

In August 2011, while I was the Communities In Schools – Bay Area Campus Coordinator at McWhirter Elementary School, I met Shanna. Shanna was a homeless, domestic violence survivor victim, mother of two young sons, and had newly immigrated to the United States from Nigeria. Shanna had no friends, family, or support system in her new country- let alone neighborhood! Shanna was highly educated in her home country, but this did not translate to the United States requirements for degrees. Although I was a complete stranger, Shanna opened up to me and let a very vulnerable side show that not many had seen before. Her priorities are her sons and their well-being and if that meant starting from the bottom up- she was going to do that. At the time, Shanna was living in a shelter. An incident had happened and she no longer had a place to stay. To maximize available and quick resources, I connected Shanna with Monica Lambert, the Christian Action Coordinator at St. Bernadette. Monica was able to get Shanna an interview with the transitional housing program through Catholic Charities. I provided Shanna suitable clothing and drove her to the interview. Because of her sincerity and eagerness to make a better life, Shanna was accepted into the program!

Fast forward to 2014, Shanna has received her GED with honors from Houston Community College (May 2014), her Certified Nursing Assistant certification and was top of her class (September 2014), and has been awarded the prestigious Learner of the Year from the Houston Center for Literacy. With this award, she has been granted a scholarship to begin her studies as an LVN. Her ultimate goal is to become a Registered Nurse. Currently, Shanna works as a CNA in one of the hospitals in the Medical Center. She takes the bus to work every day and works very long hours, but has no complaints. She feels very blessed to have had these opportunities to reach her goals and be a strong parent for her boys. Her boys are now in first and second grade and are scholarship recipients at the local Catholic school next to their transitional housing. Shanna has recently taken the driver's test so she can one day have a car. She will be moving into her own rent home in the upcoming month and will need furniture to make her house a home. Because she was a domestic violence victim, she had to leave all of the furniture and household items she had at the apartment when she fled. I am writing to you in hopes that you can help this amazing woman and her sons. She is the epitome of what it means to reach for your goals!

I nominate Shanna.

Darryl Smith