

CAMPBELL OFFICIAL'S LOST DAUGHTER HOME

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Nichole [REDACTED] used fake names, stayed with strangers and cried on holidays during the 18 months after she ran away from home.

She tried to call her parents several times. Once her mother's phone was disconnected. Another time she got her father's answering machine.

"I'd hear my dad's voice - I'd just freeze," she said. "It brought up all those feelings I tried to act like weren't there."

On Thanksgiving Day, she finally summoned the courage to speak to her father, Dave [REDACTED].

He was at home alone, eating mushroom soup and noodles - a favorite meal he used to share with Nichole - when she called.

"She said, 'Dad, I want to wish you a happy Thanksgiving,' " [REDACTED], a Campbell County commissioner, recalled Monday. "I went, 'What?' She said it again. I said, 'Nikki?' I couldn't hardly talk to her. I was so choked up.

"I told her how much her mom and I loved her and how much we missed her. I didn't press her or anything. She asked me, 'Well, Dad, can I come see you?' "

At 4 p.m. Friday, Nichole, now 18, and her fiance showed up at [REDACTED] Ft. Thomas home. It was the first time he had seen his only child since June 1990. "I just hugged her," [REDACTED] said. "Then we both had a good cry together. We've just been kind of going over what's happened."

Nichole's mother, Gail, was out of town when Nichole returned home. [REDACTED] and Nichole met her at the airport on Monday. "Nikki went behind her and put her hands over her eyes," [REDACTED] said. "She almost lost it."

Until Thursday, [REDACTED] didn't have a clue to where Nichole was. She was listed as a runaway with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and with the Kentucky Missing Child Information Center.

[REDACTED] spent weekends looking for her. Nichole was last seen in Cincinnati on her way to school with several friends when she had an argument with another girl. They were all members of the drug rehabilitation program Kids Helping Kids.

Nichole had been in the program for about 10 months.

Nichole, who admitted that she smoked pot and drank, said she didn't want to be in the program. "I wanted to do things my own way," she said. "I didn't want anyone telling me what

to do."

Nichole stayed in Cincinnati a few weeks before catching a ride to Cleveland. For the past 15 months, she's lived in Columbus. She found a sales job for a company that helps people with poor credit records get credit cards. Last December, she met her roommate's brother, John [REDACTED]. She and [REDACTED] are now engaged.

But Nichole said there was nothing happy about her life before she met her fiance.

"I was scared," she said. "I don't like to talk about it. I always wanted to come home. I missed them. But the longer you stayed gone, the harder it gets to come back. "I was lucky that nothing happened to me. I think God was there and keeping things from happening to me."

Nichole said she didn't want to hurt her parents, but said the experience helped her.

"I never used to appreciate anything," she said. "When you are on your own you learn a lot of things."

Nichole said she also found out her parents' lectures weren't just lectures, but facts of life.

"I found out they were true - the importance of school, family and having confidence in yourself. Everything I never listened to then - but it stays with you and everything they tell you, it's right. It just took me learning on my own." Nichole also doesn't drink or smoke anymore. "My parents used to tell me, 'You

don't have to drink to have fun.' And you don't," Nichole said.

She said she stopped nine months ago. "I quit because I wanted to. I didn't want to be in that type of lifestyle."

Nichole also decided to stop living a lie. About three weeks ago, she told her fiance the truth about her past. He pressured her into calling her parents.

She's glad she did.

She couldn't wait to see her cat, Pepper. Her bedroom is the same. She's been sleeping with her teddy bear.

"I pictured how I wanted home to be," she said. "I came home - it was more than I expected. Everyone was real nice. I felt real welcome."

Nichole said her parents, who are divorced, are happy too. ■■■ is engaged and will get married next year.

Nichole is going back to Columbus, but wants to move back to Northern Kentucky.

Before she gets married, Nichole wants to get her General Educational Development degree. She wants a career.

For the past 18 months, ■■■ said he thought the worst happened to Nichole. "I thought either she would be dead or just holed up in some fleabag apartment on drugs, which she isn't.

"I would have been happy to find out that she was alive on Thursday. To find out she is healthy and happy and a grown-up young lady - it's the biggest joy I could ever had.

"You couldn't write a better ending."

- Caption: PHOTOPost Eighteen months after Nichole ■■■ ran away, she returned to see her father, Campbell County Commissioner Dave ■■■. Nichole, who had been living in Columbus, called home Thanksgiving Day.

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