



# How a Caring Teacher— and School Choice!— Changed My Life

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**W**hen I started high school, I was going through serious issues. Like every other teen, I was worried about how I looked and what other people thought of me. As a child who was born addicted to drugs and lived below the poverty line, my worries were very different from those of my peers.

My worries as a teenager were about

whether the electricity would be on at home or whether my birthmother would be coming back into my life (only to leave again). I was worried about my grandmother, the one I call mom; she sacrificed all she could to provide for me and my siblings after selflessly adopting all three of us in her retirement years.

So much was going on at home, that

school really wasn't my first priority. My grades kept falling and my attitude towards everything got so much worse. I was rude and selfish; I cursed at my teachers, graffitied the walls, and skipped class frequently. I felt like everything in this world was out to get me, but many saw my behavior as a nuisance and not a cry for help.

One day, I got into a fight with another student who later stole my cell phone. I was distraught—my mom had saved for months to get that phone. When I got to my next class, a teacher that I liked asked me what was wrong. I told her that someone had taken my cell phone and I insisted that she let me leave so I could find it. She let me go, but of course the phone was gone by that time. When I came back into the class, my teacher stopped class and pulled me into a quiet room. She then said to me, "Ashley, I feel like you are upset about something more than just losing your cell phone."

At that moment, I broke down and started crying. Then my teacher, Jennifer Perez, took me in her arms and held me while I sobbed for what felt like forever. In that moment, I felt like somebody actually understood me.

In addition to being my 9th and 10th grade English teacher, Mrs. Perez also became my mentor. She cared about me and kept me together when everything felt like it was falling apart. Her guidance helped me get back on the right path. However, near the end of my 10th grade year, she told me that she and my favorite principal, Mark Thomas, would be leaving to teach at another school.

I thought they were leaving me, and I didn't know what to do. It was then that Mrs. Perez asked if I wanted to go with them. She told me that they were going to Victory Christian Academy. I automatically said no; I was afraid that since it was a Christian school and I was not a believer, it would not be a right fit. Plus, I thought that it was going to be full of snobby rich kids who could never understand a person like me.

Mrs. Perez insisted that I give the school a try and she set up an interview at the school for me. I was accepted immediately, but then came the question of how I was going to pay. Victory is a private school, and my family barely had enough money for the bills, much less a private school.

However, the school informed me about a low-income scholarship to attend Victory, called Step up for Students. The scholarship allowed me to attend a school for which I would not otherwise have the money. When I was at my original high school, I can say that many teachers cared and really wanted to help the students there. However, the resources and the time outside of class that I needed were not something they could provide. It was difficult learning in that environment, and it was just not the right fit for me.

I flourished at Victory. My grades went up from Ds and Fs to As, Bs, and Cs within the first semester. By the second semester, and from that point on, I was an A-B student. Over half of the students there were also on the scholarship, so I never really felt out of place. I participated in my first sport,

became an honors student, and did something I hadn't thought possible two years prior... I graduated.

If Mrs. Perez had never shown me this school and the scholarship, I probably would have flunked out of high school, and I certainly would not have gone to college. It is thanks to that scholarship and Victory that I can now proudly say that I have graduated with my bachelor's degree in history from the University of Central Florida!

Victory was the right choice for me, and I am so thankful that I even had the choice. I had attended public schools and magnet schools my whole life and started failing

in middle school. Obviously, these schools weren't the right fit for me, but they may have been for somebody else.

At the end of the day, every student is different and therefore not every student will thrive under the same conditions or in the same environment. School choice gave me a chance. It put me on the road to success. And it should be available for every other student as well.

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