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## Foster daughter fights for her self

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Author: GOSIA WOZNIACKA, The Oregonian

SUMMARY: Where many such youths fail, Tabitha Jenner overcomes --with help

Tabitha Jenner scanned the mail, dismissed it as junk and raised a hand to throw it into the fireplace.

"Open the letter before tossing it," Donald Davis told her. The lanky 18-year-old had lived with Davis, her foster father, and his wife, Lorrie, for more than nine years, most of it in this split-level house in Troutdale.

Tabitha found the white envelope and tore into it, pulling out a form notice from a bank she had never done business with. She handed it to Donald. "Looks like someone tried to take a credit card in your name and it was rejected," Donald recalls telling her. He saw confusion in her face.

It was probably my mom, she remembers blurting out. Her estranged biological mother, Tonya Mertes, was emotionally and financially desperate and had a lifelong struggle with drug addiction.

Now, Tabitha learned on this February afternoon, she was trying to steal her daughter's identity.

Tabitha's body stiffened, her jaw clenched. Her mother had used Tabitha's name in the past for electric and water bills. The girl had forgiven her many times over the past decade --for relapsing into drug use and breaking promises about change --but she struggled with the chaos her mom brought on.

It is a battle she's fought all of her young life --one that requires others to help her win. Her odds are grim: National statistics show most foster children fail to succeed. Some studies show that more than half don't complete high school or get a GED. And when they leave the system, many find themselves unemployed or homeless.

But that moment, in early 2006, when a mother tried to deceive her daughter, would be the crisis point for Tabitha. It would force her to look at her own history and decide whether to break free or be dragged down by it. It would be one of the hardest and most important decisions she would ever have to make.

"I was still really hoping it wasn't my mom," Tabitha says of the attempted identity theft. "But deep inside, I knew."

\* Tonya Mertes ran away from home at 14 and gave birth to Tabitha three years later, divorcing the father shortly after. She used methamphetamine and other drugs and was later diagnosed with attention deficit disorder and manic-depressive disorder. She eventually would have seven children. Tabitha is the oldest.

They lived in dozens of apartments, motels, friends' homes and rehab centers --drugs and alcohol a constant. A neglected Tabitha skipped most of first grade. When drugs immobilized her mother, Tabitha took care of two baby brothers. Often, Tonya left the girl alone with the boys for days. Tabitha cooked meals and lulled them to sleep at night.

Her mom was tidy, though, and their home was usually clean. There was food to eat. Sometimes, when not strung out, her mom was loving and would cook or read bedtime stories to the children. They would have quiet evenings relaxing together on the couch, watching TV and sharing stories. Tabitha told her mom everything.

But there were other evenings. Like the one she recalls from March 1997.

They were on the couch in a Portland apartment when Tonya's boyfriend started pounding on the door. Tabitha, who

was 9, can't recall how he and another man got inside. The boyfriend wielded a curved knife, like a half moon, and accused her mother of having a relationship with the other man. He slit Tonya's wrists in front of her daughter.

The girl remembers crying uncontrollably, screaming for the man to stop. He pulled out a gun. "He told me if I didn't stop screaming, he'd shoot me," Tabitha recalls. "He was holding the gun to the other man's head, then he pointed it at Mom and at me."

Tabitha doesn't remember the rest of the night. But two days later, the family returned home to find the furniture smashed, their clothes, couches, and feather pillows cut up into shreds, and ketchup smeared all over the apartment's walls. That night, someone tipped off the Oregon Department of Human Services.

Despite repeated attempts, The Oregonian was unable to reach Tonya for this story. State records show that the children became wards of the state.

Tabitha remembers her mother screaming and crying; she remembers holding a younger brother and bawling. She says a caseworker tore the little boy out of her arms. "It was traumatic," she recalls. "I had been Mom to him since he was born."

\* It's a spring afternoon near the end of her senior year, and Tabitha pulls out a large keepsake box from deep under a chair in her bedroom. Her brown hair is pinned up in a ponytail, and she's wearing a trendy T-shirt and jeans. She hasn't opened the box, which she made with her mom and brother, for more than two years. She hasn't shared it with Donald, 36, and Lorrie, 33, since middle school.

