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A diploma in the art of rising above hardships

By [Lee Cataluna](#)
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Today, Rayleen Egami graduates from Waipahu High School. In the fall, she'll leave for college on the Mainland. Those events take on added significance when you know what she's lived through.

Over the past four years, there were days when Rayleen got up in the morning not knowing where she'd be sleeping that night. Rayleen lost one parent to heart disease, the other to crystal meth. Orphaned and indigent, she and her younger brother and sister were bounced around from house to house. They lived with relatives, friends of relatives, and foster families. Rayleen went to four different high schools, including one in Alaska when she was sent to live with family friends for a few months.

She came to psychologist Robert Woliver's office 2 1/2 years ago through Child Protective Services. Woliver ended up helping Rayleen get into an SAT preparation course, fill out college applications, even learn to surf.

"You see somebody trying so hard like this," Woliver says, "you just want to go to bat for them."

Woliver is quick to list all of Rayleen's accomplishments. She made the honor roll at all four high schools she attended. She was elected governor in the YMCA's Youth Legislature program. She took Advanced Placement Physics and got an A. She participated in cross country, track and soccer. She wrote for her school paper. She worked after-school and summer jobs, waking up at 5 every morning last summer to catch two buses to get to an internship at the J.W. Marriott Ihilani Resort & Spa.

When Rayleen's little sister was assigned an essay on "the person I most admire and want to be like," she wrote about Rayleen.

"A lot of kids out there are drowning," says Woliver. "Here's one who's a success story."

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Woliver's not sure why Rayleen has risen above her circumstances, though, and he refuses to take any credit. "I don't know where she gets this from," he says.

The letter of recommendation Woliver wrote for Rayleen's college applications reads:

"These traumas of the death of one parent, of losing the other parent to drugs, of moving and changing schools, of being forced to start over semester after semester, would discourage most adults, not to mention an adolescent.

"Yet, despite these hardships, or maybe because of these hardships, Rayleen never quit, never gave up and never quit achieving and never wavered from her goal of attending college and making something of her life."

The essay she wrote for her college applications included this paragraph on gratitude:

"While my life has not been typically ordinary, I'm thankful that I've experienced hardship in my life. It makes me appreciate things that I have to work for way more than I would if they were just given to me. I've decided to take the initiative in my life to serve as a positive role model for my brother and sister, as well as others who have suffered the casualties of drug use, the death of a loved one, or been involved in foster care. I know what they are going through because I've been there ... and survived."

Rayleen turned 18 last month, so her status as an orphaned child in foster care has changed. "I'm totally done with all that," she says. She's on her own now, and that comes with a different kind of uncertainty.

She's not sure where she'll be living this summer until she leaves for college at Loyola Marymount. Once she gets there, she knows no one in California.

And though she has scholarships and loans, she's still thousands of dollars short for tuition. She's working this summer and waiting to hear from one last scholarship program. If that doesn't come through, she's not sure what she'll do.

Perhaps in the future, Rayleen may be better able to say what it was that kept her going despite the pull and swirl of trouble and heartache. Perhaps, though, it's very simple, and she already has the answer: "I think I just wanted something better."

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