



Ariana connected with horses last summer while she worked at Arena, the horse barn at Coyote Hill Christian Children's Home. She learned to feed, water, clean and ride them.

THE GIRL AT THE EDGE OF EVERYTHING

Ariana, a foster child, is entering the most formative years of her life. She faces a daily struggle to become more than another lost cause.

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Photos by Neeta Satam*



She has such a beautiful name. In a story full of sadness, that's another bitter truth. Her name suits her perfectly, summing up her innocence and kind nature. It's a refreshing name, one you don't hear often. But she is a foster child, and the state of Missouri asks us to protect the identities of foster children, so we cannot use her name here.

So, for this story, she chose a different name: Ariana.

Her dad lives somewhere in Mexico — not the one in Missouri — and he has never spoken to her. When she was born, he punched a wall in the Boone Hospital Center delivery room. Then, he rushed out. He wanted a boy. Soon afterward, he left the country.

In the 14 years since, her family has been fractured in other ways. Ariana has five siblings: one older sister, two younger brothers and two younger sisters. Ariana's mom, who we'll call Jane, lives about five hours away. Her mom's life is improving, but it's still nearly as messy now as it was in the early 2000s, when she was in and out of relationships and battling legal trouble. Her struggles hit their worst in July 2013, when the state took Ariana and one of her sisters, who chose the name Justice, away. Jane has lived without them for the past year and a half. The oldest sister ran away. Her mom still has custody of the other children. They weren't under her care when the state intervened on Ariana and her sister's behalf.

Ariana and Justice are in limbo, stuck in the foster care system. But no matter how bad home was, Ariana still loves her mom and family. Because she loves them, she also suffers.

Two years ago, when Ariana first came to Coyote Hill, a foster care facility in Harrisburg, she was a hopeless case. She fought every rule and quit in the face of every challenge at school. Then, last summer, she discovered horse riding and, from there, football, cheerleading, quiz bowl and competitive cheer. And she found hope. A girl who never attended school went from failing all her classes to earning As and Bs in her final semester at Harrisburg Middle School.

She became a new person.

Ariana has shoulder-length, naturally wavy dark brown hair and rosy cheeks. A seventh-grade boy has a crush on her, and she's not exactly sure what to do about that. She has a few crushes of her own, too, and she got to go to the Harrisburg Middle School dance this spring with one of them. Ariana giggles every time Justice brings that boy up — but, Ariana's quick to point out, Justice has a crush on that boy, too.

She's never lived in a city, but she just knows she belongs in one. Once, she went to Atlanta, and she got to visit Florida last fall. There, she saw the ocean for the first time: The moon reflected on the water as the waves rolled in. It was unbelievable. Next on her travel list is Hawaii or New York City, but she's not sure which will come first. She'll be in Jamaica for a church trip this June, an early birthday present. Her big day — she'll be 15 — is during the trip.

Ariana is a spitfire. When she first came to Coyote Hill Christian Children's Home, she had a temper that flared often. She threw picture frames and flower pots, broke furniture and walls and accidentally hurt one of her foster parents. Now, she's better at channeling her anger, but she's just as spunky.

She has made so much progress since her first year there. She joined the school football team and played the craziest position imaginable for a 4-foot-10 middle schooler: offensive line. She spent most of the games getting knocked down, but she found a way to keep standing up. Her bruises became sources of pride. The sport taught her to embrace new challenges, and she worked into a routine: school, football, dinner, homework, bed, repeat. She missed a few practices, sure, but her grades soared. Once a seventh-grade student at a second-grade reading level, she started catching up. "Last year, I was just being lazy," she says. Now, all of her teachers compliment her progress and behavior.

Behind all that, though, is reality. Ariana is four years from aging out of the foster care system. Mark Courtney and others at the University of Chicago conducted a longitudinal study of foster children in the Midwest who "age out" of federal programs. Courtney found that at age 19, a year after leaving the system, girls were far more likely than their non-fostered peers to be arrested, become pregnant and have been homeless, evicted or below the poverty line.

Ariana is an eighth-grade girl with problems no eighth-grader should face. A former resident of Green Hills Mobile Home Park in Columbia, she's been yanked from her family, seen an older sister run away and had at least four family members put in jail. She internalizes all of that, and it turns into outbursts of anger, shouting and tears. "I'm kind of tired of being here," she says on a late night in October, "but I have to suck it up. It still doesn't feel like home." Nearly six months later, on a swing set outside her foster home, she looks at the sky. The swing hangs low, but her feet barely scrape the ground. She's tiny, thoughtful and blameless.

