Pieces of My Life
STORIES OF SURVIVAL AND TRIUMPH IN FOSTER CARE

A collection of blogs from CR’s Fostering the Future campaign
When children are removed from abusive and neglectful families, they should be kept from further harm.

And while foster care can be a safe haven for some, it can be heartbreaking for others.

Too many kids are left to live in dangerous situations or languish in institutions, are shuffled between multiple homes or torn from siblings.

That’s why Children’s Rights steps in.

We use the law to hold governments accountable and defend thousands of kids when foster care systems fail. Children’s Rights has secured court orders mandating top-to-bottom child welfare reform in more than a dozen states.

As a result, kids are safer.

They get the education and healthcare they need. They have better foster homes.

Best of all, children find permanent, loving families more quickly, ensuring they have the brightest possible futures.

Dear Readers,

When Children’s Rights decided to launch Fostering the Future, I knew I wanted to be involved.

Why? Being a kid is tough.

It’s hard enough when you’re dealing with the everyday stuff: a kid brother or sister who irritates you. A teacher who misunderstands you. A friend who lets you down. When things get really intense, it could be the school bully, or the pressure to use drugs.

These things aren’t easy, but they often turn out OK. Your dad mediates when you and your sibling start scrapping. Your mom meets with your teacher. Your parents show you how to negotiate conflict, to stay strong in the face of peer pressure.

But what happens when your mom is grappling with mental illness and can’t go to your school? When your dad, out of work for far too long, takes out his frustrations on you? What if the “everyday” stuff prevents your role models from keeping you safe and meeting your most basic needs?

Oftentimes the answer is foster care. Children get pulled from their homes to be in safer, more supportive places. Sometimes it’s a relief, even though it means losing everything they’ve ever known. But sometimes, stability is out the window. When kids are bounced from home to home, have multiple caseworkers and land in dicey placements, life can get even scarier than it once was.

And far too often the voices of these young people aren’t heard. That is why Children’s Rights instituted a month-long campaign in May, National Foster Care Awareness month. Fostering the Future provides first-hand accounts from those who have experienced state care. While foster care was a saving grace for some writers (spoiler alert: I was one of the lucky ones), for many it wasn’t too pretty.

As you begin reading you’ll see that foster care is in desperate need of reform across the country. So we, the voices of Fostering the Future, appreciate you taking the time to hear us. We need everyone to do their part to make sure our children have the brightest futures possible. Thank you for joining this fight.

Darryl “DMC” McDaniels
October 2013
When I was 5, my mother passed away and I entered New York City foster care. I quickly saw just how bad it can be inside a broken child welfare system.

In the first home, I was treated like I didn't even exist. It felt bad to be ignored, but I learned to be grateful for homes that were merely indifferent after I was placed in an abusive and neglectful one. A few more followed the first and I’m still reminded of them every day. Having my arm pressed against a pot of boiling water left a scar that I try not to glance at while I’m typing. A kick to the head from a work boot left a mark on my hairline that I glimpse whenever I comb my hair. There were many more injuries and they all have memories attached to them that I’ll never forget.

Being abused wasn’t the worst of it though; the countless nights I went to sleep hungry and hoping to never wake up again are what I recall most vividly. My entire childhood, or at least what I can remember of it, was spent knowing no one could be bothered with me, a feeling that has followed me well into adulthood. However, as I got older and learned more about the world outside of foster care, dreams of never waking up were replaced by dreams of escaping into a different life.

Luck came my way just before my 16th birthday, when I was placed with a foster family that cared about me. They went out of their way to make sure I got the mental health and educational help I needed to attain the different life that, until then, had been nothing more than a dream. Thanks to them, I was able to go to college and start the process of building a life for myself outside of foster care. Despite everything that happened to me while in care, I ended up being “one of the lucky ones.” However, I still entered adulthood without a family or support system. It’s a day-to-day reality that weighs heavily on me — knowing that I don’t have the safety net so many people my age are accustomed to having. The traumas I went through obviously were difficult, but what I struggle with the most are the seemingly little things. Knowing that every birthday will come and go without a call from relatives. Every holiday season will be spent constantly reminded that I have no family to spend it with. Part of me will always be the scared little kid in a home that isn’t really home. This is what it means to have a “lucky” foster care experience for too many kids.

