

The incredible story of Dawn Loggins

They walked the aisles at Old Navy, Ross and outlet stores. Dawn paused over clothes that appealed to her style. Gray, black, purple shorts, sundresses and shirts. She kept her distance from anything yellow or pink.

The 17-year-old had never shopped like this before.

She was always looking for a bargain.

Shirts, shorts and flip-flops. She worried about the prices. Robyn Putnam, her guidance counselor at Burns High School, caught on.

Putnam first knew Dawn through her transcripts. A straight-A student with a laundry list of school transfers. Dawn's parents didn't take her shopping, so Putnam did.

"Do you want it? Will you wear it?" Putnam asked.

"Yes. I'll wear it."

"Then put it in the cart," Putnam said more than once.

Burns High faculty and staff pitched in with money here and there. Dawn had new purple pillowcases, sheets, a mini-refrigerator and a desk lamp piled onto the shopping cart. She wrote thank-you letters, including one to her dentist, who had supplied the toothpaste and toothbrush.

Dawn was bound for N.C. Governor's School at Meredith College in Raleigh.

She was to spend six weeks with some of the top rising seniors from all over the state.

She wasn't worried about being the new kid at Governor's School. She knew it wouldn't be like middle school.

Those years were her worst.

Dawn owned two dresses in middle school. Most days, she wore the burgundy striped one with a black flower stitched at the bottom. Her grandma didn't make her shower every day. Some days, she forgot to brush her hair.

Girls would tease the cute boys in class by saying that Dawn liked them.

"People thought it was funny when the guys were grossed out," she said.

She dealt with the teasing by not talking.

The kids called her stupid.

Governor's School would be different. She'd be around students who wanted to excel, whether they were rich or oddballs.

They didn't know about the Lincolnton home she lived in with her family. There was no power or water. Or about the trips to the park with her brother to fill empty jugs with water to take back home. They needed the water to flush the toilet, wash and cook ramen noodles for dinner.

Dawn didn't ask her mom for a ride to Raleigh. She couldn't take the argument it would cause. Dawn doesn't get through one without crying.

She knew her mom and stepdad were heading to Tennessee for a visit the week she was to leave for Raleigh.

"She said, 'Bye, have fun,'" Dawn recalled.

Putnam told Dawn to call whenever she needed anything.

So she did.

Putnam packed a van with Dawn's belongings and the two headed for Raleigh.

'Not like middle school'

Friends came easy at Governor's School. It wasn't hard to start a conversation after learning about astrophysics, dissecting cow parts and watching translucent fish eggs hatch.

Dawn reunited with her friend Emily at Governor's School. Emily still teases Dawn about her asking, "Where do you hail from?" when they first met in the eighth grade.

Typical Dawn choice of words. She'll say "accosted." She won't talk college sports. Not her thing. She dabbles in multiplayer games like Dungeons and Dragons, The Lost Odyssey and Gears of War.

She carries a backpack with a red and white medicine symbol etched across the front. It reminds her of a "medipack," an icon for health, in the "Left 4 Dead" video games.

"I'm a nerd," she said, tugging at the sleeves on her "Talk Nerdy To Me" shirt.

'The number you are calling...'

Governor's School let out for a four-day break in July. She had been at the school for about a month. Dawn visited her boyfriend's family in Conover during the break. She

met her boyfriend, Josh, when she was a student at Bunker Hill High School in Claremont before she transferred to Burns High.

While on break, she got a call from her mother.

They met under the shade of a carport. Her mom and stepdad didn't know she had learned about forensic science, fingerprinting and astrology while at school. They didn't ask a lot of details, she said.

"It's as if I never left. It was a regular conversation we'd have on the couch," she said.

They kissed her. They hugged her. They told her to have fun at school. They said their I love you's.

"Sorry we can't stay long, but we have to go," Dawn's mom and stepdad told her.

The conversation lasted about 30 minutes.

She gave her parents her phone number at the school. They never used it, she said.

Dawn returned to Governor's School. She debated with fellow students and shared her ideas openly. She felt it was OK to be a nerd.

With a week left in the program, Dawn started with a call a day to her parents. A few days later, she upped to five calls a day.

"The number you are calling has been temporarily disconnected," the recording told her.

Dawn called her grandma, an aunt and other family members. She asked if they had heard from her parents.

No one had. How would she get home? Where was home? Where was her family?

