

## Intensive Strengths Based Case Management: A Success Story

By Wendy Grace Evans

Jessica Lazu wants to be an attorney and from the conviction I hear in her voice, I have no doubt that someday she will. Jessica is 26 years old and has lived in foster care since her mother died from cancer when she was thirteen. “I was placed in really bad foster homes for years and did the whole running away thing because I was being abused in these homes,” explains Jessica. By age 16, Jessica was pregnant. “I never had a stable childhood even when my mom was alive. She had cancer and I was always taking care of my mom and my little sister. But I would endure it all over again just to have my mom back,” shares Jessica.

Four years ago, Jessica lost her job and was on the verge of being evicted. All of the shelters were full, and she had no place to go. “Because I grew up without parents, I never had the luxury of going home when things weren’t working in my life,” says Jessica. “Without a place to stay, I had nothing.”

Jessica was referred to The Connection Inc. funded by the Department of Children and Families in Connecticut. The Connection Inc. provides intensive case management and supportive housing services to families in Jessica’s situation.

She was introduced to a case manager from The Connection, but things did not work out as the result of a personality conflict. Jessica was immediately transferred to another case manager, Nancy Salgado-Santos, who describes Jessica as a young woman with a great deal of motivation. “When I met Jessica, she was homeless. She was a young woman with a daughter. Jessica knew she wanted to be something in life, but she didn’t know what road to take,” says Nancy.

“One thing I really want to emphasize is that Nancy pulled out that treatment plan for me and said ‘this is what you are going to do, and this is what you are going to accomplish.’ Nancy gave me a lot of positive reinforcement. It helped me out a lot, especially all of the footwork she did to help me get back into school,” says Jessica.

Nancy’s efforts on Jessica’s behalf helped to create a clear pathway for Jessica to follow. Together, they developed a treatment plan that addressed Jessica’s goals for furthering her education, finding permanent housing, and finding a job. Initially, the Connection provided Jessica with rental assistance from a transitional housing fund, until she received a Family Unification Program voucher. The voucher enabled her to move to a quiet neighborhood where she found great schools for her two children and friendly neighbors. Jessica earned an Associates degree and is now studying for a BA in Criminal Justice and Science. She pays 30 to 40 percent of her income towards rent, as do all clients with section 8 housing.

“My goal, says Jessica, “is to be an attorney. I would like to work with youth who have had barriers in their lives, or difficult upbringings. I want to help make a difference,” explains Jessica.

Case management from The Connection made a powerful impact on Jessica's life. "There should be programs like this everywhere. Nancy helped set me on the right path and made a big difference in my life."

Her goal is to give her children the kind of childhood that she never had. "My daughter is eleven. She's gorgeous and she loves her school. My son, who is three, is a little busy guy. I am really blessed."

She laughs and then says with honesty, "But don't get me wrong, some times I am like, 'oh my God, can I really do this? Without the support of the Connection I would have never been able to do any of this, because I wouldn't have been able to afford housing or school."