

Hello!! My name is Ariana Heist. I am a homeless youth that lives in one of the HYP buildings. The interaction programs have greatly impacted my life, in the best ways imaginable. I appreciate everything they have been able to do for me, and with me.

Friends For Change, FFC, I joined in 2020 after covid hit, and we were finally getting back to normal. One of my friends invited me, but I heard of the program many years before. When I first went they were very warm and inviting. I hadn't had stable friends, or felt like I fit in much. I was a "weird kid". But I immediately felt like I belonged somewhere, and had a chance to meet new people there. It was a home, a safe place. It has stayed that way through moves, group changes, and schedule conflicts. They always found a way for people to be included. They also have opened up many opportunities for me, with field trips, projects, and help navigating throughout life. I'm very thankful for this program, I genuinely don't know where I would be without them.

BARJ has helped me as well. FFC and a friend had introduced me to Jax. She started working with me when the school wasn't listening to me about my health and wellness needs, while I was navigating a lot of medical problems. Then, she stuck with me because I had some other troubles navigating my classes, and especially when graduation hit. I had just figured out what I wanted to do thanks to youth led business (YLB). but I had no idea where to start with applying to college and my finances. But BARJ was the perfect program. Jax explained everything, and helped me apply, and made sure I had everything I needed. At every bump in the road I had someone to walk me through it. It was great. I never even thought college was a possibility. Now I have a plan for the next few years that includes getting a degree that really means something to me.

YLB really helped me figure out what I wanted to do after graduation. I had no idea at first, then FFC introduced me to the program. We met at First Proof Press, and Dan taught us to do so many different things. I had so much fun and I was actually good at it. Then for an English class we had to create a brochure, logo, slogan, and just about everything for a fake company we created that was good for the environment. This is really what set in stone for me what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a graphic designer. It was the first time in a while I was actually excited to do something for school. Then, FFC was letting me do odd jobs like making pamphlets and invites to events. YLB was giving me extra work to do things digitally, I created their logo, a brochure, and so much more. It felt like a perfect fit, and taught me so many useful skills.

All these programs also gave me an escape from my day to day. My parents were heavy alcoholics and as me and my siblings started to grow up, we realized how bad it was. My parents were abusive, both emotionally and physically, my mom was mostly emotional and my dad's was more physical. Me and my siblings were the ones taking care of them. We all had to protect my mom from my dad. And my siblings and I all tried to shield and protect each other from our parents. It was a vicious cycle. They had anger issues and alcohol and drug addictions, which just made the abuse worse. As time went on they got worse too, they started to act like the addicts you see on the streets or even in movies and on tv. At one point we were

fighting over something as simple as laundry. It eventually led to my dad tell me to get the fuck out of his house, which they would do quite often in arguments. I went to my boyfriend's house and stayed for a few weeks, the whole time my mom begging me to come back, telling me he didn't kick me out, and the whole argument was my fault. Eventually I was forced to go back due to not having stable housing.

FFC had helped me navigate returning, even getting locks for my doors, and trying to make it a safer environment to return to. Both my siblings got older and moved out. I was left by myself in that home and my parents were constantly back and forth fighting, and eventually they "split". Due to their addictions they both lost their jobs, and couldn't keep the ones they got after. They stopped paying bills, and sometimes we didn't have electricity, water, food, or even heat in the winter. It was impossible living conditions. My dad was moving in and out depending on if his girlfriend wanted him that night or not. He would get aggressive, break windows, and start fights. We had to keep calling the cops, getting restraining orders that would just get dismissed in court. It was like I was drowning in a hell I couldn't escape. I had to take showers at FFC, and go to friends houses for diners and to do laundry, as well as fill water jugs to be able to flush the toilets, charge my phone at school and hope the charge would last till morning to wake me up and find ways to stay warm. I didn't feel like myself anymore.

FFC kept mentioning the HYP program but I kept denying because I couldn't bring my pets, my dog and cat. Eventually I decided to leave them behind. which hurts me to think they're still stuck there, no one to help them, take care of them. But I was num. I was always sad, or angry. I stopped taking care of myself, and didn't leave my room except to fight with my parents and to be their parent. I had to find their stashes to throw away, call the cops when needed, find ways to get them food, I even started carrying Narcan, which FFC happily provided.

I filled out the paperwork for the HYP after I decided to get out of my situation, and got a room almost immediately. Living here lifted a weight off my chest and I started taking care of myself. I actually eat a bit more healthily, shower daily, go for walks, and socialize. My case manager has helped me get to and from stores to buy necessities, and helps me fill out paperwork I can't understand. She also helps me navigate problems I can't figure out and makes sure I have everything I need. I have self worth again thanks to the HYP. It gives me the space to grow and be my own person again.

I started filling out the paperwork to get a voucher and an apartment of my own. A year ago I never even thought that was a possibility because I was so stuck. I have so much trouble. finding an apartment for me seemed like a fever dream, but now I know it's possible. I'll be safe, with my pets, and I don't have to fear I'll be thrown out at any moment or in a fight, cuz my parents are "having a bad day". I just get to be me again.

I'm so thankful that Interaction has such amazing programs. I don't know how I would have survived such bad conditions without a creative outlet or a safe space, and support system from everyone I've worked with from this company. I wouldn't be me, or anyone for that matter.

This company will be a part of my life forever, and I know other people feel the same way I do. I love Interaction and everything it's done for me. They probably saved my life.

Thank you for listing to my story,

Ariana Heist