

Profiles of Hope



Samantha Rocafuerte is a confident, articulate young woman who has struggled to overcome a difficult childhood. Taken away from her mother at the age of two weeks, Samantha spent her early childhood in the home of her aunt while her mother valiantly fought to overcome substance abuse. Her father was in and out of her life during those years, but left abruptly and moved out of state when Samantha was eight years old. Meanwhile, her mother embraced wellness, succeeded in overcoming her addiction and regained custody of her daughter. Samantha's mother has been sober for eighteen years. "She is my inspiration and my hero," notes Samantha proudly.

Throughout her years as an elementary and middle school student, Samantha struggled with an anxiety disorder known commonly as social phobia, which caused her to be fearful of interacting with other students. At the age of 15, the anxiety became too much to bear and she attempted to drop out of high school. She returned four months later and managed to complete the coursework for her freshman year and successfully passed all of her final exams. She dropped out for good as a sophomore.

Like Samantha, approximately 7% of high school students will drop out of school before reaching the 12th grade, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Students from low-income families are almost twice as likely (13.8%) to drop out of high school as their higher-income peers. There are many significant reasons teens drop out of high school before graduating, ranging from peer pressure to lack of parental support to failure to address special needs. A feeling of boredom or lack of engagement at school is another common problem. While the reasons for dropping out are varied, it is predictable that those without a high school diploma will fare worse economically than their peers. Without a diploma, they will have a difficult time finding meaningful work. High school drop outs will earn less, have poor health, live in poverty and have children at an early age, many of whom will also grow up to be high school drop outs, according to EduGuide, a non-profit organization that works with schools and other non-profit groups.

Samantha stayed home for over a year. She attempted home schooling, but found that she lacked the discipline to continue. At the age of 16, she learned about the Summer Youth Employment Program at Project Self-Sufficiency and decided to enroll. Through the program, Samantha learned about the skills she would need to be successful in the workplace, she gained valuable experience at a job site by working with children at the Sussex County YMCA, and for the first time in years, she was not afraid. Working with children inspired her to pursue becoming a pediatric nurse. Knowing that continuing her education was the first step, Samantha registered for the Youth Connections program at Project Self-Sufficiency.

Samantha worked diligently in the Youth Connections program. "These past few months have changed my life in so many ways. At the time that I started this program, I was very shy and extremely nervous. I am so grateful to everyone who helped me to find my inner strength and continue." After mastering the skills she needed, Samantha took a practice test and received a perfect score. "I was on cloud nine." Samantha received her GED in April. In June, she was invited to be a featured speaker at Project Self-Sufficiency's Celebration of Literacy, an event which honors agency participants who have achieved academic success during the previous school year. "At the Celebration of Literacy I had one goal, and that was to encourage one person to join the program. When you drop out of high school you miss so many things, like prom and graduation. At the Celebration of Literacy, I felt like the valedictorian." Just as she had imagined, Samantha was greeted after her speech by a woman who was inspired to register to obtain her own GED.

For Samantha, being able to meet people like herself was just as important as receiving a diploma. "It's nice to have things in common with other people and to meet someone who has the same goals. After I got my GED, I kept coming back to the program because of my friends. I helped them with their problems. It was like teaching. It was nice to feel needed and to feel that somebody finds you important."

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