

Lisette Orellana, 24 years old

I was once that girl, who didn't believe, had no desire had let go of those dreams and the confidence that had once defined me. When I became pregnant at age 15 and lost the trust of my family, I felt I had become invisible to society and they no longer saw a girl with potential. All of the sudden I was only a statistic of soon to be high school dropouts. I condemned myself to be at the side of an abusive man who constantly showed me everything I did not deserve: domestic violence, loneliness, and fear. I no longer believed in me. I no longer had goals, not even when my little girl arrived did I think I could be a good mommy to her. What had gone wrong?

Then I came to PEARLS. A program for parenting teens from Crittenton Services of Greater Washington in my high school. From the minute I walked in I felt a connection with the other girls who were navigating the challenges of teen parenthood and the staff listened, believed, and did not judge me for having a child and still wanting to pursue my education. Then, I became pregnant again, even while on birth control and taking all the precautions I still became pregnant and this time for sure I thought my life was over. But Crittenton was still there. I didn't have to give up my dreams. Those dreams had to become a reality.

The amazing thing is that those words got to me. Having one person believe in me sparked a feeling of worth. I wanted to hold on to that sense of empowerment. I had let go of so many things already but I decided to stand strong and I was not going to let go of that. And while things at home were only getting worse, I stayed determined and kept waking up every morning to go to school. I kept putting up with my kids' father drinking and abuse to continue school. Then one day I learned that there was help for a girl like me. I didn't have to put up with him, I didn't have to allow my children to experience that. But where was I going to get that courage? Unfortunately for me, it took him beating me in front of my 22month old and three month old for me to take a stand to leave. I had to have them witness me on the floor, sore and bruised. It took a lot of strength to get up and grab the courage to walk away and not look back. I finished high school, and received my Bachelor's degree in Communication from the University of Maryland. I now work at Crittenton Services of Greater Washington as their Director of External Relations.

I stay involved with Crittenton because I don't want girls to realize how much they're worth too late. I want them to shine their light with all their might because they're worth it and because they have so much potential.