

## **Becoming Part of a Real Family**

Unlike many other kids in foster care, my siblings and I entered the system because my mother battled mental illness. This was very scary to us. Because of her illness she was never really able to take care of me or my four siblings. When my mother was taking her medication, she was like any other parent, but the problem was that most of the time, she just stopped taking it. We knew it was a matter of time before we wouldn't be able to stay with her.

I never had much of a relationship with my dad, and he died when I was 8. I briefly stayed with my aunt, but after a few months she wasn't able to take care of me anymore. Other family members seemed unable to care for us too. So, at age 7, I entered the foster care system. I was happy that my youngest brother and I were always placed together so I could keep an eye on him. To be honest, I always felt like his mother. I thought it was important that, as siblings, we could maintain a relationship. Fortunately my other siblings were placed in foster homes nearby. The most difficult thing was switching schools frequently, so it was hard to maintain friendships and keep up with schoolwork. From what I can remember I was placed in at least six different homes.

As I got older, I realized what a relief and rescue foster care was – I was learning what it was like to be part of a real family. I was blessed to be placed with people who really did care about me. But there were several times when we were sent home to live with my mom, but it always failed because she would always stop taking her medicine. One time she withdrew us from school, and I taught myself and my brother at home for a while. Because my mother refused to sign away her parental rights, I was never able to be adopted by foster parents who wanted me. At one time, I did have a lot of resentment toward her, even though I realized it wasn't her fault. This disease had control of her life.

I now live with my older brother and his wife. They became foster parents to me and my 16-year-old brother, and I am thankful for their decision. My other brother now lives in Tennessee and my sister lives near me.

When I am older, I want to become a foster parent, especially to older youth. I know that these kids are the most difficult to find placements for because I was one of them. I've recently learned that there were more than 8,000 youth 13 and older who lived in the foster care system last year in Pennsylvania. I'm hoping I can – and will - make a difference.

*Christina Searfoss, 18, resides in Throop, Lackawanna County. She will attend Temple University in the fall. Christina 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](http://www.porchlightproject.org).*

