Stephanie Lutz: From Chaos, With Honors
Mike Wilson, The Oregonian, June 2, 2009

Stephanie Lutz doesn't have time to answer questions.

The David Douglas High School senior, a four-year varsity athlete in basketball and tennis and a three-year varsity volleyball player, has a lot to do tonight before her graduation ceremony. She needs to put the finishing touches on her speech, figure out what to wear and make sure she has everything for her senior all-night party.

She doesn't want to answer questions because she's busy, but also because of this: What if people don't accept her after they get the answers?

She doesn't want pity. She's scared of being teased.

This week, thousands of students in the Portland area will cross a stage and receive a diploma, each with a story of success. But perhaps none is more heartbreaking than Lutz's.

"A lot of people thought she went home to a mom and dad and a perfect little house," says her school counselor, Denise Riesenman. "They thought she grew up on the west side (of Portland) and went to summer camp and played tennis in the evenings. But it was total chaos all the time."

Students participating in David Douglas' graduation ceremony tonight were allotted six tickets each. Lutz gave hers to her grandma, two aunts, her older sister and her mom.
She should have given one to her dad, Terry Lutz, but he is serving a 40-year prison sentence in Ontario and has not seen his daughter in 12 years. She should have given one to her brother, T.J., but he has been dead for 10 years, having killed himself when Stephanie was 8.

It's surprising that Valerie Lutz, Stephanie's mom, is even able to attend. In Stephanie's freshman year, her mom was taken away in handcuffs, arrested for selling and using drugs.

"I was walking home from my bus stop when I saw blue and red flashing lights from my house," Stephanie wrote this school year in a scholarship essay. "Knowing that it was a police car, I raced to see what was going on. As I reached my driveway I saw an officer direct my ragged mother into his car. I began to sob and yell in hysteria. A woman that I had never seen before then approached me. She informed me that she was from DHS and that I would need to pack my belongings and go with her. My worse fear had finally become a reality. ... I was put into foster care."

Lutz had done everything she could to get her mom to stop using. She flushed pills and threw away needles. One time, she found her mom passed out in the bathroom, a needle in her arm. When Lutz began to fear the drug dealers parading to her house, she got involved in virtually every extracurricular activity she could.

She played volleyball, basketball and tennis for four years, competing in the state tennis tournament each season. She's the student body president. She carries a perfect 4.0 GPA -- she will graduate as one of the school's valedictorians tonight, first in a class of 592 students -- and is active in National Honor Society.

"Sports were kind of a way out," Lutz says. "When you're there, you don't think about everything that's going on (at home)."

And it is because of all her involvement and stellar grades that no one ever knew Lutz didn't have a home.

After her mom was arrested, Lutz moved in with her aunt, Vickie Wallace, Valerie Lutz's sister.

Through the two years Lutz lived with Wallace, only two people outside of her family knew about her situation: Riesenman, her counselor, and her best friend, Johanna Wilson.

Wilson and Lutz had met in third grade during elementary school basketball. They wore matching outfits and bonded over a shared love of animals. They captured stray cats around their homes, feeding them and nursing them back to health.
"... My true calling is animals. ... The Humane Society is like an oasis to me. Being in an animal's presence calms me and makes me feel like nothing else matters at the moment. All my problems disappear the very second I set foot inside a cage."

When Wallace decided to move to Seattle and Lutz found herself without a home again, Wilson suggested Lutz move in with her.

Wilson's mom, Tina Gefre, had always thought Lutz belonged with her and Johanna anyway. Lutz moved in -- once she got the OK for her cocker spaniel, Spunky, to join the family, too -- and slowly, people started to figure out what her home life was like.

In October, Lutz won a $10,000 scholarship from Stand for Children, a national organization dedicated to ensuring excellent public education for everyone. As part of the scholarship, Lutz would be filmed in a short video where she explained how she "beat the odds."

For a moment, she considered not doing the video.

"I didn't want pity," Lutz says.

But she agreed, and when the video went up on YouTube, teachers and classmates were shocked to find out the star of their school was, by the legal definition, homeless.

"How could somebody be so well-adjusted with everything that's happened?" says her science teacher, Dave Gilbert.

"Since I never got bad grades, I was never questioned about stuff at home," Lutz says.

But once they found out her secret, teachers rushed to help her.

Over the summer, Lutz decided she wanted to attend Tufts University, a small liberal arts school in Boston with a top-notch veterinary school.

"I've always been an animal person," says Lutz, who wants to be a vet. "You can talk to them and tell them anything. You can yell at them but they'll always come back."

She says they provide unconditional love, something Lutz has not always found.

Riesenman thought Lutz should check out the campus before she committed to moving 3,100 miles away. She figured the David Douglas staff would be eager to help Lutz now that her story was public, and put out a letter asking for donations to buy Lutz a plane ticket. Riesenman estimated Lutz would need about $400. In less than two days, she collected more than $1,000.

Even after being accepted to Tufts and being awarded a financial aid package that will cover her entire cost of school -- totaling more than $53,000 -- Lutz had to get clearance from the Oregon Department of Human Services to leave the state for college.
Finally, the girl who was homeless would have her pick of places to go.

Lutz says she's now willing to talk about her home life, instead of dodging questions like she did for years.

"My life hasn't been ruined," she says. "I don't view it like that."

She talks to her dad on the phone periodically, and is slowly trying to rebuild a relationship with her mom, who's out of jail and lives in Portland. And although Lutz is quick to duck praise for overcoming everything she has, her school is infinitely proud.

"I've been a counselor for 27 years," Riesenman says. "I've had kids who have conquered some horrific things, but to excel like she does, with little to no help ..."

"I'm in awe of her."

**Demonstrate Understanding**

1. If you were trying to explain this article to a friend, what would you tell them? Include main ideas and supporting details.
**Demonstrate Understanding**
2. Use the chart below to identify three people who helped Stephanie along the way and describe how they helped.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People who helped Stephanie</th>
<th>Example of how they helped</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Develop an Interpretation**
3. Why do you think Stephanie chose not to tell anyone about her home life? Use evidence from the article to support your answer.
Develop an Interpretation
4. Based on the information in this article, what do you think might happen in the future?

Analyze Text
5. What is the author's purpose for writing this article? Use details from the article to support your answer.
Analyze Text
6. The author uses many direct quotes from the people involved in this story. Write out one of these quotes and explain how it helps you (as a reader) understand the article more fully.