The idea that one has to hit the proverbial lottery to have a happy and productive life after foster care infuriates me to this day. There is nothing I can do that will change what happened to me, but I can do something to help make sure future generations of children don’t go through the same thing. That’s why I decided to work for Children’s Rights.

Now I get to spend my days as part of an organization fighting for the widespread reforms that failing child welfare systems desperately need. We have won court-ordered improvements in more than a dozen states, making foster care a better place for tens of thousands of children. These include comprehensive screening of foster parents, better training for caseworkers and post-foster care services for youth exiting the system — the kinds of things that could have made all the difference for me while I was in care.

While I still wish that I could have had a more-or-less normal and happy childhood, I am oddly grateful for the perspective going through foster care gave me. I have no idea what I’d be doing if I wasn’t working to fix the system that let me down, but I do know it wouldn’t be anywhere near as fulfilling. The life I dreamt of having is coming together, now all I have to do is keep up the fight.

“BEING ABUSED WASN’T THE WORST OF IT … THE COUNTLESS NIGHTS I WENT TO SLEEP HUNGRY AND HOPING TO NEVER WAKE UP AGAIN ARE WHAT I RECALL MOST VIVIDLY.”
After sitting down to write this, I begin to recall every memory I typically wish to forget. I began to think about my mom and dad’s frequent arguments, consisting of nothing but pure hatred for one another. I still remember the terrifying moments of watching my dad beating my mom. I was beyond angry with my father. Knowing him now, he isn’t usually a mean person, but my parents’ everyday drug abuse outweighed their love for anyone but themselves.

My mom struggled with mental health issues, always threatening to take her life when things got tough. She never stopped wishing she had provided better for her children, as we relied strictly on welfare. I went many years without running water. Recalling the inability to take a shower at home or not being able to wash my hands under a faucet are recent memories. There were times I went without food, heat in the winter, or days without even water to drink. Our houses were certainly not homes, but they were all that we had. Things were rough but I was forced to look at my life and consider it normal, I knew nothing else. I was a child and couldn’t change anything.

The Alabama Department of Human Resources was in my life for most of these years. Social workers would check on my family because of the constant moving from house to house and because I changed schools so often, as my mother kept running from my father. Eventually, I was removed from the home and taken away from my family. At the age of 8, soon before being placed back into my mother’s home, my older sister of 16 passed away due to a rare disease. This difficult time was hard on everyone in my family and caused my mom’s mental illness to spark to its peak.

In the middle of the night, at the beginning of my 6th grade year, my mom once again threatened to take her own life. I thought this was another night like so many others, where I would sit for hours persuading her not to hurt herself. After many tears and a long talk, my mom pulled the trigger.

My mother was rushed to the hospital. After several nights under a doctor’s care, my mom walked out just fine. However, I was taken from our home for the last time. I was placed into foster care. My first home was called the Alabama Baptist Children’s Home.

After being there for about two years, I was placed into the home where I now reside. I was blessed beyond measure to be put in these two homes. Living in these unfamiliar environments, I have never felt unloved, unwanted, or uncared for, nor have I ever felt threatened in any shape or form. This was a major change in how I was treated and what was expected of me. I no longer had to face things alone. I was encouraged to advance in my schoolwork and become a college graduate. This reinforcement was certainly something I learned to deal with.

My life seemed to have reached some stability and I was doing well when I had to face one of my most difficult challenges yet. I had to cope with the unexpected death of my mother. She had a grand mal seizure in her sleep and it caused her to suffocate. I had always kept faith in her, to rise above all of her past. There were times when she was doing so well and I believed we would one day live as a family again, but God had bigger plans. Despite her passing, it is such a blessing to know that we will soon reunite in Heaven.

I have never stopped hurting from these experiences but, despite it all, I have overcome. I have a passion for helping people, which is why I have decided to major in social work at the prestigious university I now attend. I plan to earn my master’s degree in this field and change the world.

Being a child in foster care was nothing like I had once thought it would be. Movies tend to make foster care look like a terrifying place for children to be. My experience was nothing like that. I now have awesome supporters, a loving environment, and encouragement when I need it. Thanks to the foster care system, I have been given so many awesome opportunities. Things we never had money for when I was young, such as family trips and eating out, soon became an option for me.