Part 2

At most of the homes, she slept on the couch. At one home, she took a blanket on a carpeted floor.

Couch-hopping, she called it. That's how Dawn Loggins, 17, spent the rest of last summer break.

The rising Burns High School senior had spent most of her summer in Raleigh at the prestigious N.C. Governor's School among some of the top students from across the state.

A week before the school let out, unanswered calls to her family gave way to a realization: She was homeless.

She knew her mom and stepdad planned a short visit to Tennessee. After weeks with no word from them, it looked they had decided to stay.

Their home was abandoned. Dawn's older brother had moved out, staying with friends in Hendersonville.

She was told her parents had dropped off their grandmother at the homeless shelter in Shelby, she said.

With no ride home from Raleigh, she called her Burns High guidance counselor, Robyn Putnam, for a ride.

Putnam dropped off Dawn at a friend's house in the Hickory area.

She planned her next steps days at a time. Careful not to overstay her welcome, after a few days at one friend's house, she moved on to the next. At one place, she shared a bathroom with eight people. She bathed at night after everyone was asleep. She washed dishes and swept floors to show her appreciation.

When Dawn talks about these weeks now, her voice doesn't change. She's not emotional about it.

"I realized I was getting nowhere calling my parents. What was I going to do? Cry about it? I had no choice but to stay with friends," she said.

Dawn had been moving around with her family for years. Chased out of houses and trailers with eviction notices tacked to the front doors.

She adapted. And she had offers to stay on at one friend's house in Catawba County.

But that wasn't the answer.

She had been around there for middle school. Those were the years when she was picked on, tormented for being poor, not bathing every day.

Dawn had to get back to Burns High before her senior year started. Burns was high school number three for her. It was also her safe haven.

Searching for a home for Dawn

Burns was a place where Dawn had a job cleaning the school's classrooms, bathrooms, hallways and offices before and after school.

Dawn was allowed to stash her belongings in a closet near the cafeteria.

Dawn's brother, Shane, had gone to Burns, too. Dawn's advanced placement U.S. history teacher, Larry Gardner, had taught Shane.

She hadn't been able to take as many challenging classes as her classmates.

"Every time I moved to another school, I felt further behind. I was disqualified from taking challenging classes because I missed too many days," she said. "Now at Burns, I could take AP and honors classes."

Gardner and other Burns staff had looked out for Shane and now, Dawn. Shane went to finish high school in Hickory.

They gave the siblings shampoo and soap and let them shower at the school. Junie Barrett, Dawn's custodial supervisor, washed the siblings' clothes in the washing machine custodians used to clean mops.

A few times in her junior year, while Dawn was living with her mom and stepdad in Lincoln County, the school staff drove her home and picked her up for school — 50 miles away.

Barrett and former Burns High Principal Gary Blake remember an afternoon when Dawn asked them for candles. They asked why.

She said she couldn't complete her homework in the dark. Her home had no running water or electricity.

Her question pained Blake not just as a principal, but as a father. Barrett remembers the strain in Dawn's voice when she asked for the candles.

Blake met with staff and counselors the same afternoon. They paid the family's power bill that month. They set up a plan of action to help Shane and Dawn.

"We're all some children have. We want to make sure students have a safe haven," Blake said. "If we don't care, who will?"

While Dawn roamed across Hickory staying with friends, her guidance counselor, Robyn Putnam, searched for a home for Dawn. She called a list of friends and coworkers.

"Can Dawn stay with you?" she asked.

Putnam called Sheryl Kolton, a custodian and bus driver for Burns Middle and Burns High. Kolton's youngest daughter, Amber, was Dawn's first friend at Burns. Dawn had slept over at their house before.

Kolton knew Dawn as her daughter's shy and quiet friend. The two had spent most of the time in Amber's room. She knew that Dawn needed a home and wanted to finish high school.

"I don't even remember how the conversation started. How many phone calls do you get like that?" Kolton said. She thought about her answer for two days. Eventually, Kolton said yes.

Taking care of one of their own — on their own

No one risked calling the Department of Social Services about Dawn, who was 17 at the time and had been homeless.

Those who cared about Dawn could have lost her to foster care if they alerted the authorities to her situation. Putnam was afraid Dawn wouldn't be able to take classes she had lined up for her senior year at a different school.

Putnam and Kolton made sure Dawn had everything she needed: Clothes, food, shelter and Burns.

