

Award of the State

by Danielle Sheppard

Considering the derogatory names my mother would call me when I was a child, it came as a relief to be considered something positive; an award of the state.

Of course now I realize that I confused the word “award” with “ward”—meaning I was removed from my home by the state. But as an eight year old child who had been emotionally and physically abused the majority of her life, I think I needed to believe that I was special and valuable to someone.

This bittersweet mistake became a precursor for my time with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). I viewed it as a positive time and therefore it became a positive time. I learned early on to accept DCFS and the child welfare system as the parents I needed. Yet when I was younger I still wanted very much to be with my mother, even though I knew I shouldn't be.

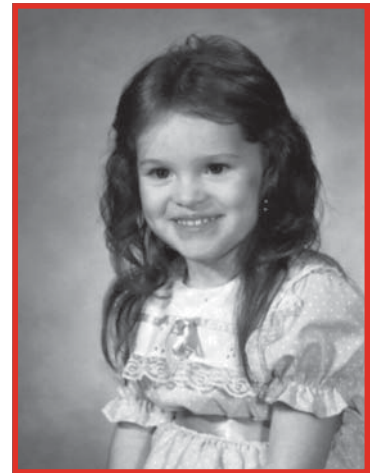
Being a parent is admittedly a difficult job. For all creatures in fact. Birds have to care for whelping chicks until they can fly on their own, lionesses have to tackle huge game for their helpless young, and humans are expected to provide a nurturing environment where their children are emotionally, physically, and financially stable.

Unfortunately, many people (a prime example being my mother) are not ready or are unable to do this. Those who are not ready to be parents too often abandon, hurt, or lose their children to the state. The children are then left searching for parental guidance and love in places and people they never should have to.

As one of these children I can admit that when you do find this miracle place you are ecstatic and don't care whether the people in it are your biological parents or not. For me, this place is Cunningham Children's home.

I've been in Cunningham's independent living program for three years and I've grown a tremendous amount during that time. I've slowly grown into a mature young adult who pays bills on time and earned an Associates degree.

I know I couldn't have done it without Cunningham's staff. Like a daughter would to her mother, I would call my caseworker stressed out many times, and relied on her advice and



Danielle, Age 4



Danielle, Age 11

assurance that things were going to be okay. Financially they helped me pay my rent and gift cards I earned would often make a difference as to whether or not I would be able to buy basic things like toilet paper.

Like all parent-child relationships, everything wasn't always pleasant. I've yelled at my caseworker many times and I know there were times where she wanted to say "forget you."

But rough times make a relationship stronger and the fact is Cunningham cares about me too much to ever give up on me. And knowing this, I can never stay mad for too long.

Now, as I am nearly 21 and about to leave Cunningham and begin my life without them, I know I will be successful and productive because of their influence and guidance. I will honestly miss the people of Cunningham because they are so important to me and have played such an important role in my transition from teenager to adult; girl to woman.

During my time at Cunningham I became what I had always sought: someone's child—a valued person who did in fact become an award.

But Cunningham too became my award. Cunningham was my prize for having endured all the malevolence I experienced as a child. As such, they had attended to my whelping calls so that I could grow up one day and leave the nest.

This fall I will do just that by continuing my education at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale.

Instead of my biological parents, it will be my prized Cunningham staff who will move me into my dorm room at college—setting me free and hoping with fluttering hearts and wide eyes that I can fly without them.



Danielle, age 20 (left), with Cunningham Caseworker Jill Miller