

Sonia's Story
Troy, OH

Sonia Holycross, a Getting Ahead graduate, Circle Leader, and AmeriCorps Vista worker in Troy Ohio went to West Virginia with a Bridges Team to introduce Bridges to the Juvenile Services Department of the State. She and Carlos Guajardo (see his story) played an important role in helping the providers understand Bridges constructs and the process that can help people get out of poverty.

Before I go into details of my life I first must give you a description of my parents. My father was a Sergeant in the Vietnam War and a Black Panther for the civil rights movement. My family says before he went to Vietnam was a man of strong integrity, values and work ethic. When my father came home he was not the same. My father felt abandoned by his country and since he was African American he blamed a lot of it on his color. My mother's mom died of cervical cancer, my mom was only 12 years old. My mother at 12 had the burden of raising her 6 year old sister and her 14 year old brother who suffered from severe mental health issues. My mother's family was mostly from Kentucky and no one has ever graduated. Logically most people would think that it was not my mother's burden but my grandfather should have raised all the children right? Well with all respect to my grandfather he would proudly tell you how hard he worked to provide all the things that his children needed. My grandfather even married two additional women hoping to provide a mother for his children. One of those women is who I know as my grandmother god rest her soul. My mom never bonded with her mother. She has spent most of her life wanting to be loved and accepted and most of all she did not want to be like her family.

My mother and father had a one night stand at least that was the full intention of my father who was secretly married. When I was born my mom was 17 and she had only the best intentions for me. She privately carried the guilt of having a child with a married man. I remember my mother always taking me to my father's or grandma house so I could spend time with them. My mom wanted even them to accept her and more importantly to accept me. My father's family always ridiculed my teenage mom on what she was doing improper to me rather it be no undershirts or the way my hair was done. Truthfully they hated my mother because she was white, young and she had one of their own "ME". I can remember my father and grandmother always trying to make her feel bad so she would give me up to them. She never gave in despite her economic situation. I learned quickly to please both sides of my family.

When I was with my father he would get mad and tell me horrible things about my mother to get me not to love her. My mom had many boyfriends and because she did not fit in with her family she felt that black men accepted her better. I often wondered since the only thing she really says about her mom is that she hated black people if that was her reasoning. My dad constantly cheated on his wife. I have walked in on him sleeping with random women. He often treated like I was his friend and confided in me like I was an adult. He had nothing to hide whether it was sharing his violent Vietnam stories or his drug addiction. He often had me in an environment where it was appreciated to have me pass the pipe around; I actually thought I was being quite helpful. One summer my step mom decided no more and left him. Feeling deserted he decides to

tell me that my mother went to jail for welfare fraud and we were going to live in California with my god parents. So we got on the greyhound a few again decided no more and left him. Feeling deserted he decides to tell me that my mother went to jail for welfare fraud and we were going to live in California with my god parents. Instead of having dreams of the first day of school I was wondering where we would sleep and eat. I was around 8 years old and by then my parents had filled my head with so much negativity about one another I didn't know who to believe. In the time I spent in California I quickly learned how to take a bus and the underground railway (BART) system across San Francisco every morning to school by myself. I learned the true meaning of Christmas at 9 homeless in the back seat of my dad was constantly trying to find a girlfriend to take care of me but the more disappointments that came our way the more drugs he used. Finally he met Angela a young Pilipino women who already had 8 children of her own. She fell in love with my dad quick and partly because they shared the same crack addiction and both were looking for the opposite sex to make their families complete. So Angela was so obsessed with my dad that I became a threat to her. When my mother and the police found me she quickly came to California to get me. I remember when she picked me up a part of me was furious! I mean I just got use to the situation. I feel like as soon as I adjust to the drama of my parents they go and very abruptly change everything on me. So the punishment was that I could not see my father again or as she put it until I'm 18.

