

## Lansing Sanchez-Castillo: 'We were suffering but I never cried in front of them. I wanted to show them I was strong.'



Three words summed up Lansing Sanchez-Castillo's memories of entering a foster home for the first time in the tiny Eaton County village of Mulliken. Shaken. Broken. Scared. The circumstances were horrendous. His parents were gone and Lansing and his siblings spent over 10 years living in his grandparents' suburban home in Grand Ledge until it was discovered his step-grandfather was sexually abusing children in the home. Lansing was one of eight children, some of whom went to his mother's family in Texas while others stayed behind with his maternal grandmother after his parents died. Lansing was 5 years old when his father murdered his mother and killed himself. It took some time to find her body, discovered in a field in Charlotte by a man walking his dog.

Lansing's journey into Michigan's foster care system began with a remarkable experience given the pain of his childhood. His foster mom was a single woman named Kate. And though he and his siblings lived with her for just three months in rural Mulliken, his memories are detailed and vivid. "It was very small town-living. One intersection. One gas station. It was so far away, and even though it was kind of chaotic for us, Kate and everyone was so passionate and patient and kind to us. It gave us space and time to heal." Kate's parents, Rick and Charlene, often helped out, and Lansing recalls Rick driving him to morning swim practice at Grand Ledge High School. Rick had been a high school swimmer, too, and they shared that. Kate's dad always had kind words for Lansing, and made sure the youth went off to practice with a healthy nutrition bar. It's no surprise that the acts of kindness had an influence on Lansing when he entered college and discovered a passion for public service. Rick Jones had had a successful career as a mid-Michigan state representative.

**After living with Kate,** Lansing and his younger brother and sister moved in for a couple of years with an older brother who was employed as a mason and lived in the town they grew up in. Lansing took responsibility to make sure his younger siblings ate healthy food, did their homework, and went to bed on time. But Lansing said his older brother "had mentally checked out," was constantly high, and wasn't doing right by them. He had a new car but the refrigerator was often empty. "We were suffering but I never cried in front of my younger sister, Anna, and brother Cisco. I wanted to show them I was strong. During that period, I became a rock for them." When Lansing complained, his older brother told him to look for another place to live. In his senior year in high school in 2013, Lansing spoke with three people - his case worker and an aunt and uncle who lived down the street from his maternal grandmother - and the siblings moved in with the middle-age couple. Meanwhile, a local

teacher and close family friend advised Lansing that if he ever felt unsafe, she had a few open rooms.

Lansing said he and his siblings tried to make themselves useful with housecleaning chores but his relatives were also caring for a new grandchild at home at the time, and that made their reception feel cold and unwelcomed. Meanwhile, the youths were assigned a volunteer court-appointed special advocate (CASA) who made a great difference in their unhappy lives. “Shelly’s first experience with us was witnessing teenagers sitting with their arms crossed in front of their bodies. We were not the happiest. Then she started talking about things we were interested in. She started to believe in us again. That brought warmth into a very cold home. She helped inspire us, and kept the flame burning inside of us.”

**Today, Lansing, 23,** studies international relations at Grand Valley State University, and does independent research in international relations with an emphasis on human rights and economic policy. His ambition is to go to law school and work in child welfare reform, but he’s also attracted to careers in the United Nations or U.S. State Department. Lansing has had some significant experiences as a college student thanks to scholarships that have allowed him to study and travel abroad. He’s made two trips to Europe in 2017 and 2018, studying in a university in Krakow, Poland, which offered him access to a host of other Eastern European countries, including Ukraine, Germany, and the Czech Republic. “Traveling made me a happier person and broadened my horizons. Education gave me the stepping stone to achieve these dreams,” he said. Lansing is fascinated by learning new languages that may hearken to his family roots – his father was an immigrant from Cuban who came to work for General Motors in Lansing and his mother was a Native American with ties to the Lipan Apache peoples of Texas and New Mexico. Lansing participated in a service trip to assist people in the Cherokee Nation, and feels a connection to environmental causes, in addition to human rights and children’s rights.

Lansing is mindful how his childhood experiences have played havoc with his mental health. Strained family relations because of the early trauma in their lives haven’t helped. “I don’t have the same support system as most people. When it’s the holidays, we don’t have a place to go where we see the same people.” As small children, they received support through Ele’s Place, a center for grieving children, but counseling help wasn’t suggested beyond that. At Grand Valley, he found counseling services frustrating and inadequate. After burying issues or trying to smile his way through troubles, he’s only recently realized that mental health is an area of his life that needs attention. Prone to depression and anxiety, he’s experienced post-traumatic stress disorder. His father suffered from bipolar disorder and never sought treatment, which disturbs him. “I’m not breaking the chain. I’m not breaking the wheel,” Lansing said. “If my father had had help maybe he wouldn’t have hurt my mom as long as he did, to the extent that he did, for as long as he did. Maybe that grandpa wouldn’t have abused my younger siblings, wouldn’t have become such a monster. How do we break the cycle and prevent these things from happening. How can we get kids and parent mental health services when they need it?”