

**"I am the Lorax"**

By Theresa Bassett, Charlie Bassett-Kennedy and Peri Stone-Palmquist

*A story about a mother, her son and an advocate, all working together so he could graduate.*

THERESA:

"I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees."

Like the Lorax in the popular Dr. Seuss book, I come tonight to speak for those who need a voice. Those who have been overlooked or whose voice hasn't been given the respect that it deserves.

My name is Theresa Bassett and my son, Charlie, was sent to jail during his senior year of high school. .... My son. ....

A violist in the orchestra. A water polo player. A beloved brother and son.

But when Charlie was arrested, it was as if my son no longer existed in regards to education. My calls went unanswered.

This is a kid who had been in the same school district all of his life. He had the right to services until he graduated or the age of 26. The district collected \$9,000 from the State of Michigan every year to provide an education for him.

CHARLIE:

I was arrested on May 7, 2016, just after turning 18. I had substance use problems that led to my arrest for robbery. I had just weeks left of my senior year, but I was going to have to take summer school to graduate.

Once I was in jail, I thought about school but figured it was just over. I didn't know that they had obligations to further my education once I was locked up. It made me pretty depressed. I wasn't a big school person at that moment, but I knew without an education, you really can't get anywhere in life. I had thought about going to community college, the Coast Guard, construction and other options. But now it was going to be hard to get anywhere.

THERESA:

Once Charlie was in jail, I immediately contacted the school to see what could be done. .... There was no response. This was in May. June rolled around. I was getting nowhere.

Charlie had just turned 18. His age was used against us. I would get no response, supposedly because of confidentiality even though Charlie had signed a release for me to have access.

My son was sitting in jail not getting any academics at all. He only needed 3.5 credits to graduate.

I am a product of the same school district, I have multiple degrees and teach in the same district, I have sat in a million special education meetings as both teacher and parent, and I couldn't get help. It was so frustrating.

And incredibly sad. I realized that this group of kids were disposable. I called the Student Advocacy Center... the only place I knew of, in hopes that they could help me, help Charlie.

PERI:

It was June 2016. My team knows when they present me a case, I get fired up and I did this time, too. I felt outrage. Disbelief. But I'll be real. I had other feelings, too. I was worried. I had never had a case like this before. What if I couldn't help?

And Theresa is a fierce advocate. What if I disappointed her?

No matter. Onward.

Within days of Theresa calling, I reached out to the district and got a quick email back that they didn't know who Ms. Bassett was and she had never contacted them.

Wait, what?

This should have been a sign. You don't know who this is? This is the mother. This is your employee! And she has contacted you. Many times.

How can other parents outside the system navigate this world when parents who are teachers *in* the system can't?

I was told the district didn't provide services to students in jail but they asked me for a contact to look into it further.

And we were off. Off to chart a new path. At least I hoped so.

But on June 15, the district's legal counsel gave us their decision. They were **not** responsible. The state or the county should be the ones arranging educational services for students in jail.

So .... Yeah. We disagreed.

We drafted a special education complaint to the state and my intern, Lauren, visited Charlie in late June at the jail to sign it.

CHARLIE:

Lauren explained that SAC wanted to help me graduate, that my parents and Peri were fighting for me.

I was surprised that SAC would file that complaint with the state and focus so much on me.

I didn't feel like a number anymore.

PERI:

We finally got clearance and permission from the jail and district bring Charlie work from his health class.

Lauren, a former teacher, literally photocopied pages and pages of work for Charlie.

SAC was providing the only educational services after 2 month in jail.

CHARLIE:

Lauren was human contact for me. All my other visits were limited to a video screen. She was the link my education AND my family.

THERESA:

Lauren was amazing. She came to court proceedings, tutored Charlie one on one, and provided us with information as to his health and state of mind.

PERI:

But then something weird happened.

On July 1, we got an email from the district's special education office telling us that we were not authorized to provide tutoring. Mind you, the district was providing NO SERVICES to this student.

The irony was too much. You won't provide services but you won't let us do it either? Huh?

