

## Maria Chose to Blossom



"I realized that my experiences could lead me in two different ways, either stuck within the trauma and allowing that trauma to dictate my life, or I could use my experiences as power, allowing me the grace to blossom."

Maria chose to blossom.

At 13 years of age, Maria couldn't have anticipated the life she now lives. Growing up in the foster care system exposed her to many challenges, including complexities, hardships, loss, systemic inequalities, and inconsistencies.

Maria experienced a disrupted adoption and underwent frequent changes in residence, transitioning from shelters to congregate care facilities, psychiatric hospitals, and foster homes. These continuous shifts introduced new faces, schools, and environments, all of which had a detrimental impact on her mental well-being, sense of security, self-esteem, and the quality of her education.

For a significant portion of her life, Maria grappled with the dehumanizing effects of systemic gaps, feeling like just another statistic in a system that made it difficult to discover her true individuality and purpose.

Maria vividly remembers the crucial moment she crossed paths with DCF Social Worker, Gina Cluff. She firmly believes that Gina, rather than adhering to what might have been perceived as conventional or routine, altered the course of her permanency plan - setting her on the path to healing.

Gina considers herself fortunate to have Maria in her life. "Maria has faced significant challenges throughout her youth, but she has dedicated time to self-improvement and healing. She has gained insights into how her circumstances have shaped her but never allows them to hold her back. Maria has used these experiences to mentally, spiritually, and emotionally enhance her personal growth. She is someone who can achieve remarkable things! Maria is truly an extraordinary individual with a promising future. I eagerly anticipate watching her continue to mature and see where life leads her. I am blessed to know Maria and have her in my life."



This was not the only adult who came into Maria's life to help shape her future.

While in high school, Maria required a respite foster care placement. She crossed paths with Pam DelCiampo, a licensed foster parent affiliated with Community Residence Inc. (CRI). Maria formed an immediate and strong connection with Pam and her extended family.

Pam firmly believes that life has no room for coincidences as she reflected on how Maria came into her home. As Pam was getting ready to host a party for more than 100 guests, she received a call from CRI, asking if she could provide care for a young girl. Despite the day's chaos, Pam felt an undeniable pull to say yes. She describes how an immediate bond formed between Maria and her family, and she now regards Maria as an integral part of her family.

Pam took an active role in Maria's life, accompanying her on college tours, participating in her high school and college graduation ceremonies, and maintaining their connection for various holidays and celebrations.

"Maria is committed to advocating for children in her foster situation through her future career goals. She is selfless and caring about others. She makes a point of coming over when she knows my grandchildren are here. They love her as much as she loves them. My wish for Maria's future is that she can make the impact on others that she envisions. She has the exponential ability to make that happen. All this from a small child who was moved from place to place and given a bad deal, but somehow made it all happen. She truly is a blessing," Pam stated.

Despite frequent moves and challenges, Maria set a goal to attend college. At the end of her junior year in high school, Maria discovered UConn Rising Scholars (URS), formerly known as UConn First Star Academy, an immensely beneficial and life-altering opportunity. This dynamic four-week program offered her a taste of the post-secondary educational environment and the chance to earn college credits. Through this experience, she received a top-notch education, engaged in intellectually stimulating classes, and connected with influential mentors.

Maria found hope that she could attend a four-year university like the University of Connecticut.

UConn Rising Scholars transformed Maria's life, instilling the confidence, connections, and practical academic skills she needed to excel. This program contributed to her growth in the past, and she continues to thrive thanks to its dedicated staff and the opportunities it provided.

Following participation in Rising Scholars, Maria was recommended to join Student Support Services (SSS), a similarly designed summer program geared toward UConn freshmen, ensuring their enrollment into UConn. The SSS program was invaluable for this first-generation Latinx woman in foster care during her first year in college. It offered her a diverse community and similar benefits to URS, providing a solid foundation of support for her initial year.

During her time in college, Maria met Alex Katz, the URS Program Coordinator at the time, who went on to create a program called Creating Caring Communities (CCC). Alex and Maria had a lot in common as

Alex created CCC at the same time she herself was an undergraduate student at UConn, facing homelessness and family estrangement. This newly formed group consisted of students with firsthand experiences in their pursuit of resources despite facing resistance from the school. It provided one-on-one mentorship to each youth, equipping them with necessary skills and knowledge.

Alex's guidance paved the way for Maria to emulate her leadership, support students grappling with similar difficulties, and initiate the process of dismantling institutional obstacles. Like Gina Cluff, Alex consistently stood up for Maria and was there when she needed support the most.

Over time, Alex observed Maria's remarkable journey as she consistently pursued and accomplished numerous goals, surmounted various challenges, and actively sought opportunities to assist others. "I am consistently impressed by Maria's heart, drive, dedication, resilience, and compassion. She is always finding ways to advocate for others and to create a safe and trauma-informed space for them to develop a more empowered sense of self. Maria is such a force for good in the world, and I am honored to be a part of her journey," Alex stated.

Maria has equal admiration for Alex. "Her firsthand experiences have enabled her to relate to me in a way no one else can, as she genuinely comprehends the full breadth of my struggles," she stated.

Maria eventually served as President of Creating Caring Communities. While Maria acknowledges her hard work and determination in reaching her position, she emphasizes that these programs opened the door for her, equipped her with the necessary tools, and offered ongoing support and mentorship. Thanks to these programs and her support network, she has been able to transcend her circumstances and is dedicated to helping other students facing similar challenges.



Maria graduated from UConn with a 3.8 GPA and is presently engaged in her graduate studies at the University where she is actively working toward an advanced degree in Public Policy, explicitly focusing on Child Welfare Law and Equity. She is advancing her knowledge as a Fellow with the CT Office of the Child Advocate and is working for the Commission of Women, Children, Seniors Equity and Opportunities (CWCSEO).

While her future career path may still be uncertain, Maria relentlessly desires to gain comprehensive knowledge in various facets of public policy.

She also has aspirations of potentially attending law school in the future.

Maria was selected as a member of the 2023 Cohort of Jim Casey Fellows by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Over the upcoming year, Maria will collaborate with a diverse group of young individuals with personal experiences from various parts of the country. Together, they will lead initiatives aimed at enhancing policies in the child welfare sector.

While acknowledging that there are persisting gaps and systemic problems within the child welfare system, Maria remains hopeful about ongoing improvements, inspired by the significant transformation that the Department of Children and Families (DCF) has undergone since she entered fourteen years ago.

Maria's most valuable piece of advice for youth who have experience in the foster care system is clear. "It's essential to recognize that you have the right to embrace your humanity, expect to be treated with kindness and respect, and pursue healing, regardless of where you are in your personal journey. The frequent penalties that young people in foster care often face due to past traumas have contributed to a narrative that labels them problematic, challenging, or abnormal children," Maria stated.



Nevertheless, Maria encourages youth to find strength in understanding that it's perfectly acceptable to react to difficult situations with emotions like hurt, anger, fear, sadness, and grief. In essence, it's okay to be vulnerable, she explained.

"Remember, you have the permission to be imperfect, and you should assert that humane treatment and the opportunity for healing are your unconditional birthright. You are always worthy and deserving of it," she stated.

Maria's advice underscores the importance of recognizing one's intrinsic worth, embracing vulnerability, and demanding humane treatment and healing as fundamental rights, regardless of past experiences or challenges. She encourages individuals to break free from the stigmatizing narrative surrounding them, emphasizing that they deserve kindness, respect, and the opportunity for personal growth and healing.

Thank you, Maria, for sharing your story and all you have taught us!