



Dear Friends,

It is incredible how one event can change the trajectory of someone's life. I remember my early childhood fondly. My family lived behind an orange grove in a small town in Florida. We were happy, until one fateful night.

When I was 9 years old, my stepmom set our house on fire while my family was asleep. I lost my youngest brother, my uncle, and the only home I had ever known. My entire body was covered in burns, and I was taken to Shriners' Hospital in Cincinnati for treatment, where I stayed for several months.

I had no family available to take care of me after I was finally released from the hospital, so I was placed in foster care. Though my foster family tried to take care of me, I was too much to handle. After living with two different families, I was placed in Lighthouse's New Beginnings program at age 17.

The Lighthouse staff tried to teach me life skills, like cooking and cleaning, and they connected me with a counselor to help me work through the trauma I had suffered. I tried to be good, but I never felt like I fit in with the other girls. So, I acted out by running away, stealing, and doing anything that I thought might help me be accepted. No matter how badly I behaved, the Lighthouse staff never gave up on me.

Unfortunately, I learned that when I turned 18 years old I would have to move out of New Beginnings. I had no idea where I would go in a city where I had no family or friends. I felt so lost and unloved. Luckily, even though my behavior was still out of control, Lighthouse was willing to help me find a place to live and get on my feet. They placed me in Lighthouse's shelter, now known as Mecum House, where I stayed until I eventually found an apartment.

Not long after moving into my own apartment, I found myself in trouble. I dropped out of school and began dating a boyfriend who forced me to help him sell drugs. I was arrested and spent six months in jail. When I got out, I had lost my apartment and all of my belongings. I had nowhere to go.

I called my caseworker and asked if Lighthouse could help me. Even after all of the poor choices I had made, they agreed. Because of Lighthouse's help, I completed my Associate's degree to become a medical administrative assistant. Now, 10 years later, I am also a motivational speaker for other burn victims and foster youth. I wouldn't be where I am today without the support of the Lighthouse staff.

I am delighted that New Beginnings is moving to this new, larger facility and will be able to help even more girls like me work toward a better life.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Burns
Lighthouse YP Committee Member and
Former New Beginnings Resident