

Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota

Participant Nicole

She was very determined and, uh, really just a joy to work with. And uh, brings that passion that is Nicole to every situation.

She just has this great big, beautiful spirit that she brings even when, I mean you don't know, but all the stuff that's going on in her life.

When a participant comes to me looking for help, I start out by listening to what their situation is and I try to find out what it is they're trying to accomplish. In some cases, like with Nicole, it's going to get off into all kinds of other areas of social service need.

I grew up in Chicago housing projects. My mom wanted to better life for me and my sisters, it was um, really rough. Left Chicago when I was 14, been here in Minnesota ever since. My mom was a working mom, she worked 2 or 3 jobs, she was hardly ever home. But we did have a good home.

Life after that, I was 18, I didn't go to college. I asked my Mom, "Mom, am I going to college?" And she's like, well, I really don't have the money. I didn't even look, I didn't even try. I went to work right away.

She was very underemployed. She had two part time jobs, one as a PCA. And she had a part time janitorial job in the wee hours of the morning, like three hours a day.

I lost my job, so I had this other minimum wage job, you know, paying market rent, I couldn't afford it. I got two months behind on rent, lived there for 7 years and they evicted me.

It felt like I was less than nothing. Like, I had no purpose.

You're at home and you're watching a movie like this person that's just hit rock bottom because that's where I was, rock bottom, living out of my van.

If felt like I had nowhere to go. No one to turn to.

I went into the school to ask for some help with some housing. And that's how I met Bill at Goodwill Easter Seals. And he was talking to me and listening to me and he was like, okay, I'm going to help you, uh with your resume. I'm going to help you get into this class and I'm saying to myself Jesus, God, I need a home first. How and I going to go to school if I don't have no stability, you know? But then I had to take a moment and had to say, you know, maybe this is where you need to start first.

So it was a real struggle for her, but, you know, she was still really focused on getting more work and building her skill set. To express her passion for working with children, that came through loud and clear real early.

Besides getting them ready for college, we were also linking Nicole and her classmates with Goodwill Easter Seals and what we call the navigator there. So my role as the teacher is to do that academic skill

building and then the navigator is the one supporting in all those other things that can get in the way of showing up and staying focused on the work.

As we got to know each other in that first semester at college, then she told me also, you know, I've got a whole bunch of people in my life who don't want me to succeed, who are ready to pull me down, and this is not just about a college class, this is about a transformation and who I'm going to be in the world.

There were days that I wanted to quit and days I was like I was just tired of this, I'm tired of just not having and um, (CRY) you know, just not having things that I wanted, you know. So I set all of that aside and I said you know Nicole, you either want to go back to the way things used to be or you want to take this opportunity and you take it and do what you can do with it.

What Nicole said is I know I don't want to be poor, I want a stable good life and so even early on when her whole story could have been about her past, she was moving in this direction of I have a vision and a goal.

The job came along not too far into her second semester and then the housing and so, you know, things really started falling into place for her. Job wise she's in a child care center where she's an assistant teacher.

My job, I love it. I guess I love it so much because they don't judge me. They accept me for who I am Like I know God put me here to work with kids. That's my purpose, I know my purpose now. I have a purpose. We all say we don't know our purpose...I know what mine is now. When you think positive, positive will happen.

Those old powerful stories that what's really true about me is, I'm poor, I fail, whatever those stories are, that's just not her story anymore.

The whole range of services that we provided to Nicole included employment, transportation, housing services, mental health services, educational programming. A lot of goals of programs like at Goodwill Easter Seals is for people to become independent so you sort of have to let them move on and cheer them on as they go, and that's easy to do with Nicole. It's just a wonderful feeling to see where she's at today.

I just have this like very clear confidence about what she's going to do. So she told me she's close to finishing her AS, Associate of Science, so she's going to do that. And she told me that she's going to go on to transfer all those credits into a four year institution, get a four year degree, well she's going to do that. So I'm just going to wait for her to call me and tell me when she's graduating and I'll show up.

I want to say thank you to everyone at Goodwill Easter Seals because everyone has their part. This journey, I just thank God. Because without it, I would have nothing.