

## Running toward a bright future

By: [Constance Cooper](#)

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Constance Cooper | Ledger-News

**Brandi Price, center, took first place in her age division at the Cherokee County YMCA/Rotary Fall Classic 10K run Oct. 17.**

Most people would spend the rest of their lives running from the things Brandi Price has been through. Instead, the 18-year-old is turning around and facing it her past head-on.

Brandi is a freshman at Georgia Highlands College, an A student who spends her nights waitressing Pizza Capri and paid for her car with cash. A long-distance runner with incredible work ethic, she closed down the restaurant late at night on Oct. 16 and, on five hours of sleep, took first place in her age division at the YMCA/Cherokee F all Classic the next morning.

Brandi is the kind of kid any parent would be proud to have raised. She's not the kind of kid you would expect to come from a household where physical, verbal and sexual abuse were routine.

After a botched Department of Family and Children Services (DFACS) investigation resulted in Price being beaten and forced to recant her report of abuse to her school counselor, the teen is speaking out. Last spring, for her senior project at Sequoyah High School, Price

worked with Cherokee County Assistant District Attorney Ashley Snow, who prosecuted one of the cases against her abuser, to create a video educating law enforcement and child protective services workers on the consequences of not following protocol in child abuse investigations.

In the opening to the video, Snow says that in Brandi's case "the child abuse protocol was not followed and as a result, she spent over a year in an abusive home."

"The point of her story is not to point fingers at any particular agency, but to show the impact of child abuse on the life of the child," Snow says.

The second of eight children of a frequently unemployed mother whose ex-boyfriend is serving a six-year prison sentence for child abuse and molestation, Brandi is a bright, bubbly, well-adjusted teenager who makes you question everything you thought you knew about how children grow into the adults they become.

"She's breaking the cycle," said Brandi's foster dad, Andrew Earle. Earle and his wife, Debbie, took Brandi in when she was 14. They were the girl's fifth foster home in six months.

Brandi said she first went into foster care as an infant, when one of her mother's boyfriends was accused of sexually abusing her. Brandi didn't know about the alleged abuse until she was taken into protective custody again as a teenager, but she does remember that "DFACS was always getting called on us" for reports of neglect while Brandi and her siblings were growing up, tightly packed into government-subsidized housing.

According to Brandi, her mom, Connie Davis, was also a product of the foster care system and moved frequently, as she went from one romantic relationship to the next. Brandi attended four elementary schools, four middle schools and two high schools before graduating from Sequoyah.

"We lived at every exit, from 1 to 27," she said.

Although constantly on the move and often left to fend for herself, Brandi said things didn't really get bad until P.J. moved in.

Phillip Jones Jr. was a convicted felon wearing an ankle bracelet when Davis started dating him in 2003.

The couple courted by pacing back and forth down the small strip of road Jones' bracelet allowed him to walk. "He could only stay out so late, so their love was limited," laughed Brandi, a biting sarcastic girl who likes to crack jokes anytime the conversation gets too emotional.

After the state took Jones' bracelet off, he moved into Davis' home and fathered two children with the woman, already a mother of six. Brandi and her older sister became responsible for the babies, and the girls often stayed up all night caring for the infants, who were born just a year apart.

"They'd often stay up really late at night having to care for the babies," said Snow. "They didn't have their own beds to sleep in. They would come into school with dark circles under their eyes and fall asleep at their desks."

The tough situation was made worse after Jones got a job. Working gave him money to go out drinking, and drinking made him mean.

According to Snow, Jones used extension cords, belts, hammers, bowling balls, whatever happened to be nearest when his temper flared to beat the girls. He made them hold soap in their mouths for hours whenever he thought they were lying and would force them to stand with their arms out holding his work boots. If their arms began to tire and droop, he'd start beating them.

"We could never ask why, or we'd just get more whoopins," Brandi said.

According to Snow, Davis helped Jones hide his abuse of the girls.

"Their mom would say (to Jones) 'Don't use the bicycle chain on them, because it will leave marks,'" recounted Snow. "They would have bruises on their arms and legs and would wear long-sleeved shirts and pants to cover it up."

