

A grim past but a bright future

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Stillwater High School 2016 graduate Natasha McClure sits in the school's foyer on Tuesday, May 17, 2016. (Aaric Bryan/Daily InterLake)

By SEABORN LARSON Daily Inter Lake | [0 comments](#)

Editor's note: *This is the third story in a weeklong series recognizing noteworthy graduates from the Class of 2016. This year's series highlights "comeback kids," students who turned challenges into personal triumphs.*

From orphanages in Eastern Europe to a children's retreat near Eureka, Natasha McClure has hurdled years of uncertainty and adversity to reach the milestone of high school graduation.

"It's a huge relief," she said. "I've been going so hard for eight years, it just feels like everything is kind of lifted going into summer."

The final challenges along her route in high school education included her minor and major thesis papers. In her major thesis, McClure dove into the controversial discussion of abortion. Her thesis examined the psychology of women after undergoing abortions — how their lives would change and the unexpected grief that often follows.

"A lot of these women go through abortions and don't realize the consequences they will have to go through after abortion," McClure said. "A lot of them, when they see a child it would remind them of the abortion or the pain in their hearts from losing their child."

McClure, 19, has her own past riddled by grief, but through the healing elements of time, space and a healthy new lifestyle, she found a home, a family and a route to a college education.

McClure was born in the Ukraine. She entered the orphanage system there with her brother, Andre, after they witnessed their mother stab their father when she was 3 years old. She doesn't know what became of her parents after the night of the stabbing.

McClure remembers the dim orphanage lights and constant voices of other children echoing through the hallways. She remembers being fed poorly and being separated from Andre in different age groups, sometimes for as long as a year.

McClure said she and her brother held on to a brother-sister bond that transcended the institutional divisions and brick walls. They had promised to stay together however they could and they had to, she said, because in a orphanage setting, community support, let alone family support, is hard to come by.

“It was not a loving community; there was no sense of love. It was vicious sometimes. You had to fight for what is yours,” McClure said.

McClure endured tormenting and beatings from other orphans. McClure said she also was sexually abused, which took a long time to disclose.

“There was this guilt and this shame and it makes you feel very dirty,” McClure said. “You have to have the courage to talk about it with other people.”

Through a variety of different institutions over several years, an American family finally met McClure and her brother and brought them to California when she was 8. McClure said it was a good family; they went to church on Sundays and played tennis afterward.

But after years of living within the walls of orphanages, McClure said she had developed a violent side.

A series of tantrums led to hospitalization and pharmaceutical treatment, which led to a rift between McClure and her family, and soon she was on her way to the Ranch for Kids near Eureka.

This time, she encountered hearty meals, lots of horses and other children whose eyes were opening to the Big Sky lifestyle. The ranch was the last step McClure would take outside the traditional family system.

After her family dropped her off in Eureka, she occasionally would see Dave, the man who brought her to America. But eventually, communication became less and less as the family drifted away, including her brother Andre, whom she thinks of often.

“I miss my brother all the time,” McClure said. “He’s my hero. No one can ever replace him.”

Fortunately for McClure, another family soon came into the picture. She still laughs and smiles when thinking of the first time she met Greg and Theresa McClure. Greg was curling his mustache when meeting her for the first time. She said the curling action denotes his thinking face.

After a few meetings, the McClures were adamant about bringing Natasha into their home.

McClure was 9 when she first moved in with the McClures, who own the KOA campground near Columbia Falls. She remembers her 10th birthday as the biggest one she has ever seen.

From day one, Natasha said the large family was warm with embrace and urged self-control to help her temper. Her new brother, Michael, became the new kid to look up to. He was born in Russia and was adopted by the family from the ranch at the same time.

She symbolically flushed her pills down the toilet and began toward a healthier life. The McClure family soon enrolled her at Stillwater Christian School. The tantrums have faded and the energy was redirected toward school work.

“It’s definitely been a change,” McClure said. “It was the start of my life. I got to know myself better.”

McClure said her teachers, friends and, perhaps most importantly, family have been the new linchpins in her pursuit of future goals.

“We have a lot of kids that do really well; we don’t have a lot of kids with her background,” said Micah Tinkham, the English rhetoric teacher who oversaw her final thesis. “To me, she’s a great success story of international adoption and not being a statistic. It’s exciting to see her do well, considering the hard youth she had.”

Two months ago, she contacted Dave and her brother Andre, whom she hasn’t seen in 10 years. They both will attend her graduation ceremony on Friday night.

“That will be very exciting to see him; I’m so happy to see him,” she said.

This fall, McClure will attend Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, one of the biggest Christian institutions in the country.

She hopes to earn a degree in criminal psychology and work for the FBI, where she believes she can do some good for a sometimes bleak world.

Her parting advice to the following classes at Stillwater Christian:

“Do the best that you can and have a really good last year,” she said. “Push yourself and excel at everything you know. Try not to let the negativity around you get to you; try to stay positive and stay true to yourself.”