

**Ch.O.I.C.E. Academy —  
The Experience  
by Kathy Wawrzyniak**



**Our grandchild was born at CVH to a single mother whose boyfriend was sometimes in the picture, but usually not. During her first two years we had her every other weekend and usually one or two nights a week for overnight visits. Around the age of two our daughter moved to another state taking her child with her. Several months after the move we received a call telling us that the living condition had changed and our grandchild needed a place to live. The person on the phone asked if we could come and pick up the child. When my husband told her that we lived in Vermont and it would take at least 2 days for us to get there he was told that the child would be placed in foster care. The odyssey of gaining guardianship began and lasted for two years.**

**Fast forward...**

**My husband and I were given temporary custody and guardianship to our grandchild when she was four. At that time she came to live with us here in Vermont. This situation was made permanent one year later. Her academic education was full of ups and downs. She had some very caring, concerned and supportive teachers and special educators. There were also a few who struggled with a child who had a difficult time in and out of the classroom.**

**At the start of Middle School, in a new environment, with new teachers and different expectations things went from tolerable, but frustrating, to a time of frequent school meetings, discipline sessions and tears. My grandchild banged his hand into a wall and sustained a fracture of his hand. At that time he was placed at the Brattleboro Retreat for 9 days returning home and going back to school. The situation at home quickly deteriorated and the child attacked my husband on several occasions. These attacks necessitated treatment and an MRI**

for a head injury and sutures for lacerations. In January of 2010 he was again sent to the Brattleboro Retreat, this stay lasted for 22 months.

Throughout her late elementary years this child started to tell us that she wanted to be a boy. Her male identity started with haircuts, choosing a male name and wishing to be addressed as him, and he. On his second Brattleboro admission he asked that he only be referred to as male. This was agreed to and life for him began in earnest. He was quickly accepted by family and friends as a male and has been male to this day.

When we were told that he was to be leaving the Retreat, his sending school told us that they could not accept him back and we needed to find alternate placement. The search was on to find a school where he could succeed as a person and as a student. We, my husband and I traveled to a variety of places. He was discharged from Brattleboro on a Thursday, we interviewed at Ch.O.I.C.E. the next day and he started his schooling the following Monday. Little were we prepared for the dramatic changes that we were to experience.

Our grandchild, now male, was considered as one of the student body from day one. He was placed in the high school milieu and as they say 'was off to the races'. The teachers were accepting, his needs and accommodations were just part of the day. Lessons were explained, questions answered and



thoughts challenged, but never was he made to feel unimportant. This student became a real, caring, eager to learn student. His academic achievements became milestones. He learned a multitude of new and exciting things. Discipline at school was not necessary. Life at home was different, quieter, and

a lot less stressful. (To be sure things were not 100% "Parent's Magazine" ideal, but there was a new sense of calm and peace.)

This child who had never been invited to a play date, birthday party or sleepover was now talking about this friend and that friend. He was invited to go fishing with a student, to go to someone's home for an afternoon, to go bowling with another student's family. He was part of a group, he was accepted as just another kid from school. He spent his birthday with a fellow student. The change in his demeanor was dramatic and significant. The friendships continued through his entire high school experience.

The staff at Ch.O.I.C.E. accepted him and us as valuable members. We were consulted, our opinion was sought and our questions were answered. Not once were we, his guardians, caregivers and grandparents made to feel unimportant in his education and future lifelong success.

Not once during his high school years did this child refuse to go to school. Not once did he tell us that he didn't like school. He was up every morning, dressed and waiting for the bus so that he could be part of the positive time that he was having. Once on a very snowy morning when school was cancelled, he became upset and wanted to know, "why can't we go to school, it's just snow?"

Did we become the Ozzie and Harriet family? No, not by a long shot! What we became, with the help and assistance of everyone at Ch.O.I.C.E. was a family with a student who is transgender, a family with a student who has some mental health problems, a family with a student who has special needs and a student who most of all was accepted by everyone, including himself.