



“ I was a foster child. ”

Shalena's Story

“My Guardian ad Litem never gave up on me. She stuck with me and even to this day, about 14 years later, we still have a marvelous relationship.”



Shalena Williams is as smart as a whip. She's been told that all of her life. She exudes confidence and politely, with a smile, informs us of the correct pronunciation of her name. It's actually "SHAH- lena." It doesn't take her long to start sharing her story of life in foster care, her personal will to succeed and the acknowledgement of the guardian ad litem who positively impacted her life forever. In this month's success story, she shares in her own words her trials and triumphs while in state custody.

Childhood

I grew up in Beaufort, S.C., and my childhood was normal for the first few years of my life; a stable environment with a mother and a step-father. When I was around nine or 10, my mom went to New York and left me with my stepdad and other siblings. When she returned, she just was not the same person, I guess. She had started using drugs so life from there just kind of went downhill. It was a downward spiral. She would get involved with all types of men who were not only abusive to her but us as well. She would find herself in all kinds of situations that were not good for us.

I had mixed feelings going into foster care. A part of me wanted to be with my family but I think I understood that it wasn't the best situation for me. I knew my grandparents were limited in what they could offer me and I wanted more.

Eventually, she sought help at a domestic violence shelter and we were living there with her. One day she left and was not back by curfew. At that point, they called the Department of Social Services and that is when they got involved. I don't know if she ever made an effort to get us back but it didn't seem like it since we never got back with her. I guess she felt like it was just easier without us.

The Foster Care Experience

Everybody's story is different. It gets to a point that you're always telling your story again. Whoever you meet, you go through the whole thing again. I would tell a current foster child not to get frustrated and don't give up. It's hard to trust people but know that there are some people out there that can be trusted. Just give people a chance to enter your life. It may be difficult and you may have to go through various case workers or guardians ad litem before you feel like this is probably the one person I can depend on. I'm not saying that you have to trust anybody completely or totally, but just give them

a chance to do their job and not judge them based on the person you had before or the people you've encountered previously.

The families I got, I always felt that I was out of place and I knew that it wasn't my home. So it was hard to fit in, especially in the homes where their biological children were. But I did have one awesome foster parent back in Beaufort. She was really awesome. I lived with her for about a year and probably would

have stayed in her home until I emancipated but I got myself into some trouble at school that caused me to be removed from her home. That's when I was moved to the Upstate. My foster mother in Beaufort was very nurturing and very supportive. She had another child in the home, her biological son, who was maybe a year or two older than me. She was always there. If I got into something, she was there. If I needed her to come to the school, she was there. She made sure I was involved in extra things and after school programs. She was the first foster parent that actually told me that she loved me. You don't hear that a lot.

I remember the first week I was placed in her home, I ran away. Most foster parents would say, "I don't want this child anymore," but she actually wanted me to come back and allowed me to come back. I was there for a while. I did really good there.

Every child is different. You can't really plan for the next child that is going to come into your home. You just have to be willing to do some extraordinary things and step outside of the box. You can't really raise these children as you would your own, not only because of laws and limitations, but because foster children are very fragile. Anything at any given point can send them into one direction or the other. Fortunately, for me, there was somebody in my corner so I didn't fall to pieces, and they didn't want anything. I just feel like these are kids who need constant guidance, support, and just to know that you are there. A lot of times, foster children won't show that they're appreciative of what you are doing but deep down inside, they really are. They just don't know how to express that.

Shalena's Guardian ad Litem

I didn't meet my guardian ad litem, Robin Freyburger, until I was 15. At that time she came to me and wanted to know if I wanted to be adopted. I gave her a really hard time. I cursed her out and called her everything I could think of but I think that was normal for the situation that I was in and my environment. Being in foster care was hard. There were trust issues where I didn't trust many of the people I came into contact with and it was hard to build and keep relationships. My GAL, though I gave her a hard time in the beginning, never gave up on me. She stuck with me and even to this day, about 14 years later, we still have a marvelous relationship. So I'm really appreciative of everything she did for me. Without her, I would not have known what was going on with my case or where I was going next.

She was the one who pretty much kept me abreast and up to date on everything that was happening behind the scenes. A lot of the time I wasn't at my court hearings or foster care review board meetings, but she was. I can definitely say that she was at every single one of them. At every court appearance I had, she made it her business to be there. My furthest placement was in Greenwood and I'm originally from Beaufort. My GAL's office was also in Beaufort but she made it a point to drive those four hours and come and visit me regularly when nobody else came to see me. Robin was probably more involved than my own family.

