

Grand Prize Winner

HOW I MADE MY LIFE BETTER



Justin Walker

Age: 16

New Alternatives
for Children

Taking Chances Like Never Before

When I went into care, I felt petrified. I was away from my family, and I felt lost. It was a lot of mixed emotions. When I joined New Alternatives for Children (NAC), I didn't feel like doing anything. I thought that nothing could get better, only worse. Little by little, I realized I had to overcome all these negative emotions and work with my situation.

A New Alternatives for Children social worker suggested I give therapy a try. I was nervous and skeptical about pouring out my feelings to a stranger. It was hard thinking about everything that was going on. I left my brothers and my mom and everyone I knew when I was only 14. My mom had told me that I didn't need therapy. It made sense at the time because I never talked about what was going on inside my head.

The first time I sat down with my therapist it was hard and nerve-racking, but I knew it was a step in the right direction. After the third or fourth session, I opened up. It felt good talking, letting out all my emotions.

Therapy has helped me be more open with people. I don't have anything to hide or be confused about. Being in therapy made me realize I wanted to change the way I approach things like participating in more events and being open to doing anything positive.

When I was in middle school, I didn't take school very seriously and I didn't think much of it until I got into 8th grade. Teachers were talking to me about high school and my grades weren't good, so I decided to step it up. NAC told me about tutoring at the

agency, and I tried it. I saw great improvements in my grades and attitude. Once my grades got better, I started to feel more excited about school and myself.

Ryan, my tutor, really pushed me to do my work and he motivated me by talking about college and what he went through in school. It meant a lot to have that role model because none of my family ever went to college.

Because of tutoring, I was able to pass 8th grade and take my work ethic into high school. It wasn't always easy; I slipped up for a few months, but I bounced back, and now my grades are honor roll material.

My therapist encouraged me to attend at least one NAC social event. I didn't want to go. I didn't know anyone so I thought it would feel awkward. I wanted to stay home and play video games. My NAC social worker pushed me to attend the NAC Holiday Party. I felt anxious, but I didn't want to be sitting home doing nothing and feeling lonely.

I felt shy at first, but everyone went out of their way to introduce themselves. It made me feel special. I started going to more events and then joined a sled hockey team. I found a passion to be on a team despite my disability, cerebral palsy. Through sled hockey I've gotten invited to go scuba diving and play wheelchair basketball. I'm trying new things and taking chances like never before.

I wouldn't be as confident if it weren't for NAC. Having a disability made things hard in my life, but I have wonderful people to fall back on. It's like having another family. □