



Honor Student on Promising Path Despite Bumpy Beginnings

By **ROB KUZNIA, NOOZHAWK STAFF WRITER** | Posted on 05/28/2008

Reprint with permission of Noozhawk <http://www.noozhawk.com/>



Bishop High senior Stacie Raichelle, a former foster child who couldn't read until after fourth grade, excels in AP courses and will graduate with a 3.8 GPA.



Stacie Raichelle, a senior at Bishop Garcia Diego High School, seen with her adoptive parents, Allen Raichelle and Kathy Rayburn, is the Goleta Valley Chamber of Commerce's Student of the Year. (Rob Kuznia / Noozhawk photo)

It's one thing for a student to graduate high school with a 3.8 GPA after taking tough classes. It's quite another when the student is a former foster child who, in the summer after fourth grade, taught herself to read.

That's the story of Stacie Raichelle, who on June 7 will graduate with those achievements and more from [Bishop Garcia Diego High School](#).

Earlier this month, at the annual Goleta's Finest awards, the [Goleta Valley Chamber of Commerce](#) declared Stacie the Student of the Year.

Stacie and her older sister, Gena, were dealt a bad hand at birth. Their Sacramento-area parents were addicted to methamphetamines and alcohol, and at times the family was homeless. Eventually, the girls were placed in the foster-care system, where they frequently moved from home to home.

Because of the abominable neglect and constant upheaval, Stacie rarely attended school from kindergarten through third grade. In fact, sometime around Stacie's first-grade year, she and her sister missed an entire year of school.

The instability came to an end eight years ago, when the girls, at ages 9 and 10, were adopted by Santa Barbara couple Allen Raichelle and Kathy Rayburn.

Now, Stacie, much like her older sister " who last year was a finalist for the chamber's Teen of the Year award " is a high academic achiever. Her impressive grades were earned in difficult classes, including AP government and physics.

Her extracurricular involvement includes being the president of the [Goleta 4-H Club](#), a member of her school's Math Honor Society, a volunteer who helps disabled people ride horses at the [Hearts Adaptive Riding Center](#), a member of her school's Jewish Culture Club and a participant of four different school sports teams.

But the journey to better days hasn't been bump-free. When Stacie first got to Santa Barbara, she had a lot of catching up to do. Initially, she was too embarrassed to let on.

Stacie started attending [El Camino Elementary School](#) in Goleta as a fourth-grader, and her teacher, Heather Cash, quickly assigned her a reading schedule that was years behind her peers. "They were reading chapter books, and I was reading little baby books," Stacie said.

To this day, she feels deeply indebted to Cash. "She was like my lifesaver," Stacie said.

That year, everyone in the class was allowed to choose a book for a reading assignment. Stacie chose a [Pippi Longstocking](#) book, because she liked the cover. She took the book home and pretended to read it. When quizzed on it by her parents, Stacie replied with a blank stare.

“She hadn’t read anything yet,” said Rayburn, sitting with Stacie and Allen in the living room of the family’s house in Goleta. “She’d be sitting on her bed with the book open. I think she was just daydreaming.”

After deciphering the problem, Stacie’s parents began reading to her every night. When they finished a book, they would reward her with a dinner at [Sizzler Restaurant](#).

In the summer after fourth grade, Stacie became a regular at the [Goleta Public Library](#)’s summer reading program. (Gena was older and hadn’t fallen as far behind.)

Determined to catch up, Stacie checked out books with audio recordings and followed along with fervor. At first, it was an odd sight, seeing an incoming fifth-grader in headphones reading picture books such as *Curious George*.

In a matter of weeks, Stacie absorbed the lessons younger kids typically learn in years. By the end of the summer, she was reading chapter books such as those in the *The Baby-Sitters Club* series. By seventh grade, she was earning straight As at [La Colina Junior High School](#).

Still, some awkward problems persisted. For example, from the beginning, Stacie had scored too high on aptitude tests to qualify for receiving special-education assistance. As a result, the family paid for tutoring. Also, although Stacie could easily comprehend the meaning of the grade-level text she was assigned, she still had trouble reading out loud. For this reason, administrators at La Colina were reluctant to let her take honors courses. “They thought I was stupid,” Stacie said.

Rayburn, who works as a software engineer, decided to intervene. “I kind of got obnoxious, and she ended up in honors,” she said.

Once again, Stacie earned all As.

Despite her difficult upbringing, Stacie doesn’t shy away from talking about it. In fact, she hopes doing so will help chip away at the stigma that tends to bedevil many foster children, especially the older ones who, unlike Stacie and her sister, often get overlooked by prospective adopters.

Stacie doesn't remember much about her biological parents; she was only 4 when her social worker took her and Gena away the first time. They were put back a couple of times, but taken away for good when Stacie was 7. She does remember wild parties, with drinking and drugs. "My parents didn't wake up to take me to school, or were hung over," she said. "They were social in a bad way."

At age 17, Stacie is one year away from being legally able to seek out her biological parents, but she doesn't think she's ready for it. "My mom had the choice of sobering up and not doing drugs, and she didn't," she said. "At least at this stage in my life, I'm not ready to talk to them."

For five years, Stacie and her sister lived in a handful of foster homes. Not all were bad, but the constant upheaval made it almost impossible to concentrate on school. Peers taunted them for being foster children. Playground fights ensued.

Before adopting the girls, Raichelle and Rayburn met them in the city of Paradise, north of Sacramento. To this day, Stacie chuckles at the quirky gifts proffered by her future parents: gummy worms and dictionaries.

The girls reported back to their social worker that they liked the couple. Not long after, Stacie and Gena moved to Santa Barbara to feel out the situation further. Several months later, they were officially a family. The parents were in their 40s.

"I feel I did not grow up until the day the girls called me dad," said Raichelle, a senior editor at *Abc-Clio*, a Goleta-based publisher of educational and reference products. "That's it, you're grown up. You have this responsibility that you never had before."

Despite being a spirited student at the Catholic Bishop High, Stacie is devout in her Jewish faith. When Rayburn "who grew up Methodist" converted two years ago, the girls participated in the ceremony as well.

On May 8, the Goleta Chamber gave out the Goleta's Finest awards, including hers, in front of a dinner crowd at the [Bacara Resort & Spa](#). But Stacie was in Europe, participating in the symbolic [March of the Living](#) out of Auschwitz with about 15,000 other Jewish teenagers. Gena accepted it in her stead.

The family chose Bishop High School because they thought Stacie was better suited for a setting that is rigorous yet small. Plus, Bishop, which separated from its governing archdiocese about five years ago, does not require its students to be Catholic. About 20 percent of its students are not.

"Bishop bends over backwards to make people of all faiths feel welcome," Rayburn said.

Stacie said most of her classmates take a healthy interest in her faith, but some have trouble understanding. "So I assure them that it's not weird to be Jewish," she said.

Stacie plans to attend [Santa Barbara City College](#) next year, though she was accepted into [Sonoma State University](#). Eventually, she would like to attend there or [Cal Poly](#), and plans to major in psychology, and eventually become a children's social worker, like the one who helped her.

Her message to children in foster homes or living with adoptive parents is this: "There's nothing to be ashamed of."

Meanwhile, her mother has a message for people who are thinking about adopting children "especially the older ones who tend to get overlooked: "There's hope for these kids, and they need people who will take them."

