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Determination Paves Her Way From the Streets to Medical School

When Mimi Black was a homeless teenager, living on the streets of San Francisco, she used to sleep in front of a police station. "It seemed like the safest place," she says. Then she moved to the redwood forests of Eureka, California, and traded her city sidewalk for a hole in a burned-out tree.

Now 26, Black is finishing a bachelor's degree with honors in cellular and molecular biology at Humboldt State University. Already accepted by two medical schools, she wants to specialize in research on and treatment of developmental disabilities, like the Asperger's syndrome that her 10-year-old adopted son has.

"School is the one thing in my life that has kept me going," she says.

The personal history Black relates sounds like a soap opera. "My parents were drug addicts," she says. "They lost their home, and my Dad left. Mom pulled my 11-year-old brother and me out of school and took off with us in her van. We were living from campground to campground."

That wasn't the way she wanted to live, Black says, so she took off for California. She was 16 years old.

"I wanted to go back to school," she says. But when she sought help from state agencies, Black discovered that she occupied a no-man's-land. "I was over 16, so the child welfare people couldn't do anything for me, and I wasn't 18, so I couldn't get assistance as an adult," she recalls. "I'm living in a tree," she says she told the authorities. "Come back when you're 18," she says they replied.

On her 18th birthday, Black was back at the state social service agency's door. Before long, she had a check for rent on a room. With a place to live, she was able to get a job and to enroll at the College of the Redwoods, where chemistry soon proved to be her favorite subject.

Three years later, she moved on to a premed program at Humboldt State. While earning a 3.5 grade point average, she also found time to work with developmentally disabled adults, teach a science class at an elementary school, lead student volunteers who put on science and math workshops for junior high school girls, preside over the Premed Club and the student chapter she organized of Court-Appointed Special Advocates, help raise \$3,000 for cancer research and run three miles a day.

This year the California State University System Board of Trustees honored her with its Outstanding Student Achievement Award.

For the past three summers Black has worked in her advisor Jacob Varkey's HHMI-supported student research program at Humboldt State. She did a study of mutations in the spermatogenesis gene of the worm, *C. elegans*, identifying two new alleles. The work won her second place in a California State Universities undergraduate research competition. Now she is working with Varkey to place the gene on the physical map of *C. elegans* and hopes to help author a publication on the research. "She presented a poster at the American Society of Cell Biology meeting, and it was very well received," says Varkey. "She's really quite incredible."

Black was 23 when she adopted Anthony, a developmentally disabled ward of the court whom she met in a group home where she worked as a counselor. She since has married, and her husband has adopted the boy too.

How will she balance the demands of medical school and mothering a disabled child? "I know it will be hard," she says, "but it is do-able. Anything is do-able, if you want to do it enough."