"I look at the box from time to time," she says, carefully dusting off the purple cover with "Tabitha" scrawled across it in large black letters. "But I never really open it. It puts me in a sad mood."

She pops open the cover, plunges her hand inside and fishes out a mound of letters, Snoopy stickers, two pendants made by her mom, a tattered doll, a giant Valentine's Day card, letters with colorful covers, postcards, dried flowers. She gazes on a Polaroid of her mom surrounded by all her children.

It has been nine years since DHS swooped in. Sitting at her foster parents' kitchen table, she remembers how the Davises took in her and her brother Timothy after stays in half a dozen other foster homes. Those years had been rough. Each time she switched foster families, she switched schools. She didn't have friends and missed her siblings, three adopted by a couple who left Oregon.

The letters from her mother are filled with "I love you's," addressed to "the most beautiful girl in the world."

May 1997: "I think of you two, everyday. Remember, things are going to be better. It's going to be just 'me,' 'you two' and your brothers and sisters. Just the 'six' of us, this time. We'll all be safe and happy. Does that sound good? I think it does. Lots of hugs 'n' kisses, mom."

Until then, though, the Davises would be her family. Lorrie and Donald, then in their 20s, remember Tabitha, who was at the end of third grade, as a lonely child. She wouldn't play outside and insisted on being in charge: She would call her caseworker, cook dinner, try to arrange transportation and scold her brother. The couple wondered whether Tabitha would be able to overcome the confusion and uncertainty that most children in foster care struggle with.

In time, she made friends. Her foster parents both had jobs with the Salvation Army, and she went to Salvation Army summer camps. Responsible and mature, if a little reserved, she did well in school. "A dream kid," her foster parents recall.

The couple couldn't adopt her, though, because her mother had not relinquished parental rights and Tabitha continued visiting her. The state's goal was to eventually reunite Tabitha with her mom. The visits, followed by therapy sessions, were difficult. Tabitha would be tense before, a "wreck" after, and spend days recovering, Lorrie recalls.

Sometimes the visits turned sporadic or stopped, such as when Tonya had two more children or relapsed and went to jail or rehab. In the past decade, she has been convicted of multiple felonies, including possession of a controlled

substance, drug delivery, theft, forgery and identity theft.

The keepsake box reveals Tabitha's heartaches. Her mom went to prison during her sophomore year at Reynolds High School, sending Tabitha into another spiral of depression. Her grades plummeted. She stopped talking to friends. "Mom, I am very hurt and upset, just becuz I have always wanted the best for you & becuz we were finally building a relationship again," reads a letter never sent. "And I always wonder, WHY? More and more I don't understand it all."

Lorrie and Donald --which is what Tabitha calls them --deeply felt Tabitha's hurt. Other foster parents urged them to cut off Tabitha's visits with Tonya.

But the couple felt she needed the contact with her mom to continue growing up. They encouraged her whenever they could. They told her how glad they were she was part of their home, and that she was not to blame for her mom. The family sat down to dinner every night, starting with a prayer. Tabitha volunteered at Gresham's Salvation Army church and played on the school volleyball team. She spent time with her numerous friends. She began to feel comfortable.

\* Earlier this year, Tonya was out of prison, and mother and daughter would often talk on the phone. Tabitha looked forward to her mother attending her high school graduation. She wanted her to be proud that she was doing great at school and holding down two jobs, one at a bank and the second as a manager at Dairy Queen. Tonya promised to be a better mom.

Then the letter came from the bank.

The day after she realized her mother had tried to steal her identity, Tabitha went with Donald to the Troutdale Police Department and filed a report. When they returned home, Tabitha cried for a long time.

She called her mother and confronted her. "She denied it up and down," Tabitha recalls. "She said she would never do that to her daughter. She lied about it over and over, when it was clear and obvious that it was her."

Later that day, Tabitha joined friends at a Reynolds High basketball game. As she watched the game, her mother sent her 15 text messages on her cell phone. "I didn't do it," she remembers them saying. And, "well, what if I did do it, it's really not a big deal."

"I knew it was her," she says, "and I so badly wanted her to tell me that she did it. To take responsibility for it. But she never came clean about it."

