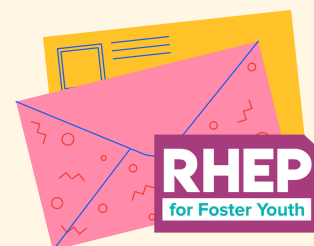


# A LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

BY JENNIFER M., RHEP YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD

**Sometimes I wish I could talk to my younger self.** I'd be real: Jennifer, when you were fourteen, life was hard. You hadn't yet met Mama Pat, who would be a loving foster parent to you and teach you about healthy development. You didn't yet know how to stick up for yourself. **You don't know it yet, but Jennifer you are going to make it through.**

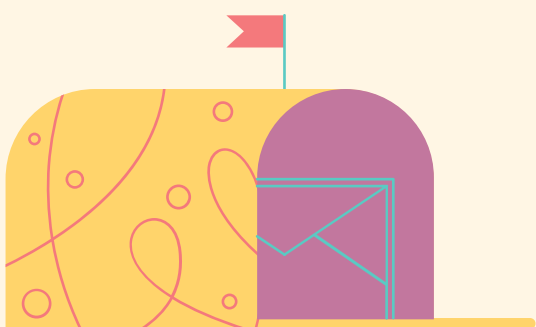
At 14, you are experiencing the roughest time ever in your life. This is the year when you will lose your mother, sister, brother, and your first child. You are completely over life at this point. You will run away from the group home you're living in. **You won't know what to do with your life.** But you do know you don't belong in foster care and that you are not going to be a victim of sex trafficking anymore. You're over it all. You want to end your life at this point. No one cared about you. No one wanted to see you doing better than them...



*When I was 14,* I was very sexually active. Out of all the times I had tried to get pregnant—to finally feel unconditional love from another person—it happened at the time I didn't need it to happen. I was homeless, mostly sleeping on the street or at random dudes' houses. I used to try and stay at my auntie's house but I always felt like I didn't fit in with my cousins. So I always found my way back on the street being a victim of sex trafficking just to make ends meet.

I found out I was pregnant with my first child inside of a Burger King bathroom. I was alone and scared. I simply couldn't believe that this was happening to me. Do you know what it feels like to have a life-changing event happen to you in the most vulnerable way? To find out I was pregnant right after hearing the news that my birth mom had passed away... I never had a relationship with my mom, so the pain I felt was unbearable. I have 13 brothers and sisters. I am the last child of my siblings. I was the last one to have a baby and my mother was never going to see the birth of my child.

At this time, **I didn't know who to talk to about sexual health education, or even how to have safe sex.** I was talked about and laughed at when I asked my aunties and cousins. That's when I started going to Planned Parenthood to get the information that I needed- to get condoms and plan B. **I was really lost in the world.** I didn't know what I liked, I didn't have friends, I just had people that used me and abused me. I was back and forth from Las Vegas to living the street life. And once I had my daughter, things got a lot harder for me. She was born with a heart block and needed a pacemaker right away. I tried to change my life for the sake of my child but everyone was against me, even my own family. **I felt voiceless against the people that were supposed to help me.** I was labeled a hoe, a runaway, and a disgrace to society. No one wanted to take me and my daughter into their home because the social workers were writing letters that weren't in my favor. No one wanted to take a teen mom with a baby who had medical problems.



**I had nobody on my side until I met my foster mom, Mama Pat. She gave me freedom and space to be myself.** She was upfront and open-minded with me. I was able to talk to Mama Pat about my relationships with different guys and speak about how they treated me as a woman. I was able to talk to her about sexual mishaps I had. She educated me on how to properly use a condom. She taught me about STDs and infections. She also taught me about consent. She told me that it is always okay for me to say NO if I don't want to do something or perform a sexual act. I always used to think that it was okay to do things that you really didn't want to do.

A lot has changed now. I am more aware of my sexual health and I know my body. I have been in a relationship for 5 years now and it has taught me a lot about **tolerance, respect, and boundaries.** I'm still learning to enforce my boundaries as far as a man respecting me in a relationship and treating me with love and honor. I'm still learning, but I have come a long way from my teen years. I'm not so easily influenced by certain things. I am still finding peace within my life at this moment and I can honestly say, if it wasn't for the things I experienced at the age of fourteen, I don't think I would be where I am today.

**I am grateful and at the same time, I do wish my life had turned out a lot better than it did. But I am still alive and I still have a chance to find my purpose and be at peace with my past.**