

Cassidy Tarajos - Age 16

Name of Parent - Lori Tarajos

Name of Your Dance Studio - The Studio of Rochester

As a growing and evolving young woman, I've been given a life which has sculpted me to be here today. My beautiful single mother who works 8 plus hours a day to support me and my brother, has created a life I couldn't repay her for. As far as I have come in my life so far, there have been many bumps in the road which have gotten me to this point. As a typical teenager, I attended public school. For many, school is an escape from they're everyday home life. That of which it was for me, until it became an unsafe place that I began to resent. The kids who I've grown up with decided to label me as a target and make me feel unsafe in what was supposed to be a learning environment. A specific experience that has stuck with me was at a football game where the student section was filled with cheering students whose faces were all familiar. Minding my business, I saw a spot in the back of the bleachers where I could blend in with the rest. The group of boys in front of me quickly realized I was behind them and decided I didn't belong. Water was being poured down my shirt, my makeup dripping down my face and things flying in the air aimed at me. Not one part of me felt like I deserved it. I stayed quiet as I always did and stood lifeless in shock, no one stood up for me. I ran out of the stadium and called my mom. Begging her for mercy, she came to the game. She was furious that her baby girl was being treated in such sickening ways. She went to the student section herself and stood up for me as no one else did. At such a vulnerable time, I was convinced I would never feel safe as myself. Even the school staff turned a blind eye to what was so obviously happening right in front of them. Again, my mom came to the rescue to protect me from harm. The comments and harsh actions I was receiving before the football game didn't stop after the game. Through the midst of being bullied and destroyed by my peers, at the end of the day I had a different escape. An escape that was irreplaceable, it was where I felt at home. I found myself through dancing, with girls who supported me and teachers who encouraged me. But, the words I was told over and over began to engrave into my head, I believed them when they said I was fat, ugly and worthless. These vicious experiences provoked an eating disorder, which has been a struggle of mine for a while now. A mix of anorexia and Bulimia caused my body to irregulate and

have never ending damages. Bulimia nervosa is an emotional disorder involving distortion of body image and an obsessive desire to lose weight, in which bouts of extreme overeating are followed by depression and self-induced vomiting, purging, or fasting. Bulimia which was nudged by the torture I was experiencing at school. In and out of treatments, countless absences at school and plummeting grades, my mom never stopped trying to retrain my brain to feel love and compassion. Tripling down to me not having the strength to be on my feet and dance my heart out with the people who made me feel so safe. My mother, who supported me in every way, went to the ends of the world to accommodate an everyday life I was no longer suffering through. Struggling day after day, being too scared to ask for help, came a point where I knew I needed my mom to step in to hold me and make sure no one could hurt me anymore. The administration turned a blind eye once again, "bullying happens and it could have been worse", they said. In a roller coaster which became my life, my mom fought the school and enrolled me in an online program where I then had space to rebuild my confidence and strength to dance again. I took care of myself in a way I never had space to do, I was finally surrounded by positivity. I had to relearn my passion for what I once adored and find myself again. Now, standing here a 16 year old who graduated high school a year and half early, dancing and working countless hours, I could have never made it without my mom and my studio family. I am so proud of myself for learning to be comfortable in my own skin once again. I am beyond blessed and unbelievably lucky to stand here on my own two feet, dancing, with a family full of nothing but love and support.