I think without the support of my GAL I would not have had the opportunities that I've had or even known about certain programs and things that I was eligible for. I would not have known about the independent living program or types of assistance and aid that is available to foster care youths. I feel like the GAL is that voice that children have and they can go to and talk to about any and everything. There is no one-sidedness. He or she is there for the best interest of the child. I think my GAL [Robin] really displayed that to the fullest extent possible. So I am grateful to GALs and everything that they do. It's hard work, I'm pretty sure. Although on a volunteer basis, I feel that it just has to be somebody who has the heart and the passion to do the type of work that's required. You can't put just any and everybody in that particular role.

The Importance of GALs

Guardians ad litem are in a better position to be "for" the child. Case workers have their hands so full. By having a GAL, it's like you have that "extra". You don't always have to go to your case worker, you can go to this middle person and they can make sure that things get done. I feel like they play a very important part.

They have to have the time and be in a place in their lives where they are emotionally able to take on more. It is a demanding job. I think someone who is flexible, has a passion for helping others, who is committed, organized and detailed would make a good GAL.

Emancipating From Foster Care

I pretty much emancipated myself when I got married. I was 19. I think that was one of those, "Ok, I'm going to go get married; it's going to make things all better" type of things. But it wasn't that

way at all. I used to be a person of impulse, so I never really had a plan. I always just did things I thought would be best for myself. It seemed like my plan after I graduated high school was to go to college. I figured once I did that there would be a time where I had to cut ties altogether with DSS and everything. I've always been ready for it. It's not like anyone just sits there and says, "Oh, I want to be in DSS custody for the rest of my life." Going to college was pretty much my plan. I knew from there I would be able to do anything I wanted to do.

The Will to Succeed

No one in particular [pushed me to go to college]. I knew it was an option and I think I didn't want to end up like a lot of my peers and a lot of the situations I've seen around me. I just wanted to be a better person. My grandfather, he believed in me. He knew I was smart enough to do what I wanted to do. He would tell me, "Go ahead and finish school" and that sort of thing, but I wouldn't say that there was one particular person that really, really pushed me. When the time came for me to go and start making a decision as far as college goes, it was me who did who did everything I could do. I made sure my financial aid was together and sent off applications. Nobody sat down with me to do that. I'm just thankful that I had enough sense to go out there and find the answers that I needed for myself. But whatever I needed, like a letter of reference, I could always call on my guardian ad litem.

Shalena Williams, LSW

Social workers changed all the time but my GAL didn't. I just wanted to be that social worker that was going to be there when the times got rough and not say, "there's nothing else I can do with this particular child", and push them off to somebody else. I can say I started off with DSS and then ended up with managed treatment services, therapeutic foster care, just the whole gamut. A lot of people are involved and there is really not a lot of stability. You have social workers who get burned out easily and it's understandable. But at the same time when I saw those social workers and did get a good one, I recognized "this is a good social worker and this is the type of person that I aspire to be". I've always known I wanted to help people but didn't know in what capacity. I've always had that burning passion to help children who grew up in foster care like I did. I feel like I understand both sides of the coin.

Right now, I'm doing well. I'm a licensed social

worker in South Carolina and just graduated with my master's degree in social work last May. I guess I can say I'm one of the success stories. I don't know how many there are out there but it is really hard to stay focused and do what you have to do. I cannot sit here and say that it was easy because I got into a lot of trouble when I was in foster care. It didn't stop me. If anything, it made me who I am now. It made me a better person.

No matter what you've been through, you can bounce back. I think that children in custody often get a label. There's like a negative stigma attached to the whole foster care experience. Foster care is not all negative. There can be many positive experiences. It just depends on the individual and how they embrace those experiences. I won't say that foster care for me was a walk in the park because it wasn't. I've had those horrible foster homes that probably no one should ever have licensed. As mentioned before, if you get into something, there really is no one there to kind of support you or give you other options. For example, in a normal family, if their child gets into trouble the parent automatically is going to come to their rescue. With foster care, you don't get that. It's like a "throw away the key- lock them up" situation. It's really sad. But it goes back to having my guardian ad litem. She was that voice for me in court. It's like, though you see what this is in black and white on paper about this child, that does not necessarily define who that child is. I feel like given the right environment, anybody can thrive. It doesn't matter where they come from, as long as they have an environment to do so, I think people can change for the most part.