

Jennifer Eva Emelogu's Speech Given at "A Season of Harvest"

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I am honored and take great pride in sharing my past experiences with you about the Austin Children's Shelter.

My mother had seven children by five different fathers -- a small army of our own. Out of the seven, only five of us experienced foster care. The oldest two were already grown and out of the house by the time CPS stepped in. We experienced neglect and abuse on many different levels. We didn't understand why our mother did most of the things that she did, it didn't make sense. After we were placed into care, a psychological evaluation was done on each family member involved, including our mother. It was then that my mother was diagnosed as Manic Depressant, with symptoms of Paranoid Schizophrenia. At that point the abuse and neglect almost made sense, there was a source from which all this had come from.



Photo by Bill Virun

Immediately upon removal from our home, we were taken to an emergency shelter outside of Austin. This would be our first shelter of five. We started to get used to the rules of foster care, the rules of shelters. Every shelter is different -- the environment can range from extreme structure to a dangerous setting, with very little structure. Structure was not something that we were used to, but it was good for us in a lot of ways. A lot of people think that foster care should be a lot easier than living at home, but I beg to differ.

As time passed we were placed in another shelter and then to our first foster home. After two years, we were removed from that home and consequently Austin Children's Shelter was our place of refuge. Unlike my other siblings, I had the opportunity to stay at Austin Children's Shelter on two different occasions. This shelter was unlike any other shelter I had been to. The staff really cared about my interests and helped me achieve my short-term goals. I was involved in basketball for my high school, as well as a club volleyball team. The seasons for these sports were going on at the same time... how was I going to get to my practices? Every day, a staff member would pick me up from basketball practice and take me straight to volleyball practice. Not to mention, there was always a staff member waiting for me when practice was over, as well as food prepared for me when we returned to the shelter. That was more than I could ever ask for.

I always played sports -- that was my interest and therapy. Over the years, I dealt with five different foster parents. Unfortunately, not one foster parent could help me help myself the way that Austin Children's Shelter did, not one.

As far as everyday life at the Austin Children's Shelter, it was like a short lived dream come true. This was the first shelter that I didn't want to leave when my time was up. We went on outings to local parks, museums or something else special that they had planned for us. There were a lot of things to do around the house as well. I was able to help with small tasks in the kitchen, something I really enjoy. The arts and crafts options seemed endless. There was so much to do at the shelter, I rarely wanted to leave if I didn't have to. I am a homebody and the shelter was my home.

Austin Children's Shelter was there for me at a crucial time in my life. They helped me get to practice and tournaments for my volleyball club team. Through club volleyball, I received a scholarship to play volleyball at St. John's University in Queens, NY. I ended up at UT San Antonio to finish out my college volleyball career. I am now a teacher and a coach at Hawkins High School. I plan on playing professional volleyball overseas in the near future.

I am not the only sibling out of foster care that has been doing exceptionally well. My older and favorite sister, Caroline, has also graduated from college with a degree in Finance. She is now the Project Manager for the ETV Program. ETV stands for the Education and Training Voucher program, a program that helps former foster youth financially through college and vocational schools. Caroline is so strong and resilient to me, she is one of my inspirations to keep going, to keep pushing in life. We are all successful in our own right.

I don't believe in coincidences, Austin Children's Shelter was in my life for a reason. I was more than just a name or a number. The staff cared about my emotional, physical and psychological well-being. That's more than what a lot of people have done. I am glad to share with you my experiences because they made me who I am today. I look forward to your continued and generous support so other children can have a great experience with the Austin Children's Shelter as well.