

A Foundation to Build On

Brian Carmichael knows what it's like to be homeless, hopeless, and struggling. Since both of his parents died when Brian was eight years old, he's had to navigate life for the past 22 years largely on his own.

"There were a lot of days when bad things were happening and there was nothing I could do about it," he says.



Brian struggled through school, then dropped out in tenth grade when he had nowhere to live. He worked at a lot of different temp jobs, trying to survive. And, in his words, he "did some stupid stuff and went to jail a couple of times for petty crimes." Finally, he says, "I thought, this isn't the life I want. I realized I had to be accountable. My parents dying when I was a little boy made me feel hopeless and helpless, but I realized I had to just stop getting in trouble if I wanted my life to be different."

The birth of his first daughter, when Brian was 26, gave him the drive and focus to start making changes. "Not having parents myself and then becoming a parent – I didn't know how to do it. So I just read everything I could and tried to figure it out. I know what I didn't have, growing up, and what I want to give to my kids so their life is different."

One of the books Brian read taught him a new word: perseverance. "I had never heard that word before, but this book said the only way to be successful is through perseverance and explained what it was. And I thought, yeah, that's what I have to have. That gave me a lot more hope to push forward."

He started thinking about how to create a financially stable life for himself and his daughter. "I thought getting my high school diploma would give me a foundation to build on," he explains.

When he had been at Lancaster County Prison, he'd heard of the GED program offered there, but because his stays at LCP had been for just a few weeks each time, he was never able to get into the prison GED classes.

"I guess that's a good thing," he says, with a wry smile, "that I wasn't in jail long enough to take classes." Fortunately, IU13, which runs the GED classes at LCP, also had a community-based GED program along with specialized services for students with a criminal background through a federal grant they'd received called the "Improved Reentry Education" or IRE program.

In early spring of 2017, Brian went to the CareerLink and completed many of the CareerLink's reentry employment workshops, then enrolled in IU13's IRE GED program. There, he met Mary Edith Leichliter. She provided 1:1 tutoring for Brian to prepare him for the rigorous set of exams that he'd have to pass in science, math, reading, writing, and social studies to earn his diploma.

Though the program gave him some hope, the struggles to make ends meet and survive day to day continued to hit Brian hard. "Life sometimes got in the way," he says, "but then I had to make some choices and take accountability to keep doing this. That's perseverance."

He continues, "Commitment matters. Some people will judge you for not showing up or not following through, but there are people like me who have obstacles after obstacles and we just need patience and understanding. That's why I appreciated Mary Edith so much. Even when I had problems and dropped away for a while, when I would pop back up and call her to start up again with the tutoring, she would just say, ok, great. Do you want to come in on Tuesday or Thursday? She never judged me. She just had pure intent to save a bird with a broken wing."

After a year and a half of perseverance, Brian passed all of the tests to earn his high school equivalency diploma on September 21, 2018, just two days after the birth of his second daughter.

He's philosophical about all of the struggles he encountered along the way.

"Even the people who closed doors on me helped me in a way because it made me really want to keep pushing to prove them wrong and prove they couldn't stop me," he says. "I don't hold grudges and if you don't want to help me that's fine, but I'm not going to give up. I've made a thousand mistakes in between all of that but every experience is just knowledge. Before I go to sleep every night, I think about what I did that day and what else I could have done different or better and I just learn from all of it."

Now, with his newly-minted diploma, Brian has started thinking about what's next. "I can see kids younger than me struggling and going through the same issues I went through and I want to be able to help them," he says. So he's hoping to enroll in Phoenix University.

"Now I need someone to help me figure out how to do college. I want to have a small business to help other people, and be able to hire people who need some help. I just feel like I really want to give back and also be able to make some money to support my daughters. You need more than just a positive and ambitious attitude. I just want to make myself a good helper for other people who really want to do good for themselves too."

When his official diploma arrived in the mail, Brian kept it unopened in the envelope. He's waiting for the right moment and the right way to celebrate his accomplishment.

Regardless of when that moment of celebration comes or what form it might take, he's confident that having his diploma will make a difference for him.

"Opportunities will come and I'm just more optimistic now," he says. "This will give me a foundation which I never had – to build anything I can dream of."