

## **“This is Just the Beginning!”**

**Dana Ebiasah**



Today Dana Ebiasah is certified by the DC Department of Behavioral Health as a Peer Specialist, working to help her clients and herself to understand their diagnoses of mental illness and get the services and support they need. Obtaining her GED was a milestone on the now-“positive and hopeful path” of her life.

### *Early Life*

Dana was born in 1984, the oldest of six daughters. Due to her mother’s substance abuse problems, Dana was placed in foster homes early in her life, and was in and out of different homes and schools for most of her childhood. Her father came around only rarely, to bring her ice cream. She describes herself as a “sweet, shy, and quiet” child. While in middle school in Maryland, Dana says: “everything was cool”. However, she eventually started smoking marijuana, breaking curfew, and generally taking advantage of her kind foster mother. By the time she was 14 she had stopped going to school and found herself pregnant. All of this led her to move to another foster home and then to Saint Ann’s Infant and Maternity Home, where the sisters lovingly raised her and her baby for one year.

### *Things Got Tougher*

At the age of 16 Dana had her first mental breakdown. Yet – despite her inability to manage her daily life and her depression – she says that she did not take mental illness seriously. So following a two-week hospitalization, she stopped taking her medication and stopped going to therapy. Looking back, Dana describes these as “dumb decisions” which led her to spend several years on the street, running away from all the services that were offered, and getting into trouble with the law. Though she began a GED course, she got into a fight with a fellow student and was expelled. She later tried another GED course, but it did not hold her interest.

By the time she was 20, Dana reconnected with the father of her daughter, and got pregnant again. This caused discord between Dana and the woman she was involved with at the time, which left Dana devastated and depressed and led to a second mental breakdown. During this period she continued getting into trouble with the law and later broke probation. It was around this time that she called DC Child Protective Services to take her kids.

Though Dana had a number of jobs, she often stole from her employers and got herself into a couple of serious fights with her friends. But it was while she was in police custody awaiting trial for one such incident that she decided that she wasn't "going to mess up again."

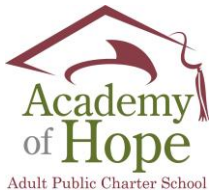
### *Moving toward her GED*

Fortunately her friend dropped the charges against her, so Dana was able to go back to work. But this time she became a hardworking, energetic, loyal employee – first at McDonald's, then at Taco Bell. She gained responsibility, got her driver's license, and became a store manager. Dana remained loyal to her employer, did not steal, dropped her old friends, and stayed off the street. However, although other employers wanted to hire her, they did not due to her record.

When Dana was 26, she says that she looked around at the people she saw on the streets of downtown DC and decided that she wanted to be like them. She began "visualizing becoming something different" and realized this meant that she had to go back to school. After researching GED programs she found the Academy of Hope. She says, "I knew I would get my GED when I walked through the door." Dana was immediately struck by the bright atmosphere and by the instructors, whom she describes as "friendly, bubbly, cool, and funny", and worthy of her respect. She began taking notes and paying attention in class. And the fact that all the other students were focused on obtaining their GED helped her to "stay focused".

However, while preparing for her GED, Dana became depressed after a breakup with her partner and was finally diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Though she had stopped coming to school, she says that Academy of Hope staff kept calling and encouraging her, and eventually got her re-engaged in her studies. She also received strong support from AoH during a custody battle she had for her older daughter. On the academic side, through her class on "Infinite Possibilities", Dana learned to visualize her goals, increase her self-esteem, and become empowered. She says this class "impacted transformation in my life: how to speak positive things to the universe and how to support them with hard work.

In November 2013 AoH staff encouraged Dana to take the GED test and covered the cost. Though she didn't feel ready and was "stressed out", she says that she read each question carefully, feeling that she "owed it to Academy of Hope to do well". When she called Ward 8 to let them know that she had passed, she remembers hearing them all applauding her achievement. Dana recalls the support AoH gave her "every step of the way. They were there for anything, they provided the support that others did not. I really appreciate that and I'll never forget it."



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### *Moving Forward*

Before graduation in June 2014, Dana felt stable enough to reach out to mental health services and began attending the DC Recovery Program. Today she is working there as a Peer Specialist. She has completed training and testing and is now certified by the Department of Behavioral Health. Dana says she gets “tons of support” there in her ongoing efforts to understand her diagnosis and set boundaries. She wants “to help others and provide hope to those who have no hope, those who have given up.” From her own experience, she knows that “there is a possibility and hope to change.”

*We would like to thank Jan Leno for volunteering her time and skills toward putting these stories together.*

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