

Reaching for the American Dream, With a Little Help from the SSA

Scholarship winner Natasja Hengstler was literally raised in self storage.

By John Dunlap

Natasja Hengstler would be only too happy to tell you that she is living the American dream. At 23 years old, she is smart, ambitious and outgoing. She's married to her high school sweetheart and is working on a bachelors of science degree in applied mathematics with a concentration on physics at the College of the Desert in Palm Desert, California. And she speaks happily of the fact that her formative years were spent living in an apartment in a self storage facility.

While many people think of the little house in the friendly neighborhood as the way to grow up, Hengstler says there were many advantages to living on a self storage property, which she did, beginning at 13.

"It was a blast living in a self storage facility, way better than being in a single-family house," she says. "What kids do you know who have a built-in roller skating rink in their backyard or a private gated entrance to their front door? Oh, and my girlfriends and I used to tell my little brother that the second floor of the center building was haunted. After that he never dared to get into the elevator."

Now, ten years later, Hengstler is the beneficiary of the \$5,000 Ed & Craig Olson Scholarship Award that is part of the Self Storage Association Foundation's first class of scholarships. She is one of seven recipients who were chosen from a group of applicants who either work in

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Natasja Hengstler has made the most of living in the self storage world thanks to her mother, Carol Bush, who works for Extra Space Storage in Utah. Photo: Melisa Pannunzio

the self storage industry or have a parent working in self storage. In Hengstler's case, it is her mother, Carol Bush, who is the connection to self storage.

Bush, who now works with Extra Space at its corporate office and is the manager and service team leader of their National Sales Center Learning, helped introduce Hengstler to life at a self storage facility. In 2000, Bush, who had been looking online for a job opportunity, found one managing an Extra Space facility in Burbank, California. Bush soon guided the facility to new heights in sales and occupancy rates, all while being a single mom. And part of that scenario included living on-site, which was just fine with Hengstler.

"I had moved a great deal up to that point since my ex-stepdad was involved in sales," Hengstler said. "But I never considered that a negative; I just made new friends everywhere I went. And when we moved into the self storage facility I was able to play hide-and-seek with my friends as well as go rollerblading. I felt safe since there were cameras all around. About the only spooky part of it all was turning off the lights at night—that wasn't very fun."

Just a Staircase Away

For a kid who had grown up in Minnesota and lived in Chicago, this was just another new adventure. And she is forever thankful that her mother could find a way to be successful in self storage while also being a mom.

"She is truly a testament to the self storage industry and the opportunities it provides," added Hengstler. "She started just taking care of one property and within months brought it to the top in sales and occupancy. She loves what she is doing; more importantly, it has allowed her to provide for a family of six on her own. And she was always so grateful that, although she was working, all of us kids were just a staircase away."

Hengstler now lives in Indio, California, near Palm Springs, with her husband, who she met at the age of 15. In the fall, she plans to transfer to Cal State San Bernardino, one of the largest teacher training institutions in the country.

As far as the SSA Foundation scholarship is concerned, "It is going to help pay for my tuition and books, and anything left over will go toward future books needed," she said.

"I can't tell you how much this means to me and how appreciative I am to the Self Storage Association," Hengstler added. "When my mother came across the scholarship opportunity I didn't think much of it considering that the last thing most companies are doing right now is giving money away to students. This scholarship is such a blessing."

So now Hengstler will work toward her degree, then get out into the working world.

"I may decide to work in the field for a couple years before going back and getting my teaching credentials," she said. "The best teachers are those with real-world experiences. Plus, I think it would be fun to create new formulas and work beside truly elegant, inspiring individuals."

"College is by no means the end of the road for my education," Hengstler concludes. "After I graduated from high school, while most kids chose to take a trip to Europe, I took a year off before starting college to go to cosmetology school. It was simply something I always wanted to learn. And when I have children and they are all grown up, I want to go to culinary school or take theology classes. Learning is fun. We should never stop learning and growing, no matter what our age or situation."

And, as Natasja Hengstler can attest, always be open to the joys of living at a self storage facility. Sometimes it even pays off with a scholarship. ❖



The SSA Foundation Ed & Craig Olson Scholarship

A-American Storage Management Founder Ed Olson, a member of the Self Storage Hall of Fame, has long backed Association programs. He and current A-American president Craig Olson provided the first named gift of \$50,000 to the SSA Foundation Scholarship program. The Ed and Craig Olson, A-American Storage Management Co. SSA Foundation Scholarship will help fund students who work or have family members working within the self storage industry—for at least ten years. Founded in the Los Angeles region, A-American operates facilities in California, Illinois and Hawaii.