

• Success starts at •

# HOME

Specialized foster program  
gives one young man the  
foundation he needs to  
thrive in college



Photography by Evan Cohen

The first few years of my life, I didn't know much about stability or security. I was in and out of foster care, living with six different families by the time I was eight years old. Then I met Bea and Larry Thomas, who became my foster parents.

It was 1994, and I was part of the Kennedy Krieger Institute's Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC) program. The program helps hundreds of children with developmental disabilities, emotional challenges, and medically fragile conditions find homes when they can no longer live with their parents.

My then-foster mother sent me to Bea and Larry for respite care, a type of temporary care that allows foster parents to take a break from the round-the-clock responsibilities of foster parenting. Bea and I hit it off right away. She was so much fun to be around! Our first weekend together, we played tennis and ate doughnuts. And she made me laugh with her jokes. Soon after, I moved in with the Thomases full-time. Now, it's as if I've been there all my life.

As part of TFC, the Thomases went through extensive training at Kennedy Krieger to learn how to take care of me. That training helped, especially when I became a teenager. High school is tough, regardless of your family background. But not having contact with your birth family makes it even harder. I needed direction and they provided it. A social worker also

worked with us regularly to help us set goals for my future, like getting a job, taking the SATs, and applying to college.

I'm proud to say I achieved each and every one of those goals. I've been working part-time as a driver and manager for Papa John's Pizza since 2002. I graduated from Milford Mill Academy in Baltimore in 2003, and I currently have a 3.0 GPA at Frostburg State University.

Larry Thomas died two years ago, but Bea—Mom—remains one of the most important parts of my life. She loves that I'm going to college. She always brags to her friends about me,

**"It's as if I've been there all my life."**

saying she'll have a big grin on her face when I walk across the stage at graduation. She says she's proud of me. Well, I'm proud of her. It took a lot of courage and patience to be my mom.

Even though I'm an adult now, I still count on my mom for a lot. She gave me the stability and love I needed at a crucial time in my life. If it weren't for Mom and the TFC program, I would not be where I am today. ■

-Imir Woods, 21, is a junior at Frostburg State University, working toward a degree in communications. After graduation, he hopes to get a job in public relations. As told to Alison Eatough.

For more on this program, please visit [www.foster-a-hero.org](http://www.foster-a-hero.org).