

South Side grad stays focused

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India Ballard-Bonfitto's honor roll recognition and certificates recognizing her excellence in drawing line the fireplace mantel in her house. When talking about her daughter's accomplishments, Allison Ballard uses Ballard-Bonfitto's middle name, calling her India Jade.

"She calls me that when she's proud of me," says Ballard-Bonfitto.

As a recent graduate of South Side High School, Ballard-Bonfitto has much to be proud of. On May 14, she became one of eight Indiana high school students receiving \$5,000 college scholarships from the Horatio Alger Association. Another certificate added to the mantel.

In the fall, she will attend Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, majoring in fashion design. She says receiving the scholarship was a great honor, because it was something few people receive. The Horatio Alger Association is recognizing her for challenges she faced during a time in her life when she says she didn't feel she was good at anything.

When Ballard-Bonfitto was 9, she, her brother Jacob and her two older half sisters had plans to spend Christmas Eve with their father. She remembers being especially excited because she and her father had gone grocery shopping for special snacks for the occasion. At the time, she was still grieving from the death of her grandfather the year before, and she said she comforted herself by eating.

When the night came, Ballard-Bonfitto called and knocked on her father's door, to no answer. She said she knew something was wrong. Her mom later told her that her father had died. Ballard-Bonfitto said she remembered feeling so sad, "like the world had been ripped out from under me."

After her father's death, she continued to use food for comfort, but as she got older, she "slowly became more self-conscious of her body." She said she tried different ways to lose weight and bought diet pills.

The summer between her seventh- and eighth-grade years, she participated in a modeling competition, but was devastated when she didn't receive any call-backs.

At 13, her feelings of inadequacy and need for perfection turned into an eating disorder. She would often eat only "soup" made of water, celery and bouillon cubes. Other times she would go all day without eating, only to binge later and make herself vomit. She had a combination of anorexia and bulimia.

After three months, a guidance counselor informed Ballard of her daughter's eating disorder. After consulting with specialists, Ballard learned Remuda Ranch in Arizona was a highly recommended treatment center, but would cost almost \$100,000 for the treatment her daughter needed.

Ballard had no insurance at the time to help cover the costs. She says she felt terrified, helpless and overwhelmed, knowing eating disorders had a high rate of relapse. She called back and negotiated for a lower price.

"I had to take out a second mortgage on my house, but I didn't hesitate because it was what needed to be done. I truly felt I was fighting for her life," said Ballard.

After two months, Ballard-Bonfitto returned home, without the structure of the treatment center, the chef or the dietitian, but she has never relapsed. She says she's never felt the temptation.

"I don't want to be back in the place I was," she said.

Today, Ballard-Bonfitto says she counts calories more than she should and still has issues with her personal image, but she no longer thinks being especially thin is attractive. She's looking forward to starting college and says the scholarship fits with her goals, because it's about helping people. As a fashion designer, she wants to help young girls with their body image.

"I want to design clothes that are more flattering, clothes you don't have to be super-skinny to be able to wear," she said.

Ballard cannot stress enough how proud she is of her daughter. She said as a family, it has taken hard work and determination to get where they are today.

"We've been to hell and back, but our family has come out strong and intact," she said.