

When I was three years old my mom died and my dad had a really hard time handling it. Then his brother died and I guess the anger was too much for him. He started drinking and for as long as I can remember my childhood was filled with his drunken rage. I had a hard time going to school as friends and other kids were always asking me why I had this bruise on my face, or that bruise on my neck. I would just say I didn't know. I didn't want to go to school because of all the questions. Then one day Children & Youth showed up at my house and started asking questions and taking pictures of me. I was really scared and I didn't know what was going to happen to me. By the time I was 14, I had started drinking and later tried to kill myself.

I was sent to a hospital for a few weeks to get help and after that, a foster care group home. I was just 14. In the group home you had to stand in line to talk to someone if you had a question about your homework. You had to stand in line to talk to someone about your problems. I hated it. When the other kids and I would go outside to play football, it was fine. But inside there was always aggression, teasing and pushing.

This was not the place for me, especially at 14. A traditional family environment would have been so much better for me and this was far from a family environment.

After being in the group home for about a year, my father and step-mother got in touch with me and said things would be better, that my dad had stopped drinking and so a court hearing was held and it was determined I could go back home. I thought things would be better and for a little while they were, but it wasn't long until I felt scared again from the verbal and physical abuse. As part of my depression, I was drinking, too, and began to rebel by doing things I wasn't supposed to be doing and ended up getting into trouble with the law. Finally, I confided in my probation officer about the abuse at home and told her I wanted to go live with a foster family. When I was 17 and a junior in high school, I went to live with my first foster family.

It took a couple of placements to find the right match for me, but finally it clicked. It was the first time in my life I really felt part of a family. My foster parents really made me feel at home. I stayed with them until after my high school graduation and though I no longer live there, I talk to them often and they invite me back for holidays. Right now I'm working two jobs and plan to go back to school. I have a lot of friends and people who support me.

I'm living the best life I can but I have regrets about some of the things that happened to me and the way they were handled. I wish those involved in my case would have found relatives for me to live with so I never would have had to go into the group home. That was hard. Years later my brother helped me find my gram, my mom's mom, but I wish I had known about her – or other family members - sooner. A group home is not a family. If I had been placed in a foster family home first, before the group home, maybe that would have been the kind of place where I felt supported so I didn't feel the need to rebel.

I spent so much time scared, angry and confused. I know things could have been different for me if someone would have realized how important it was for me to be a part of a safe and stable family.

Doug Sunday, 20, lives in State College and is engaged in the Porch Light Project, which seeks reform of Pennsylvania's child welfare system to assure a "forever family for every child." Visit the initiative at www.porchlightproject.org.