"I don't want to get stranded."

There's no emotion in her voice. She looks down, then up at the two-story house where she lives, then down again.

"I feel like I'm stuck here."

Ariana and Justice were living in a Columbia motel with their mom in July 2013 when the call came. Pack up your

things, her mom said. The Children's Division is taking you away.

This brings us to Coyote Hill. Less than a half hour northwest of Columbia, the facility is down a gravel road off the main thoroughfare of Harrisburg, a town of 266 people. To get there from Columbia, you take a straight shot north on Stadium Boulevard to 124 West, then into the town. There's one stop sign. A few churches. Run-down barns. Abandoned farm equipment. Shotgun houses. A post office. Tucked around them are the most beautiful expanses of land you'll see. When the sun goes down, wow.

Keep straight at the gravel road, and go until you reach the T — you'll be looking at a white-picket fence. See that huge red barn with the white roof? Coyote Hill is just down the road that leads to it. Turn there. Here's the pond where the kids swim, the one that sparkles all day because the sun hits from the moment it crests over the horizon. That's the first house. Splendid, right? There's a basketball hoop for warmer days, a jungle gym complete with a slide and monkey bars, snug between all these trees. And man, oh man, those trees, especially in the fall: a cacophony of color. Red, yellow, orange, mahogany, burgundy. When the sun hits them, this gravel road buzzes with life.

The white-washed houses, the play areas, the quaint town — if you didn't know better, you'd say this was an oasis. And in a way, it is. Coyote Hill keeps siblings together in order to make the fostering process less painful. The system is unique to this place. Yet, make no mistake. This is not home. It never will be. Their parents aren't there. The kids who live here bear scars — some on their bodies, some on their hearts.

Coyote Hill is a private foster care facility that receives money from the state. The foster parents get food from local pantries, along with other household necessities. Each house has about 10 people in all, eight kids and two parents. The adults aren't foster parents in a traditional sense. They're employees of Coyote Hill. That means the children are the responsibility the organization but under the supervision of the adults in their home. There are four houses on the Coyote Hill campus; about 30 kids or so, depending on new arrivals and departures.

Ariana, 13 when she arrived, walked in, with a crying Justice in tow. She unpacked garbage bags full of clothes. She fought back the tears leaking around her hazel eyes. *This is crazy*, she thought.

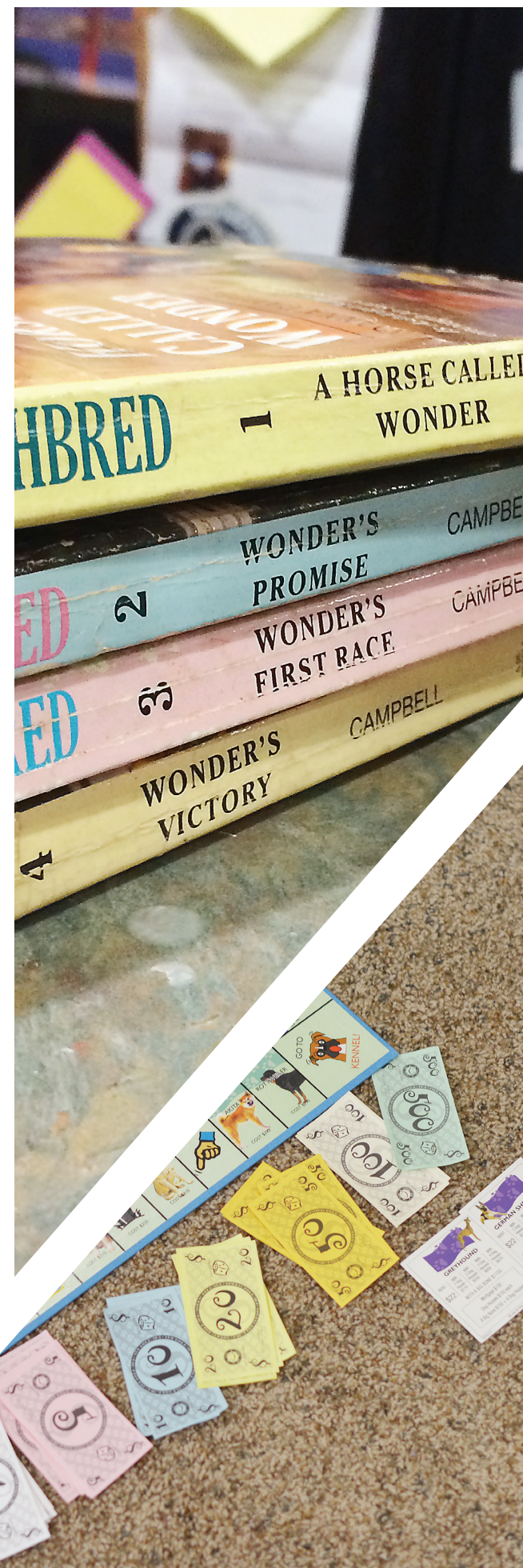
It was dinnertime. A house full of six unfamiliar kids, younger and older, gathered around a long birch table with the people who were supposed to replace her mother, brothers and sisters. She ate chicken nuggets, but not the peas. She hates peas.

