drops me off at camp and I didn't see my brother for six months or my mom."

Though Heather said her caseworker "tricked" her into going there, the Eckerd Youth Alternative Camp E-How-Kee near Brooksville is also where her life started to change.

"I just headed down the wrong road and got put away — thank God," she said.

While at the camp, she learned how to use a two-person handsaw to cut down a pine tree and a "log dog" to drag it back to the campsite and turn the logs into primitive open-air shelters. She lived outdoors without electricity and used lanterns for light at night.



Photo by Matthew Beck

Citrus High School senior Heather Cogar, 18, laughs with her surrogate family, the Vincents, Thursday afternoon, Oct. 29, 2009, as she relaxes in the back yard of her Pine Ridge home.

"It's complete wilderness," she said. "I loved it."

That's where she also learned to live with the other girls in her group, doing everything together, all the time. In the program, if issues arise, Heather said everyone in the group stops to deal with it.

"It's completely therapeutic," she said.

A typical stay at Camp E-How-Kee is about nine months; she spent about 18 months there.

Heather said that was in part due to a setback she had when for about nine to 12 months no one could reach her mother. After spending three months in depression, Heather decided to move on with her life.

"Because with or without my mom, I had to change," she said. One of the reasons she wanted to change was to be there for her little brother, Tyler. He currently lives with his grandmother in Zephyrhills.

Gale Wire, a counselor or "chief" for 21 years at Camp E-Nini-

Hassee in Floral City said after 18 months in Brooksville, the plan was for Heather to move into a group home at E-Nini-Hassee. Because Heather was still a little "cantankerous," Wire said Heather went through six more months in the therapeutic wilderness educational system of E-Nini-Hassee before going into the group home for about 18 months.

Wire said Heather started to make improvements at E-How-Kee when she realized the positive reinforcement she received from so many adults. A deeper level of change in Heather's value system came in May 2008, when Wire said Heather made a decision to be independent of the dysfunctional family system she had been clinging to.

Wire said Heather's mother, Denise Miller, also became an important part of her daughter's progress.

We got Mom very involved in all aspects of the program when she came to E-Nini-Hassee," Wire said. She called on Heather's mother twice and told her they

needed to talk to her daughter.

“I know Heather didn’t like it,” Wire said, “but the fact that Denise participated was wonderful.”

Heather started at Citrus High School as a sophomore in the 2007-08 school year when she was still living at the group home.

She said she focused first on building relationships with some of the school staff members including Deputy David Vincent, the school resource officer.

From mentors to surrogate parents

As Heather became better acquainted with Vincent, Wire said coincidentally she was developing a relationship with his wife, Angel, because she also worked with some of the girls from E-Nini-Hassee — where she met Heather.

Mrs. Vincent said she and her husband started talking about mentoring a teenager “because we just felt like we had the time and the heart to give to another child.”

For the start of her junior year, Heather said Mrs. Vincent volunteered to take her shopping for school clothes.

Though he is protective of his family, Vincent said he and his wife saw something truly different with Heather — “her attitude and probably that little bit of longing to belong into a family.”

The Vincents started including Heather in family outings, then holidays. They discovered she got along well with their boys Ethan, 6, and Landon, 5. If she had challenges arise at school or work, Mrs. Vincent said Heather shared them with her and her husband.

“She fit in real well with our families and our families’ personalities,” Vincent said.

The connection between Heather and the Vincent family grew. “It was just kind of a fluky thing,” Mrs. Vincent said.

“We knew that she had good goals and she had come a long way in her own life and gotten to certain points,” Vincent said.

Vincent said he and his wife started thinking about what to do when Heather turned 18 and officially “aged out” of the foster care system. They knew Heather did not have any family members she could live with locally.

Living on her own when she turned 18 was an option, but Vincent said Heather wanted to be in a family setting while she was in high school.

Because she was doing so well in her studies and sports, Vincent said he thought it was important for Heather to stay in the community in order for her to continue to be successful. It’s what Heather wanted, too, Mrs. Vincent said.

With Wire’s support, the Vincents asked Heather if she wanted to live with their family after she turned 18.

Heather said her reaction was: “I would love to be a part of your family.” On the night of her 18th birthday, Heather moved to Citrus Springs to live with the Vincents.

It’s a girl!

When she arrived to move in, Heather said the Vincents had “It’s a girl!” balloons waiting for her, as well as some Cinderella items.

“They’ve changed their whole lives for me,” Heather said.

She said the Vincents have showed her what a real family is all about. Though she has a good relationship with her mother now, she also calls them “Mom” and “Dad.”

“The love and care experienced from them is something I’ve never had before,” she said.

Wire said Heather’s ability to identify her need to be part of a family and develop lasting relationships with very secure mentors are part of Heather’s problem-solving skills.

“She’s already had the freedom,” Wire said, “and she’s smart enough to know that she thrives under structure.”

Mrs. Vincent said she enjoys watching Heather have new ex-

periences, from eating fajitas and shopping for semi-formal gowns to watching a space shuttle launch and hearing that there is, indeed, a manned International Space Station in orbit — something she said Heather had never heard about.

“That’s a fun thing, just to give her as much experience in life as possible and in a family setting,” she said.

While their have been some adjustments involved with bringing a teenager into their lives, Mrs. Vincent said she appreciates everything Heather offers them and she called her a shining light who makes them laugh all day.

Their adopted son, Ethan, is from Guatemala and Landon has special needs. Add Heather to the mix and Mrs. Vincent said they have a well-blended family. “It’s kind of fun, she said. “I guess families have no boundaries.”

“I appreciate all that she offers to us,” Mrs. Vincent said, “and hopefully she feels the same way. Heather’s lived a remarkable life and come through many hardships.”

Vincent said his biggest surprise having Heather in the family is how much he worries about her.

“You know, I think our biggest concern is we hope that we give her the advice and guidance that she makes the right decisions out there,” he said. “I think that’s our biggest goal with her.”

When Heather was voted homecoming queen for Citrus High School in September, it was a big milestone for her.

“I cried,” she said. “Half of the pictures are me wiping my eyes. When I accomplish something and I’m proud of myself, all I do is cry.”

Vincent also knew how important this was for Heather.

“Just knowing the things that she’s overcome in her short life, I was proud of her,” he said. “She’s a great kid. We call her the social butterfly.”

Being voted homecoming queen also had a fairytale quality.

“She always says she feels like she lives a Cinderella life,” Mrs. Vincent said, noting that Heather also has Cinderella on her door and that being crowned queen was like Cinderella getting her glass slipper.

After graduation, she plans to attend the University of South Florida. She doesn’t know what her major will be, but she has many ideas ranging from criminal investigation and marine biology to psychology and physical therapy. If she is not accepted to USF, she plans to start out at community college. Mrs. Vincent said she and Heather have talked about her continuing to live with them if she does.

Heather would also like to work at E-Nini-Hassee for a while.

“I’m just going to be a chief in the woods,” she said, “because this is just, like, the best thing to see somebody change as much as I did.”

She attributes all the positive changes in her life to her experience at Eckerd Youth Alternatives, where she learned that she shouldn’t use her background as an excuse or a weapon. Though she has had many successes thus far, she knows she has further to go.

“I’m unstoppable.”

REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION FROM

CITRUS COUNTY
CHRONICLE
www.chronicleonline.com

Copyright www.chronicleonline.com. All rights reserved.