

## David Van Horn's story: 'I use my life experience to help people in similar circumstances.'

**David Van Horn** has experienced foster care twice in his lifetime – the first time as a newborn and the second time when his adoptive father died when he was about 15 years old.



David doesn't know who his biological parents are – his father adopted him when he was abandoned at the Fort Lauderdale, Florida hospital where he was born. The elder Van Horn worked as a nurse at the time, and eventually adopted eight children, all of whom were born into the world drug-addicted. David said his father was a very tall man with a big heart – the kind of man no one would mess with. He nursed all the children during their illnesses, though two died in infancy. In the early 2000s, David, his father and two sisters moved to Traverse City where his

father's ex-wife lived; two older brothers and a sister stayed behind in Florida. A year later, David's father was dead of a heart attack at age 56. While David's sisters stayed with his father's former wife, David went to live with a foster family he knew from church. There was no other extended family.

"Initially, when they told me I had to go into foster care, I honestly was upset for like 10 minutes. Then I was okay with it. My family couldn't afford to send me to college and do certain things. Those were some of the things I was thinking about." Growing up, David's house was that house friends liked hanging out in. Money was tight, and music and sporting events were too expensive for the large family. But David said his father made sure the kids were taken care of.

David moved several times before graduating from high school in Traverse City. The first home "was different for me" because it was a family home with a mother, father and two children. "I tried to be very normal but it was different for me. I was pushing them away. Eventually, the wife didn't want me anymore." Then he stayed in two other "respite homes" for extended periods before moving into another family home where the parents "were religious like me." It was a good fit until it wasn't. David says the dynamics of "you guys are just the foster kids" took over. When David was graduating from high school, his foster parents dropped him off at the ceremony and left to run errands. "They never came – nobody came except for my foster case worker and her boss. It was a really crushing moment in my life." Later, a foster sister drove him to Northwestern Michigan University where he stayed for two years before dropping out.

Without a permanent residence, he couch surfed for a while and stayed in a homeless shelter when there was nowhere else to go.

At 26, David has lived the life of an activist for years and continues working toward a bachelor's degree online in public administration. He has a full-time job as a nursing assistant at Munson Medical Center in Traverse City. He has worked for a youth homelessness project in Traverse City, and through that experience was asked to serve as a technical adviser with the National Youth Forum on Homelessness. He is currently helping northern Michigan communities with a 100-day homelessness challenge focused on rural areas. "I've always had activism in me. I use my life experience to help people in similar circumstances."

David has suggestions for easing the complications of life in foster care when he meets with his state Legislator during Foster Job Shadow Day. One involves waiving fees and streamlining the process for official documents for youths seeking a social security card or copy of a birth certificate – two essential documents many youth who have moved from their family of origin don't often have in their possession. Another is encouraging youth to be present at all court proceedings regarding their care in the system. "When I was in foster care, I was there for the whole process. There were no secrets because I was able to go to all the court hearings. I personally was able to advocate for my own self," he said.