

Mooseheart Reflections: Two Stories of Departing Students

What follows are excerpts of remarks from two Class of 2009 Mooseheart graduates offered as part of Executive Director Scott Hart's report to the International Convention in Chicago May 24. We think these recollections from our new grads offer compelling affirmation of why our support of Mooseheart is so important, and hope you do too.

Heather Hensley: John Long once said: "They say it takes a fool to conquer the impossible, but maybe he is the only one who tries." I don't know about you, but I feel that just by being able to stand up here, I have conquered the impossible. I have conquered my past, come to terms with who I am today and feel a great sense of excitement about my future because of you.

When I was little I lived with my mother, who was not only clinically bipolar, but also schizophrenic. My earliest memory of her is having a crowd of people crammed into our little trailer, abusing alcohol and drugs. Her decisions to use marijuana, heroin and methamphetamines--and to allow them to become the number one priority in her life--left me pushed aside to defend for myself, as no little girl should ever have to. In my short lifetime I have witnessed things that would make most people cringe. I went to school when I felt like it. I ate whenever I could find food, and I looked forward to the 15th of every month, because that was when my mom got her food stamps and I knew that she couldn't waste those on drugs like she did any other cash she came by.

But by the fifth grade, when I arrived at school in the same outfit I'd worn for three days in a row, and hadn't eaten a solid meal in about a week, I finally broke. I walked into the nurse's office, sat down and cried. After I was fed, Social Services was called and I was sent to a distant relative in Georgia. I was only there for about 8 months when my mother, who was not legally allowed to have custody of me, came and got me.

Apparently the relative had signed guardianship back over to her, because they didn't want me any more.

So we traveled back to Arkansas, and lived with my mother's new husband for a while. One day when I came home from school I found all of my mother's possessions gone, and I knew she had left again. I thought I could depend on my mother as a child should be able to, but I was dead wrong.

At the age of 14 she told me that she didn't want me living with her anymore. Even though I did all that I could, I ended up moving in with a friend, staying as long as I could and then moving on to another friend.

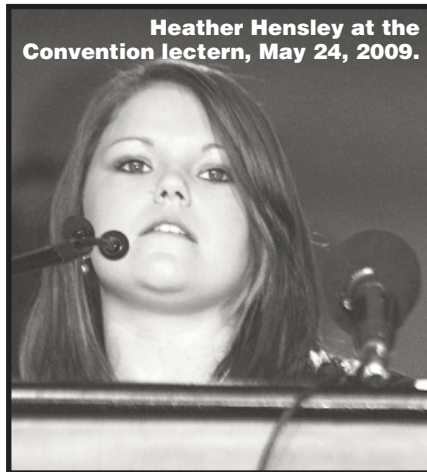
One night I was invited to have dinner with a really good friend of mine, and it was through her family that I learned about the Moose and Mooseheart. I decided that if I was ever going to amount to anything, I would have to get a high school diploma and go to college. It was my hope that Mooseheart would give me that chance.

After meeting the administrator of my sponsoring Lodge, and listening to him talk about how good my life could be, I was hooked. I wanted this place. I *needed* this place. I moved out of my friend's house and stayed with a Chapter

'09 Grads Heather Hensley, Marco Namowicz tell Convention their stories --and of their boundless gratitude to Moose members

member until it was time to drive north.

When I arrived at my new home, I would never have



dreamed that the 8 other girls sitting at the dining room table, waiting to welcome me, were about to become the closest friends and sisters that I could possibly imagine. Although it was hard, I loved the fact that someone was just THERE.

Senior year I became yearbook editor, a National honor society member, a part of Teens Accepting Christ member, a student tutor, and the Student Activities Council

President. I also finished up my Health Occupations vocational course work and completed my clinical rounds at Delnor Community Hospital in Geneva, Illinois. I had the privilege of being involved in the Youth Awareness Program. I traveled to Hampton, VA and spent four days there convening with 50 other students who were also in the program. Mooseheart opened so many doors for me, and helped me realize my true potential.

I want you all to know that each and every one of you, with every gift you send to Mooseheart or Moosehaven, with every meeting you have at your lodge and chapter, with every card you send your Sponsored or Sunshine child, with every visit you make to

Mooseheart to let the children know you care, you are a piece of the solution. You are bringing a sense of family to kids who have never had that before. You are giving a birthday gift to kids who grew up not expecting to receive little if at all, and you are making a difference in young peoples lives.

This fall I will be attending Aurora University and hope to transfer down to Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in a few years to complete my Bachelors in Radiology. I have decided that I want to help people, and health care turns out to be a good choice for me. I will be receiving a generous \$24,000 scholarship from the Arkansas Moose Association. I am forever grateful for you, my Moose family, my Mooseheart Home and the opportunity I now have to attend the college of my choice.

I want to thank each of you here today, and those who could not make it, for believing in me, providing me a home and giving me a future to be proud of. Without you as a piece of the solution in my life, I would be lost, without hope and anyone to guide me in life. You have changed my life! Thank you!

"You are bringing a sense of family to kids who have never had that before."

