

## Phillip O. Berry senior survives hurricane, homelessness to get diploma

On the second day of her senior year of high school, Christian Brister was worried about settling into her classes – advanced placement courses in physics, calculus, psychology and English, along with more science electives. She needed to finish buying school supplies.

But she'll always remember that day (Aug. 26, she says offhand, as if it's still marked in her calendar) as the day her family moved into a house after four months in a homeless shelter.

Brister, 18, will graduate from the Phillip O. Berry Academy of Technology on Friday, and she almost never stops smiling. But she acknowledges that her family's years of instability, when they bounced from homes to shelters to a motel and back again, were tough.

"I don't think I ever got depressed," she said, "but I was always stressed."

Brister was born in New Orleans and left the city with her family after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. By 2009, they were living in the Salvation Army Center of Hope near uptown Charlotte.

As a single parent with Brister and two younger children to care for, her mom struggled to hold onto jobs. At one point, she was juggling three at once, working for a package delivery service and a fast-food restaurant while also employed as a certified medical technician.

By April 2014, the family was back in the shelter, but by August, they had found a house with "some really good help" from Supportive Housing Communities, a nonprofit dedicated to ending homelessness.

School was Brister's "sanctuary" through the challenges of the past 10 years, especially when she was trying to do homework on a top bunk bed in the noisy shelter.

Babies cried all night, she said, and she couldn't turn the lights on and off when she wanted. She struggled to get a good night's sleep, let alone prepare for the SAT, which she took in June while living in the shelter.

At school, she didn't talk about her living situation at all.



Christian Brister and her family went through Hurricane Katrina, struggled with homelessness and now she's about to graduate from Phillip O. Berry Academy and head to UNC-Chapel Hill.

“They (her classmates) didn’t know,” she said. “Gosh, I’m so thankful for that.”

Brister said she sees education as “the only way” to financial stability. She wants to be able to support herself along with her mother and siblings.

With her mom working several jobs, Brister was often responsible for her younger sister, now 6, and brother, 10. Frequent babysitting strained her ability to participate in extracurricular activities until her sister started school.

In the past two years, she’s made up for lost time. She joined Health Occupations Students of America, a service club for students interested in healthcare professions, two honor societies and Art Club.



Jamall Kinard, Communities In Schools Site Coordinator at Phillip O. Berry Academy of Technology, with Christian.

She spent the summer of 2014 living in the shelter, but she also had “the best experience” through the Mayor’s Youth Employment Program. She worked as a receptionist in a doctor’s office, learning how to manage appointments for a busy practice while getting experience in healthcare.

Since middle school, she’s also been part of Communities in Schools, a program designed to support students facing challenges so that they stay in school, graduate and find careers.

That’s how she met Jamall Kinard, now a site coordinator for Communities in Schools at Phillip O. Berry.

Brister calls Kinard her second father. They’ve known each other since she was in seventh grade – he taught at her middle school before moving to Phillip O. Berry.

In their last few weeks together, Kinard says his job is to make sure Brister is prepared “for when she goes and becomes a woman in the real world.” They talk about how to use a checkbook and read a credit score. Everything he’s worried she didn’t learn in the classes where she performed so well.

Brister’s mom never wanted to see anything but As on report cards, and Brister was determined to succeed.

“There is no way that my life is going to be like my life is now,” she said.

Brister wants to work in neonatology, because, she said, she loves science class and working with babies. She’s not sure yet if she’ll go into nursing or a pre-med track when she starts classes at UNC-Chapel Hill in the fall.

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