

Done running: troubled teen gets life on track; speaks out for other kids

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Image 1. Shamelen Henderson, 17, went through 24 foster and group homes in Washington, D.C., before finding one from which she didn't want to run away. Photo by: Theresa Vargas/Washington Post

Some holidays used to be sad for Shamelen Henderson. She remembers spending Thanksgiving and Christmas in a group home when she was 13 years old. A small number of people who are not related are put into group homes. They need care, support or supervision.

"That Made Me Want To Run"

The home was for juvenile offenders, kids who had to stay there because they had gotten into trouble. The other girls had families they could visit, but Shamelen didn't. She was a foster child and a runaway. She was alone.

She was with the people who worked there, "crying most of the time," she said of those holidays. "That made me want to run, too."

Shamelen started running away when she was 12 years old. She ran away from one foster home after another. She lived in 24 foster and group homes in five years.

Now, she is 17 years old and she's done running. She is speaking out.

A Voice For Children

She has become a voice for children in Washington, D.C. Her hope is to help those in foster care and the juvenile justice system of police and courts.

Recently, the teenager stood before D.C. Council members and spoke on behalf of the city's Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS).

"I don't want them to go through what I went through," Shamelen said of other children.

She said she ran away from places for different reasons. Some weren't the right fit, and some adults were "bad foster parents." Sometimes, she ran away to get back to family members she missed, but that running and missing school landed her in the criminal justice system.

"That's Your Gift"

The system should offer help for what children have been through, she said.

Linda Harllee Harper, a leader of DYRS, praised the teenager's skill in speaking out for herself and others.

"That's your gift," Harper told her, and asked why she is interested in it.

"I like to advocate for people because I know what it's like to be a person that doesn't have anyone to advocate for me," Shamelen said.

People describe Shamelen as someone who is smart and wants more from life than what she was handed.

Accepted To Three Colleges

Shamelen is doing well. She works at Starbucks, gets good grades and has been accepted to three colleges. She is also waiting to hear if she can get in to Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C.

However, for a long time, she wasn't doing so well. She dreams of becoming a lawyer who represents children in the justice system because she understands what it feels like to be a child who needs that help.

Shamelen said running away and missing school landed her several times in juvenile detention. It is jail for people under the age of 18. The first time, she said, came after she skipped school for three months. When she finally showed up for class, she was called to the office, where a police officer took her into custody.

Experiences In Juvenile Detention

"My first week, I cried," she said.

One of her worst experiences, she said, was at a juvenile detention facility in Virginia.

"They treat you like you're an adult," she said. "You only get three-minute showers. You share underwear. If you get into a fight or something like that, they put you in this place called the Bahamas. It sounds nice, but it's not nice. They give you your food through a slot."

Her situation changed when she was put into DYRS' care when she was about 15 years old.

She said workers connected her with adults who seemed to care and gave her advice. They told her how to channel her feelings so she wouldn't blow up in anger.

"She Treats Me Like I'm Her Child"

Shamelen was in a group home when she was told that a Washington police officer was interested in fostering her.

She recalled thinking, "I'm not about to be in a foster home with a police officer."

Then she met her, and they talked and she visited the officer's home.

In November 2017, Shamelen moved in with the officer, and she has not run away since.

"She treats me like I'm her child," Shamelen said.

Quiz

1 Which two choices are main ideas of the article?

1. *Shamelen Henderson received praise from DYRS leader Linda Harllee Harper.*
2. *Shamelen Henderson spent Thanksgiving and Christmas alone when she was 13 years old.*
3. *Shamelen Henderson had many negative experiences growing up in foster care and ran away often.*
4. *Shamelen Henderson wants to use her experiences to become an advocate for other kids.*

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 3 and 4
- (D) 1 and 4

2 Which sentence from the article supports a main idea of the article?

- (A) A small number of people who are not related are put into group homes.
- (B) Her hope is to help those in foster care and the juvenile justice system of police and courts.
- (C) Some weren't the right fit, and some adults were "bad foster parents."
- (D) "If you get into a fight or something like that, they put you in this place called the Bahamas."

- 3 According to the section "Accepted To Three Colleges," how did Shamelen end up in juvenile detention?
- (A) She skipped school for three months and was brought into custody after returning to class.
 - (B) She ran away from her group home to get back to family members she had been missing.
 - (C) She refused to work with a lawyer who was trying to help get her into a new foster home.
 - (D) She got into a fight with another girl about the time allowed for showers and sharing clothes.
- 4 What caused Shamelen to turn her life around?
- (A) She got to speak to the city council and met Linda Harlee Harper, a woman who decided to take her in and raise her like her own child.
 - (B) She was accepted to three colleges, which gave her the confidence to try harder in school and get a job at Starbucks.
 - (C) She got a job working at the local Starbucks, where she met a kind police officer whom she got to know very well.
 - (D) She met people who cared about her and helped her with her emotions, and then she moved in with a police officer.