

How CATS transforms at-risk teens into self-sufficient adults



"CATS kept me alive. Knowing that CATS was in my future, I knew I couldn't skip that test or get an F. I knew CATS and Bridging the Gap would give me the structure I was crying out for."

- Aislynn B., CATS and BTG graduate 2014

As a patient care assistant at Cincinnati Children's Hospital and Medical Center for almost three years, Aislynn has found ways to use the trauma and abuses of her childhood to make life better for others.

For as long as she can remember Aislynn lived with her grandmother, who taught her many things she values including her faith. She could visit her mother and brother, who lived in the same neighborhood. Aislynn never understood why her mother chose to keep her brother and not her, even though their home and those visits were anything but positive. When you grow up feeling abandoned and being abused, she says, "you have a core disbelief that you cannot do well. You think that if you could, all the bad things wouldn't be happening to you."

At 15, her personal habits were reckless; her academic career as well as her health were at risk. It didn't help that "I've been in classes where I know the teacher knew I was in trouble, but didn't care."

"CATS kept me alive," says Aislynn, who learned about the program, including career opportunities through Bridging the Gap, when she was a sophomore and too young to enroll. But "knowing that CATS was in my future, and that I had to be in school to go there, I knew I couldn't skip that test, and I couldn't get an F." She didn't mend her ways, though, until she started at CATS. "You can't be reckless with your life when you go to CATC. They care too much; they'll notice."

Ironically, Aislynn didn't tell anyone at CATS what she was going through. They'd ask how she was doing, offer to talk, say that if she needed anything to let them know, and she'd answer that she was all right. "I was good at distancing, being funny." CATS was her safe place, she explains, and "when you live in chaos and you find peace, you don't want to bring the chaos into the peace."

The caring alone was enough to keep her going, and she was finding her talents, gaining confidence. When Mr. Ryan put a camera in her hands she discovered an ability to see things differently: "Beauty in the crevices, roses growing out of concrete...CATS taught me to believe in myself, gave me something to latch onto." Aislynn started Bridging the Gap in her senior year, graduated, applied for and landed the job at Cincinnati Children's.

Sometimes, Aislynn shares her stories with her young patients. "If you don't shine light on your scary places, then you can't help children who are in their own scary places figure a way out," she says.

Aislynn aspires to write her memoirs and to add motivational speaking to her health care resume. "I know my purpose: to heal through my hands, and also through my gift to tell my story." she says.