Of course, foster care is not the ideal family. But I would love to tell future and current foster youth that anything is possible! No matter your goals, big or small, they are nothing but achievable. There is no room for doubt, just believe.

“FOSTER CARE WAS NOTHING LIKE I HAD ONCE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE.”

By Michaela Sanderson
Most people wake up each day with a mom, a dad or some form of a family structure. However, the youth in foster care who have this type of life are few and far between. I entered foster care as an infant, and my childhood would forever remain “chained” there. Growing up in care was very difficult for me. I had no sense of self-worth or identity and most of the time I felt alone, even though I had a foster family. I barely remember important parts of my life, like a year that I excelled in track or my drama performances, because no one was there to support me or cheer me on.

I was never adopted, and I grew up feeling that no one ever really wanted or loved me. As a result I spent my entire childhood and the majority of my adult life drifting in and out of relationships, and struggling to grasp the concepts of life, love, trust and, most of all, family. The scariest part about being in foster care for me was turning 18. The average kid cannot wait to turn 18, graduate from high school and get ready for their journey to college or to travel down that brave road to adulthood. However, by the time I turned 18, the road to college was a distant memory.

Instead I was constantly looking for a place to live, couch surfing, trying to figure out how to pay for my most basic needs — on some days I even had to figure out how I was going to eat (and believe me, there were plenty of nights that I went to bed hungry). This is the one area where I feel the foster care system, as a whole, has dropped the ball.

“Aging out,” is what they call it, and it affects thousands of kids across our nation; unlike the “Harlem shake” or some gaudy fashion, this “trend” never gets a million hits on YouTube, and you can’t pick it up and read about it in the latest fashion magazine. What you can do is see homeless teens skateboarding till nightfall, or hanging out in a library or local mall to keep themselves busy, to avoid thinking about the hunger in their bellies or the agonizing reality that they have no place to sleep.

This is what the end of foster care meant for me, and thousands of foster kids across this country. Not The Blind Side fairy tale ending you thought it would be, huh? Sure, that movie was based on a true story, but for thousands of us there is no Sandra Bullock — or her real-life equivalent — to whisk us away in a fancy car to a better life. Look at it this way … children are being removed daily from unimaginable situations of abuse and neglect, anywhere from physical abuse to the lack of proper food, housing, and unsanitary conditions. Those kids are removed from their families and now placed in the foster care system — understandably so. But many of them are well cared for, only to age out into the same conditions that originally landed them in foster care. This, without a doubt, needs to change!

In all fairness, there are some amazing foster care endings, where youth have thrived and they have done very well after exiting foster care. However wouldn’t you want every child to leave foster care with a success story?

By LaTasha C. Watts

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I went into foster care in my early teens. I remember it like it was yesterday. The long ride to an unknown house I would live in. With a family I had never met. Not knowing what to expect ... How would I be treated? Where would I sleep? Would I have my own room? What kind of food would I eat? Were other kids there?

Those questions and many more swirled around in my head. The cold January ride from Philadelphia to central Pennsylvania was only two hours, but seemed like it was taking forever. I had just spent a couple of months in a juvenile detention center waiting to see what the courts would do with me. I was the youngest kid in the center at the time. I was so naïve. The other kids all seemed so street smart. I heard lots of crazy stories about bad home life, group homes, crimes they committed and more. It made the experience so surreal. I was just a shy little kid from the suburbs.

The day I was taken from my mom’s house is very clear in my mind. My dad was absent from my life. I had just spent a year with a physically abusive uncle. At the end of the school year, I was sent back to live with my mom. After only three months back with my mom and sister, I was removed from the house. They came and took me to the police department. Later that day I was dropped off at the juvenile detention center.

I was placed with a Methodist minister and his wife. They already had another foster boy the same age. There had been others before me. The remaining time it was just the two of us with an occasional day visit from residents of a local Methodist home for children until the day I aged out. I was treated like I was one of their own. My foster parents could not have kids of their own for medical reasons unknown to me. I had heard stories from other kids in the system about various forms of abuse, neglect and being moved from home to home. I did not experience that. The home I was placed in was where I lived until I aged out. It was the longest I lived anywhere in one place until where I am today. I guessed I had hit the foster care lottery. It was the first time I experienced a stable home in my life.