"Clean your plate," her foster parents, strangers, said.

She did. Following the rules. That was the first step. The toughest step. A couple months later, those parents left, and new ones came. She had to adjust all over again.

We can't use Ariana's last name, either. But we can tell you her family's story.

Ariana joined 6,321 other Missouri children who were taken into state custody in 2012. The state said she and her sister were products of "educational neglect," a ruling that puts about 100 kids in the system per year.





Ariana and Justice get some of their toys through donations and others from Jane. Their mom got them both baby dolls for Christmas this year.

The compulsory attendance law, No.167.031 in the Missouri Revised Statutes, states any adult with custody of a child under 17 must ensure the child is enrolled in and attending school. Failure to do so results in a Class C misdemeanor, jail time and, in some cases, loss of custody.

By the time the state arrested Ariana's mom on July 16, 2013, Ariana and her sister had missed an entire school year. Jane then skipped several court dates, which led to another arrest on Feb. 22, 2014.

When the girls were first taken from her, Jane called Ariana and Justice twice a week and tried to visit Coyote Hill every other week. Those privileges were revoked because Jane kept showing up to visits with men who weren't relatives, which is against the rules.

At one point, the girls had gone nearly half a year without seeing their mother face to face. She worked to regain her visitation privileges, and two months ago, on March 21, Jane finally made a trip to Coyote Hill. A week later, she returned again. The girls now get four-hour unsupervised visits every week with their mom. It could be a sign of good things to come, but history suggests otherwise. And Ariana blames herself for all these difficulties. She has blamed herself ever since she and her sister first pulled up to that house at Coyote Hill. She thinks she it was her job to make sure they went to school.

"She takes on so much," says Rachel Howell, Ariana's foster mom. Standing in the place that Ariana now calls home, Howell looks toward a wall with portraits of each of her foster children — Ariana, Justice, six others. Howell stares at the image of Ariana, who wears the biggest smile of the bunch. She also takes on the most responsibility for the group's behavior and her sister's wellbeing. "From her perspective, they're in foster care because of her. I see it in her eyes."

Howell's voice softens.

"Nothing is her fault."

She's so worried about what Ariana's future might hold, how bleak it looks, how much promise she has. Her little foster girl is about to go through some the most definitive years of her life — high school — without her mom. She'll be different from most of her friends. Her life will remain in nearly constant flux.

"I pray daily that she'll fight," Howell says. "She's really starting to see that she's doing good things."

Her teeth chatter and her hands are numb, but Ariana wants to ride her horse.

She has on her Harrisburg football shirt, and on a late November afternoon, at sunset, light creeps through a sieve of clouds and spills onto the rolling fields along that gravel road. It's in the 20s, but that's warm enough.

Ariana first took to riding over the summer, and she became one of the best riders at Coyote Hill. The trainers gave her the Cowboy award, the black belt for horse-riding at Coyote Hill. Remember that big red barn you saw coming in? That's Arena, where the horses live. Ariana greets a friend from another house on the complex.

"I'm leaving Saturday," the girl says, her teeth clicking.

Ariana hugs her. “Forever?”

“Forever and ever and ever!” A pause. “But I’d rather stay here forever.”

Ariana’s eyes widen. “Really?”

Her friend left Coyote Hill before. It didn’t go well. This forever will hopefully last a little longer.

Ariana and her friend trudge across the hoof-stamped field toward a 5-foot-tall gray thoroughbred, Alera. She’s a 14-year-old who used to be a Stephens College equestrian horse. She’s Ariana’s favorite because she’s good at trotting.

Alera is calm today. Ariana saddles up and puts on a dark green helmet. The breaths of horse and rider hover in the air. The Coyote Hill horse trainer, Allison Mathers, calls out commands.

