



## Hard Work. Plus A Little Luck!

By Barbara Brown, Resource Specialist

As Crystal Lipek began to consider the possibility of attending college, she knew that it would take a lot to make it happen. Life had just begun to really become settled and comfortable for Crystal, a former youth in care who was adopted at the age of 16.

But time was not on her side. If she wanted to pursue college, she'd need to both believe in herself and get to work.

Fortunately academics had always played a large part in her life, and it was a place where she excelled.

Despite her aptitude for academics, life's turns sometimes created additional challenges. She knew that attending college would be financially difficult, but wasn't going to let that stand in her way.

While attending Milwaukee High School of Arts, Crystal did some savvy things. She volunteered in the guidance office. That gave her a jumping board to learn about all the various grants that were available. She wrote the essays, submitted many grant applications, waited, and was awarded several grants and scholarships.

One scholarship that Crystal received was the Wisconsin DCF Scholarship for Youth in Out of Home Care, which awards up to \$5,000 per year. (<http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/children/IndLiving/prgserv/scholpro.htm>)

Now that Crystal had the financial means available to attend college, she needed to figure out which college to attend. She fondly recalled the trips with her mother during winter break of her senior year in high school to various colleges.

Crystal's mother's advice was to choose a college for herself—not based on others' expectations. Her mom was supportive of Crystal and was

thrilled when she was accepted to UW Madison.

Crystal works as a housefellow in her dorm and is an active student on campus. She was admitted to the College of Education in 2009 and is majoring in both education and

political science.

Crystal has also become more passionate about social justice. After she graduates in 2011, Crystal is leaning towards attending law school, especially after having the opportunity to intern in Washington D.C. during the summer of 2009 with the Congressional Coalition of Adoption Institute (<http://www.ccaainstitute.org/>).

Not every person who has been in foster care will go to college. Unfortunately, many who might excel in school find that other life challenges stand in their way. Crystal has some suggestions that may help you navigate your world through foster care and your education.

“Crystal has had to overcome numerous obstacles but she has always achieved her dreams.”

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### Crystal's Advice to Youth In Care and Education

- Learn how to navigate the system—both in care and in school.
- Get the best education you can and use the opportunities that are available to you.
- Learn how to get through the process of applying for grants, scholarships and college. It's hard work and a tedious process. But do it! There are a lot of resources out there you may never have heard of. Talk to school counselors in your school and at colleges and training institutions.
- Be open to a variety of opportunities. Learn about different professions, the education required and jobs available. You might not choose a four-year college, but take advantage of *any* educational opportunities that can help you.
- Try new classes if they fit into your program. They may open a whole new world of possibilities.
- Explore different colleges. Make appointments to visit different places. Ask questions and talk to admission folks— it's their job to talk to you.

It's a scary dilemma to be forced to grow up fast without being taught life skills as you grew up. Work with what you have and keep moving in a good direction.

Crystal's history is not any easy one. She was placed in care with a family from the ages of three to six. She was reunified with her birth mother when she started school and was again placed in care during her eighth grade—with a relative initially, and later with a teacher who adopted her.

Crystal considers herself lucky to have had those three years with the family who gave her a childhood from ages 3 to 6, and to now be adopted by loving parents. Crystal also considers herself blessed. She found refuge in school and academic

success. She made lifelong friends in school and has related well to most of the adults in her life.

If you had asked Crystal when she was 10, 16 if she would be attending UW Madison and majoring in education and political science, and thinking about applying for law school, she would have known that these realities matched her dreams but would take a lot of luck plus hard work.

Over the years, as Crystal's personal situation changed, her goals have evolved and grown. Throughout it all Crystal dreamed big, believed in herself, and found the support she needed along the way.

"Crystal personifies success," says Mike Heath who knows her from the Youth Advisory Committee. "She has had to overcome numerous

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## *Hard Work. Plus a Little Luck, continued*

obstacles but she has always achieved her hopes and dreams.”

Crystal’s story is great, but reality tells us that only a small number of Wisconsin youth in care complete a four-year degree. Nationally, only about 10% of former youth in care ever attend college of any kind; of that, only about two in a hundred complete a two- or four-year degree.

However, even enrolling in a certificate, licensure, or apprentice program (i.e. electricians, hair dressers, nursing assistants, medical transcribers, plumbers, etc.) often helps give people the education they need to find the work they want to do.

Others use on-the-job training and pick up classes to establish themselves. Still others do well by working hard and learning skills as they work or working their way up to managers in retail or restaurant companies.

Wherever you find yourself in the job market, join in cheering Crystal on find a little of her hope and confidence in your own life.

We hope Crystal’s story might give you some ideas about facing your own life adventures. Maybe college isn’t your dream. Maybe it is and you have always dismissed the thought because it seemed impossible.

There is hope and there are ways to get what you want. Sometimes you have to adjust your life and really work at it.

### **Other Advice from Crystal**

- Know that luck is part of anyone’s success, but equally important is hard work.
- Recognize the good in all situations and find out what makes you happy.
- Find a meaningful purpose for your life.
- Take care of yourself. Work on what you can now and leave the rest for another time.
- Get the help you need and support you need. Crystal finds that guys seem to be more resistant to seeking help and support and often struggle alone.
- Take time with others. Helping others who have been in the system or who have other challenges may be important to your wellbeing.
- Find three types of mentors:
  1. those who have been in care,
  2. older students during your freshman and sophomore years
  3. at least one adult mentor who you can rely on for advice.

Success is ultimately about finding something that you love and going for it. Know that the path in life is not always straight. You already have handled a lot as a child in the foster care system. Why not give that dream of yours a chance today?

