

December 14, 2012

Mr. Jon Gutzmann
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Dear SPPH Staff,

From the bottom of my heart, I want to thank you for the opportunities that you provided me and my family to become economically self-sufficient.

In 2009, I left a one year treatment facility in Hennepin County with my, then, six year old daughter, Halle. Because of the St. Paul Public Housing Section 8 Program and New Foundations, I was able to secure independent housing for me and my daughter. Ready and eager to begin a new life, I moved into the Section 8 funded program located at 1171 Westminster Street in St. Paul. I was nervous, scared and uncertain of what the future would bring. All that I was certain of was that I was grateful that there was a program like Section 8 and New Foundations that existed. I had been a homeowner in the past and was not used to using public funding for anything. But because of poor choices that I made after some very abusive events occurred in my life, I now had a criminal background, was in recovery from chemical dependency and was rebuilding my entire social network and professional network. Most importantly, I was rebuilding my relationship with the children that I had been estranged with and building a life with my six year old daughter.

During the process of signing up for Section 8, I met a woman named Kaohnou Yang. As she went through the paperwork process, rules and regulations, she mentioned a program option called the FSS program. As the group of twenty or so of us were busy completing paperwork, I became more and more interested in this opportunity she was talking about. Housing was the primary basic need that was now being covered, but I did not want to live off the “system”. I wanted to work. I just needed a break. I needed somebody to not look at me for what I did, because that is not who I am.

As we all completed our paperwork that day, Kaohnou asked those of us who were interested in signing up for the FSS program to stay back and she would explain the program in details. I was amazed to see everyone in the room leave, except me. As she explained the program, I was becoming more and more hopeful. So, I signed up. Never in a million years did I expect that after 3+ years I would be graduating from the program. I just committed to the wonderful opportunity that was provided to me, once again, by Ramsey County.

During that same period, I was participating in the MFIP program. I had a fantastic worker by the name of Ann Jalonen. Ann saw through me. She saw my potential. She had confidence in me. She provided me with the courage and strength to move forward, and to move forward with zeal. Shortly after that, I met a man named Walter Rhodes. I worked with Walter on different employment options. After a month or two, Walter called me and asked if I would participate in a program called Changing Lives. It was a pilot program that he was starting to help people get hired permanently. Well, I hadn't had much success securing any sort of employment up until then, even though I tried. Apparently ARC didn't want to hire me, nor did a couple of other agencies that I worked at. I liked working at ARC, but they didn't want me. So, I began to participate in the Board of Directors Meetings at Breaking Free, Inc. Being alumni of Breaking Free, I was passionate to serve. So, when Walter asked if I wanted to work at Breaking Free and get paid, I was elated. I asked the Executive Director of Breaking Free, Vednita Carter if I could work as an employee and Ramsey County would pay me, she said, "your fired from the board and you can begin working on Monday." ! It was a win-win.

At that time, Breaking Free had a very, very little budget. They were not in a position to offer me a position so the Changing Lives program opened a door that would otherwise have been shut. After successfully completing the Changing Lives program, Vednita decided that she would make some sort of way for me to stay on. I worked for about a year at a salary of less than \$10 per hour. After a few grants were received, my salary went to \$13 per hour, then after another year, \$15 per hour. Not only was my salary increasing, but my experience was increasing. I was thriving and so was Breaking Free. I was offered a management position and today, I am Vednita Carter's Executive Assistant. I am happy to report that, last Monday, Vednita was at the White House and is now making recommendations for senate policy changes regarding human sex trafficking throughout the entire United States. I get to help Vednita write her speeches, put together presentations and provide advocacy to women/girls who have been victims of human sex trafficking. My life is very rich. My children are happy and my family is healthy. Breaking Free is growing by leaps and bounds. I would like to say that it is partially because they hired me, through the Changing Lives program. And because I graduated from the FSS program in August, I was able to purchase a reliable car.

Given the mission of the FSS Program, "The Section 8 Family Self-Sufficiency Program is a voluntary five-year program for families with Section 8 vouchers. The program helps families become financially independent. The main goal of the program is to help families get good jobs and earn enough money so they do not need public cash assistance. Families get education, job training, and other services.", I can't thank you enough for meeting that goal with me.

I will be forever grateful to Kaohnou Yang, Ann Jalonen, Walter Rhodes and the whole FSS program staff. You have helped shape and form my life.

With highest regards,