



## How one girl overcame abuse, abandonment to graduate with top honors

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By Molly Bloom

At school, Taniya Shockley was the smart kid, the one everybody wanted to work with, the girl teachers wanted to take home.

At home, no one wanted her.

The oldest of six children, Taniya was born in Decatur to a mother unable to take care of her. She lived with a series of people — a grandmother, family friends, an aunt — until she

ended up in foster care in New Jersey where by her own account she was beaten, punched and berated.

Even your own mother doesn't want you, her foster mother told her, she said.

After a family member molested her, she moved in with another relative and then another, eventually ending up back in Atlanta as a teenager, living in a house rented by a woman she barely knew with no food, no electricity and no way to get to school, she said.

Then a neighbor's daughter introduced her to pastor Gary Burke.

Today, when she [graduates](#) in the top 10 percent at Atlanta's Carver High School for Health Sciences and Research with a full ride to the University of West Georgia, Gary Burke and his wife Felisia — the couple Taniya now calls mom and dad — will be cheering her on.

“This is the first actual family where I've never had to think well, what am I going to do now” after they kick me out, she said.

At that first meeting at the Burkes' church, Lakewood Church of Hope, Taniya spent an hour telling her life story. But she kept repeating one plea: “I just want to go to school,” Felisia Burke said.

Burke knew the look in her eyes. As a teenage mother, she'd had it herself.

“Taniya had that inner will to keep going,” she said.

The Burkes enrolled Taniya at Carver. Taniya later moved into one of the bedrooms vacated by their older daughters.

Raising Taniya “gave us the joy of parenting again,” Gary Burke said. “And the joy of ‘maybe without us on this one, we don’t know where she’d be.’”

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution was unable to reach Taniya’s biological mother — listed numbers for her were not in service — but the Burkes and school staff confirmed the outlines of Taniya’s story.

When Taniya came to Carver as a junior, she had an “A” average, but no birth certificate, Social Security card or confidence that she’d have a place to sleep next week. Her school “support team” — two teachers who took a particular interest in her, Carver’s guidance counselors and a graduation coach — the Burke family and her church “family” helped her settle in and thrive.

“She’s like the daughter that everyone wished they had,” Carver guidance counselor Keala Edwards-Cooper said.

This spring, one of the Burke daughters got Taniya and her friends a post-prom hotel room under the condition that no one else be let into the room, Gary Burke said. Rules got broken; the party got rowdy. When Taniya got home, the first thing she said was “I called my aunt so she can come get me,” certain that she was going to be kicked out.

“She has this, ‘if I do something wrong then I’m going to just leave before someone puts me out,’” attitude, Gary Burke said.

“In this family, no matter what you do, we don’t fall out so you have to leave. That’s not how families are. I think she’s just now starting to understand that when she does something wrong, she’s still OK.”

After the prom incident, the Burkes grounded Taniya for a few weeks and took away her cellphone. The aunt Taniya called never showed.

"I don't hate them," she says of her biological family. "I just have my limits with them."

Taniya's biological mother will visit from New Jersey for graduation. Taniya talks with one of her aunts from time to time. She hasn't spoken with her biological father in years.

But, she says, "I want them to know, I'm OK."

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