

# How Natasha McCurdy went from an unhoused dropout to the Staunton School Board chair

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STAUNTON — Sitting in a chair in the corner of her living room, Natasha McCurdy laughs a lot more than you might expect from someone who has lived her life. She could be, and probably should be, mad at the world. It certainly appears the world is mad at her.

McCurdy has been broken several times, always putting the pieces back together only to see another crack form. She was in the foster care system. She and her family have experienced homelessness. She was placed in an alternative school for disciplinary issues. She dropped out of high school. Her sister died. Her dad got sick. Her dad died. She's lost touch with some siblings.

McCurdy always managed to find a way to pull herself back up, sometimes with a lot of support from teachers and friends and the community.

The latest crack may be too big to repair, though.

Last year doctors discovered a brain tumor. McCurdy has been told there's a 5% chance she'll live 10 more years, although new medical procedures are being found all the time so maybe there's a miracle in her future. For now the medical professionals want to hold off on surgery for as long as possible.

"As soon as seizures start I'm out of time," McCurdy said. "They have to then try and get it out, but we don't know when that is."

Talking about the tumor, which she has jokingly referred to as a Skittle because it originally was the size of the small candy when it was discovered, although it has grown since, is where you start to see a little despair set in, but only temporarily.

For years the 35-year-old has been taking classes at Blue Ridge Community College with the idea of transferring to a four-year school. On a shelf in her living room there are text books about physics, an area of study she was pursuing. In between those classes she took others in which she found interest, slowing down her progress toward a degree but increasing her knowledge base. She took a DC and AC fundamentals class to learn about circuits. One time she needed to fix her heater so she took a class that taught her how.

Something always seemed to interrupt her progress. Right before she was diagnosed with the tumor, after she had fallen the first time in July 2021 and suffered a concussion, she had started back at BRCC with one semester remaining to a degree. The concussion made it hard to concentrate on learning, so she stopped again.

Her willingness to keep trying showed determination when so many people would have given up. Sitting in her living room one morning in the middle of August, McCurdy admitted she might finally be at that point.

"It's like I have a 5% chance over 10 years," she said. "Why am I going to like spend my time doing that and then ..."

McCurdy trails off briefly before the optimism returns.

"But there's also a 5% chance so yeah," she said, giving a little chuckle. "Maybe I should get it done in case we hit the 5%."

Not many are betting against her after what she's already overcome in life.

One of nine siblings, McCurdy moved with her family to Staunton from Mountain City, Tennessee, when she had just become a teenager. They lived on Bridge Street, which turned out to be the last place they all lived together as a family. Someone had told her dad that Staunton City Schools weren't good, so he sent the kids to Augusta County Schools. McCurdy attended Beverley Manor Middle and Buffalo Gap High School before someone found out the family lived in the city. That's when she started attending Lee High.

While in high school, McCurdy was sent to Genesis, the regional alternative school at the time. She's still not really sure why that happened, although she and the principal at the time never got along. When she was sent back to Lee High she was put in the PULSAR program for at-risk kids.

Meanwhile, after her parents returned to Tennessee, she was unhoused, along with her twin sister.

"When you're homeless in high school, there's not a whole lot of options for you," she said.

She stayed in a friend's basement. She lived at the abandoned DeJarnette building off of Richmond Road and Frontier Drive. She lived in old train cars with holes in the bottom that she could crawl through to get into the trains. She squatted in unoccupied houses.

"I just thought it was normal," McCurdy said.

She understands that it's not so normal now that she has her own family.

"I had to be responsible and not be a kid," she said. "Now I see my kids just being kids and have to remember they are like this because it's normal. I was not."

When she was younger, McCurdy was in the foster care system.

"The goal for foster care is always reunification," she said. "So they would get to that point we'd go back (to her parents) and I guess they'd mess up and we'd go back into the foster homes of hell. It always seemed like when we had nice ones we went home sooner, when we had crappy ones we seemed to be stuck there longer."