Even as a kid I could understand her side but deep down inside I was mad but I knew that it would make her mad if I showed her that I loved him. So I held it in and went on, my mother tried her best to spoil me clothes, shoes or whatever I wanted. Naturally she could not afford this lifestyle so I picked up on her schemes and scams along with a few of my own to get what I wanted. Eventually like every other unhealthy relationship she had she became pregnant with my sister Brittany. All through her pregnancy I felt like I was nonexistent there was nothing I could do to even raise her eyebrow. So I'm talking back and staying at my friends more and more. I'll be honest I was being a smart mouth and I probably deserved to be disciplined, but everyone was just too busy to take time to discipline me ever. The times that there was no man there I played the father role and when my mom was at work which was 70% I was the mother.

So I then felt empowered to come and go as I please. I started out telling her where I was and eventually since she really didn't care I just stop communicating more and more with her. Being introduced to the gang life was inevitable to a kid growing up in Elgin, IL the whole town was gang infested. There are a lot of rules and regulations in the gang and respect and pride of you set is a must to survive. I thought deep down that she would send me to my dad if she really thought she could not handle me. I did not really know what I was getting into after all I'm a kid from Piqua, OH at heart. I know through life that you can't let people see your weakness as my parents' model first hand for me. To look at me I was built pretty tough and I can give someone a look that will keep them up at night. But it's all an act that I learned to survive in my environment. My environment was chaotic, we were constantly struggling, hungry almost every night, isolation because you can't hang out with anyone in another gang, and pain constantly fighting, jumping, drives bys. Even though the gang wanted us to do bad things to one another they always undeniable showed me love, support, and acceptance. You can always find someone to relate to in the gang rather it be parents are addicts, dead beat dads, sexual and or physical abuse in the home you name it you'll find someone who has been affected by it. I eventually pushed my mother further and further away with my violent gang banger attitude. Despite my

tough attitude I have always felt the closet to my sister; after all, she was in the same situation as I was. Different dead beat dad same situation I would always say. My mother knew how much I loved Brittany; she was always so worried that she would end up like me. I eventually ended up pregnant by another gang member. I remember my mother was sick of my actions that she got an apartment for me in the neighborhood that I use to bang in. She told me she and Brittany were moving back to OHIO. My mother could not take it any more between Brittany's crack addicted father and me, her gang banging daughter she had enough. I was so happy I thought. I got an apartment and I could finally do what I wanted to do I thought. Then I remember the day before my mother was supposed to go back to Ohio. I was walking to the seven eleven when one of my rivals jumped out of a car and put a gun to my head. I was about 6 months pregnant at the time. I still can hear the guy screaming representing for his gang and disrespecting mine.

He pointed the gun to my head and said "Are you ready to die?" and I screamed "go ahead do what you gotta do". I remember as I said those words I thought of the innocent life that was in my stomach and I knew that I was done with the gang life. It wasn't about me anymore I had someone else to take care of. It took one of the older girls in his clique to check him. She hated me but she was about seven years older than me. She told him that he was going too far I was pregnant and the baby did not deserve to die. If it had not been for Taylor in my stomach I would not be able to right this story right now and this I know for sure. So he told me to go home and when he caught me in nine months my child would not have a mother. As I was walking away I felt like the world was spinning around me I had certain life events flash in my head and I began to break down. By the time I hit my front door I don't think I have ever needed my mother so badly before ever. I started packing all my stuff in her already packed U-Haul and told her that I was coming to Ohio also. I promised to go back to school and stay out of trouble. So we moved back to Ohio and I went back to high school, but eventually dropped out. My mother placed me in an abuse shelter with my daughter. She felt she could do no more for me or my child. I have been the victim of abusive relationships all my life and when it came time for romance I accepted what was available to me. I was 17 and had an apartment and I was a perfect target for every hustler, playa, or drug dealer around. I was abused physically, sexually and mentally on a daily basis. I ended up pregnant again and again and again and again. I found myself alone used up with five hungry mouths to feed. I would be so afraid to leave because I thought I couldn't make it financially, or the fear of my kids never having any father figure would hold me back. In fact most of my pregnancies were forced upon me just to keep me in the relationship.