In situations like Dawn's, Jane Shooter, assistant director for the county DSS, said social workers would have attempted to locate her parents and understand the situation. If they determined a child needed to be placed in foster care, their first attempts would be to find a safe guardian or foster family in the area. But that's not always possible.

Members of the Burns community took care of one of their own on their own.

But was this the right thing to do?

"I can only say if you suspect a child is neglected or abused, by North Carolina law, you're mandated to report it," Shooter said.

Children in foster care age out of DSS's protection when they turn 18 years old. Dawn turned 18 on Feb. 29.

"There's nothing we can do now that she turned 18," Shooter said.

The first time for rules

At Kolton's home, Dawn had rules to follow: Keep good grades and behave. She couldn't smoke, drink or do drugs.

"It was odd. It was the first time I had an individual look at me and say, 'This is what I expect of you,'" Dawn remembered.

Kolton's home with black shutters sat below a grassy slope on New Bethel Church Road outside Lawndale. Dawn carried in the packed suitcase and travel-sized bags she tugged around Hickory.

Kolton said Dawn walked around the house with her head tucked down. "It was like she was almost hiding," she said.

It would take time for her to feel truly comfortable at Kolton's.

Part 3 of 4: Dawn plans for college

Dawn Loggins wrapped a purple and white scrunchie around her long blonde hair and chugged a mug of apple juice. She didn't have time to eat breakfast before work.

She was up around 5 a.m. The Burns High senior didn't fall asleep until 2 a.m. She had been studying for an advanced placement U.S. history test.

She flung her backpack over her shoulder and rushed to school. Yellow buses sat in the parking lot. It was dark outside.

Dawn slid on a pair of clear plastic gloves. She read over the list of school offices, hallways and bathrooms to clean.

As many of her fellow classmates smashed the snooze button, Dawn pulled a vacuum and trash bin down the empty hallways.

The 18-year-old Burns senior works mornings and afternoons as a school custodian.

Dawn doesn't bother to wear jewelry with her black shirt, pants and sneakers. Earrings, bracelets and rings get in her way while on the job.

Dawn doesn't listen to music while she works alone every school morning. Instead, she recites her to-do list for the day in her head: Homework assignments, activities in astronomy and photography clubs. She sighed at the thought of advanced placement calculus as she swept a hallway rug.

She pushes thoughts of her parents out of her head. She prefers not to be annoyed while working, she said.

She pinched a wad of gum off of a carpet and tossed it in the trash bin. Because Dawn was wearing gloves, she didn't mind picking up gum someone else had chewed.

The gloves ripped. She returned to the cabinet for another pair.

She paused in the doorway of a boys' bathroom, broom in hand.

“Is anyone in here?” she called out. “I always have to say that even though I know no one’s inside this early,” she explained. It was 7 a.m.

She reached into a urinal and pulled out a damp, crumpled paper towel. Her tone stiffened.

“This bothers me. It’s lazy,” she said, flinging the towel inside a trash bin. “I hate walking into classrooms with soda bottles all over the floor. That’s the only thing that bothers me about my job.”

Cars and trucks trickled into the student parking lot. Puttering buses finished their routes. The hallways were still empty.

When she finishes work early, she’ll head early to her first-period class with Larry Gardner, her AP history teacher. She’ll finish any homework and study. Sometimes she’s first in class before him.

Dawn’s day started three hours before the first bell rang at 8 a.m.

Then, it was off to a day of AP and honors classes.

She will sneak into guidance counselor Robyn Putnam’s office for a quick hello between classes. She never left without grabbing pieces of candy from the dish on the file cabinet.

And do it all again after school

When the dismissal bell rings, Dawn doesn’t head home or to athletic practice. She goes back to work, cleaning Burns high for another two hours.

Then, she goes home and works on her homework for hours. Sometimes, she falls asleep on a textbook.

This is her routine every morning, every afternoon and night, five days a week.

Just weeks before her senior year started, Dawn was homeless. She had spent the majority of her summer at the prestigious N.C. Governor’s School in Raleigh.

But when it was time to return home, she learned her mother and step-father had moved to Tennessee. Her older brother was living in Hendersonville. Her grandmother was staying at the homeless Shelter in Shelby.

She roamed the Hickory area, staying with friends and sleeping on couches.

Years before, eviction notices forced the family out of homes without power and running water. Burns High faculty and staff let Dawn shower and washer clothes at the school.

Putnam found Dawn a home with Sheryl Kolton, who works as a custodian at Burns Middle and Burns High.

