**From scrubbing floors to Ivy League: Homeless student to go to dream college**

By **Vivian Kuo**, CNN Thu June 7, 2012



Dawn Loggins never gave up on her dreams, even when she was homeless. She heads to the Ivy League this fall.

***Editor's note:*** *To hear more from Dawn Loggins and her journey, watch Martin Savidge's full report tonight on* [*AC360*](http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/) *at 8p/10p ET*

**Lawndale, North Carolina (CNN)** -- It's before sunrise, and the janitor at Burns High School has already been down the length of a hallway, cleaning and sweeping classrooms before the day begins.

This particular janitor is painstakingly methodical, even as she administers a mental quiz on an upcoming test. Her name is Dawn Loggins, a straight-A senior at the very school she cleans.

On this day, she maneuvers a long-handled push broom between rows of desks. She stops to pick up a hardened, chewed piece of gum. "This annoys me, because there's a trash can right here," she says.

The worst, she says, is snuff cans in urinals. "It's just rude and pointless."

With her long, straight dark blonde hair and black-rimmed glasses, Dawn looks a bit like Avril Lavigne. But her life is a far cry from that of a privileged pop star.

She was homeless at the start of the school year, abandoned by her drug-abusing parents. The teachers and others in town pitched in -- donating clothes and providing medical and dental care. She got the janitorial job through a school workforce assistance program.

She's grateful for the work. But it's where she's going next, beyond the walls of Burns, that excites her most. She applied to four colleges within North Carolina and one dream university. She'll graduate soon before heading off, leaving her dust pan behind.



Dawn Loggins has worked as a janitor her senior year to make ends meet.

For now, there's still work to be done. She stops for a quick bite to eat in the custodial closet amid Pine-Sol and Clorox. She then darts to classes -- three advanced placement courses and an honors class.

**Growing up without electricity**

Dawn grew up in a ramshackle home with no electricity and no running water. She often went days, even weeks without showering. She and her brother Shane -- who was equally studious in his schoolwork -- would walk 20 minutes to a public park to fetch water.

"We would get water jugs and fill them up at the park, using the spigots in the bathroom. And we would use that to flush the toilet or cook with. Stuff like that," she says.

She confided in a staff member at school. She had trouble doing homework at nighttime because her home had no electricity and she couldn't afford candles. It was difficult to read in the dark.

"OK, we'll get you some candles. We'll take care of that," said Junie Barrett, Dawn's supervisor.

Another time, Barrett says, Dawn and her brother asked if they could use the school's washing machine to clean their clothes. "I said, 'Just leave them with me. We'll get them washed, dried,' " Barrett recalls.

"We let them use our shower facilities in the locker rooms because they had no running water. They had nothing to bathe in."

Burns High was their fourth high school since middle school, as they moved from town to town. Living the life of a rolling stone, the two had missed several months' worth of classwork when they first arrived two years ago, putting them well behind other students' progress.

Shane was outgoing, but Dawn always appeared more reserved.

Guidance counselor Robyn Putnam saw the potential in Dawn and Shane early on and enrolled them in online classes to get them caught up. The work paid off.

**Abandoned by parents**

Last summer, Dawn was invited to attend a prestigious six-week residential summer program, the Governor's School of North Carolina, at Meredith College in Raleigh, 200 miles east of Lawndale, to study natural science. It was a field Dawn had never studied before.

The program is reserved for the state's top students.

Putnam ferried Dawn to Raleigh to attend the elite program and took her shopping, making sure she had the clothes she needed. Other faculty members contributed funds, too.

Putnam worried Dawn's home situation could worsen while she was away. "We weren't even sure where her parents were at that time. And there was an eviction notice on the house," she says. "We kept telling her to get everything she could; we knew this was a possibility."

Dawn saw her parents for 30 minutes during the middle of the summer program during a short break. They talked about her school and how she was doing. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. "It was just a regular conversation," she says.

She wouldn't hear from them again for weeks.

As she prepared to leave the summer program, she kept calling her parents' phone, only to learn it had been disconnected. Putnam picked her up and brought her back to Lawndale.