“She’s really come a long, long way,” Mathers says. Ariana steers Alera, trotting around a bend, then takes her through a barrel course. The paces kick dust into the air, and soon a light mist hangs over the riding area. “Alera and her make a good team.”

Finally, the cold catches up to Ariana. After a few trips through the obstacle course, the girls go into Mathers’ office to watch *Second Chances*, a movie about Sunny Matthews, a girl with a damaged leg who finds and saves a crippled horse. A white dog with black spots dog named Cooper cuddles up to the group as they settle in on the floor with blankets and pillows. A cat — Kitty Kitty Meow Meow — curls up in Ariana’s arms.

Sitting a few feet away on a ledge above Mathers’ desk is a sign: “Saddle up and follow your dreams.”

The sun is long gone by 6 p.m., and the air is sharp against the skin. Mathers gathers the girls into a Gator four-wheeler and speeds toward the houses. The wind swirls, and the girls scream. They huddle together in the back seat and squeal with joy. They’re blissful despite how frigid it is, lost for a minute in how magical this place, home or not, can be.

Ariana and her sister have been to Family Court in Columbia once every couple months for the past two years. Per Missouri law, only the court can terminate parental rights, but the court doesn’t do that if parents make a good faith effort to fulfill their obligations to their children.

A few relatives, a cousin at one point in December, for example, have offered to take Ariana and her siblings, but Jane often interferes. Even if the children go home with a family member, Jane is barred from visiting and communicating with the children freely. Jane told the cousin that as soon as their cousin picked up the kids, she would be over to take them.

So on a mid-December morning in 2014, when Ariana and her sister went to court, prepared for a new home, they were told they had to remain in foster care.

Their cousin didn’t want to put them in danger or get herself in legal trouble because Jane visited without permission. The girls might have been with family for Christmas. Instead, they headed back to Coyote Hill.

Ariana stewed. She was angry at her mom, her cousin — everyone. Howell expected a blowup. She and her husband, Al Howell, know they’ll often be the targets of misplaced anger. Instead, she saw Ariana restrain her temper. The Howells have no children of their own, but they’re remarkably close to the eight children who live with them at Coyote Hill. They try not to play favorites, but Ariana, despite her outbursts, has left an impression on them.

“Jane is by no means the worst mother in the world, but she hasn’t tried,” Rachel Howell says. “Instead, she’s made excuses and let two incredible young ladies pick up the pieces. She has caused so much pain for both of them, and they place the blame everywhere else. The woman is not bonded to her kids. She has not fought for them.”

As Ariana matures, she seems as if she’s beginning to understand her mom’s flaws. But the bond her kids feel is unbreakable. They fawn over Jane and would fight adoption at every turn. That word — adopted — that would mean that they’ve given up on her. That means goodbye. They want to be as close to their mom as possible, no matter the effect that might have on them emotionally. But the girls are already taking part in a



Ariana’s favorite horse is Alera, but she says riding the gray thoroughbred is getting old. She needs a new challenge. If she decides to keep riding, Ariana wants to pick a new horse and learn to jump.



high-wire act, and the truth is that being close to Jane makes them more likely to fail. That's clear whenever she visits. The more contact they have with Jane, the more likely they are to lash out or quit on schoolwork.

"She could so easily get caught up in the wrong crowd," Rachel Howell says. "For all the things she's dealt with and all the things she's been through, she still has a bit of a clean slate." But Ariana is pretty susceptible to her friend's suggestions. Despite her strong will, peer pressure is a weakness.

Howell prays she keeps making good choices.

The house is full of sniffles and sneezes. Ariana is one of the virus' victims. "She's feeling a little sick," Al Howell says. Ariana manages a nod from the couch as she and other kids try to pick a movie.

The Christmas tree is up and holds decorations from all the children. There are gingerbread houses, with gumdrop shingles and icing for windows. Most of them are rock-solid, which disappoints the younger kids who want to turn their projects into a snack. The group made picture frames, too, and decorated them with sand and shells from that fall trip to Florida. Christmas is a festive time of year and also a difficult time. Holidays remind kids of their parents.

The children come to a consensus: *The Fox and the Hound 2*. Blankets are wound tightly around tiny bodies. As the movie drags on, Ariana's eyes droop. She curls up

tighter. She rolls to her side.

Ariana won't get to go home. Some of the other kids won't, either.

"Christmas is going to be a little bit harder," he says. "I tell these kids all the time, 'I have no idea what you're going through. But I love you, and I'm here for you.'"