‘People have it worse than me’

The hardest time for Dawn was the first nine weeks of this school year. She juggled AP and honors classes, clubs and adjusting to life at Kolton’s home.

She thought about college and her future. But she didn’t realize how soon applications were due. It was already October.

Dawn didn’t know where to begin. But Carol Rose did.

Rose is a mother of three college students. She knew about researching and applying to colleges. Rose, who heard about Dawn through school staff, was touched by Dawn’s story — completing Governor’s School and maintaining strong grades while homeless.

“I was afraid to meet her. I didn’t think I was worthy of helping her,” Rose said. “I knew I was going to fall in love with her.”

Dawn worked after school with Rose. They met in conference rooms or wherever Burns had an open space and a table. Dawn wrote essays and Rose critiqued them.

Rose told Dawn that colleges would compete for her not just because of her high marks, but the way she managed to keep them through years of poverty and school transfers.

North Carolina State University, Davidson College and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill were Dawn’s choices.

“Reach for the stars,” Rose told her. “Apply to Harvard University.”

Harvard University?

Burns was her fourth high school. Dawn had nearly perfect grades. But what Harvard student didn’t?

She had a few honors and AP classes in her junior year. Missed school days from constant evictions disqualified her from taking more advanced classes.

She wasn’t ranked in the top 5 percentile at Burns. Would she be enough to turn Harvard’s head?

“People have it worse than me,” Dawn said. Rose mentioned Harvard again. Dawn dismissed the idea, again.

Dawn submitted applications to UNC-Chapel Hill, Davidson College and N.C. State.

Dawn took a break from the college crunch. She went to a family member's birthday party in Marion one weekend in October.

Dawn's mother and stepdad were there. They hadn't spoken to Dawn since the first week in July.

"That's when my mom told me she definitely moved to Tennessee," Dawn said.

Dawn returned to Kolton's home Lawndale.

Submit

"Where else do you want to apply?" Rose asked Dawn. The first semester of her senior year was almost over.

Dawn knew Rose was taking the conversation back to Harvard.

Dawn wanted the college process to end.

Then, Dawn thought about her parents.

"I was angry with my parents for leaving me to take care of this myself," she said. "The thing that kills me is how they affected my education. Had they not prevented me from taking AP classes, then I could go Harvard. I wasn't at a high enough caliber to get in."

Dawn remembered the countless days her mother stayed cooped up inside a bedroom.

No power. No water. Sometimes, no food in the house. Dawn and her older brother took care of themselves.

"In her mind, she thinks she was a good mother," Dawn said. "I still love her. You can't just stop loving someone."

Despite the flashbacks, Rose's question lingered. Dawn finally gave in and applied to Harvard.

Dawn took Rose's advice for the essay. She wrote about the turmoil she endured battling poverty and hunger to preserve her education.

An education would shield Dawn from becoming what she feared most, what she promised herself as a child she wouldn't become.

"I didn't want to end up like my parents, picking between buying food and paying the rent," she said. "No, I've come too far for that."

Rose was with Dawn when she clicked “submit” on the online application to Harvard University in December. They were using a laptop in the parking lot of Jack in the Box.

Then, Dawn drank a milkshake.

No more applications to submit. Dawn could breathe easy.

Part 4 of 4: Dawn visits Harvard after receiving an acceptance letter

In March, the mail brought bulky envelopes filled with acceptance letters, pamphlets and welcome folders from colleges.

North Carolina State University. Warren Wilson College. Davidson College.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. All said yes to Burns High senior Dawn Loggins.

She still hadn’t heard from Harvard University. She was feeling doubtful.

While some classmates had begun taking advanced placement and honors classes years before, Dawn was constantly on the move, her family evicted from home after home. She missed a lot of school days, making it impossible to take some AP classes.

Last summer, she found herself homeless and spent weeks hopping from couch to couch at friends’ homes in Catawba County. Eventually, she found a home with Sheryl Kolton, a custodian and bus driver at Burns Middle and Burns High.

Dawn found time to join the National Honors Society, National Spanish Honors Society and the Beta Club and she’s president of the photo club.

Before and after classes, she works as a janitor, cleaning the high school she attends. Despite her straight As and an SAT score of 2110, Dawn didn’t think she was competitive enough for Harvard.

The letter

One night, after coming home from cleaning Burns High, there it was. A small envelope on the kitchen table.

