

The Hour Online

Beating the odds Teen rises above circumstances to make a better life

Michael Hollinger wasn't supposed to graduate from high school.

Hollinger, 19, remembers sitting across from his guidance counselor as the counselor suggested he consider attending night school to finish his degree because his academic performance was well below average.

"I really wanted to walk across that stage and get my diploma, not have someone hand it to me at 7:30 p.m. at night with no ceremony, no nothing," Hollinger said. "I wanted that sense of accomplishment."

It's not hard to imagine why his guidance counselor thought he might not be a candidate for graduation: As a transfer student to Brien McMahon High School from Harding High School in Bridgeport, Hollinger had a 0.1 GPA.

Hollinger was, by his own admission, a difficult kid to be around, getting in trouble at school and with the law. Difficult is the word that could best describe Hollinger's entire life.

When Hollinger was 8 years old, he and his 10-year-old brother C.J. were taken from their father's custody after his father passed out drunk in the street and the police brought him home — the last in a long line of drunken incidents.

The family was evicted from their home and the two brothers went to live with their pastor. Their father went to live in a homeless shelter. Hollinger's mother left home when he was 2. He doesn't remember her at all.

"I remember leaving our house after we were evicted with just my clothes that I was wearing," Hollinger said. "My clothes were ripped and my sneakers had holes in them. If I jumped up and down, they fell off."

That was March 8, 1998.

Since then, Hollinger has been under the care of the state Department of Children and Families. He lived with his pastor for three years until the pastor and his wife began having family struggles of their own and couldn't care for the brothers any longer. This began a long series of moves for Hollinger that brought him to several foster homes.

When he was 13, Hollinger was separated from his brother and placed in a foster care home in Bridgeport. By then, he had become a "rebel."

"I was getting in trouble a lot and just doing whatever I wanted to do because I didn't know why I had to listen to someone who wasn't my parent, even though I'd never really had a parent to tell me what to do," Hollinger said. "I was in a gang, I was committing robberies, getting in fights nearly every day and not going to school," Hollinger said.

Eventually Hollinger's foster mother in Bridgeport couldn't handle his delinquent behavior and since the Department of Children and Families didn't have an available foster home for him, he was sent to Community Solutions in Norwalk.

Hollinger continued to get in trouble there and after four months, he called the pastor who had taken him and C.J. in the first time, and asked if he could come to live with them again.

The pastor agreed and Hollinger stayed with the family for two years until the pastor decided to move to Stratford. Not wanting to move and have to start over again, Hollinger asked a friend from Brien McMahon — the school he was now attending — if he could live with him.

"He said he had to ask his father so I thought for sure that was a no, but then he called me back and said that I was his new brother," Hollinger said.

By now, Hollinger was a junior in high school. This was the same year his guidance counselor told him he didn't expect him to graduate.

As it turns out, the prospect of not graduating from high school was just the challenge that Hollinger needed.

"Don't ever make a bet with me unless you want to lose," Hollinger said. "I'm not the type of person who likes to lose anything or be wrong about anything."

At that point, Hollinger was also under the supervision of Christopher Ragsdale, a social worker with DCF's Norwalk office. Ragsdale believed in Hollinger and wanted to see him graduate as much as Hollinger wanted to.

"There was no way they weren't going to let my man graduate and feel that sense of accomplishment," Ragsdale said.

In his third marking period, Hollinger went from a 1.3 GPA to a 2.7. In the fourth marking period, he raised it to a 2.9.

"They still didn't think it was going to be enough, but my teachers said they saw a change in me and Chris was supporting me, so they gave me a chance," Hollinger said.

During his senior year, Hollinger had GPAs of 3.3, 3.4, 3.79 and 3.6. He finished his high school career with a cumulative GPA of 3.6.

"I had the right people in my corner to help me," Hollinger said. "Some people can do it with one person, but I needed more than one. In Bridgeport, there was no one in my life telling me that there was a brighter side, but here I had people like Chris I could call any time I needed him."

In the end, Hollinger was able to graduate.

"Graduation was surreal," Hollinger said. "So many people told me that I couldn't do it, but I did. I heard my name and that was all that mattered. It was the best day of my entire life."

Hollinger is now a freshman at Norwalk Community College, where he is studying to be a social worker. He has plans to attend the University of Bridgeport when he completes his degree at NCC.

He is also living in his own apartment with his brother, with assistance from DCF. In the past, teens "aged out" of DCF at 18.

Now, if there is a teen such as Hollinger who is working and maintaining a good GPA, DCF will find them an apartment, assist with their rent and utilities, help them with college tuition, provide them with vouchers for clothing and manage their case until they turn 23.

Hollinger also serves on the Youth Advisory Board for DCF, helping to make decisions that affect the kids currently under DCF's care. One day, he wants to be commissioner of DCF.

"I think I'd be good at it," he said. "I know the system inside and out, and I think I could make a difference."

Hollinger is also a member of Young Life, a Christian youth group for teens, something he said gave him strength through the most difficult times.

Additionally, Hollinger helped his father find a job and is trying to mend that relationship. DCF is also trying to locate Hollinger's mother and younger brother, although Hollinger isn't sure that he wants to see his mother just yet.

Ragsdale said he always knew that Hollinger would be successful.

"I expect great things from my kids and I'm not satisfied with less and I won't allow them to sell themselves short," he said. "I'm very proud of him. Not only is he focused but he has empathy, and I didn't teach him that. He had it in him already."

Hollinger said that now he only looks ahead.

"I look back at my childhood and it sucked," he said. "I wish I could change it, but I can't. All I can do is make my adult life better than my childhood and do things differently in the future. I can't look back anymore."