

2014 Helping Children Soar Benefit

Remarks of Lena Borsellino

LENA

Good evening and thank you for asking me to join you all tonight. I've never spoken in front of so many people and I'm so excited to be here. Thank you, Jon, for standing by my side tonight and so many times before today.

To tell you my story, I want to start at the beginning. People ask me about my biological mother and my grandmother, who I lived with in DC when I was younger. I don't remember much about them except little bits and pieces. I do know they were both drug addicts.

But I do remember my sister and brother.

My sister and brother were my world. When I was just two, my sister took care of us. She gave us baths and basically did all the things that a mother should do for her child – even though she was only seven. I remember being hungry and she would make hot dogs for us. And when we had bake beans, that was a good day.

It didn't last, though. I'm not sure exactly what happened but, I went into foster care when I was about five.

Eventually, my brother and sister and I were all split up and lived in different homes in DC. I really, really wanted to be with them so I started to make problems. I used to always say, I want my sister I want my sister, I want Terri, I want Terri. I remember with one foster family, I would run away from the bus stop every time school got let out. Eventually, I got moved again to another home. I bounced from place to place.

Believe me – things were rough. I felt like I didn't have any control over where I was going to live or who would take care of me. I felt like I had to fend for myself.

Then, when I was 10, I met Jon from Children's Law Center. I'd had so many different foster parents, social workers and therapists. I remember when I first met Jon, I thought, I'm not going to like him. But then I found out that Jon is amazing. He really cared. I could call him with all of my problems and he would listen.

Most importantly, Jon was the one who helped find my mom and made sure I could be with my brother and sister. So, thank you Jon for everything you've done for me and I mean that from the bottom of my heart.

I want to tell you all how I met my Mom, Tara. And by that I mean, the Mom who adopted me, but I don't like to say adoptive mom because she's the only Mom I know.

When I was 13, my brother had ended up moving to Virginia in a foster home with Tara. At the time, I had moved in with a foster family in Maryland, but Jon made sure I visited my brother every weekend.

At first I was really skeptical of Tara. I didn't want my brother to get his hopes up. He wasn't in as many foster homes as me and my sister. He was basically in an institution for years and the first place he moved to when he got out was with Tara. I didn't want him to think he was going to be there forever, because most of the time it didn't work like that.

But then, once Tara and I got to know each other, we warmed up to each other. Tara also was really smart. She had these two dogs, one of them used to follow me around everywhere and I really loved them. So, I think Tara noticed and instead of talking to me alone, she always tried to talk to me when I was playing with the dogs.

She figured out how to connect with me. And then she invited me to live with her and my brother.

Well, I'm not sure all that was involved but I know Jon had to move mountains so I could live with Tara. I had to move from Maryland to Virginia, change social workers, schools, foster care agencies – everything. I remember it was supposed to take a long time but somehow it happened in a few weeks. And good thing, too, because once the decision was made I had already packed my bags and I was ready to go.

Once I moved in with Tara, there were some rough patches but we all got through them – often, with a little counseling from Jon.

I remember one time it was really late, it was like 12 or 1, and I called Jon when me and my mom were butting heads. I had walked out and I was really upset and I called Jon because I didn't know what to say and what to do. And Jon said, go home, go to your room, and I'll call your mom. Well, I went home and went to school the next day and I'm not exaggerating, Jon was there the very next day at my school. And we all worked it out.

Finally, after a few months of living with Tara, it didn't feel like a foster home anymore, it just felt like I had been there forever. She felt like my mom.

Eventually, when I was 17 and my brother was 19, my mom adopted us both. It was liberating – my whole life, I felt like I wasn't a part of anything, I was just part of this big system – and then all of a sudden, I was a Borsellino. And that's my mom right there!

And my sister also came to live with us. All three of us now, we are family.

The other great news is that even though I have lived in so many different places and went to so many different schools – I am a high school graduate. I graduated last year with a high school diploma and a cosmetology license. It was very hard, but I did it. And, it was one of the best days of my life.

So, my story tonight has a happy ending though it hasn't really ended yet. Today, I'm working two jobs and own my own business to save for my future. My dream is to become a social worker and help kids like me. When I look back, it's hard to imagine getting here from where I started.

I am thankful to so many people for helping me throughout my journey, including my Mom Tara, my brother and sister, my boyfriend Andre, and so many others. But I especially want to thank Jon and Children's Law Center for being with me every step of the way.

Thank you all again for listening to my story tonight.