



Spreading Your Wings

How your United Way Dollars are Changing Lives

This fall, like thousands of other young people across the metro area, Steven Pollard is leaving friends and family behind and heading off for college. The 20-year-old Independence, Mo. man already has an associate's degree from the Metropolitan Community Colleges and is going to Emporia State University where he'll be studying political science. Steven is excited about his future and has set some ambitious goals in life. He hopes to become a lawyer, get involved in politics and become a U.S. Senator someday. People who know Steven say with his friendly personality, leadership skills and ability to communicate, anything is possible for the engaging young man.

The fact that he is heading for college with such lofty goals is a testament to Steven and those who helped shape him, especially during his formative teenage years. Without their mentoring and guidance, Steven says his life easily could have gone a different way.

Steven never knew his father growing up. Steven and his younger brother lived with their mother who was unable to work because of a disability. They lived on welfare and his mom's disability check. Their family moved around a lot. Steven attended four different high schools, but still managed to graduate with his class.

The defining moment that changed his life came when Steven was 16 years old. That's when caseworkers from the Children's Division of the Missouri Department of Social Services took Steven and his younger brother into protective custody, saying their mother was incapable of caring for them anymore.

They were temporarily placed in a Salvation Army shelter until a more permanent placement could be arranged. The shelter staff noticed that Steven had a positive attitude and was a good role model for his brother and the other children as well. They recommended Steven and his brother be placed at Drumm Farm, in a United Way-funded program for children in the foster care system, to add some stability to their lives. From the day they arrived at Drumm Farm, Steven and Matt began to thrive. Steven remembers, "Once I got here, I realized it was a great place for us. The fact that my little brother got to be here with me was the best thing of all."

But instead of just having one brother, suddenly Steven felt like he had 27 brothers and sisters, along with foster parents who cared about him and wanted him to succeed. "It felt like we were all part of one big family. We've become very close. With all we've done together, there is no other way to describe them besides brothers. We've gone to school and camp together, gotten into and out of trouble together and learned a lot of life lessons along the way."

Steven's foster parents at Drumm Farm say he has an outgoing personality, makes new friends easily and is a natural leader. They encouraged Steven to get involved in the City of Independence's Youth Court, where teenagers accused of minor crimes are judged by their peers, deciding guilt or innocence and what the punishment should be. Steven's foster parents encouraged him to become a camp counselor, where he did so well that he was hired to train other counselors. His foster parents also suggested Steven get involved in debate, saying it would teach him to speak clearly, better organize his thoughts and argue persuasively. Steven recognizes all are important skills he will need if he wants to become a lawyer or politician. Although he's never won a tournament, Steven loves debate and says he plans to continue at Emporia State.

Steven says, "My personal experiences with the foster care system and juvenile court were a factor in my wanting to become a lawyer and get involved in politics. I have seen how the system works from the inside. There need to be changes and I want to be in a position where I can someday help make those changes."

Law school will come later. Right now, Steven is focused on his undergraduate studies at Emporia State. His Drumm Farm foster parents and his little brother took Steven to school and encouraged him to come back home for the holidays. Steven says the hardest part in going away to college is leaving his foster parents and 27 “brothers and sisters.” He promises to stay in touch by phone and e-mail.

Reflecting on the five years he's spent at Drumm Farm, Steven says, "The most rewarding thing has been the way everyone has worked together to help me succeed. They taught me the skills I need to be independent and prepare me for the future. Without a doubt, Drumm has been there for me. And although I didn't realize it at the time, through its support of Drumm Farm, United Way has been there for me. All I can say is thank you. I hope to make you proud---and maybe even convince you to vote for me someday."



Steven Pollard and his foster mother pack the car for the trip to Emporia State University.



Steven says he will miss his younger brother, Matt, while he's away at college. But he promises to stay in touch with phone calls and e-mails.