



## A Future to Take Stock In

### From a Broken Family in Childhood to Foster Care to Class Valedictorian, Robert Hurley Is Poised for a Life of Endless Possibilities – Propelled by a New Family’s Love

The hallways near the front office at Boca Ciega High School are serenely still on a recent morning, the calm before the bell when students will spill out of their classes in a portrait of constant motion. But these same halls presented a far different picture one day just over three years ago – a common scene that went unnoticed amid the daily rush, a quiet conversation between a student and teacher.

The topic had nothing to do with grades or after-school activities; discipline issues or small talk. The truth is, it had nothing to do with school at all. That day, a tall, soft-spoken freshman and scholar in the Pinellas Education Foundation’s Take Stock in Children program, a student with a gentle smile and mop of brown hair, spoke with his geometry teacher about a far different kind of subject. It was one that could forever change the course of the teen’s life – and instantly alter the world the teacher and her family knew.



Robert Hurley and foster mom Amy Krusemark at a Duke football game on a visit to campus in 2018.

“I remember standing there and saying, “Well, Robert, what do you think – is it a good idea?” recalls Amy Krusemark, known for her high energy and a passion that entwines numbers and children.

The bright, reticent student, Robert Hurley, then 15, had a simple answer. “Yes.” And with that, the path was paved for Robert’s math teacher to become his legal guardian and for a remarkable story – one of resilience, love, and the support of the life-changing Take Stock in Children program – to unfold.

It is a story of a child whose family was torn apart amid drugs and dysfunction, and who could easily have fallen into the cracks of the foster care system, facing an uncertain road ahead at best. Instead, he will graduate from Boca Ciega High next month as Class Valedictorian, having earned a weighted GPA of 4.66 – with *full rides* already offered by Yale, Stanford, Duke, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Florida. On his weekend trip to Yale, with all expenses covered by the university, Robert, a guitarist, even got to practice with the Bulldog marching band.

It’s the story of a boy who grew up with his sister in two-bedroom trailer, raised by a mother who loved her children, played Monopoly with them and sang them Elvis songs to calm them at night, but fell into a life of dealing drugs – while the children’s drug-addicted father abandoned the family altogether.

He and his little sister loved their mom, and accepted the wayward environment as their everyday normal. Still, they went to bed on beat-up living room couches at night, or sometimes slept on the floor if strung-out adults passed out on the couches. When authorities were notified, the siblings were taken from their mother and placed in a group home, part of a children’s village run by the Salvation Army. The situation could easily have derailed many other children.

“Luckily,” Robert would one day write in a college essay, “it had the opposite effect on me. I used my situation to propel myself toward a better future, but I did not do it alone.”

He did it with Take Stock in Children, a program that helps low-income students succeed in middle and high school, receive guidance from a mentor, college success coach and school ambassador and receive a college scholarship by sticking to the program’s rules. Robert met with his Take Stock mentor, Robert Davis, once a week after being placed in the children’s home and enrolling in Azalea Middle, and that relationship became a foundational building block in his life – even though it’s the mentor who never tires of saying, “Robert, you’re my hero!” Says Robert of Davis: “He’s a great guy and I always tell him what I’m doing every week. He really cares about me.”



He did it thanks to the compassion of his first guardian, Gene Goldberg, assigned to him by Child Protective Service's Guardian Ad Litem program. Gene never failed to visit Robert at the group home and helped him cope after the tragic death of his big brother John, six years his senior, who was killed in a 2016 car accident on Highway 19. This past month, Robert was also named the winner of the first Guardian Ad Litem Triumph Award in Tallahassee, winning \$5,000, a laptop and even spending the week working as a page.

He did it with the help of Gianna Barrett, the group-home manager, who enrolled Robert in the medical magnet program of Boca Ciega High, so he could pursue his dream of becoming a surgeon, and who made him bacon-wrapped meatloaf and banana upside-down cake on his birthdays.

And he did it with the selfless, loving support of Amy. Only days earlier, she had learned via an email written by Gianna to Robert's teachers that he was about to be moved from the Salvation Army group home to a new family unit in a different county – and possibly even out of state. Until then, she had no idea he lived in a group home with his sister and other foster kids.