Lauren politely explained that we did have permission from central administration. She continued on her way, although it wasn't until late October the credit was recognized.

Anyway ....the week of July 13, in response to our state complaint, district tutors were cleared to enter the jail. Yeah!

But wait. Don't get too happy. It was several more days before anything started. At least once, the tutor arrived when Charlie was meeting with his attorney — and *that* was used to argue he didn't really want these services. His math teacher brought a GED workbook, not work from his required math class. And then there were vacations and cancellations.

We argued about whether he was due 6 week of make-up tutoring or 7 weeks. Apparently the last week of school doesn't count. So 6 weeks it was.

We were asked to rescind the special education complaint. But we felt there was too much left to be resolved, so we didn't.

At the end of August, we got a big package in the mail. The state's findings. The district was found non-compliant and ordered to develop policies and procedures to educate ALL special education students in the jail.

CHARLIE:

I was dumbfounded that the state would find in my favor.

We really do matter.

THERESA:

Once the Department of Education ruled in Charlie's favor, the district stepped up and took things more seriously but it still felt adversarial. They were reluctant to provide any information, any updates.

It felt as if district was being forced to do something they didn't want to do.

PERI:

We finally had a special education meeting for Charlie on Sept. 30, but the next week, he was transferred to a halfway house. And the process had to start again.

Again, we were told, "We don't provide an education here." Again, we would have to chart a new path, only now, we knew none of the players and he was an hour away.

I contacted the facility director or local district every single day. I jumped through every hoop, and finally, it was set up, more than a month later. But then they couldn't even enroll him in the right classes.

For awhile, Charlie and his tutor met outside, until it got too cold. Then in a cold basement where there was no Internet.

It was ridiculous.

Just before Thanksgiving, he was removed from the program due to a probation violation.

Charlie was literally put out on the street on Nov. 30 and came back to Ann Arbor Thursday, Dec. 1. We notified the district the same day. By Monday, he was in *our* office, ready to work. We enrolled him in one of our online classes and he worked 2 hours that very day.

We emailed the district again and asked that services re-start. We tried to see if he could go to a school but were told he was not allowed on school grounds.

The district's virtual school enrolled him, but he had to re-enroll. Pages and pages of paperwork for a kid who had gone to the same district his whole life.

The six hours weekly of one-on-one tutoring that had been provided, per the state complaint, was not offered. He was offered nothing.

We were on our own. Charting our own path.

Charlie kept coming to SAC working on his own, making good progress. We kept contacting the district.

Finally, at the end of January, more than a month after our initial request, an IEP meeting was held.

THERESA:

At his IEP, it felt like the district was trying any way possible to get rid of Charlie. Instead of focusing on what he needed to graduate, all of a sudden Charlie was being accused of having a weapon on campus in an incident eight months earlier. They used that to argue he shouldn't be allowed in school. It gave me pause to think of the extent the district would go to get Charlie off their books.

PERI:

At the meeting, it sounded like there would be all this support for Charlie in this new exciting program at the library, but that's not what happened. He was only to get two hours weekly of help, instead of the six in the complaint. Our concerns went unanswered.

THERESA:

Charlie was depressed and demoralized. But again, Peri and the Student Advocacy Center were there for him.

At this time, Charlie was constantly being harassed by the police. One time, he was confronted by the police at the Crisler Center while volunteering at the concession stand.

He was managing this long list of items for probation. It was absolutely unattainable for a 19-year-old with no transportation, no job and no money. It was a tough time.

On his way to SAC in late February, Charlie made the mistake of getting together with a few friends and a student was robbed of his cell phone. Charlie was arrested. His choice was to plead guilty to larceny and spend 10 months in the Washtenaw County Jail or go to trial and risk going to prison for two years. Another youth had already been given a deal to testify against Charlie and the others.

Charlie maintains to this day that he was not involved. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He is one of many innocent people given jail time due to the system of plea bargaining.

CHARLIE:

Peri offered me a ride that day to SAC.

To this day, I regret not taking that ride.

