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Teachers were the lifeline for Jennifer Headlee when few other adults were looking out for her.

Headlee was orphaned at 15 when her mother committed suicide, and teachers at [Sun Valley High School](#) in Mesa made sure she not only got to school every day but had something to eat, too. They pulled her aside and chatted with her every day to make sure she was getting through that day.

Now, more than 10 years later, it's no wonder Headlee has found a home in the classroom.

Life was difficult when the then-16-year-old Headlee worked two jobs to help pay the mortgage on the Mesa house she shared with her brother and sister. The house was so ramshackle that the siblings had to use the bathroom in a nearby gas station for many months when their toilet was broken. But still Headlee made it to school and the teachers made time to tutor her.

Joe Procopio, head of Sun Valley, an innovative charter school with flexible scheduling, says, "The staff kind of adopted Jennifer. We were kind of like her family in a sense."

This month, the 27-year-old Chandler resident graduates from college with a teaching degree - paid for by an anonymous donor who was moved by the traumatic circumstances of her life. Headlee has been working as a substitute teacher for several months.

"That first day, when I walked into the classroom, I knew that was it," she says. "I knew it in my heart."

And if those in that class knew of the immense obstacles she has overcome, they would understand why she has bonded with one particular second-grader. He too is an orphan.

Double tragedy

Headlee was just 2 when her father died of cancer. He also left behind his pregnant wife as well as 5-year-old Brian. Holly was born a month later.

The siblings could only witness their mother's tragic life, a woman forever haunted by a rape at the hands of her father, later watching him fatally stab her mother when confronted with the crime.

When Headlee was in [middle school](#), her mother spiraled into a deep depression, addicted to painkillers and alcohol.

She would find her mother in the bathroom passed out, with bloody cuts on her wrists, in the morning before school.

"I would try to clean up the mess before my sister would wake in the morning," Headlee wrote in her college-scholarship application two years ago.

But their mother also looked after her three children, cooking and baking as any mother would, even making wedding cakes. She loved visitors. A strict parent, she rarely let her children spend the night with friends.

Except once - the night she shot herself.

Afterward, Headlee was filled with anger, feeling that her mother had given up, yet understanding the psychological burden her mother bore for decades.

With the siblings on their own, Brian Headlee turned down a college scholarship and worked wiring houses to support his sisters. Jennifer started her freshman year at [Red Mountain High School](#), but quit after a few months to work two jobs, one at a fast-food restaurant and one as a telemarketer.

It was hard. Their power was turned off for a while, the toilet was broken and they struggled to pay the mortgage.

At one point, a counselor came by the house to talk with the three young people. "It got kind of emotional, and I think it was too much even for her," Headlee says. They didn't know who sent her, and they never heard from her again.

Many others did step up. People took them grocery shopping or dropped off meals. Money was slipped under the door. They always had Christmas.

"One thing that I learned as an orphan is that you get to choose your friends and your family," she says. "You learn to value those that you do have in your life."

Finding a way

A little more than a year after her mother's death, a friend's mother took charge. She arranged for Jennifer to attend Sun Valley [High School](#).

Procopio remembers when the heartbroken teen arrived.

"These children were basically alone in the world," he says.

He recalls how Headlee stayed the course.

"She kept looking at the big picture. She had goals. Seeing how caring the staff is, that gave her hope, and kept her upbeat and positive," he says.

In fact, she combined two years of high school into one. Headlee's teachers provided the necessary motivation, believing in her.

For graduation, the teachers and staff made sure she had a pretty dress and a manicure.

"It was basically things that a mother would do," Procopio says. "It was quite emotional."

After high school, Headlee took classes at Mesa Community College, continued to work two jobs and considered a career in business before realizing her heart wasn't in it. She thought about being a teacher. Procopio continued to mentor her.

"He told me that time will fly by no matter what, and it's up to me what I'll do with that time," she says.

New life, new hope

Headlee looked online for scholarships and stumbled on to the Web site of the Orphan Society of America, which helps people who are orphaned by suicide, homicide or accident.

Headlee was amazed at what she read. When founder Tarah Epstein Baiman was a teenager, she saw her mother's boyfriend gun down her mom. Eighteen months after a highly publicized trial in which the man was acquitted due to temporary insanity, Epstein Baiman's father died of complications from diabetes.

"Her story made it all seem more personal," Headlee says. "I sent her an e-mail that night. I was typing and crying at the same time."

Epstein Baiman called a few days later and the pair talked for hours.

"She knows all those feelings you can't explain to someone else," Headlee says.

"Jennifer has an incredible amount of compassion," Epstein Baiman says. "It's such an unusual position for someone who's been so traumatized in her life - to be so

optimistic."

The society awarded Headlee \$15,000, the amount of her tuition, thanks to an anonymous donor who also was an orphan. He'd been amazed by her story, Epstein Baiman says.

Headlee enrolled at Ottawa University in Chandler, majoring in early-childhood education. She also worked as a substitute teacher at a Chandler school and especially related to a young boy who was orphaned at age 4.

"For a child's success, the day doesn't end in the classroom," says Headlee, who called the boy, now a second-grader, on Christmas Day.

Headlee is excited to get her own class of children.

"Each one deserves attention," she says. "Everyone has a story that you never would have guessed."

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Jill Richards/The Arizona Republic

After years of hard work, Jennifer Headlee, 27, of Chandler, will graduate with a teaching degree.

More on this topic

Orphan Society founder understands the pain

Tarah Epstein Baiman incorporated the Orphan Society of America in 2005 to help people like herself.

When Epstein Baiman was a teenager, her mother was shot to death by a boyfriend. Her father died a few years later. She lived with her grandparents and had a network of close friends and supporters.

"But, like many orphans," she writes on the Web site, "I still felt deeply forlorn without my nuclear family or relationships with people who truly understood what it was like to be parentless."

After 9/11, Epstein Baiman wanted to help children orphaned by the attacks but realized they were already getting support. She studied the issue for several years before deciding to help people who are orphaned by suicide, homicide or accident.

"Trying to say that our primary purpose is to provide access to school is great, but the reality is that a lot of these people are in a situation where school isn't an option for them," says Epstein Baiman, 38, of Pennsylvania.

So the group helps in other ways, such as providing funds to a woman whose electricity was about to be cut off.

"There were three siblings in Georgia who had no money and their parents didn't have headstones, so we provided them

with headstones," she says. "We do a lot of little things."

Details: www.theorphan.society.org.



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