

"Find the good in everything."



"Awesome and a little crazy," are the words used by Stephanie Cooper to describe graduation day at Central Connecticut State University. That smile while walking across the stage. The cap and gown. Family in attendance.

A college graduate!

The day was not yet over. After the ceremony, Stephanie visited her mother's gravesite and with diploma in hand, took a picture.

Mom would be so proud.

We all have a personal story. Stephanie Cooper is our teacher of resilience, determination, advocacy and giving back while we are the students - learning from her to assist the next child or youth in our path.

Stephanie spent a brief period of time in foster care as a young child before being reunified with her family. At 10 years of age, Stephanie's mother died of cancer and her aunt became her legal guardian via Probate Court hearings.

It is these early childhood experiences which Stephanie believes formed the foundation for her empathetic and compassionate ways. "I was the mom of the group," she stated when describing relationships with peers and friends. "Super caring" is another term she used when referring to the concern she has for others.

Stephanie aspires to be a human rights lawyer and a commitment to college was the first step towards achieving that goal. "I love learning," Stephanie stated. She has a particular interest in African American history and can "talk about history all day long."

National statistics show that only 3-7% of youth in foster care will graduate college as compared to 30% of all Americans. Stephanie was up for the challenge.

"It was a long run," Stephanie stated as she recalled her college years.

Yet, due to finances, this opportunity was almost not possible.

Given Stephanie's guardianship was transferred via Probate, she was not eligible for a college subsidy through the Department of Children and Families.

Finances were extremely difficult to piece together. Significant loans were taken out to pay for classes, room, and board.



In contrast, a couple of Stephanie's siblings were adopted after their mother passed away, making them eligible for the DCF college subsidy and receiving annual stipends to offset tuition.

Stephanie's desires to pursue a degree were balanced with the college debt she continued to incur. She continued to move forward and commenced efforts to change the system.

Stephanie, while still attending the University, began advocating to impact Connecticut Statutes regarding financial subsidies for youth who experienced a transfer of guardianship. Her goal is to draw attention to the vast differences in financial support between these youth and those adopted.

She has now spoken multiple times with Legislators, in front of committees examining subsidy determinations broadcast on Connecticut Television Network (CT-N) and may pursue further advocacy efforts in the upcoming legislative session.

Stephanie is the voice of thousands of youth across Connecticut who seek a more equitable system.



"I want to be in a history book," Stephanie explained. "I want to be at a podium one day in front of a large crowd talking about how things are going to change." The dream may also take her to Washington D.C. where she has visited on a number of occasions as she is fond of the culture.

Stephanie was recently accepted into Howard University to pursue a Master of Social Work degree and has committed to begin their on-line program despite the high loans again she must incur to pay for her education.

Stephanie will also be working full-time as less than 48 hours after graduation, and hours after her party ended, Stephanie began her career as a Youth Development Specialist (YDS) at Our Piece of the Pie in Hartford. Her role is to work with over 50 youth to assist them in developing goals and an individualized success plan. "I was going to go into something I knew I enjoyed," she stated.

She is now a role model for youth in the care and custody of DCF. Many of whom do not like the Department's place in their lives.

What is her message to the youth she now serves?

"Being involved with DCF has nothing to do with them. They did not cause the involvement," she advises these young adults. "Take advantage of supports DCF has to offer."

"Do not ever give up," she emphatically answered when asked about the messages she delivers to those who are in a similar situation she experienced years ago. "You have to ask for help. You have to advocate and cannot do everything for yourself."

Stephanie sees firsthand the challenges of today's young people. They may feel disempowered, without a voice or uncertain about their future. "Youth are afraid to ask for help," she stated.

In regard to advocating for yourself, she is equally clear in her message. "Putting your feelings first does not make you selfish," she tells those on her caseload. "Be interdependent and not independent," are more words of her wisdom.

"Advocate."

Stephanie should be commended on her strength and perseverance. She is strong. Insightful and has already impacted so many.

While early life experiences posed challenges, she rose to the occasion time and time again.

"Find the good in everything," she stated.

Beautiful words to live by.