People often say "they don't know I could raise five children" and I smile because honestly people probably don't like the reality of how we survived for so long. Being around all those unsavory people taught me a lot. I was exploited and terrorized so eventually I did the same back. I even married the first nice man that came my way just to get out of the abusive relationship that I was in. I did not realize until I wanted a divorce after only nine months that I was living the same way my mother was. I was simply "Looking for love in all the wrong places". That sparked my motivation to further my education and make something of myself. I did not want my mistakes to be repeated through my children.

When I first heard about the Circles program I was in my local Job and Family Services trying to get day care while at college. The case worker quickly told me that by being a part-time employee I did not qualify for childcare to further my education. I could only get childcare for

when I worked. Now, I'm not the smartest person but I know the only way out of poverty was to complete my education. So I argued my point because my goal was to become self sufficient for myself and my five children. The only way to get the assistance was to work more hours, but how could I work more and be a successful full-time student while still raising the five girls on my own? Needless to say, my desire to argue my situation got me nowhere; at least that is probably the Conesus of my local job and family services. Right in the middle of my desperate plea she handed me a paper and told me to call the number and make an appointment to be interviewed. As I walked out of the office feeling once again morally defeated by the "man", I could hear my caseworker voice as she was explaining about the new group called Circles and how she thinks I would fit in because of my attitude of wanting something better for my family.

I can remember my interview I was very excited to participate. Finally a program that cares about getting people out of poverty. It was like a chance to be heard, understood and more importantly a chance to succeed. I have been in generational poverty all my life so programs come a dime a dozen but never a program like this. All the programs thus far have been designed to either temporarily assist you or maintain you in your current situation, (which most of us are trying to break away from). This program focuses on giving you the tools and support to allow yourself to become self sufficient.

My first weeks in Getting Ahead were such an eye opening experience for me. I have never realized how many people cared about people in poverty. My life experiences have reinforced that people in poverty are the left behind, forgotten members of the community. To meet so many people who really care about the individual faces, situations, and life experiences that poverty encompasses really changed my life forever.

Going through the Getting Ahead book was really a personal battle for me. Realizing that a lot of the situations and feelings that I had about poverty all my life, were really keeping me bound to it (this was really my Aha moment). When I began to understand that I was a victim of generational poverty that's when I found strength to overcome it. It motivated me to want to break the cycle for my children and their children. Having lower expectations for your life because of your economic status is a reality for too many people. Assigning blame does not address the problem. Understanding gives you tools for change. When you are personally responsible for your life is when life is worth living. Circles of Hope has been the most effective program that I have ever experienced. When you grow up in poverty you tend to believe that is your life. Circles provides a support system to help you achieve your goals, while instilling hope, self-esteem, and irreplaceable connections to the community. I have never been so connected with my community, for example my involvement in Make a Difference Day. People in poverty have been dehumanized by their situations for far too long. This program has taught me that there are people who really care and I can honestly say that I would not be where I am today if it had not been for Circles.

I'm currently an AmeriCorps Vista serving in Miami County for the Circles program. I believe in this program so much that I left my full time position as a manager at Wal-Mart to join the fight against poverty. I'm a single mother with five daughters and if I can succeed I know others can to. My goals as a Vista are to provide Bridges out of Poverty trainings, coordinate poverty simulations, expand Circles and bring our community together through education and

awareness.

If given the support that it needs, I see Circles success rate increasing. I envision more people becoming self sufficient and community pride rapidly growing. This program is key to stopping the vicious cycle of poverty in our community as well as other communities. We have exhausted our welfare system, which tends to keep people trapped in poverty. At some point we have to realize that our current methods just do not work. It is a time for results, especially in a time of such financial uncertainty for all people.

Sonia Holycross, Troy Ohio