In the left hand corner: “Harvard.”

This wasn’t like the thick oversized envelopes from the other schools. It didn’t look good. Dawn opened the letter.

She gasped as she clutched the page.

“Dear Ms. Loggins,” the letter read. “I am delighted to report that the Admissions Committee has asked me to inform you that you will be admitted to the Harvard College class of 2016... We send such an early positive indication only to outstanding applicants...”

Dawn was excited, but she didn't jump up and down. She didn't yell.

“I've learned over the years not to get my hopes up because I've been let down so much,” she said. “It makes disappointment easier to handle.”

She's been through years of broken promises.

She remembers her parents telling her they would live in a new home as a family with Dawn's older brother and her two half-sisters.

That never happened.

Her stepdad is facing a drug charge and is now being held in the Lincoln County Detention Center.

Her mom is sharing a one-room motel with Dawn's grandmother in the Hickory area.

The girl who swept the school's floors

The next day, Dawn walked down the hallway to U.S. history teacher Larry Gardner's class.

“Mr. Gardner, what do you think of this?” she asked, handing him the letter.

He couldn't read anything past the words Harvard University in the letter's heading.

He remembered the Saturday afternoon he sat down to write her recommendation letter to Harvard. He had thrown away the first draft.

“God, give me the words to say,” he'd asked.

Gardner held back tears thinking about the girl who swept the school's floors. Harvard wanted her.

“It was good to see her smile,” he said. “There were times you couldn't get a smile out of her.”

Dawn shared the news with others who had helped her. Her principal, Dr. Aaron Allen, her school counselor, Robyn Putnam, and Carol Rose, a mother who helped her apply to colleges.

Dawn ended with a round of calls to her family.

Her older brother, who was living in Hendersonville, told her she never should've doubted herself.

Her grandmother screamed through the phone.

Dawn's mother told her she was proud.

That call felt bittersweet.

"What right does she have to look at me and say, 'I'm proud of you?' She didn't contribute or anything," Dawn said. "But, I guess, at least she said something."

Dawn doesn't know whether her stepdad knows she got in to Harvard.

Dawn doesn't want an apology from her parents.

"I just want them to be there for my two sisters," she said. "In their minds, they did the best for us. I don't hate them. They have to live with the consequences of their actions."

A trip to Harvard

On Thursday, Dawn boarded a plane for her first flight. It took her to Boston.

Burns High faculty and staff had pitched in for the trip to Cambridge, Mass., to tour the prestigious university. Junie Barrett, her custodial supervisor at the school, accompanied her.

Sporting her Burns Bulldogs T-shirt, Dawn explored the Harvard campus with a map. She stayed in a freshman dorm through the weekend.

Back at Burns, on Tuesday afternoon, the girl who wouldn't let herself show excitement was giggling.

It was her same matter-of-fact voice, but interrupted by spurts of laughter.

She talked about staying out until 3 a.m. with her new friends — prospective Harvard freshmen from other states.

They went to a late-night Harvard ice cream social. They got caught in the rain. They shared an umbrella as they navigated the streets. Dawn's sneakers were soaked.

She marveled at the stately architecture of the Harvard buildings and the stained-glass windows in the dining hall.

She learned she wouldn't need a car. Nearby shops and restaurants are still open at 2 a.m. and within walking distance from the campus.

There's also the subway. She learned the hard way to hold on to the bars when the subway started moving.

She slid into a passenger.

He laughed. Not the reaction she expected.

Dawn wasn't afraid to ask people for directions on campus. Everyone was helpful.

"They didn't try to show their smarts with using big words or being super geniuses," Dawn said. "They were friendly."

Dawn met with a Harvard financial aid adviser last weekend.

Harvard has offered Dawn financial aid that would cover tuition, room and board, she said. That doesn't include books and living expenses.

Harvard is also helping her find a job at the university, Dawn said.

'This is where I see myself'

Dawn toured a Harvard science laboratory. She talked with undergraduate students about their original projects — from studies of fruit flies to research that combines economics and biology.

The Harvard students were making hypotheses.

Doing the research.

Developing the theories.

Making groundbreaking advancements.

She wants to study animal habitats. Harvard seems an ideal place.

Her eyes brightened when she talked about the campus laboratory she toured. She could see herself in that building — working with fellow students to produce groundbreaking research.

"This is where I see myself in four years," she said. "This is where I need to be."

Reach reporter Alicia Banks at 704-669-3338.