

Homeless in Chicago

How grit, determination, friends rescued one homeless teen

By Cindy Dampier
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"After school was the worst time," says Eric Robinson.

"Sometimes I would just take long walks and breathe, and take long, deep breaths because I wouldn't know what I was going to do.

"I would call a bunch of people and try to find a place to stay, or sometimes I didn't call anybody.

"I would sit up all night. I would just sit there and worry about myself and wait until the next day of school."

Eric, at 15, was one of thousands of homeless young people living on their own in the Chicago area. When the doors of Niles Central High School in Skokie opened each morning, he would enter with the other students, his body flooding with relief to be back in a place he belonged.

"His story is unfortunately not all that unusual," says Joy Cheng, a longtime social worker who worked with Eric at Niles Central.

"What makes this story unusual is Eric."

Two weeks ago, Eric, now 18, crossed a stage at Chicago's Union League Club as part of another group of students: the freshly minted graduates of the French Pastry School, one of the city's most well-regarded culinary schools. Improbably, at the end of his long, harrowing walk through homelessness, Eric found himself accepting a diploma from a pair of grinning French chefs in front of a lavish Christmas tree, while relatives and friends wept discreet tears of joy in the background. It was hard to say what was



more surprising: the new world he found himself in or what it took to get him there. Eric started life with more than his share of challenges. He and his siblings, Tevin and Helen, spent some time in foster care but, from the time Eric started kindergarten, were raised by their mother, Denise, a nurse's aide. Denise settled her family in Skokie to get her kids into suburban schools. "I wanted the best for my babies," she says. Making ends meet was always a challenge, but Eric says he remembers it as a happy time. His mom would come home from work around the time he got out of school, he says, and cook dinner. On holidays, she would buy a cheesecake for dessert, because it was Eric's favorite.

"Everything was good at that point in my life" he says. "Then stuff started to change."

As her children grew into teens, says Denise, the family's life became more chaotic, with her older children struggling and an unhealthy relationship with a partner. "There was a lot of turmoil going on that the family had to cope with," says Cheng. "There was a lot of stress that his mom didn't have a lot of control over, and neither did Eric."

All three Robinson kids attended Niles Central, a therapeutic school for students

who can't handle a standard high school environment. "Every one of our students has an unstable home situation," says Elizabeth Dribin, who taught Eric math and English. "I always tell students, 'Let us help you. Let us in.' But it's so hard for them to trust. It was hard for Eric to trust too."

It took an incredibly painful breakthrough to change that. "Truthfully," Dribin says, "I think the biggest turnaround was when he went homeless."

In the summer between his sophomore and junior years, Eric's family continued to disintegrate around him. His mother had medical issues that would eventually result in a need for a hip replacement, his siblings were spinning out of control and "the family lost their housing," says Cheng. Though Denise searched for another place around Skokie, she couldn't find one and was forced to double up with family on Chicago's South Side.

"We had to leave," says Denise, "and Eric, he was determined not to come. He wanted to finish school in Skokie, and he told me if I was to get him a transfer, he wasn't going to go back to school."

"My mom said that she was moving," Eric says. "She wanted me to go with her, but I made the decision to tell her no."

Denise says her kids, raised in the suburban environment, were afraid of city neighborhoods. Eric saw other dangers. "I knew the influences and all the people, and I told her that environment wasn't the best for me. I couldn't make it around that environment." His anxiety swirled around the thought that he might end up dropping out of school.

"My mom moved me to the suburbs, so that I could see how other kids succeed in life," he says. "And that made me want to succeed and made me stronger. It made me look out there and think, 'You're going to have to do a lot to make a name for yourself.'"

Denise, already overwhelmed, pondered what to do. Though friends and relatives urged her to "just make him come," she didn't want things to go that far. "I did try to come get him," she says, "and he refused. I didn't want to have police involvement or anything like that. I kept saying we have to find somewhere for you to go, because you can't be staying on the streets."

In the end, Eric promised her he would go to school every day. A friend said he could stay at his house. And mother and son parted ways.

His only remaining link to home was phone contact with his mother. "My mom would text me every morning," he says. "She's still there, a part of me every day. So I know for a fact my mom didn't just get up and leave me; she didn't abandon me. She didn't mean it like that. I mean, things happen in life. Certain people go through stuff that you can't really explain."

Denise would ask if Eric was going to school, if he had everything he needed. "He'd say, 'I've got somewhere to go,'" she says, "but I know there were some nights that he didn't." The promise of a bed at his friend's house soon fell through, leaving him searching for a safe place to sleep. Like most homeless teens, he was fearful that the police or the Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) might intervene if people found out he wasn't with his mom, and kept the nightmare to himself for months.

"I was still scared," he says, "but it hit me in my heart that I had to man up."

The school Eric had been determined not to leave behind, Niles Central, was in the end his saving grace. Though many homeless teens struggle to come to school at all, he attended faithfully, which is why the students and staff began to notice that he was wearing the same clothes day after day. And that he wasn't showering regularly. Ashamed, he continued to keep quiet, until confronted by

a teacher. "As soon as I opened up," he says, "people would be helping me because they wanted to. They seen what a good person I was, and how every day I came to school and showed that I wanted to better myself. That showed me I had to keep moving on, because they trusted me with their hearts."

