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Lindsey Verret: overcoming the odds

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Butte Falls High School senior Lindsey Verret.

The string of family and personal hardships 17-year-old Lindsey Verret faced in her young life would have been enough to debilitate some people.

Instead, Verret, who graduated Friday from Butte Falls High School, used the strikes against her as inspiration to work harder toward having a better life. So far, the rewards have followed.

Verret recently received a \$20,000 Horatio Alger National Scholarship, the largest scholarship program in the nation for high school students who have overcome significant obstacles in their lives. She plans to attend Arizona State University to study kinesiology and Spanish. Out of 50,000 applicants, she was among the 104 who received scholarships this year.

"Throughout my life, I have learned to see everything as a learning opportunity instead of saying, 'Oh, this sucks,' because I couldn't really change what was happening around me," she said.

Verret eventually wants to go into the medical field. As one of Horatio Alger Association's partner universities, Arizona State will match Verret's scholarship dollar for dollar, meaning she is receiving a total of \$40,000 in scholarships. Based on her family's income level, she also secured about \$10,000 in federal grants.

The Horatio Alger scholarship included an all-expenses-paid April trip to Washington, D.C., where Verret met celebrities and public figures, including Tom Selleck, former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, astronaut Buzz Aldrin and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.

"Everyone said we were going to the National Mall," she said. "I said, 'Oh, cool, I get to go shopping.' Later I discovered the mall was the monuments. I was much happier about seeing the monuments. It was really awesome."

To be eligible for the Horatio Alger scholarship, a student's family must earn \$50,000 or less, and the student must participate in co-curricular and community activities and have a minimum GPA of 2.0. Verret has a GPA of 3.88.

Verret comes from a low-income family, but the major obstacles in her life stemmed from her parents' drug use, multiple moves and sexual abuse when she was 13.

Her parents divorced when she was 10. After the divorce, she, her sister, Audrey, now 19, and her brother, Donny, now 21, were placed in foster homes because their parents were using drugs.

Their mother later stopped using drugs to regain custody of the children and Verret and her sister returned to live with her.

Life seemed to be improving until their mother became engaged, and her fiance began sexually abusing Verret.

When her mother found out about the sexual abuse, the family moved to Spokane, Wash., to live with Verret's aunt, and the fiance was prosecuted.

"Then we moved to our own place in Spokane," Verret recalled. "Subsequently, my mom had a stroke."

Her mom was in rehabilitation for nine weeks. During her recovery, she spiraled into despair and then alcoholism, Verret said. She eventually recovered and recently enrolled in college, but at the time, Verret didn't know what would happen.

"Basically, it was every man for himself all of our lives," she said. "It's a big reason I am so independent and go meeting the world."

She said optimism and staying focused on the future helped her to overcome her struggles.

"When things were overwhelming, I would just look to the future and say, 'This is not how it's always going to be. It's not worth letting it bring me down,' " she explained. "I just said, 'This is one more opportunity to learn.' Each blow has been more motivation to push forward. Having been exposed to people in their 40s still doing drugs, I never wanted to live that lifestyle. I told myself I don't have to live like those people. Especially with the sex abuse, I realized it was his problem, and I shouldn't let it affect my self-esteem."

When she was 16, she returned to Southern Oregon. Verret lived with her father in the Butte Falls attendance zone, but she wanted to play volleyball in Prospect, where she had lived as a young child.

The Prospect coach, Marci Gallagher, whom she knew from her previous time in Prospect, invited Verret to stay with her and her family so Verret could play volleyball with the Cougars.

"We placed fourth in state that year," Verret recalled.

After surgery to reconstruct a major ligament in her knee, Verret gave up sports for a while and settled in Butte Falls to finish high school.

She said her knee surgery was a blessing in disguise because it gave her more time to focus on preparing for college.

Last fall, Sarti Powell, the counselor for the Butte Falls senior seminar — a class designed to prepare students for life after high school — suggested she apply for the Horatio Alger scholarship.

Verret turned in the application on the day of the deadline, Oct. 31, thinking the likelihood of winning it was slim.

"I said, 'It's going to get there late. It's going to ruin my odds,' " she recounted. "It is such a huge scholarship. I thought there was no way.

"All of my life I looked at other people and wished I had their lives, but I tell you what, filling out the form for federal financial aid, not having any assets, winning this scholarship, I look back now and everything is just charming."