

Breaking the Cycle:

Ava V.'s Journey from Foster Care to College and the Impact of Ohio Reach

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When Ava V. entered the foster care system at 14, her life changed in an instant. In 2020, she and her 3 siblings were told that they had to pack up their things and leave home. That feeling of uncertainty has shaped her goals and become the foundation for her strength and motivation.

“At that moment, I distinctly remember the social worker telling me that she could not imagine how difficult and frightening such a drastic change must be...When I become a social worker, I will be able to relate to students firsthand,” Ava reflected.

Now a sophomore at Miami University, Ava is pursuing her bachelor's in social work. She places human connection and empathy at the center of her educational experience – whether studying abroad in Luxembourg with a focus on child and adolescent behavior or creating and implementing a mentorship program for incoming students with foster care experience. “I hope to advance my career and academic opportunities, while also becoming a more culturally competent person as a whole,” she said.

Behind her accomplishments is a journey marked by barriers she has faced and overcome. After emancipating at the age of 18, Ava became fully financially independent, responsible for tuition, housing, and daily living expenses. While she has worked hard to support herself, financial strain remains.

“While I am so grateful for the scholarships that I have received, I still am paying a few thousand dollars a semester for housing/tuition. I had saved enough through my part-time jobs to be able to pay my first year in full, but I am most likely going to have to take out loans for my following years of school,” she explained.

This reality is what led Ava to apply for the Ohio Reach Scholarship. Supported by the Ohio Department of Higher Education, Ohio Reach exists to uplift foster care- and kinship-connected students, helping them pursue higher education and transform adversity into opportunity. By investing in students like Ava, Ohio Reach creates a ripple effect – empowering young people to not only achieve their goals but also inspire change in their communities.

“I see my future as one of ongoing self-discovery, wellness, balance, and stability. Above all, I want to break the cycle. I want to break the stigma around foster kids. I will stop at nothing to make sure that every second of my fight to make it out of the system is worth it,” Ava explained.

Today, she is excelling academically with a 4.0 GPA. After graduating with her bachelor’s degree, she plans to continue her studies and earn a master's in social work to become a substance abuse counselor. More than anything, she wants to be a source of support for those who have faced challenges similar to her own.

“I yearn to continue to learn as much as I can about the profession, and also from those who depend on it. I want to practice empathy and treat each case individually with special care ... Yet most importantly, I want to make a difference and have a positive, lifelong impact on the most vulnerable people who need it most,” Ava said.

Ava’s story embodies the mission of Ohio Reach: to ensure foster care-connected students know that, despite a difficult past, they can create bright futures for themselves. As she puts it, “...I have learned that my experiences do not define my potential, and my circumstances do not define me. Instead, these are the things that motivate me to not only achieve my goals, but to also transcend them.”