My only wish is that there was a program in place while I was in the system that would have helped me build confidence and guide me in a better direction in life. A program to help kids learn to be healthy, productive and grow in a positive direction. When I aged out, I moved out and found myself living on the street. After a few months I moved up to couch surfing for another year before getting on my own feet and getting a place of my own to live. I spent the next six years being my own worst enemy, angry at the world for my problems. An affliction I have termed A-holitis. Maybe a good mentor program would have changed that? I don’t know. It sure couldn’t have hurt. Just cutting kids loose who age out, with no support line, is awful. I have learned that a failure to plan is nothing more than a plan to fail.

I am now a successful, self-employed business owner. I have a great wife and three great step sons and a home of my own. My foster parents are still in my life, lovingly supporting me today. I feel the foster care system gave me a safe haven to grow up in but did not give me the tools I needed at the time to succeed in my life and move on in a more positive direction. I had to struggle and learn them on my own through trial and error. I will be dealing with much of it for the rest of my life. I imagine some never get over the trauma of their youth. I was one of the lucky ones. And luck should have nothing to do with it!
My name is Deanna. When I was 3 1/2 years old and my sister Alyssa was just an infant, we were found all alone in a cardboard box in a New Jersey swamp. We had been abused and neglected by our birth parents, and were placed into foster care. Alyssa and I had three older siblings that were in foster care before us. When my birth parents became pregnant with me, they agreed to voluntarily sign over parental rights of my three siblings to the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS), so they could keep me. Then, they went on to add to our family another little girl, my sister Alyssa. But my birth parents’ habits never changed. They severely neglected and abused Alyssa and me. My birth mother was never charged with any crime for what she had done to her children and my birth father agreed to a plea of a detached parent with no time in jail and a $50 fine.

Our experience in foster care was a safe and loving one. Our first foster placement was with a lady I came to know as Momma Jean and her husband Bernie. Alyssa and I both had many physical and developmental delays, and they fought very hard to keep us together in the same home. After being in this good foster home for one year, the state still wanted to put us back in our birth parents’ care, even though they received no training or services that would have taught them how to care for us properly.

Mama Jean and Bernie didn’t want us to get too attached to them, so we moved to a second foster home that also took good care of us and met all of our needs. The state knew when they placed us in this home that it was also not a forever home. Our foster parents, Nanna and Pop-Pop, were older and were also concerned about us bonding with them and making us suffer through another separation. DYFS still had no real plans for our future, and my sister and I became part of a class action lawsuit that was filed by Children’s Rights against the state of New Jersey. This lawsuit provided us with the protection that we desperately needed. Even though the lawsuit did not seek monetary damages, my sister and I feel we got something much more valuable, a family and people we can call “Dad and Mom” forever.

Now, we’re free of the neglect and abandonment that we were forced to live in for so long! My family and I will be forever grateful to Children’s Rights for fighting for us when nobody else would. We have met many kind and loving people at Children’s Rights who are committed to saving children. We hope and pray that Children’s Rights will go on forever to be the voice of many children!

My sister Alyssa was with me all through foster care. We both understand that we were very fortunate to be together. Our biological family has been scattered, and we are the only two siblings that live together. During our adoption process my new parents were informed by DYFS that a sixth child was born in our biological family, but we didn’t know her whereabouts. My adoptive parents later learned that she was in foster care for four months during our adoption process. We believe her name is Brandi, and we are now trying to find her.

When Alyssa and I look back at our lives we realize that we were never alone. Our Heavenly Father was with us the whole time. He placed us with an adoptive father and mother who have a forever love for children. My new Dad and Mom gave me and Alyssa four more adopted sisters. They have taught us the true meaning of what it is to be loved! My Dad is a very silly person who makes us laugh a lot. He is not afraid to open up his heart to us and to talk to us about anything. My Mom is always there for us no matter what the need is. She helps all of us with our schooling. My Dad and Mom teach us about God’s amazing love! Alyssa and I know that God has always been with us.

Finally, A Loving Family

By Deanna
Dear Current Foster Youth,

My name is Ryniqueka Dowell. I am 21 years old and I attend California State University, Sacramento. I am a part of the Guardian Scholars Program, which helps former foster youth financially, mentally, and physically. They are here to make sure we succeed.

