

# Volunteer Helps Foster Youth Succeed

When Jo Gramling Lopez, a former Wall Street attorney, left New York and returned to Spartanburg, she had no idea where that path would lead. "I was working across the street when the World Trade Center fell," she recalls. "The plane hit, and then we were trapped in our building. It made me think I wanted to do something more worthwhile in life."

That something turned out to be the Spartanburg Volunteer Guardian ad Litem Program. That was 3½ years ago. "The best part about it is getting to know the kids. They inspire me, they really do. It's just amazing, what they accomplish, and the fortitude and strength that they have, beyond anything anybody can believe."

Brittany is a perfect example. Jo was appointed as her volunteer 3 years ago, when Brittany was 15. It wasn't easy at first. Jo said "I had worked with younger children, and I didn't know whether a teenage girl would like me. I didn't know how much I could bring to the plate for her."

Brittany remembers thinking during their first meeting: "I hope this lady ain't here to talk to me, 'cause I don't want to talk." "It takes a long time for me to trust somebody, but she was coming to see me constantly. What made me change my mind was her saying, she wasn't there to judge me, or be all in my business. I felt comfortable around her. She was always asking, did I need anything. And I thought, this lady really cares about me."

Brittany came into foster care as a result of neglect and abandonment. But she hasn't let that hold her back. A gifted singer, she is now 18 years old, out on her own, and a senior in high school. She plans to go on to college next year, hopefully Clemson. She says Jo has been a major influence on her life. "She used to always tell me, don't give up. I had heard it from other people, but it's different when you hear it from someone who means it. From her, I know she means it."

Like many young people in foster care, Brittany was moved to different homes, and had five different case workers in her three years. But Jo was always there. "If it wasn't for her, I don't think I would have made it that long in care," says Brittany. "I was angry all the time. But she used to talk to me about stuff. She always responds to me,

she always gives me advice. Whether she likes what I'm doing or not. She's like the mama that's not here."

Brittany has high hopes for her future. "I am going to have my own group home, or be a counselor or therapist. For all the kids who have been through what I've been through, or worse. To show them that there is somebody who will be there for them, care for them and love them. Someone who can say I know how you feel. I know what you been through. This is what I believe, and this is what I know, that I am going to make a difference. And I am ready."



*GAL Volunteer Jo Gramling Lopez and former foster youth Brittany.*