

“Being homeless didn’t stop me from being dux.”

RASHEMA, 19, WAS THE SMARTEST PERSON IN HER GRADE. NO ONE KNEW SHE HAD NOWHERE TO GO AFTER SCHOOL.



Because of my great grades, I got into an awesome uni and live on campus!

WHATEVER YOU'RE GOING THROUGH... JUST KEEP PUSHING AND BELIEVING IN YOURSELF.

A lot of kids hate school, but I was never one of them. Growing up, I always tried to stay at school as long as possible. Most people didn't know the reason why was because I often didn't have anywhere else to go. I grew up with my mum and five brothers and sisters. We moved around. A lot. I went to five elementary schools, two middle schools and three high schools. Sometimes we moved because my mum didn't like the school we lived by. Other times, we moved because she was evicted. My mum didn't work – she was on government assistance, but it often wasn't enough for her to support six kids and pay the bills. When I was about 15, my mum sat me down and said she couldn't afford for me to live with her anymore. She sent me to live with some people we didn't know very well, but I didn't complain. At least it was a place to stay.

In high school, my family never had a home. We took life day by day. On good days, we could afford to sleep in a motel or we could stay with my aunt. On bad days, it would be a shelter. For three years, the shelter was our main home. All seven of us shared one room. We didn't have a refrigerator or microwave or a living room. All there was room for were bed cots and little cubbies underneath to keep our belongings. The bathroom was down the hall, which we shared with other homeless people.

The one thing I could always focus on was school. Moving around so much, I never really took the time to get to know anyone – I figured why make friends when I'd be moving soon anyway – but school was important to me. My mum and older siblings didn't graduate high school, but I was determined to go to uni. In year 11, my guidance counsellor told me I was dux of my year. It didn't really hit me right away. I just wanted to get to uni. I didn't care if I was last in my class or first in my class. I applied to 10 schools because I was scared I wouldn't get in anywhere. But because I graduated first in my class, I actually got into a lot of schools and some offered me a full scholarship.

Now, I go to Georgetown University, one of the best schools in the US. Many people are wowed by the prestige, but I really would have been happy anywhere. I picked this school because it gave me a good financial aid package and is close to my family. I live in the dorms, but my mum and some of my brothers and sisters still don't always have a place to stay. Many people expect me to be resentful, but I really just feel blessed. I was never one of those kids who needed trendy clothes or the latest phone. I was happy just to have shoes without holes in them or a pencil in my backpack.

I want people to know that no matter what you're going through, whether it's having low self-esteem, dealing with depression, feeling suicidal or having a mental disability, just keep pushing and believing in yourself. That's where it starts. It's not up to other people. It has to come from a place inside of you. That's the biggest lesson I've learned growing up and am continuing to learn. Your circumstances aren't going to change in a day or a month, but they will change if you have patience and believe in yourself.