The care Eric received from the school staff gave him more determination to keep going. And his gratitude and determination inspired them. Teachers remember him trying to mentor other students who became homeless, putting in a good word for a student who seemed like a troublemaker, or pointing out to other kids how much time and energy the staff put into caring for students. "We've seen kids in all kinds of situations" says Dribin, "but he's one of a kind. He can see the good in everybody, and he's put things into perspective for a lot of the staff here. He has changed my life in so many ways.

"They say it takes a village to raise a kid," she says. "This is really a case where you can see that village coming together for Eric."

At Niles Central, teachers started each day by checking whether Eric had a place to stay for the night. They had the school van pick him up wherever he happened to be each morning — sometimes a different location each day. Quietly, they made sure he got haircuts, kept his cell phone service up, gave him sneakers.

"I didn't ask for it," Eric says. "But sometimes I would feel like people are helping me like this because they know what it is to struggle and what it means to help somebody, the happiness they receive from helping somebody. Pretty much the whole school watched over me and took care of me."

When Eric mentioned that he was looking for a summer dishwashing job to help keep himself afloat, a social work intern at Central, Flora Lazar, had a better idea. Lazar knew chefs Jacquy Pfeiffer and Sebastien Cannone,

founders of the French Pastry School, and decided to call them to ask if they would help set Eric up with a dishwashing post at a good restaurant.

"When we heard what he was going through," says Pfeiffer, "we were like, 'We're taking this kid on board. We're creating an internship, so in the summer he doesn't get in trouble or whatever.' It would have been a crime not to do something."

"I didn't know I was interested in pastry at first," says Eric. "But I was excited." To make sure he nailed his commute from Skokie to the school in downtown Chicago, Cheng rode the train with Eric the first time.

"He was overwhelmed by all of this," says Pfeiffer. "He didn't know how to react, and I said, 'Just come, see if pastry is for you, then go back and finish high school, and maybe we'll meet again.'"

"I told him you just go and try it," says Denise, "And you never know, this might be your passion. After the first day, he called and told me, 'Mom, I love it. This might *be* my passion.'"

When Eric returned to Niles Central for his senior year, he was once again staying with friends. But he had something new to think about. "He had imagined something better for himself," says Cheng. "The internship really opened his eyes to really a whole other world that he had no experience with. It really expanded his world enormously."

Pfeiffer and Cannone had seen Eric's gratitude and hard work firsthand, and so were prepared to take the next step. When spring rolled around, they gave Eric a call. "They said, 'How would you like to come to the French Pastry School?'" Eric says, "and I said, 'Doesn't it cost a lot of money?' That was the first thing on my mind. But they said they were going to work it out, and they did." Thanks to Pfeiffer and Cannone, and Cheng's dogged help with scholarship applications, Eric was able to enter the French Pastry

School's Art of Pastry program in July. With scholarships and a student loan, he was able to meet the \$23,700 tuition for the six-month program. The father of a former student offered to subsidize his living expenses, and a fellow student offered to take him on as a roommate in his downtown apartment. Pfeiffer, a partner at artisan bakery La Fournette, secured him a part-time job there. "I did have a little bit of worry," says Cheng, "because it's such a different world. There are so many different kinds of people there, and the standards are extremely high. I think any 17-year-old might struggle with that." At first, the program did seem a bit overwhelming. "He had to learn everything," says Pfeiffer, "but I told everyone, 'Be patient with him — he's just a kid.'" Week by week, he learned a chemistry lab's worth of ingredients, as well as new techniques, and he discovered new favorites — like macarons, the delicately textured, classic French filled cookie, which he brought to his mother, so she could have a taste of his new life. "They are so good," she says. Eric is also fascinated with the endless shapes and types of bread produced at La Fournette, where he now has a full-time job. He practices tempering chocolate and making pastry during his free time, and is determined to one day master his pastry-school nemesis, cake decorating. (He's still shaking his head over the fondant flowers that didn't come out the way he envisioned them.) "My original goal was to own a bakery of my own one day," he says, "but for now I want to work at the bakery and just learn more for a few years." He and his roommate are planning to look for a new apartment together in a few months. Pfeiffer has pledged to watch his progress closely. "We are his new support system now," says the chef, "and we plan to keep it that way for a while."

It's a welcome expansion of the family that has grown up around Eric. His mom, who stays in touch daily, is now living in Dolton with Eric's sister, Helen, a student at Malcolm X College. Brother Tevin is a student in Bloomington, Ill. Cheng, Dribin and the rest of the staff at Niles Central won't forget Eric any time soon. "Eric is a big deal at our school," says Dribin, "the kid we talk about when we have high hopes for another kid: 'Maybe he could be like Eric ...'"

Those who know Eric best point out that giving help and receiving it can sometimes be the same thing.

"There have been a lot of days," says Cheng, "when having Eric in my life was the thing that helped me keep going in the face of much harder situations, made me want to help the next kid."

"It means a lot," says Eric, "for people to be there and not give up on you. And I just have a feeling that these people are going to be there in my life for a while."