

## **She refused to accept poverty and failure**

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High school senior Natasha Sturdivant has lived in 22 Charlotte-area foster homes and care facilities, but she has always had one constant in her life: School, and the teachers and counselors who encouraged her to excel.

The Concord native is ranked 21st academically among 515 seniors at Independence High School in Charlotte. She recently earned a \$20,000 Horatio Alger National Scholarship to help fund her college education. Natasha will receive the award in Washington, D.C., this week.

The scholarship is awarded to students who've "persevered through great adversities in their lives," said Tony Novelly, head of the Horatio Alger Association.

That describes Natasha, who was shuffled from one home to the next since she was 7 years old, after her mom's troubles with the law.

Julia Jordan, 42, of Concord was declared a habitual felon in 2001 and served six years and six months in prison for obtaining property by false pretenses. She'd previously been given probation for forgery, writing worthless checks, stealing credit cards and damaging property.

Natasha said she rarely sees her mom, who has started a trucking company and is mostly on the road.

Natasha told me at Independence last week that she lived in care homes until about age 16. She now lives with a family member in Monroe, she said.

She was in a care home in Charlotte entering high school, which is why she attends Independence.

Most students placed in so many homes don't graduate high school, said Pete Kritzer, head guidance counselor at Independence.

"It destroys them," he said.

Not Natasha. "School is where my support system is," she said. "It's a place I come to and it's a sanctuary. Outside, I may feel a little vulnerable. At school, people have my back."

Natasha credits a program at Independence called AVID and its coordinator, Cyndi Wellner, for inspiring her. AVID is short for Advancement Via Individual Determination, a longtime California-based academic support program for students in grades 6 through 12. Students are often the first in their families to be college-bound.

Natasha's top choices are Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., and Spelman College in Atlanta. She's also applied to Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif., and Reed College in Portland, Ore.

"I refused to accept failure, poverty and unstable homes as my reality," Natasha wrote last year in an essay about AVID's influence on her. "I found strength in me that I did not know existed there."

"It is because of AVID that when people give me a hard time I am undaunted because I know that I have a support system that will always care about me.."

Natasha also earned a Bardoli Global Scholarship in 2010 that enabled her to study in Guatemala that year.

She wants to be a judge, mainly, she said, because of all she saw in the courts.

"She knows what it's like when the judge walks away," Wellner said. "She knows what it's like to be the child always with the backpack. And she can say, 'This has to stop,' and somebody will listen to her because of her experience."