

Good evening, I am here to tell you a little about myself.

I remember my dad going to prison when I was 5 years old, and he was released when I was 13. My mom was in and out of jail leaving me in the care of my maternal grandparents. I grew up with my brother and many extended family members in a crowded house in San Francisco. I hated sleeping on the floor of that crowded house. I remember my younger sister was taken away by her father. I would not see her again until several years later. My older brother was with other family members that took care of him. This meant we weren't very close.

I remember visiting both my mother and father when they were incarcerated. The drives were long to see them; with mom, it was harder because she was constantly in and out for long and short periods of time. With my dad it was different. He was in prison for a long time so our bond was not as tight. When my grandparents traveled to the Philippines to visit family, I was left under the care of my mom but sometimes it meant I was alone. I worried about mom often: for her safety and well-being. It was like our roles were switched.

While in middle school I felt depressed and suicidal. By 8th grade, I learned that I needed to protect myself, numb myself, and seek comfort and support from others. Growing up in my community, many of the other kids weren't the best influences. So at 13, I started doing drugs, cutting school, being out late at night and running my own life. I felt grown. I was even suspended for fighting and bringing a knife to school.

I graduated eighth grade and then found myself at Jefferson High School after a summer of freedom and partying with friends. As a freshman, I never attended school and when I did I would only attend for one or two periods. Instead, I slept during the school day recovering from nights out. I was failing all of my classes. I only had a 0.46 GPA. My friends and I often ditched school to hang out and sleep at my house. When at school, I spent time in the Dean's office due to my behavior toward staff and students.

On April 7th, at 8:59 am during my freshman year spring break, I found myself detained in the back of a cop car. I was taken to Fillmore District Police Station. After interrogation, they called my parents and then drove me to YGC, the Youth Guidance Center, which is a juvenile hall in San Francisco. It was a hard stop to my fast lifestyle. While there, I was confined for 23 hours a day. I slept, read, and prayed. Following my court I was released without further consequence. Little did I know that I was not free yet. They transferred my case to San Mateo County and they decided I needed a harder consequence. I was again detained and went to Hillcrest. After several weeks, I again was released and placed on probation, which was even worse. My dad found out about all of this and told my grandmother that he would take over guardianship of me. I moved into his home the summer before 10th grade.

With this move, many things came up for me. I felt lonely, more depressed, and out of place. I was enrolled at Carlmont High School. One of the hardest things was the school work itself and that fact that the school was not very diverse. Having to live with my father for the first time was also very difficult. He came with a firm and disciplinarian point of view. This was very different from before. It was scary. Eventually, CPS got involved. I found myself trapped in many ways: at home, at school, and in my personal life. What really helped me through this was the people that I connected to: my probation officer, the office staff, especially Ms. Plack, and my Acknowledge Alliance counselor Gladys.

As I started working with my program counselor, I began to think more about myself and it gave me a space to speak about how I felt. This helped me feel more relaxed at school and at home. I also noticed how everything changed about me: my thoughts, my choices, and my friends. Working with Gladys taught me many things I need to know in life. One of the things she's helped me with while working with her was that it's okay to feel the way you do.

One of the best things that happened that year was getting off probation quickly. I was in ways free again. Despite temptations and the drawback to the streets, I was able to avoid any legal troubles or run-ins with the police. During my high school years, I learned a lot about myself, my needs, my patterns, and my goals. During Christmas break of junior year, I had another life-changing event. My grandmother, who raised me, died unexpectedly. This hurt the most, she showed me an endless amount of love even when I was in the wrong, my grandma never judged or doubted me like the others in my family. It was a shock: I felt lonely and upset because I did not get the chance to make her proud. While my life did not change completely, life feels different. The hardest part was realizing she missed out on seeing the different life I have now. Although I have yet to fully process the loss, my spirituality grew and I became closer to God.

Today, as a senior, things still feel unreal. I am excited to graduate but even in this time of joy, I feel my grandmother's absence. This fall I plan on attending Santa Monica College. I am excited to start a new chapter. It is weird to know that I will be graduating in a few weeks, especially with a 3.3 GPA. I did not think I would make it this far. My goal is to work in the juvenile justice system with the hope of changing it so that it actually helps change the lives of youth. I am passionate about this because I want to give back to those who are going through some of the same things I have been through. I also want to travel and have my own family, including adopting kids.

Lastly, I want to thank the people that came tonight, in particular, the Carlmont High School staff for supporting me during my time at the school. I also want to thank all of you here for supporting this agency and the work they do because it really helps.