



**Unity Care Group, Inc.**  
"Creating Healthier Communities"

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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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# A Foster Care Diary

**San Jose, Calif., (November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002)** - Marquita Whitsett was once what she called "collateral." As a 6-year-old living in Cleveland, Ohio, Whitsett and her newborn sister were left with a drug dealer until their mother could repay him.

Now 19, Whitsett doesn't remember much about it except, "Mom's stomach was big. Then, mom's stomach was small. "Then, I never saw her again."

Like millions of children across the country and more than 100,000 in California, Whitsett was sent to a foster home. Her sister went to another.

Whitsett didn't find her way to Unity Care – an organization in the Bay Area that serves 84 children in group homes and dozens of teenagers in transitional homes – until much later, until it was almost too late. This is the story she tells about her journey to Unity.

Whitsett was 9 and in a foster home in Cleveland, when she got some good news. Her estranged father, now married to a woman with two sons, found her and took her in. Whitsett thought she must be the luckiest girl alive. She was wrong.

Within a few weeks, her 16-year-old stepbrother molested her. Afterwards, he said, "Okay we have to get down on our knees and pray for forgiveness."

To her confusion, the routine continued.

Whitsett couldn't tell anyone. She didn't think her father and stepmother would believe her since they often beat her, sometimes for no reason at all.

There was only one thing that kept her going.

She would cradle herself in the corner of her room, or in the dark, quiet laundry room, or in an isolated spot outdoors and write.

She wrote feverishly.

When she cried, she wrote.

As she watched cartoons, she wrote.

Three years later, Whitsett ran away.

She went to the home of a couple in Hayward, friends of her father, because she remembered how caring the man and woman seemed.

"This was a black family with white [foster] kids," she recalled thinking. "They're trying to give a chance to these kids even though they're not their own. These must be some good, good people."

When Whitsett told them what had happened to her, they agreed to care for her. They sent her to a therapist, trying their best to help her. But she wasn't ready to trust them.

Whitsett expected them to turn on her. Kick her out. Hit her. She thought the dad might start looking at her funny. Or the brother would try something.

Whitsett said she tried killing herself three times. She said she skipped school, drank heavily, sold drugs and earned a reputation for being tough.

"People were afraid of me," she said. "It felt good." Eventually, Whitsett wound up in juvenile detention for 90 days. "Having to deal with rough women, moody, some who were pregnant. It was no Ramada Inn."

Whitsett's probation officer suggested she move to another city, maybe San Jose, to get away from her old life. A few weeks later, a friend told her, "Girl, you don't have to do this. There's so much you can do with your life."

One night, when Whitsett was back with her foster parents in Hayward, she stayed up late, thinking she didn't want to end up behind bars again. Under her dingy, worn pillow, she remembered feeling her gun, cold and hard. She kept it for protection. This has to stop, she recalled thinking. I want to change.

"Sometimes it takes a few times to make it click," she said. Whitsett, then 16, left for San Jose. That's when she found Unity Care, the organization that helped her get her life together, and Alesia, the counselor who helped her trust people again.

On her days off, Alesia would call Whitsett and take her to church or to get her hair and nails done. Whitsett recalled thinking, "Wow, this lady's not beating me up, lying to me or manipulating me. She's just loving me. I like this. I like laughing and having a nice, healthy dialogue."

This year, with Alesia's guidance, Whitsett graduated high school and began taking classes at Evergreen Valley College. She now works part-time as a preschool teacher's aid and wants to pursue careers in teaching and writing. When her friends want to hang out, she said she usually has to tell them she has too much work.

Now, her life "is about getting healthy, taking care of business, studying, drinking Jamba Juice...and being myself," she said.

Whitsett offers the following adage as advice for young people who have been abused: "It's not what happened to you in the past. It's what you do to make a difference today."

#### **ABOUT UNITY CARE GROUP**

Founded in 1992, Unity Care Group, Inc. is a community-based non-profit multi-service youth and family development agency. Founded with the goal of developing educational and social programs to enrich the lives of at-risk youth, our mission is to provide quality youth and family programs for the purpose of creating healthier communities through lifelong partnerships. For more information contact the Development Department at (408) 971-9822 or visit us at [www.unitycare.org](http://www.unitycare.org).

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