They called each other several times in the next few days --Tonya persisting in her denial, Tabitha waiting for an acknowledgement. Mother asked to see daughter, who refused her.

If her mother could admit to what she did, they could then go on with life. But the admission never came, not to mention an apology. It didn't matter that police eventually would close the case because the computer that was used couldn't be tracked down and no victim lost money.

"I felt so betrayed, I lost all hope," Tabitha recalls. "The identity theft broke my heart. I thought, why does my mother keep doing it? She's let me down so many times."

\* That reality began to take hold. As her mom missed Tabitha's visits to colleges and her volleyball games, Tabitha stowed the hurt.

Lorrie and Donald grew anxious. They feared another depression in her last high school semester. Tabitha had worked so hard to overcome the challenges of being a foster child. She was applying for college scholarships, and they were afraid her grades would fall. "I was just thinking, 'This is her senior year, it's going to be her senior prom, she's supposed to have fun,' " Donald recalls. And he didn't want the identity theft to cap her senior year.

Tabitha, however, was evolving.

"I realized I really needed to focus on school and on my future," she recalls. "I had so many decisions on my mind. And it dawned on me, I can't be trying to go through college, trying to be successful, and dealing with my mom's letdowns at the same time. I'm an adult now, and she has to know that she can't push me around anymore. This is a time when I need to focus on me."

Tabitha explained that to her mother one April day.

"I told her she pretty much couldn't be a part of my life," Tabitha says. "She's hurt me enough, and I've forgiven her enough. I told her, I'm making life decisions now that will affect the rest of my life, that will affect the kind of person I become. And if she can't be a positive part of that, then I can't have her."

She finished the year with a 4.0 grade-point average. Teachers and counselors gushed praise. She was named a Ford Family Foundation Scholar and would have 90 percent of her unmet college financial needs covered for four years. At a Reynolds High awards ceremony, she received an \$8,000 Kreuger Scholarship. Unlike most children in foster care, Tabitha would not only graduate from high school, but would also go on to a four-year college.

In May, Tabitha met with her caseworkers to plan her release this month from foster care. She will leave behind "foster child," a reminder of her past. Casey Family Programs, a private foster-care foundation that has supervised her, will continue to support her through college.

Tabitha will start classes at George Fox University today.

She says she is no longer upset with fate. "I think it's something I've made peace with. I had the motivation to be successful because of where I came from. I look at my mom's lifestyle, and know that I don't want to go down that path. I want to set an example for my siblings."

She knows that her foster parents, who consider her to be their daughter, will always play a big role in her adult life.

As graduation approached, Tabitha avoided her mom. She had told Tonya earlier when graduation was, but she never followed up with an official invitation.

On June 8, Tabitha stepped onto the podium to receive her Reynolds High School diploma. Her aunt, Tonya's sister, Carmen Mertes, watched in the crowd, as did her grandmother --Tonya's mom. Her brother Timothy was there. And, of course, the Davises. Her biological father, whom she had recently met after a long absence, also attended.

Tonya didn't. And she wasn't invited to the graduation party at the Davises' home.

"It killed me that my mom didn't see me graduate," Tabitha says. "It's hard to think my mom doesn't know what I've become."

Tabitha says she loves her mom and always will. "I don't want to completely shut her out of my mind. I don't hate her, and I'll never stop encouraging her.

"Maybe one day, when I get stronger, and she gets her act together, we can have a relationship."

\* Early Friday morning, Tabitha strode down the narrow hallway of Hobson Hall, her new dorm at George Fox University, carrying a large box filled with clothes and toiletries. She stepped through the open door of Room 116, put the box down and scanned the empty walls. Lorrie and Donald deposited bags, a minifridge, a blue comforter, pillows and crates with photo frames, until the small patch of floor was covered.

"Which side do I want?" asked Tabitha, gazing at the two identical halves of the room, each tightly furnished with a desk, shelf, pull-out bed, chest of drawers and armoire. Her roommate hadn't arrived yet, so she had dibs.

She spun around the room, weighing the possibilities, then pointed to the right.

"I'll take this side," she declared. "Yes, this is it."

Gosia Wozniacka: 503-294-5936; gosiawozniacka@news.oregonian.com

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