



Mooseheart Reflections Heather Hensley

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John Long once quoted “They say it takes a fool to conquer the impossible, but maybe he is the only one who tries.” I don’t know about you, but I feel that just by being able to stand up here, I have conquered the impossible. I have conquered my past, come to terms with who I am today and feel a great sense of excitement about my future because of you.

I have been at Mooseheart for about 3 years, and have lived in both Minnesota home and most recently Illinois home. I arrived in my sophomore year, when I was just turning 16, which puts me as one of the newer kids in my class. When I first came, I remember how terrified I was to talk because I had not been north of Missouri and people just couldn’t understand me through my southern drawl! As with all Mooseheart children

and teens, I had some pretty unique and misfortunate circumstances that brought me to the Child City.

When I was little I lived with my mother, who was not only clinically bipolar, but also schizophrenic. My earliest memory of her is having a crowd of people crammed into our little trailer, abusing alcohol and drugs. Her decision to use marijuana, heroine and methamphetamines and to allow it to become the number one priority in her life left me pushed aside to defend for myself, as no little girl should ever have to. In my short lifetime I have witnessed things that would make most people cringe. But strange as it sounds, I didn't recognize at the time that anything was wrong with my life because it was all I ever knew. I went to school when I felt like it. I ate whenever I could find food and I looked forward to the 15th of every month, because that was when my mom got her food stamps and I knew that she couldn't waste those on drugs like she did any other cash she came by. But by the fifth grade, when I arrived at school in the same outfit I'd worn for three days in a row, and hadn't eaten a solid meal in about a week, I finally broke. I lost my nerve, that mature outer shield that I placed around myself that made teachers think twice about how they acted towards me, and I walked into the nurses' office, sat down and cried. I told her everything about my mother and my life at home. I explained to her as much as I could

before I made myself maintain that cool composure again. After I was fed, Social Services was called and I was sent to a distant relative in Georgia. I was only there for about 8 months when my mother, who was not legally allowed to have custody of me, came and got me. Apparently the relative had signed guardianship back over to her, because they didn't want me anymore. Of course, I still thought my mom was a pretty good person, even though she had made some pretty horrific decisions to ruin her life. So we traveled back to Arkansas, and lived with my mother's new husband for a while. One day when I came home from school I found all of my mother's possessions gone, and I knew she had left again. I thought I could depend on my mother as a child should be able to, but I was dead wrong. At the age of 14 she told me that she didn't want me living with her anymore. Even though I did all that I could, I ended up moving in with a friend, staying as long as I could and then moving on to another friend. Later I moved into an apartment with a 19-year-old girl who I shared the bills with. At this time I was working full time at a restaurant and still going to school. Everyday I was pressured to do things that only brought misery and unhappiness into my life. Hope of going to college was a far off dream that I knew would never be a reality since paying for rent and food was at the top of my list, not my schoolwork.

One night I was invited to have dinner with a really good friend of mine, and it was through her family that I learned about the Moose and Mooseheart. Her mother was a member, but did not know all the details about the school just the idea of it. She explained that it was a school for kids in need, kids like me. I was very hesitant to talk to anyone, I mean how did I know she wasn't trying to send me off to some juvenile group home, but I decided that if I was ever going to amount to anything, I would have to get a high school diploma and go to college. It was my hope that Mooseheart would give me that chance. After meeting the administrator of my sponsoring lodge, and listening to him talk about how good my life could be, I was hooked. I wanted this place. I needed this place. Could this far away campus called Mooseheart really be a piece of the solution for my overwhelming troubles? I started the application process at the beginning of the summer but didn't find out that I was accepted until August 2006. I was pumped and so excited to go. I moved out of my friend's house and stayed with a Chapter member until it was time to drive north. Imagine a 14-hour drive to a new place, knowing that you wouldn't be coming home for a long time. Believe me, the excitement was still there, but I was absolutely petrified. When I arrived at my new home, I would never of have dreamed that the 8 other girls sitting at the dining room table, waiting to welcome me,

were about to become the closest friends and sisters that I could possibly imagine. Entering Mooseheart during my sophomore year, I had some trouble adjusting. I had had so much freedom before I came and wasn't use to people telling me when to do my homework, when to go to bed, and what to eat for dinner. Although it was hard, I loved the fact that someone was just THERE. During my junior year, I worked even harder and focused more on my schoolwork. But, senior year was by far my best. I became extremely active within the community, and school. I became yearbook editor, a National honor society member, a part of Teens Accepting Christ member, a student tutor, and the Student Activities Council President. I also finished up my Health Occupations vocational coursework and completed my clinical rounds at Delnor Community Hospital in Geneva, Illinois.

Earlier this month I had the privilege of being involved in the Youth Awareness Program. I traveled to Hampton, Virginia and spent four days there convening with 50 other students who were also in the program. My kid talks centered on bicycle safety and I was able to teach children at Mooseheart and in the local are about this important subject. Mooseheart opened so many doors for me, and helped me realize my true potential.

Instead of being one of the newbies, I had become one of the girls sitting at the dining room table welcoming the new students to Mooseheart. Fifty

years from now, I'll look back fondly on my first day and say, "that's what Mooseheart is all about."

This year we will all focus on being a piece of the solution. I want you all to know that each and everyone of you, with every gift you send to Mooseheart or Moosehaven, with every meeting you have at your lodge and chapter, with every card you send your Sponsored or Sunshine child, with every visit you make to Mooseheart to let the children know you care, **you are a piece of the solution.** You are bringing a sense of family to kids who have never had that before. You are giving a birthday gift to kids who grew up not expecting to receive little if at all, and you are making a difference in young peoples lives. There are 3 very important people that I would like to recognize as a piece of the solution in my life. As administrator of Saline County Lodge No. 2567 and Past Deputy Supreme Governor for the men of the Arkansas Moose Association, I would like to recognize Wendell Dawson along with his wife Carolyn, who is Past Deputy Grand Regent for the Women. These two people, whom I now refer to as Nana and Papa, welcomed me into their family when I had none. I have spent the past 3 Christmases with them, having dinner and sharing gifts. They bring a sense of happiness to my life as no others can. I would also like to recognize Vickie Ballard, who happens to be Wendell's daughter. Vickie, or mom, was

a stranger to me when I stayed at her home the first time, right before I came to Mooseheart, but she is now so much more than that. She's the mother I never had. She takes care of me when I am home, sends me stuff just because, and calls me on a daily basis. This chapter member has risen above and beyond her call of duty, and treated me as if I were her own daughter. I just want to let everyone know that she was the piece of the solution for me.

This fall I will be attending Aurora University and hope to transfer down to Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in a few years to complete my Bachelors in Radiology. I have decided that I want to help people, and healthcare turns out to be a good choice for me. I will be receiving a generous \$24,000 dollar scholarship from the Arkansas Moose Association. I am forever grateful for you, my Moose family, my Mooseheart Home and the opportunity I know have to attend the college of my choice. I am thrilled to be pursuing my dream!

I want to thank each of you here today, and those who could not make it, for believing in me, providing me a home and giving me a future to be proud of. Without you as a piece of the solution in my life, I would be lost, without hope and anyone to guide me in life. **You have changed my life! Thank you!**