

## Music is Everything: From Hardship to Harmony



*Adrian, formerly in the care and custody of DCF and now Music Theory major at ECSU, with his cello - one of many of his creative pursuits.*

As college students across the country settle into their dorms and adjust to life back on campus, Adrian, a freshman majoring in Music Theory at Eastern Connecticut State University, is doing much more than adjusting—he is thriving. Once Adrian begins telling his story, it becomes clear that getting to this point, pursuing his dream of a career in the arts, was no small feat.

Born in NY, Adrian's early years were filled with transition and hardship. By the time he was nine, he had relocated to Connecticut to live with his aunt, where family struggles led him into the care and custody of DCF.

From there, Adrian experienced a whirlwind of foster homes, a stay in a psychiatric residential treatment facility (PRTF), and battles that would test even the strongest individuals—including a life-threatening cancer diagnosis.

But now, as he embarks on his college journey, majoring in music theory at Eastern, Adrian is building a future for himself thanks to his resilience and passion for life and art - and the influence of one special father figure who was there for him through some of the hardest times.

For Adrian, music has been more than a hobby—it has been a lifeline.

“I wake up with music, I go to sleep with it,” Adrian explained. “It’s not just something I do—it’s part of who I am.”

Adrian speaks about music with a rare kind of emotional fluency, describing how instruments like the piano and cello allow him to express what words cannot. His love for the arts is deep and expansive—spanning chorus, music production, painting, and digital media.

“When I sit at a piano, everything I’m feeling just comes out,” he said. “I’m not thinking about the next note. It’s like a conversation—one hand speaks, and the other responds.”

It was this all-encompassing love for creative expression that made choosing a college major so difficult. But music theory ultimately won out, thanks to its ability to connect technical understanding with raw emotion.

Adrian's journey to Eastern was anything but linear. At one point, college was not even on the table. He was working at a fast food restaurant, unsure of what the future held.

“I saw older couples working there, people who had clearly been doing it for a long time,” he said. “No judgment—but I didn’t want that for myself. I realized I couldn’t settle.”

That mindset pushed him to reconsider education, and ultimately to apply to multiple schools. Eastern stood out—not just because of its strong arts program, but because it offered something more intangible: a sense of belonging.

“People here actually talk to each other. I’ve made a ton of friends already,” he said. “It’s different from anywhere else I’ve been.”



*T.J. and Adrian take a selfie while grabbing a bite to eat.*

Adrian said a large part of his support network was his foster parent T.J., a longtime social worker and foster parent, who heard about Adrian’s while he was still in a PRTF. After years of instability in care, T.J. remembers hearing Adrian make a plea for a family. What he heard was an honest recognition that Adrian was ready for change and a forever home.

After learning Adrian's story, and visiting him in the hospital as he faced a stage four cancer diagnosis, T.J. and his wife Kristin got relicensed to become foster care providers specifically to open their home to Adrian.



Now living at a dorm on the campus of Eastern, Adrian remembers his time together with T.J. and his family vividly—at the hospital during his cancer diagnosis, and later in more everyday moments, like family dinners and backyard chores.

“T.J. became a father figure. I looked up to him in a way I hadn’t looked up to anyone before.”

T.J. did not just offer Adrian a home—he offered stability, guidance, and love. One day, T.J. got home to find Adrian mowing the lawn without being asked. On top of that, Adrian had just got a new job and was proactively applying to college.

On that day, Adrian recalled “T.J. said, ‘I’m proud of you.’ That hit me hard. I don’t think I’d ever heard a male figure say that to me before. I mean, I could care less if my friend said that to me, you know? But coming from T.J. meant a lot to me.”

When asked if he remembers that moment, T.J. laughs, “I don’t!”

Regardless, for T.J., it was a small, intentional gesture—but one he tries to make often.

“I think it’s important for young men in particular to hear the positives,” T.J. said. “Negative news travels fast. We share the complaints too easily, but not enough of the encouragement. So, I make a conscious effort to celebrate the good things.”

That effort has had a lasting effect on Adrian. He reflected on the quiet but profound impact his foster father T.J. had on his life, describing how an initial indifference turned into deep admiration.

“[When we first met], I didn’t really look up to him too much, he was just a guy... but after the first week I spent with him, I began to look up to him as a father,” Adrian shares. “That feeling of, like, *that’s my dad, he treats me like I’m his son*... I’ve never experienced that before.”



For Adrian, T.J. became more than a role model—he became family. From T.J.'s perspective, the feeling is mutual.

“This isn’t a story about me or my wife,” T.J. said. “It’s about kids and resilience. Adrian may not have looked great on paper, but he was ready. He just needed someone to show up, believe in him, and stick with him. I adore that kid. He’s all future, all possibility.”

Adrian is humble when asked how he made it through so many challenges. But his quiet strength is unmistakable.

“Growing up in tough environments teaches you patience and persistence,” he said. “After a while, things that seem hard to other people... they feel normal to you. You learn to appreciate where you are and who’s around you.”

Cancer, foster care placements, PRTFs, Adrian’s experienced so much for someone his age. Now, he walks across campus, music in his head, maybe an instrument in hand, a student determined to shape his own path.

As for what’s next? Adrian is not putting limits on himself. He hopes to get deeper into more areas of art, perhaps film or visual media. But for now, he is letting the music guide him.

In the quiet of the university’s auditorium, where he sometimes plays piano alone in the evenings, Adrian finds a peace that is hard to describe but easy to hear.