"When I returned, my grandmother had been dropped off at a local homeless shelter, my brother had just left, and my parents had just gone," she says. "I found out later they had moved to Tennessee."

Her voice is steady, matter of fact. "I never expected my parents to just, like, leave."

Dawn was abandoned.

"I'm not mad at my parents. My mom and my stepdad both think that they did what was best for me," she says.



Dawn Loggins maintained an A-average despite her hardships.

In fact, she used her parents' example to drive her. "I just realize that they have their own problems that they need to work through," she says. "They do love me; I know they love me. They just don't show it in a way that most people would see as normal."

**Stability in Lawndale**

For a while, Dawn lived on the odd couch at friends' homes, while she figured out what to do. Sometimes, she slept on the floor. The only thing that was clear was that she wanted to stay in Lawndale, where she was active in extracurricular activities, had a boyfriend and had a job.

Her classmates there didn't make fun of her, though she had been mercilessly mocked in middle school. "It was the worst. That's when I would come home crying because the teasing was so bad," Dawn recalled.

She had lived with her grandmother until she was 12 and attended junior high at a school about an hour away from Lawndale during that time.

"My grandma loved me, and she taught me a lot. She had lots of crafts around and watched History Channel with us. But ..."

Dawn's voice halts, then begins again a few seconds later. "She never really explained to me and my brother the importance of bathing regularly. And our house was really disgusting. We had cockroaches everywhere. And we had trash piled literally 2 feet high. We'd have to step over it to get anywhere in the house."

Dawn would go without showering two to three months at a time and wear the same dress to school for weeks straight. "When I was little, it seemed normal to me. I didn't realize that other families weren't living the same way that I was. And because of that I got teased, the kids would call me dirty."

In Lawndale, a town of about 600 in the Appalachian foothills of western North Carolina, things were different. Dawn felt comfortable.

With her parents gone, she processed the options with her guidance counselor.

She could move yet again to Tennessee to be with her mother, or she could be turned over to the Department of Social Services. Putnam feared what that might bring. "If Dawn were to go into the system, she could be uprooted again and moved around," she says.

Dawn would turn 18 during the second semester, Putnam knew, making her an adult by law. So Putnam asked Dawn: "What do you want to do? She said, 'I want to graduate from Burns. To be in the same school two years.' "

So the community and Burns staff became her family.

Sheryl Kolton, a custodian and bus driver for Burns Middle School, had met Dawn before and knew her but not well. She wasn't expecting the phone call she received. "The counselor at the high school just called me one day and asked me if Dawn could come live here," Kolton says.

A few days later, she and her husband, Norm, agreed.

**Shooting for the stars**

With a roof over her head and the contributions of Burns staff to supplement the Koltons' income needed to house and feed a growing teenager, Dawn was seemingly in a stable environment. She admits that having her parents out of the picture helped.

"Honestly it was kind of a relief," she says. "I mean, I have a place to stay, and I have a job, and I'm going to school."

As she began her senior year, Dawn turned her laser-beam focus to her future: college. She knew she wanted a different path than her parents.

"When I was younger, I was able to look at all the bad choices -- at the neglect, and the drug abuse, and everything that was happening -- and make a decision for myself that I was not going to end up like my parents, living from paycheck to paycheck."

A straight-A student, Dawn was president of the photography club. She also had started a community service program collecting thousands of letters for active military troops and was involved in National Honor Society and band club. Before she took her custodian job, she ran cross country.

She wasn't top of her class, and she didn't have a perfect GPA, but she was smart. On paper, she had always fared well.

"I was looking at her transcript, and one of the lowest grades on her transcript is a 94 and that was for a class called Success 101, and the irony of that is just really amazing," Putnam says with a laugh.



Dawn Loggins says the worst thing about cleaning is snuff cans in urinals.

Dawn applied to four colleges within the state: the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; North Carolina State University; Davidson College; and Warren Wilson College. In December, she sent one final application off in the mail, to her reach-for-the-stars choice, Harvard.

No one from Burns High had been accepted to the elite Ivy League school.