Child Protective Services regulations called for relocation of foster children after two years, so Robert was facing the imminent prospect of being sent to a new home with a new foster parent in rural Hudson, Florida – or moving with his sister to distant relatives whom they didn't know in Alabama. In either case, he would be completely uprooted from friends and the relative stability he had come to know in his group home.

Amy was moved and concerned, but Robert's situation resonated with her on another level. She was an experienced foster mother, in addition to having her own daughter, and her boyfriend, Alex Millman, had raised foster children as well. Over the course of several months, she and Robert talked about the possibility of him becoming part of Amy's family. Then it took seven additional, stressful months to persuade a judge to let Robert make a new home with his teacher.

Before the start of Robert's sophomore year, that is precisely what happened, when Amy became his foster mother and legal guardian.

Though his younger sister decided to move in with the big family of Alabama relatives, rather than become part of Amy's family, Robert stays in regular touch with her. And he savors every day of the family bond with Amy, her daughter and Alex. It was Amy and Alex who helped him focus on his dream of becoming a doctor, and encouraged him to set his sights high and complete the necessary requirements to become No. 1 in his class, attracting the kind of top-college attention normally reserved for star athletes.

There was an adjustment early on, when Amy would drive Robert to school, then teach him in geometry class. "It was an interesting discussion with his classmates after a few weeks, when I mentioned, 'Do you guys know that guy over there lives in my house?'" she recalls. "But I wanted to be sure they knew he wasn't getting any preferential treatment. Anyone who knows me realizes he would have to work even harder."



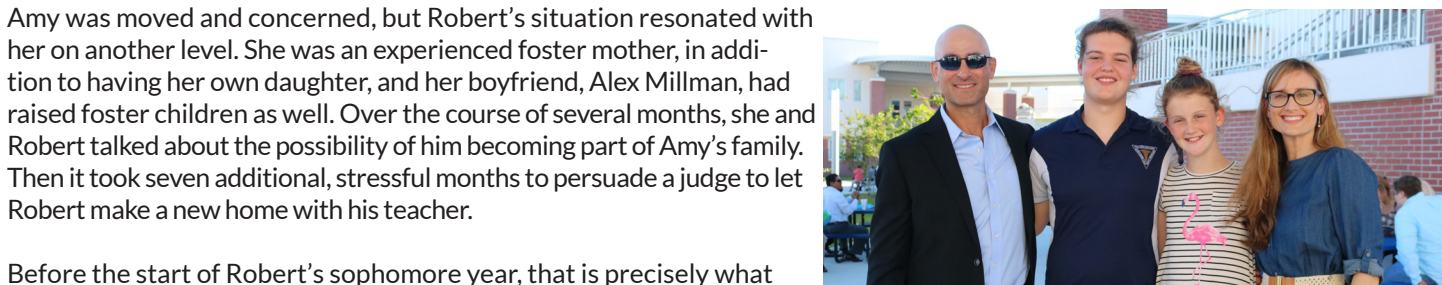
In time, Robert has enjoyed what he calls as "blissfully stereotypical junior and senior year." Amy taught him how to drive a stick shift, and, as Robert describes it, endured many a white-knuckle ride to school each day until he mastered gear shifting. But there was something more. "She became like a mother to me," he said.

On a mid-April morning, the front hallway at Boca Ciega is silent. But in a nearby conference room, Robert and Amy sit with some visitors, recounting the unlikely steps that brought them together. That night, Robert will be honored at Take Stock in Children's Senior Celebration, among 230-plus students graduating from the program – and asked to stand and be recognized by Pinellas County Schools Superintendent Dr. Michael Grego as one of three Valedictorians. And days later, his amazing story will be featured nationally in a Skype segment on *Good Morning America*.

Throughout it all, one lesson has made a profound difference on his new road to attending an elite institution and pursuing a medical career. It was taught to him by a tirelessly devoted math teacher and mom.

"Amy has helped me realize how much someone can help another person," Robert says. "She really stepped into my life and she changed it. A lot of people don't know that one person can make such an impact on another person's life. I think that Amy has showed me that I can do the same thing for another person."

Minutes later, he heads back to class before the bell, walking down an empty hall filled with promise and a future he can take stock in.



Robert with his foster family at Take Stock's Senior Celebration.

**To help more children like Robert, please support our Take Stock in Children program by visiting <https://bit.ly/2UH0Sdf> or calling (727) 588-4816, ext. 2111.**