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Tax Credit Scholarships ‘Give New Opportunities’

By Allison Nielsen



From birth, Ashley Elliot wasn't set up to succeed. When she was born, she was addicted to drugs due to her mother's drug usage during her pregnancy -- an issue which carried on in much of Elliot's childhood. Elliot's mother bounced in and out of her life.

"[My brother and I] grew up on [government subsidies,]" Elliot told Sunshine State News.

Elliot has attended public schools, a charter school, an alternative school and now attends a private school as a result of Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship program.

Since 2001, Florida has given thousands of low-income students statewide. For nearly 80,000 Florida students, the Tax Credit Scholarship program is a way to attend private schools they would otherwise would not be able to afford. Students participating in the program live below the poverty line and are given scholarship money to attend better-performing schools -- a program scholarship groups say can help set students on the track for academic success.

Before Elliot became part of the Tax Credit Scholarship program, her academic track record was far from perfect.

"Everything wasn't really working out for me," Elliot explained. "I let the environment, the kids...the way they acted [at school] kind of rubbed off on me," she explained. "I'd skip class, draw on the walls."

In high school, Ashley met Jennifer Perez, an English teacher who took a vested interest in Elliot well-being, both inside and outside the classroom. Perez reached out to Elliot and soon became a confidant for the teenager,

providing emotional support and guidance for her during a troubling beginning of her high school career.

"It was like I finally had another person to talk to," said Elliot.

The struggles weren't over, though.

"I had more people, more friends in my life [by tenth grade,]" Ashley said. "The first semester was really bad on my grades. I think I had maybe a 1.5 GPA. I wasn't stupid or anything, I just didn't do anything. It seemed like the only teacher bent on me getting better was Ms. Perez."

"She didn't want to do the work," said Perez. "She was not inspired, so she would skip [classes]."

By the time the second semester rolled around, things started to look up.

"It seemed like everything was going as well as it should," she explained.

During that summer, though, Elliot found out her principal, Mark Thomas, was leaving to go to another school -- a shocking blow to Elliot, who had grown fond of him after he had taken a vested interest in her.

"Ms. Perez convinced me that he wasn't a mean principal like everyone thought he was," Elliot explained. "He was actually a good guy. He helped me out a lot. He almost suspended me one day for skipping, and then the same day he found out we didn't have electricity [at home] and brought me food from Publix."

Ms. Perez was also planning on leaving Elliot's old school, too -- and heading to Victory Christian Academy, a private school in Lakeland Elliot could not afford.

"It's a private school, it costs money," she said.

Still, Elliot came in for an interview with Victory Christian's administration -- and they welcomed her with open arms. But she still wasn't sure how she'd be able to afford tuition, which costs over \$7,000 a year.

A few days later, Thomas, Perez and Elliot all sat down to fill out the Step Up for Students application to get the teen a spot as a student at VCA.

"It was a long process, but it was totally worth it,"

Elliot said. "In my first year of going to victory, I felt so much smarter than I did before. I had two people vouching for me...there was no more of the bad behavior. I started realizing my potential."

Her grades went up -- while she used to receive "A's," "B's," and "C's," she began receiving all "A's" and "B's" -- and during her senior year, she's made all straight "A's" each semester.

VCA helped Elliot in another way, too -- while she was there, she realized she, too, wanted to give back to the education system and wanted to become a teacher herself.

Elliot said both her school and the Tax Credit Scholarship Program which allows her to attend VCA are both incredible in helping students succeed.

"Victory and Step Up For Students realize not all people have the opportunities to do what they want with their lives, to really pursue their dreams in ways they can't even imagine."

For Elliot, the scholarship program let her realize her true potential. After she graduates this year, she hopes to attend the University of Central Florida for their teaching program.

"It's been a big life-changer for me," she said.

The Tax Credit Scholarship Program is under fire, though. Currently, the state's largest teachers' union, the Florida Education Association, is in a bitter lawsuit over

the program, saying it harms the state's public schools by diverting funds from public schools. Last year, a judge said the FEA's claims were "speculative," but the teachers' union says it will appeal the case all the way to the Florida Supreme Court if necessary.

"For more than a year, voucher groups have been demanding FEA drop a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the tax-credit vouchers. What are they so afraid of, going to the courts to ensure this voucher scheme is legal?" FEA president Joanne McCall said in a statement earlier this year. "Let's let the courts decide this once and for all."

But supporters of the program say children's educations -- regardless of their economic statuses -- should come first.

"Money shouldn't make be the decider of how good a student's education is or how important a student is," Elliot said, expressing dismay over the FEA lawsuit.

Perez agreed.

"Money should be a non-starter," she said. There are other areas the state government could find money to invest in education. It's entirely a matter of choice and allocation.

"It's given me the opportunity to see my true potential...to really shine through, not only in my life but in other people's lives," Elliot explained. "[The program] is just an opportunity people should have."