"I thought about it and just figured, 'Why not?' "

She asked her history teacher, Larry Gardner, for a recommendation letter. "I don't know how many times I started that letter of recommendation," he recalls. "Because how do you articulate her story into two pages? How do you explain this is a young lady who deserves a chance but hasn't had the opportunities?"

But after a prayer for wisdom, the words flowed.

"Once again, words fail me as I attempt to write this letter of recommendation," Gardner began. "I can promise I've never written one like this before and will probably not write one like this again. Because most students who face challenges that are not even remotely as difficult as Dawn's give up. This young lady has, unlike most of us, known hunger. She's known abuse and neglect, she's known homelessness and filth. Yet she's risen above it all to become such an outstanding young lady."

Months passed. She was accepted to the four schools in North Carolina. Each time, the acceptance letter came as part of a thick package with fat brochures and congratulatory notes.

Days went by. Nothing from Harvard.

But on a sunny day earlier this year, she came inside after tending the garden. There was a letter from Harvard, the type of letter every high school senior dreads from a university -- a regular-sized envelope, the ominous sign of rejection.

Cautiously, she opened it: "Dear Ms. Loggins, I'm delighted to report that the admissions committee has asked me to inform you that you will be admitted to the Harvard College class of 2016. ... We send such an early positive indication only to outstanding applicants ..."

She gasped when she read those words.

Gardner had the same reaction when she handed him the note at school the next day. "I just looked up at her, and kind of teared up because this is a young lady who ... " he stops, his voice breaking.

"When I first met her and had her brother in class, they were living in a home without electricity, without running water, they were showering at a local park in a restroom after most of the people at the park had left. This is a young lady who's been through so much and for her to receive this letter -- pretty awesome."

Not only was Dawn accepted to Harvard, she got a full ride. She was offered tuition, room and board, as well as assistance finding an on-campus job.

The tiny town of Lawndale rallied around Dawn again. They raised money to get her to Boston so she could see the school in person in April.

"We in a sense had a collective responsibility to get her to Harvard," says Aaron Allen, Burns High principal. "Even though Harvard was going to pay for Dawn to go on her own, this is a girl who's had multiple moves, never flown, never ridden a subway, never really been outside small town USA, North Carolina foothills, and you're expecting her to go to Cambridge all by herself?"

Barrett, her custodial supervisor, traveled to Cambridge with her. "When we went up there, it was just like she was at home. She will succeed, and she will excel."

For Dawn, it wasn't a foregone conclusion that she would attend, but her inaugural visit solidified the decision. "I just could not picture myself anywhere else, at any other college."

**Helping others**

Since Dawn's story has come out, she's attracted attention worldwide from well-wishers sending her everything from simple encouragement to monetary donations.

Dawn doesn't want the money. "When I get to college, I can work for what I need. And I know my future is going to be great."

She hopes to start a nonprofit organization to help other teens who've had obstacles in their educations, using the funds that have been sent to her. There are more than 200 students listed as homeless in Cleveland County, where Lawndale is located.

"There are so many kids whose futures aren't so sure, and they need help more than I do," she says. "I want them to be able to use my story as motivation. And I want the general public to realize that there are so many kids who need help."

The final pages of Dawn's high school chapter are nearing a close. She will walk across the stage today -- June 7 -- to accept her diploma. She has invited her parents but isn't sure they will be able to attend. "If they're not there, it would be for good reason."

But the one person she will look for in the crowd is her brother Shane.

"Throughout the years, no matter where I've been or been through, he's always been there for me," she says, with a rare ghost of a smile.

Shane will attend Berea College in Kentucky on a scholarship.

Dawn has learned the sort of lessons that can't be learned in school. "I love my parents. I disagree with the choices that they've made. But we all have to live with the consequences of our actions," she said.

She takes it all in stride. "If I had not had those experiences, I wouldn't be such a strong-willed or determined person."

She might just find Harvard to be easy.

**Helping Dawn**

For those wanting to help, Dawn appreciates the generosity. She wants to use funds to form a nonprofit organization to help other homeless children. Any contributions can be sent to: Burns High School/Dawn Loggins Fund, 307 East Stagecoach Trail, Lawndale, NC 28090