



Teen rises above all odds to succeed academically

By Jeanetta Bradley
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In September 1999, a 9-year-old girl's world changed forever. After living with eight relatives in a small house, sometimes without food or electricity, Maya Barnes was placed in the custody of Child Protective Services.

But Barnes' life is not a tale of defeat. Rather, hers is a story of academic and personal triumph.

Although she was young, Barnes, now 18, was aware of her surroundings,

"I was happy to be with my mother and brother, but I wasn't naive," she said. "I knew I wasn't in the best situation."

One day a neighbor, alarmed at the living conditions, anonymously notified authorities, and Barnes was removed from the home and separated from her mother. For the next five years, Barnes was in and out of foster care homes and eventually was separated from her older brother as well.

"It was tough, because I was young," Barnes said. "It was hard being by myself."

Despite her home life, Barnes maintained good grades while attending Elmhurst Middle School in Oakland.

"School was an escape for me," Barnes said. "I've never really had to think about doing well. It's just natural for me."

It wasn't until she moved in with her aunt and uncle in Oakland four years ago, that Barnes, 14 at the time, felt the odds were in her favor.

While living with her relatives, Barnes attended Castlemont Business and Information Technology High School, where she was senior year class president and graduated with a 3.5 grade-point average.

"Coming here was like a breath of fresh air," Barnes said. "I didn't have to be worried about things, and I could finally be a kid again."

Barnes used her past to help others. She became a tutor for Higher Ground at Sobrante Park Elementary, a program that aims to improve education for at-risk youth in public schools. Barnes was also involved with Teens on Target, sponsored by YouthAlive! in Oakland, in which teenage mentors work with other youngsters on problem-solving and peaceful resolution to conflict.

"The younger generation is the future" Barnes said, "so by talking to them, we can help solve some of the issues with violence."


After hearing about it from a friend, Barnes applied for admission to Students Rising Above, an organization that helps students from low-income, disadvantaged backgrounds. Through the program, she was granted a partial college scholarship to help minimize school loans and a laptop.

"It was great to win the scholarship," Barnes said.

In the fall, she heads to California State University, Northridge, and intends to major in sociology. Barnes hopes to have a career working with children.

"I've always loved being around kids, and I want to


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have an impact on their lives," she said

Though Barnes does not live with her mother or brother Keith, 19, she still keeps in close touch with them.

"My family is proud of me and supportive in what I'm doing," she said.


And with college on the horizon, Barnes is excited about the future and is glad that her past did not dictate her future.

"I want a family some day and don't want my kids going through what I did," Barnes said. "This is my key to success."

Reach Jeanetta Bradley at
jbradley@bayareanewsgroup.com.

Students Rising Above is a partnership between Bay Area News Group-East Bay, CBS 5 and CBS5.com that produces a series of news stories, Web features and public service announcements profiling low-income, at-risk Bay Area high school seniors who are overcoming tremendous obstacles. More than half of them are growing up without parents, 75 percent live below the federal poverty line and many have been homeless. All of them want to go to college. For more on Students Rising Above, or to make a donation, call 415-333-4222 or visit studentsrisingabove.org.


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