

From out of the depths

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David Ross is the senior class secretary at Greenville Tech's Charter High School. He's also captain of the baseball team, has a grade point average of 4.43, and was recently accepted to Presbyterian College.

Ross says none of these things would have been possible just two years ago. Back then, his life was headed on such a downward spiral he's positive he wouldn't be graduating from high school. He isn't even sure he'd be alive today.

But at age 17, he has learned that tragedy can lead to change — sometimes for the better.

On Sept. 5, 2002, Ross, until then a student at Pendleton High, found himself in the care of the Boys Home of the South, placed there by the Anderson County Department of Social Services.

The details leading up to that day are too complex to recount. He explained that he was wrestling with an uneven home life and a drug problem that had caused disciplinary issues at school.

In his first days at the Boys Home, Ross could do little else but think about how his life had come to that point.

"I was extremely angry at God ... left at a boys home without enough money to buy a candy bar," said Ross. "I was just all alone, sitting there wondering what I'm going to do with my life."

For a month, he didn't leave the home, not even to attend school. His first step, he decided, would be "to get clean off of drugs."

After a few weeks of close evaluation at the Boys Home, Ross moved to "independent living" status. He began going to church and said he did a lot of praying — especially for a foster family.

In October, Boys Home officials arranged an interview for him with Fred Crawford, principal of Tech's Charter High School. Crawford said he was impressed by Ross, but also told him that if he came to Charter High he'd only get one chance, meaning that if he had one disciplinary problem, he'd be gone from the school for good.

"The last thing he said at the end of our meeting is that he wanted to be a model student here," Crawford said. "And he has been."

Charter attendance clerk Sandy Brickman picked Ross up from the Boys Home each morning and took him back after school each day.



Student David Ross on the campus of Greenville Tech Charter High School. Staff/George Gardner

She occasionally stopped by her home on the way back to the Boys Home, and on one trip that winter, her family gave Ross Christmas presents. He was shocked by the gesture, but very grateful.

In April of 2003, Brickman and her husband, Jack, became Ross' foster parents. These days, Ross refers to the Brickmans' 15-year-old son, Will, as the brother he always wanted.

The family's caring nature inspired Ross to make his senior project about foster children. He created a guidebook showing all the scholarships and grants available to foster students who want to attend college.

Ross recently presented the project to House Speaker David Wilkins in Columbia and got his feedback. The meeting was especially important to Ross, who wants to become a lawyer, then pursue a political career.

"The reason I did this is because the information was so hard to find," said Ross. "I contacted my case worker in Anderson, her higher-ups, my guardian ad litem, looked it up on the Internet, and tried to find a book in the library. As I senior, I had to figure this stuff out and I couldn't. It took three or four months."

Ross finally got the information he needed by meeting with the educational coordinator of DSS in Columbia. He earned \$5,000 for college through education-in-training vouchers, and another \$1,750 in independent living funds.

Ross is now part of a state foster-care advisory program to help represent the views of foster youth.

Other Charter connections have helped Ross, too. The school's executive director for development, Ellen Pourmand, knew Ross would need a car when he headed off to Presbyterian next fall, so she contacted local dealerships to see if anyone would be interested in helping.

Hank Sitton of Sitton Buick Pontiac GMC Truck gave a 1994 Century Buick to Ross — and a job offer.

"I was ecstatic," Ross said.

Ross said the experience at Charter has been great, and that the learning environment there provides help when he needs it.

He said that after he went to the Boys Home, he wasn't sure he'd ever get to play baseball again, the sport he loves. But the left-handed pitcher has averaged more than two strikeouts per inning the last two seasons at Charter, and he said he may try to walk on to Presbyterian's team.

He feels blessed to have that opportunity — and the others he's had since September of 2002.

"Some of the most painful things can be the greatest moments of your life," he said. "You just don't realize it."