

February 23, 2021

Chair Williams, Vice-Chairs Leif and Ruiz, and members of the committee,

I have been an educator in North Clackamas School District for over twenty years and it wasn't until a few years ago that I was made aware of what the "xc" designation accompanying a student's name actually meant. Homeless youth are not at the forefront of professional development or other school-related conversations and/or trainings, which leaves me with a huge question mark as to "why not"?

My particular story begins during the 2017-2018 school year when I first met Sophie as a freshman in my Biology class. I noticed the "xc" next to her name, but because she outwardly appeared as a "typical" student, I did not think this designation was something that I needed to be concerned about. I am ashamed to say that I actually thought it meant she ran cross country. Sophie was at school pretty consistently, demonstrated high interest in her academics, and she came to my classroom regularly to "talk school". Early in our conversations we stuck mainly to school topics and I would help her complete homework, interpret her grades, and communicate with teachers. I did not really question why these tasks were not being completed at home.

It wasn't until Sophie signed on to be my TA her sophomore year that I began understanding her situation more clearly. She is the youngest daughter of divorced parents and both care and love her as much as any parent could. However, circumstances had resulted in housing instability. Essentially, from month to month I would hear a new story as to where Sophie and her mom were living. Typically they would stay with family friends for short stints until they had "worn out their welcome"; this is how Sophie would describe it. New arrangements would be made and they would move to their next temporary location, usually a basement without a private bathroom, kitchen, or independent heat source.

It was remarkable to me how Sophie approached her situation; to her this was just how life operated and she did not recognize anything unusual about it. Academically, she endured more obstacles than many students. She spent weekends moving and had to maneuver her schedule (showers, laundry, and kitchen use) to accommodate the homeowner's schedules. She continued to attend school regularly even though she was often tired because there was "a lot of drama" going on the night before or it was very cold in the basement and it was hard to do homework while bundled up in blankets.

Sophie was again my TA her junior year. The home insecurity continued. She was older and becoming more aware that her situation was not the typical high school experience. She wanted a more stable living arrangement for herself, but was tied to her mom's decisions and life choices. Sophie began her work with Katie Ray from the North Clackamas Family Support Center. She was very disappointed to know that her options were limited and began to be very discouraged that housing instability was her destiny.

As a teacher, I did not know where the line between student support and familial interference was. Finally, when Sophie contacted me in the summer of 2020 in tears, unsure of where life would land her next and tired of the moving and uncertainty, I contacted Katie Ray myself to explore other options. This is when I became aware of the Second Home program. This allowed Sophie to be in control of her own life circumstances when up to this point she had to simply accept the poor choices made on her behalf. Sophie was not able to fully support herself, nor did she want to. This was not a situation where she wanted to be cut off from adults altogether; she wanted the adults in her life to mentor her and advocate on her behalf.

With Second Home, Sophie has a room that is all her own. I think her tendency to keep her room stifling hot (in my opinion), may be the result of years of not being able to crank up the heat while in basements or feeling like a guest in other people's homes. Though her room gets quite messy at times, once she recognizes this for herself, she takes pride in remedying the clutter. She has rearranged her room twice, used her limited finances to buy lights, a plant, and an essential oil diffuser; all items that she shrieks for joy about when they arrive at the front porch.

We have learned to find that balance of communication where I know she is safe, while allowing her to maintain the independence she has experienced prior to living with me. At first I would have to prompt text messages to identify if she would be staying at someone else's house or if I should be expecting her to be in her room in the morning. I had to explain to her that I needed these basic reassurances not because I needed to know where she was at all times of the day, but because I would worry if she wasn't back by morning and I hadn't heard from her. Sophie's response to me was, "I am not used to anyone asking me where I will be". Now she regularly checks in with the updates I need to just know she is safe, such as "I'm good, plan to be back home by tomorrow" or "It may be late, but I will be coming back tonight".

By living here, Sophie has had the opportunity to rebuild her relationships with both her mom and dad. She refers to her room as her "home" and as the place she can go to that is neutral ground. This has been huge in her reconnecting and establishing trust with her parents who she feels really let her down these past years. She now spends time with her mom and dad semi-regularly, but what makes this reuniting possible is that these meetings are on Sophie's terms and having her own place to return to is essential to this process.

Second Home reaches out to both Sophie and I regularly, seeing if there is anything we need to continue the arrangement. I was really impressed with their professionalism and involvement from the very start. I appreciate their multiple layers of advocacy from having a rental contract, to mediation of agreements, connecting Sophie with SNAP benefits, regular check-ins, and being available to answer my questions to clarify my role as home provider. When Second Home contacted Sophie about Christmas gift selections, she was both surprised and thrilled. When she opened the bounds of gifts, she couldn't believe this was done for her. Second Home's assistance with SNAP benefits and the Christmas gifts directly relieved a financial strain on my behalf as well.

I know that this has gotten a bit longer than it should have, but youth homelessness is a growing issue that deserves so much more attention, education, and funding than currently provided. Teenagers do not have many options to make the best choices for themselves. Once they realize that they are tethered to their parent(s) who may not be making the best choices in consideration of their children, they feel a bit helpless. Second Home allows teens to make best decisions for themselves when the adults in their lives have not. In an attempt to wrap this up, let me finish with a few additional responsibilities Sophie is taking on while being an independent teen, but not in the absence adult guidance; grocery shopping with specific meals in mind and grocery list in hand, yard maintenance, pet care, laundry, communication and coordination of schedules, room upkeep, applying for jobs, applying for colleges and FAFSA, communicating with teachers about assignments and grades, mental health care, and balancing social interests with academic goals.

Thank you for your time and I apologize for the length,
Nicole Matthews
Second Home provider