On the couch, Ariana stirs for a second. She turns, tucks herself in tighter and drifts off once more.

It's Feb. 20, Jane's 35th birthday, and Christmas has long since passed. Ariana spends five minutes coaching her mom through setting up Skype on her phone, and when Jane finally gets the video working, Ariana and Justice beam.

"Look at what I got you guys," Jane says. They get a first look at the Christmas presents waiting for them whenever their mom can make the trip to Coyote Hill. A portrait of a horse because Jane knows Ariana has taken up riding. Some dolls. Jane hints that there are more gifts, too.

The girls look different from when Jane last saw them. Ariana might need braces soon, and her sister has a gap between her front teeth that their mom hadn't noticed before. Jane talks with a southern drawl, and her hair is straight and blonde, though her face looks similar to Ariana's. She looks much like she does in the photo both sisters keep at Coyote Hill: a mug shot of her from the *Columbia Daily Tribune* arrest records, printed black-

and-white on a sheet of computer paper. One is on the girls' tackboard next to pictures of cousins, brothers and sisters. The other hangs on the ceiling above the sister's bed. Justice looks at it each night before she falls asleep.

It wouldn't be a birthday call without the song. Ariana, in typical fashion, sings a little bit louder than her sister.

"Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday dear Ja-aane,
Happy birthday to you."
"Hey. I'm not Jane. I'm your mom."

Ariana chuckles, but she doesn't apologize.

Two months after this Skype call, at 10 a.m. on April 4, Jane heads to the basement of Ariana's Coyote Hill home with the girls for some privacy. It's the second week in a row she and the girls' brothers have visited. Everyone is so excited, even though the two other sisters couldn't make the trip.

Jane isn't working toward getting her kids back, though. She admits this to them. She speaks casually, as if she doesn't see how much damage what she says does to her children. But she doesn't seem to understand.

"I want you guys to stay here," she says. "You're doing so well here."

"But we want to be closer to you," Ariana says.

Why doesn't she understand? Ariana thinks. *Doesn't she*

love me? I want to go home.

Ariana is angry. Furious. Her sister tries to stifle back her tears.

Mom's visit ends at noon. The girls remain irritable and quiet, but they play with their brothers for awhile while their mom is away. The kids join a whiffle ball game, climb on the jungle gym and try to forget their mom's words.

Ariana gravitates toward a couple of volunteers who brought their toddler to the play date. Ariana holds the 2-year-old in her arms.

"You'll be a great mom some day," one volunteer says.

Ariana smiles slightly.

Ariana graduates on April 22 from Harrisburg Middle School. She doesn't want to go to high school but doesn't have a choice. She's still improving, but the importance of education isn't dear in her. Even for February's Student of the Month, it's a means to an end. Ariana and her sister weren't raised to value education, and she doesn't understand that hard work has long-term benefits.


She thinks sports are the reason she's doing well. That's a good thing but a bad sign because she doesn't take credit for her own growth. Her success might not be self-sustaining. And so many things are about to change.

Ariana's state case worker left the Columbia Children Services office in April, and Ariana is struggling to adjust to her replacement. The new case worker is nicer, but Ariana is always resistant to change. Jane is visiting Coyote Hill more often, but the more she's around, the more Ariana's grades dip — from As and Bs to Ds and Fs. Jane's presence brings brief comfort followed by emotional turmoil. Every departure, be it her mom or someone else, forms "another layer of callous on her heart," Rachel Howell says. Ariana is slow to trust, and this is why. Her life is always in flux. Because of all the changes that will take place in the next four years, and because of how many failures that come out of stories like hers, it's hard to imagine what might be in her future.

It would be remarkable if Ariana were to become a foster child who makes it. Remarkable if she could avoid being kicked out of a foster home — one recent housemate was for an incident at school. Remarkable if she doesn't wind up a pregnant teen like one of her friends from foster care and another Coyote Hill alumna did. Remarkable if she stayed away from the drugs, arrests and tough circumstances that seem to afflict her family. Statistically, Ariana is at a disadvantage. Failure is far more likely.

But Ariana deserves to be more than a number. She deserves a remarkable outcome after how far she has come, what she has endured and what she is still enduring.

In reality, her story might not have a happy ending. To most people, Ariana will remain nameless. She will be among the anonymous, the invisible, the lost because there wasn't someone to catch them, to catch her. Despite all the love at Coyote Hill, this place isn't a forever home.

One day, she will have to leave, and then she might fall. 

Ariana's positive attitude and spunky personality belie the emotional trauma she's gone through in the past two years.

