

Heaven Shaman-Page: 'You can fall to the bottom of a hole and still make it out.'

When Heaven Shaman-Page received her bachelor's degree before a crowd of several hundred at Ferris State University in May 2019, people rose to their feet as she was introduced by the university president. Her academic achievement after years of struggles in and out of foster care was remarkable, the university president said. "It was really emotional but a great thing to experience," recalled Heaven of the recognition.

Named for a favorite V.C. Andrews' book character of her mother's, one who also lived a dramatically troubled childhood, Heaven is using her life lessons as the foundation for a new future. At 23, she's beginning a master's program in social work this summer, and plans to serve young adults aging out of foster care. It wasn't her first choice for a career; growing up, she found social workers were frustrating to deal with. But the program at Ferris is trauma-focused, and she says that appeals to her professional interests. Inspired by a college professor of public policy, she has also realized that creating social policies that help kids is where change happens.



"This is where I need to get involved. I have a big passion for kids aging out of the system, and how really hard it is to find permanent homes for older kids. The fact is there just aren't enough foster homes," she said. Too many youths from foster care face negative outcomes – including homelessness and incarceration - because of the lack of supportive families, she added. "Those kids are really, really struggling with finding themselves and believing that they're worth something," Heaven said. "They've been through really crappy situations. I want them to know that they can go to college, they can go to the army, and they can get a really good job. Their past doesn't define them."

Heaven was one year old when "her case" started, she said. Due to her mother's struggles with alcoholism and drug use disorder, she was in and out of foster care for the first 16 years of her life. Her father is not involved in her life. Initially, Heaven and one of her four brothers were placed in a family home in Ohio; four years later they were reunited with her mother. When Heaven was in 6th grade, she returned to Ohio after her mother went to jail; that year Heaven attended 6th grade in three different schools. A couple of years later, she was back living with her mom. On a day near Thanksgiving, Heaven recalls her mother left the house to go to the

store and didn't return. The police were called and Heaven went to live with a great-aunt for part of the year until her relative said she could no longer care for her. Heaven was 13 and remembers sitting in her case worker's office while she searched for a home willing to accept Heaven and her younger brother Luke, then 11. At 16, Heaven and her brother were adopted by a couple from Grosse Ile, near Detroit, until she was asked to leave when she was 18. Heaven lived with her boyfriend, until she started college and he ended the relationship. "That's when I felt completely alone," she said.

Heaven is still in touch with her adoptive parents, but they're not close, she said. Her birth mother attended her college graduation and they talk frequently. Heaven says her mother is always able to calm her when she's upset and she appreciates that. However, she worries about her mother's well-being. "I constantly remind her that even when she was choosing her addiction over us kids she almost always made sure we were fed, had clothes and a roof over our heads," she added. For many years, her mother made her living as a bartender and in the restaurant business.

Heaven has been able to support herself through her undergrad years by carrying two jobs, and getting help through the Fostering Futures Scholarship, and the Education and Training Voucher (ETV), an annual federal grant provided to states to fund youth who have aged out of the foster care system. She's thrifty, only buys what she really needs, uses coupons, and plans her grocery purchases for the week to avoid impulse buying. Her car insurance payments are a little over \$1,000 twice a year. "I pay one time so it's cheaper," she said, deciding against monthly payments.

Heaven has struggled with depression, severe anxiety, and family worries throughout her life. "Change, adjustments are hard for me. I go into panic mode and overthink. I have social anxiety when I get around a lot of people. As a result, parties have never been my thing." In her teen years she began cutting and burning her body as a way to exhibit a feeling of control over her worrisome life. She sought treatment in college, but initially the counseling and a medication that she was prescribed didn't help and she stopped both. Then she found another therapist and another medication with a positive impact on her health. She is feeling much better today and is no longer seeing a counselor.

Besides the financial support she has received for her education, Heaven is thankful for the emotional support she's found at Ferris State University's FYI program, an on-campus support program for students from foster care. Several of Michigan's top universities offer on-campus support programs for alumni from foster care, but not the majority of them. Through FYI, she was paired with a mentor she is comfortable calling whenever she needs advice. Their relationship has developed over time and through weekly social get-togethers. "I have an awesome mentor," she said. Her mentor works on campus as an economics professor.

Heaven is committed to making a difference in her career.

“I don’t want to become another statistic, or fall into the same footsteps as my mother or make some of the bad decisions my brothers made,” Heaven said. “I’ve struggled really hard as a kid and I didn’t get the proper help I needed from foster parents or from my adoptive parents. I really want to be that person other foster kids need – someone who constantly reminds you that someone cares, you are loved, that there is much more to life than the small or big things you’re struggling with today -- that you can fall to the bottom of a hole and still make it out.”

She is also philosophical about what children in the system need and what they don’t always receive. Children need therapists they can talk to. Heaven said she didn’t like any of the therapists she met while in the child welfare system. “Being asked ‘how does that make you feel’ doesn’t help you,” she said. “A lot of these kids are not getting proper help because it’s not provided for, and they don’t know how to ask for it. It’s really hard for kids who have experience trauma and who were neglected. At such a young age, your brain doesn’t know how to process these emotions and feelings. The feelings get shoved to the back and come back out later in life with more trauma.”