-Heather Hensley

Marco Namowicz: It is an honor to be here tonight speaking to you, sharing my life, a life that you have all been a part of. You are givers of hope, a piece of the solution to the broken lives that misfortune preys upon.

As a citizen of Mooseheart for 12 years, I have been fortunate to grow up in a stable environment full of opportunities. My father left before I was born in March 1991. To make things worse, later that year in December, my grandmother passed away. All this time my mother and I were living with her parents in Chicago, and after my grandfather died somewhere around 1997, the burdens of death, financial struggle, and environmental instability, led to an old door of the past being knocked upon.

It was the door to the city where my mother grew up, the door of Mooseheart. The beautiful campus had been my mother's home for eight years. My mother, Rose Namowicz, never intended for me to come to Mooseheart, but in the face of struggle and uncertainty, I would find myself traveling on a road very similar to hers, approaching the crossroads of life, and experiencing the feelings that connect us all.

On May 1st of 1997 at the age of six, I entered the gates of Mooseheart, not fully understanding the conditions of where and why I was coming to live here. I remember crying on the train ride, as my mother tried to explain to me that I would be in a wonderful place, surrounded by other children my age. In time I grew to understand how everything fit together, like a 5,000-piece puzzle. I fit in, having friends and adults, teaching me lessons in life.

It wasn't until 4th grade that I made the decision to pick up the clarinet. I had joined band because it had interested me, and I thought it would be fun. Soon I found comfort in playing the clarinet, and Mr. (Steve) Schmidt, the band director, nurtured my musical curiosity, encouraging and teaching me.

Sophomore year I didn't go back out for football, for I feared of breaking a finger or hand! Music meant more than anything, and I didn't want to injure myself, leaving me unable to play. So I continued with track. Mr. Schmidt at this time informed me about Interlochen (Academy, in Michigan, one of the USA's top music preparatory schools).

I was told this was where the best went, and that I had the slimmest chance in the world to make it. I worked all fall and winter that year on my audition piece. In February 2007 we recorded in the House of God our music and sent in the CDs. All I could do was wait. Spring break approached and I stayed on campus. I spent most of the break in Maryland/Delaware home, due to the fact that my home closed. When I walked back into Antoinette Marinello on March 31, it wasn't any ordinary day. It was my 16th birthday.

As I glanced around the house my eyes fell upon a packaged envelope from Interlochen. I slowly opened the envelope, every second took a lifetime and when I saw the word "Congratulations," I jumped and yelled like a child, splashing in the water on a bright summer day. I closed my eyes and thanked God over and over.

Interlochen was a different, out-of-this-world experience. It was the longest time I had ever been away from Mooseheart, and it taught me a lot about being independent. For six weeks I was alone, making decisions for myself. I was thrown into a completely new environment. Interlochen was far away from the hectic and busy life that we are used to. I was far from being the best, but it didn't matter to me. I

had made it, and I was learning and improving so much. The experience touched every part of my soul, rejuvenating me and it was that first summer at Interlochen that I knew without a doubt I wanted to be a professional musician.

Since the beginning of high school and the summer at Interlochen, I've participated in the Fox Valley Youth Symphony Orchestra, played at the Fox Valley Music Festival, and this year I was 1st chair in the orchestra. I was also in the Illinois IMEA District Festival Honor Band.

This year I've been given the rare opportunity to attend Batavia High School half day. I played 1st chair in their top band, and was a winner in their concerto competition. I've been able to perform at University of Illinois and Illinois State University. Aside from playing in the band at Batavia, I've taken courses in Music Theory, AP Music Theory, Music History and Applied Music, in which I've given four recitals. Outside of music, I've been an altar server in Catholic Mass at the House of God for eight years, volunteered my time at a local retirement

home, and helped decorate the campus for Homecoming in 2007 and 2008. I attended Interlochen for the second summer in 2008, and progressed even further.

Even though my stay at Mooseheart has come to a close, I will be here in the city, where the next chapter of my life will bring new challenges and rewards. I'm happy to announce that I am going back to Interlochen this summer for the last possible time. It has been another home for me, and I'm excited to return. I will be attending DePaul University here in Chicago, majoring in Clarinet Performance. DePaul awarded me a total of \$33,000 in scholarships and grants. This combined with my \$36,000 over four-year scholarship, covers the cost of tuition and room and board, which is approximately \$40,000. I plan to also major in Music Education, and after my undergraduate studies, I will go to a conservatory for graduate work. I'm striving to play in a major symphony orchestra and teach music on a university level.

I would not have known the successes that I've had, if it were not for all of you. Coming to Mooseheart has been a blessing in itself and I have learned so much throughout my time there.

What you give and do is amazing. You have given me a bright and promising future. Through you I have learned independence, perseverance, and have found friends and support from around the world. You have let me chase my dreams, encouraging me and providing the means to progress in life. I truly thank you for all you have done for me and all the children at Mooseheart. May God bless you with good health and watch over you always. I am proud and honored to call you family. ■



Marco Namowicz plays a clarinet concerto for the Convention audience, May 24, 2009