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A tough life overcome

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Graduate: Ariel Ramstad has overcome plenty of adversity in her life and will now attend Gonzaga University, with most of her expenses paid through scholarships.

Ask Ariel Ramstad about her childhood and she pulls no punches.

"I grew up in a home of domestic violence," she said bluntly during an interview last week. The violence her biological father brought against her mother and herself was not private, either. The cases were featured prominently in local newspapers, and he eventually fled the state. Ramstad said her father once tried to suffocate her with a pillow and he stalked her mother, Tawnia, even after their divorce. Tawnia remarried, but Ariel's life didn't become easier.

Her stepfather, Barry, is a sweet and sensitive man. But in 2009, he suffered from spontaneous brain bleeding and nearly died. The resulting stroke left him disabled, although he's now slowly, but surely, recovering.

It would have been easy for Ramstad to choose a different path in life. Take the edge off with drugs and booze.

"I steered myself into education, instead," she said.

After surviving some decidedly dark years, the future looks bright for the 18-year-old Columbia Falls senior. She was recently awarded a Horatio Alger Association scholarship — one of 104 awarded in the entire U.S. The Association awards scholarships to students dedicated to the simple belief "that hard work, honesty and determination can conquer all obstacles."

Ramstad was recently invited to a ceremony in Washington, D.C., where she was invited to tell her story to association members, including actor Leonardo DeCaprio and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.

The scholarship — and a host of others she has won — will go toward paying her tuition and expenses when she attends Gonzaga University this fall. She hopes to go on to law school eventually.

“I’m definitely thinking criminal law,” she said. “I’m interested in helping people flee oppressive governments.”

Ramstad has been active in several advocacy organizations in high school, including PEACE, which helps students with domestic violence. She was also a member of the speech and debate team, vice president of the Columbia Falls chapter of the National Honor Society and student body president. She recently was given the student council member of the year award.

While this is all serious stuff, Ramstad has a lighter side. She loves basketball. She and her friends spent hours making signs and rally T-shirts to wear at Columbia Falls games during this championship season.

Now she’ll go from rooting for the Wildcats to rooting for the Bulldogs. She can handle it. “At least the school’s colors are the same,” she said.

She also plans to work in the ticket office at Gonzaga and hopes to have an inside track to their coach, Mark Few. Ramstad’s aunt is his secretary.

But she says she wouldn’t be there without the support of her mom and grandparents, Sandi and Tom Harke.

“My mom and my grandparents are the whole reason I’m as successful as I am,” she said.