When McCurdy was 14 there was no placement for her in the foster care system so she was temporarily sent to the Shenandoah Valley Juvenile Center for a few weeks. Eventually she was returned to her dad and began working to get emancipated, which she did two years later.

All of this was going on while she was trying to be a high school student and working to earn some money. The family was split up. Her twin, Felecia, was in foster care and the only time the two saw each other was during school hours. She remembers one teacher telling them to talk when they got home, having no idea what they were going through. Other students didn't understand it either, although she admits she's not really sure how those students viewed her.

"I don't even think the adults got it a lot of times, and there was a lot of things that happened when I was in high school," she said. "My cousin Chris got stabbed to death. So when the police came to interview us who were with him that night, people found out, so I think at some point, people just think you're the weirdo and kind of leave me alone. So it's not a lot of student interactions to know what the students thought."

Even with all that was going on, McCurdy liked school. She said school was more like home for her than home was.

"There was a schedule. I knew when food was happening. I knew where to be when, what was expected. There were some good teachers. There were also some that I'm really glad are no longer with Staunton City Schools. Maybe that wasn't really their calling. But yeah, school was good."

She wants students to understand school is sometimes the one place that can get them out of bad situations. Schools have resources and connections that are valuable.

And yet, she dropped out of school after her junior year and that summer got her GED.

"The road I took meant that I missed out on a lot, including getting to just be a kid," she said. "I didn't get to go to school activities and events because I had to work. I wish I would have got to go to games and dances, but never could."

She met her future husband when she was 16 and they moved in together. They were married in 2003 and now have three children. She's worked to give them a different life than she had, although she says she doesn't really understand what normal is.

"I know what I see on TV," she said. "I'm, like, that's what we're supposed to be doing? I'll give that a go."

When her daughter was in kindergarten she won an award for her art. The family got a letter asking them to come to a school board meeting so the child could be honored. Until that letter came, McCurdy had no clue such a thing as a school board existed. Six years later she was running for a seat on the board.

Before that decision was made, McCurdy had begun volunteering in her children's schools and was very active in the Ware Elementary PTA. She got involved with Staunton Action, a community group formed in 2017 to address various concerns with and to support the school division.

The night of the election, while other candidates were awaiting results at a local brewery, she was home with her kids, fully expecting to lose. She didn't, winning the special election for a

two-year term. She remembers thinking that she had a lot to learn to get ready, jokingly asking if there was an instruction manual.

In 2020 she ran for reelection and won a four-year term.

"There definitely have been times on the board where I've felt like I don't know as much as the others do," she said. "But I think it works because everybody has a different perspective about different things and they have different talents that they bring. And mine are for a group of kids that don't typically have representation in these places."

This year she'll get to experience something different as not just a school board member, but the person in charge. Board members had begun discussing who would be the next chair last spring and McCurdy was the consensus pick, although her health issues did concern some members, including her. Then in June she fell in her driveway breaking her clavicle and hitting her head.

She was honest with the other board members, saying she wanted to do it, but wasn't sure if her health would allow it. She suggested Robert Boyle, who has experience, be the vice-chair in case things go awry.

McCurdy was voted Staunton School Board chair in July, first taking the center seat for the August meeting. In that meeting, McCurdy, a big Trekkie, and maybe a little bit of a nerd at heart, wore a gold Star Trek Starfleet commander shirt. She was, after all, the one in charge.

For someone who doesn't love public speaking, McCurdy described that first meeting by comparing herself to the main character in the Pixar movie "Inside Out." The movie deals with emotions that are represented by various characters.

"That's what's happening in my head," she said. "It's the little red guy (anger) and the little purple guy (fear) just slamming into buttons the entire meeting while I try to stay focused."

The school board is about to undergo change with three new members joining in January and the three members she came on with in 2018 leaving their seats. While she's sad to see those members go, McCurdy is confident she is the person who can lead the board into 2023 despite the challenges it faces.

She said she was both nervous and excited. New members bring new energy, but she's had a great working relationship with the members who will be going off the board.

"I hope we can all end up being as productive as we have been the last four years," she said.