Brandi's home life started taking its toll on the girl, then a seventh-grader. Her grades took a nosedive, and she started getting in trouble ... a lot.

"I had a horrible attitude," Brandi recalled. "I was always in ISS (in-school suspension)."

Then, one day during a class field trip, one of Brandi's teachers confronted her.

"I knew what she was going to say," Brandi recounts in the training video she made with Snow. "I'd heard it plenty of times. She just asked me why I behaved the way I did and was telling me I was such a beautiful girl, and I was ruining it with my attitude. But, this time, (this teacher) sounded like she really cared."

So Brandi confided in her teacher about her abusive home. The teacher, in turn, told the school counselor, who contacted DFACS.

DFACS called Davis and arranged to interview her and Jones the next day at Brandi's school. DFACS did not, however, interview her, Brandi said.

When she found out her mother and Jones were at her school being interviewed, Brandi broke down.

“I couldn’t control myself,” Brandi remembers in the video. “I was hysterically crying and squeezing my teacher. I didn’t want (Jones) to, like, come find me at school, because I could just imagine him screaming and yelling at me in front of my friends.”

After school, Brandi went home.

“I got the crap beat out of me,” Brandi said in the video. “I can take the beatings for not doing my homework or not doing my chores, but, that night, when I was going to go home for telling on them, I was afraid for my life.”

It was another year before Brandi and her siblings escaped their abusive home. After watching a television movie on child abuse, she and her sister devised a plan for Brandi to create a distraction while her sister ran away to their youth pastor’s home.

The next day, DFACS intervened, and Brandi and her siblings ended up “scattered all around North Georgia” in foster homes.

After staying in two short-term homes and a shelter, Brandi landed in the home of a “horrible foster parent.”

“She would take our allowance and buy beer and cigarettes and get drunk all the time,” Brandi said of the foster mother. She shared a room with three other foster girls, Brandi said, and was forced to sleep on a kindergarten mat.

Then, Debbie and Andrew Earle stepped in. They were already taking care of Brandi’s two youngest siblings and got to know the teen when she visited on weekends.

Brandi stayed in the Earles’ foster home for over a year, until July 2006, when Davis completed her DFACS safety plan and got custody of her children back.

When she moved back in with her mom, Brandi had to transfer back to Woodstock High School after having just lettered as manager of Sequoyah’s volleyball team and receiving a letter jacket that all the school’s coaches pitched in to buy.

“Everybody wanted her back,” said volleyball coach Lorrie Little. “She’s an awesome kid, reliable, someone who would do anything for you.”

A waiver from the Cherokee County School District allowed Brandi to return to Sequoyah. When her senior year rolled around and it came time to do her senior project, Brandi knew who she wanted to be her project mentor: Ashley Snow.

As chairwoman of Cherokee County's Child Abuse Protocol Committee, Snow was updating the county's 50-plus page protocol manual and thought Brandi could help out.

Brandi and Snow worked together to write pocket-sized protocol cards for DFACS and law enforcement officials. Working with Tim Cavender, public information officer for Cherokee County Fire-ES, they also created a video documenting the teen's ordeal. Brandi and Snow have presented the video to the Cherokee County's DFACS child protective services workers and the Cherokee County Sheriff's department.

"We rarely hear about what happens to victims of crimes after the case has made its way through the criminal justice system," said Sgt. Chris Haffner. "The video helps illustrate why the child abuse protocol needs to be followed."

Snow is planning to show the video as part of protocol training for all of the county's law enforcement officers next month and has passed it on to Rachelle Carnesale, director of the Child Fatality Investigation Program of Georgia's Office of the Child Advocate so Carnesale can use it in statewide training programs.

"When you look at somebody as beautiful as Brandi is on the inside and out, how could anybody do anything to hurt that young lady?" Cavender asked. "That's what really affected me. She just wanted to be a normal child."

Brandi talks frequently about "just being normal," and she is quick to deflect praise for coming so far with so little.

"I've just got the hook up," she says, laying her accomplishments at her mentors' feet.

But what Brandi doesn't realize is that for all that people, like Snow, Little and the Earles, have done to encourage her, she's given them much more in return – the chance to make things better for a girl who will always make the best of things.