

Fiercely determined teen refuses to let foster-care situation define him

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A 17-year-old ward of the state sat at a computer in Grosse Pointe Woods writing the most important letter of his life. It was a sales pitch to 30 prospective foster care parents in the Rochester Hills area. He'd found them by searching through court records and legal documents. He was begging for a place to live. Begging for a chance to follow his dreams. On a spring day in 2008, he picked the families from the documents and wrote to them, all strangers.



Photos by PATRICIA BECK/Detroit Free Press

Alex (center) and friends Arielle LaBrecque and Greg Foakes share a lighter moment during their AP English Literature class at Stoney Creek High School in Rochester Hills.

"I'm sure you've never received a letter of this nature before, and I'm also quite sure you will be surprised, albeit unpleasantly, at the circumstances under which I am writing this letter."

His father left the country when he was a toddler, he explained. His mother's parental rights were terminated.

"My name is Alex, and I am a junior, soon to be senior, at Stoney Creek High School in Rochester Hills. I found your name and contact information after quite a bit of rigorous searching, strangely enough on a business listing Web site since 'Foster Care' is technically a public service business."

An honor roll student, Alex wanted to graduate from Stoney Creek and go to

Harvard. Or Columbia. Or Stanford. Or New York University. Or the University of Michigan. But he had a problem. After bouncing through eight foster placements, he was sent to live at Children's Home of Detroit in Grosse Pointe Woods. He was afraid that he would have to change schools for the third time in four years. All he wanted was to get back to Stoney Creek.

The school meant everything to him. It was more than a building; it was his home. The teachers and counselors and students and secretaries and principal at Stoney Creek had become his family.

So he kept writing his letter, trying to sell himself.

"I suppose this is where I should delve into a brief summary of my life, for your own understanding of my situation."

It is highly unusual for a child to do his own research to try to find a foster parent, but everything about Alex is unusual.

He has a 3.95 grade point average on a 4-point scale and is on track to become a National Merit Scholar. He nearly aced the ACT, receiving a 35, one point below a perfect score. And he scored 2,330 on the SAT -- only 70 points below a perfect score.

"He is extremely intelligent," said Richard Strenger, the Lake Orion lawyer who has represented Alex for more than a year. "I don't know what his IQ level is, but I would guess it's at the genius level. He is more impressive considering the adversity he has gone through. He's very, very impressive."

"My parents divorced when I was 2 years old, and I have not heard from my father since."



"My school means everything to me," Alex wrote in a letter to prospective foster parents in Rochester Hills.



Stoney Creek High School counselors Paul Carlin, left, and Colette Judge help Alex look at the Harvard University Web site.

Alex has a 3.95 grade point on a 4-point scale and earned high scores on the ACT and SAT tests

Alex was born in Romania. As an infant, he moved to the United States with his mother and father. "He ended up getting deported back to Romania and I haven't heard from him since," Alex said of his dad. "I don't even remember him."

Alex's mother earned a doctorate in computer science engineering and started teaching at a local university.

"She was a really good parent," Alex said. "She would take time to not just help me with my homework but teach me the next chapter and the next chapter after that.

"She was very compassionate. She had a strong moral compass and I feel like she instilled that in me. I think that's the reason I turned out the way I did," he said.

"My mother was a nurturing and loving person, to which I credit my early start on a path of academics until she suffered a closed-head injury from a car accident and developed bipolar disorder."

Alex said that after the accident, his mother changed. They fought constantly. He was first removed from his mother's custody in 2001.

He said it was shocking to see "someone so smart and intelligent" who was suddenly "unable to focus her eyes on you, shaking back and forth, unable to speak, and slurring words."

"I was removed from her multiple times and placed in foster care only to be returned to her when she returned to temporary stability."

He bounced through a series of foster placements. One time, when he was in the eighth grade, his mother went through a "spell," as Alex calls them. They lost their home.

"I went back to the apartment and found all my stuff scattered across the lawn," Alex said.

He was taken in for a short time by the principal at a Bloomfield Hills middle school. It was one example of countless times that Oakland County school administrators, counselors and teachers went out of their way to give Alex a safety net.

"I was relieved to have someplace to go home to," Alex said. "I gathered up as much stuff as I could into a van. It was a really sad day, but it was pretty moving too. A bunch of my teachers and neighbors helped me move my stuff into a van and gather everything up."

Her rights were terminated last year because of physical neglect and improper supervision, according to Aretha Lewis, his caseworker at Lutheran Social Services.

"While I do feel quite sad for how tragic events have transpired, I think it was in both of our best interests to pursue normalcy in our own lives prior to maintaining a family relationship."

Alex developed a rubber soul, able to bounce back from anything, forced to adapt to countless experiences and people.

"I'm a good kid with no criminal or negative behavior record, but more visibly I am an excellent student. ... My most fervent dream is to be accepted to an Ivy League school, and I actually have the intellectual and emotional capacity to do so."

Every time he was placed in a new home, there was a strong attempt by Rochester school counselors to keep him at Stoney Creek.

"My school means everything to me. When chaos reigned at home, I immersed myself in my studies and my friends, forging strong bonds of compassion and support."

Alex has built relationships with many people at Stoney Creek. For his birthday last year, school secretaries got him a cake. "Alex is one of our favorites, a star," said principal Dan Hickey. "We've worked really hard with him."

Colette Judge has been Alex's counselor since his freshman year. She saw a bright student with potential, who needed some tender, loving care. "This is his home," Judge said. "This is the only constant that he's had. I'm a mom and I treat him like one of my kids."

"Truly all I need is someplace to stay, even if I have to pay a couple hundred dollars a month in rent, for the 2008-2009 school year."

During the summer, a new family came forward. Alex moved in one day before school started and is now finishing his final year at the school he loves.

Suzanne, his foster mother, said Alex is a "caring, very bright, responsible young man, very talented and very gifted."

She said he represents hope and inspiration.

"I think a lot of people can make the choice to be amazing," Suzanne said. "They can make the choice not to give up. I think it's awesome. He has made the choice: 'I'm

not going to quit. I'm not going to let it beat me. I'm going to choose to survive.' "

Lewis, his case manager, said his potential is unlimited. "We are very proud of him," she said. "He has done very well in his placement. They are very happy to have him."

Alex wants to major in political science or economics with an emphasis on environmental [policy](#). Then again, he might work in foster care.

"I want to do something meaningful," Alex said. "I want to improve [quality of life](#) for people, and I want to do it on a large scale."

He said he has been accepted into the Honors Program at the University of Michigan, but he's still waiting to hear from Columbia and Harvard.

On a visit to Harvard, he spent a night in the dorms.

"I felt like I belonged," he said, "like this is where I want to end up."

In the letters that he sent to prospective foster care families, Alex closed by writing this:

"While my experience as a foster youth has had a major impact on me, it is by no means my defining attribute. I instead treasure my ability to weather the instability -- be it from my mother, foster homes, or youth residential facilities -- and focus on what is truly important in life; fulfilling work, an education, and bettering the lives of those around you. A person's real impact on this world is not measured by gross income or collegiate degrees. It is instead revealed by the courage of their moral conviction and human lives they touch. I choose to be the latter."

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