PERI:

I was heartbroken to hear of his arrest. But I went right to work. I notified the district right away. Three days later, it was me, not the district, in the jail with English assignments in hand. Lauren and I took turns. This went on for two weeks -- only us providing services.

Then , on March 15, we received a call from the jail. It started with a lengthy compliment about how wonderful it was that we had helped Charlie so much. Then boom. We were told we were not allowed to come back. Education was the district's job.

But the district wasn't providing services, I said. And students getting their GED have tutors, I argued. But the jail held firm. We weren't allowed to see him. I was felt hopeless and ineffectual.

THERESA:

For our family, it was very frustrating because Charlie really only made progress with Lauren and Peri. Having one of them visit Charlie was our only connection to him other than weekly visits through the live video feed.

Charlie had to wait six weeks before the district started providing services.

In the end, the district provided a teacher named Jerron to work with Charlie, and thankfully he was diligent. From that point on, both Charlie and Jerron were motivated to make it happen.

You know, one might ask, why pursue a diploma track? Why not just get a GED?

High school graduates earn, on average, about \$1,600 a month more than those with a GED, and are more likely to receive their bachelor's degree

Ultimately, this was Charlie's decision. For someone with so little control over his life, being able to decide between a GED and diploma was a big deal. The courts were also impressed that Charlie wanted this.

CHARLIE:

I'll be honest... I never really thought I was going to get my diploma until I got the support I needed.

I felt like I was SAC's only kid.

I saw kids in jail who had no family support. I saw grown men who never made it past the 9<sup>th</sup> grade because they were in and out of prison. I saw 17-year-olds and 18-year-olds with little education, stopping at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

The program at the jail would generally send kids through the GED program because some kids had so few credits. Some see it as an easier path. Sitting side by side with the students working on their GED, it was obvious that they were getting a substandard education when they are entitled to so much more

Sometimes .... I felt like dropping my pencil and walking out.

But I was so close. I didn't want to quit because of my family and everyone busting their butt for me. I owed it to myself and everyone around me.

I finished all of my course work and earned my high school diploma, thanks in large part to SAC.

(PAUSE for applause)

THERESA:

In telling this tale, my hope is parents all over will speak out on behalf of their children and keep pushing.

It is unconscionable that some students will be overlooked because their parents may not have the information they need to advocate. The system is betting on the fact that some are uninformed. Parents advocating for their students are not welcomed but very necessary.

CHARLIE:

Things have changed. The jail got Internet, so we could do online classes. The jail hired a liaison to work with the schools and kids in jail. They help the kids decide on either a diploma or GED. Education or lack thereof is what may have put some of these guys in jail in the first place. Probably 40% of the people I knew, couldn't read.

The Washtenaw County Jail just added a library. I think I read every book there. I got the nickname of '**School Boy**' and would help people write letters to their family, the judge, help them with their GED homework, help them read their court paperwork, and so many other things.

Education is so important. Back to the times of slavery, blacks were not allowed to read or write. Our educational system today is failing a ton of kids if they get to high school and cannot read.

In jail, I would get a '**write-up**' for having too many books out at one time... they called the extra books **contraband**. And in solitary confinement, you can't even have access to a book cart, depending on the guard on duty.

Anyone wanting to better themselves through learning should not be punished, especially when one takes a historical perspective.

PERI:

I remember visiting Charlie after all these changes. It was a video chat. Charlie asked me if the changes were because of the complaint, because of him. We joked that the new program should be named after him, that there should be a plaque hung up with his name.

Charlie Bassett-Kennedy School. I like the sound of that.

CHARLIE:

Today, I am working and am thinking about a degree in underwater welding or getting my EMT certification.

It is going to be a tough road but I will persevere.

I am grateful for all the support I received from so many different people. My family. My teachers. But especially SAC. The hours of work that they put in on my behalf was really amazing. Other than my parents, there was no one advocating as hard for me as SAC.

For SAC to do what they do, they need people like you paying attention and advocating for more support of this work.

Without them, I wouldn't be standing here today.