



Purcellville graduate overcomes adversity

By Allison Braund
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Despite only six years of formal education, Jessica Murray graduated this month as valedictorian of Loudoun Valley High School.

For this 17-year-old, who will attend The College of William & Mary in the fall on a full scholarship, nothing is too difficult. Her attitude and academic success contributed to her being named the Beat the Odds scholarship winner in May.



Loudoun Valley High School valedictorian Jessica Murray is this year's recipient of the Beat the Odds scholarship. She will attend The College of William & Mary in the fall on a full scholarship.

--Times-Mirror Staff
Photo/Lisa Johnson

The scholarship was awarded by the Loudoun chapter of Beat the Odds, a nationally recognized project that rewards at-risk youth who overcome difficulties such as poverty, abuse, family breakup or substance abuse.

"So many view school as a punishment," Murray said. "But for me, it was something I could never do and something I really enjoyed."

Murray's first year of formal education was fifth grade, due to difficult situations. Before that, she had only read on her own.

"History and science were completely new," she said. "I felt very behind. I didn't even know what the Cold War was."

Although Murray always worked hard, her drive changed in her junior year.

"I looked at how far I had come, and I looked at my situation and realized the best way to get out was through education," she said.

While most valedictorians can boast a slew of extra-curriculars, Murray merely has her grades, since participating in outside activities in high school was not an option due to difficult circumstances. But her scholastic merit turned out to be all she needed.

In February, Murray made another difficult decision and was placed into foster care after speaking with authorities. Her experience so far has been positive.

"I guess if you live your whole life in darkness, when you see the sun, it's a shocker," Murray said. "But, it's a beautiful experience."

The move from dark to light is a theme in Murray's life and in her passion – her art.

Murray has always been passionate about art. She is planning to double major in art and psychology or neuroscience at William & Mary. She is always careful to balance her art and studies, even in her attire. Business casual is paired with eye-catching earrings, swirled silver rings and a delicate henna flower on her wrist.

"I want to continue to do art, but getting a doctorate in psychology or neuroscience is more practical. And with all the places I've lived, all the people with psychological disorders, I know I could relate," Murray said.

"I think she is a complete inspiration," said Monica Uitenbroek, an independent living coordinator at Loudoun County's Department of Family Services. "She is so balanced in the way she approaches life, showing insight beyond her years."

For now, Murray plans to spend her summer interning at Loudoun County Public Schools' Summer in the Arts program and hopes to help others who may be struggling.

"Someone will try and stop you, and make you think you will never rise above this, but there is always that ability," Murray said. "Look for it, rise to the challenge and don't be afraid."

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