I was put in foster care at age 14 and stayed for four years. This may not be long to those of you who have been in care all of your lives, but it felt long to me. On the day that I heard that my sister, cousins and I had to go into state care I was terrified and very sad to leave my family. The night before we left I barely got any rest because I was soaking my pillow with tears. We all lived together and the thought of splitting up was scary.

Within an hour of waiting at Child Protective Services (CPS), our new families were ready to take us in. I hated the feeling of leaving my biological family and not knowing when I would see them again, of not knowing how our new families would treat us. I was so scared and the thought of splitting up was scary.

My first foster care placement didn’t go too well. My foster mother claimed the system wasn’t giving her any money to take care of my sister and I, so we went without clothes and personal items for two months. Then I ran away because I was told I couldn’t visit my hometown anymore. I was gone for about a month before I was forced to go back to my foster care placement. That very next morning I was awakened by a police-man, escorted to the police car and taken to juvenile hall. I wasn’t there for long so I’m guessing it all was to just scare me into never running away again. That was one of my worst memories of foster care.

My best memory of foster care was when I was moved back to my hometown after three months of living with complete strangers. I was so excited, I couldn’t wait to get the chance to see my family again. When they separated us I thought that I would never see them, and it had a hold on my heart. So when I did get the chance I was one of the happiest people on earth.

I’m going to be straightforward with you: I hated foster care. I was inside my shell for a very long time. I didn’t want to talk to anybody and I didn’t want anybody to say anything to me. Some of the social workers seemed like complete liars; they would tell me one thing and then it would turn out to be the total opposite. Sometimes I thought they were saying what I wanted to hear just to make me happy. I was placed in five different homes within these four years.

I wasn’t getting treated like the other kids were, especially in the places that also had biological children. I haven’t come across a person yet that actually treats foster children as if they were their own. I don’t believe that a mother is willing to do the same things for her own child and a child that is not biologically hers. To me it seems that, in the back of their minds, it is already set that they didn’t carry you for nine months so they didn’t experience that emotional and physical attachment.

All I want to say to all of you foster youth out there is to never give up, regardless of the situation, and keep in mind that there is always somebody out there that has a life way worse than yours. If you don’t have a good role model, be your own. Follow your heart and do what you think is best. Please do not give up. Take advantage of the educational benefits that are available to you — other colleges have Guardian Scholars or similar programs, so take advantage of this opportunity for help. A lot of people are expecting us to give up and not make it and this is our chance to prove all of them wrong. Keep your head up and keep striving.

Sincerely,
Ryniqueka Dowell
Hello, my name is Patricia. When I was placed in foster care I was angry and felt abandoned by my mother. I was 12 when I was pulled away from my family and placed in a foster home. I was given an opportunity to be adopted, but I turned it down, because I wanted my mom. Later I realized that foster care helped me in getting away from a horrible situation and into people who showed me the love and care I deserved.

I stayed in foster care until I graduated high school in 2008, in a total of one shelter and five foster homes. If I could change anything about the foster care system it would be the recruitment of more foster homes that are equipped to care for the needs of the teenagers. It was hard for my social worker to find me a foster home that would house a teenager for longer than a couple of months.

I also would not place children on multiple medications. I was on seven, and I always felt like I was a human lab rat. Recently I went to a high school reunion and the teachers told me that when I was a student there, I looked like I was having seizure activity all the time, and I was banging my head on the walls. They said I was the student they worried the most about after graduation.

The best memory about foster care was when my last foster mother showed me love and invited me to stay until I graduated. She motivated me to graduate high school — even though I was told numerous times by counselors and some teachers that I would not graduate in time because I struggled with English and History. Ironically, the worst memory was during that same time period. It was my senior year and I was struggling with school and, at the last minute, trying to find a college to attend, and a place to live after I graduated from foster care.

When I was in care the people who influenced me most were my last foster mom, who encouraged me to stay in school when I had thoughts of dropping out, so I could be the first one in my family to graduate; my best friend, who was there for me when I was down and led me to go to church and accept the Lord as my savior; and my teachers, by constantly staying on me about my school work, about making smart choices, and always expecting 100 percent from me.

Being a foster child has its ups and downs, but it was the best thing for me. Some of the downs were that I was teased and overmedicated, but the good has outweighed the bad. If I wasn’t placed in foster care I probably would not be who I am now — a smart, happy, and loveable young woman who is able to help others dealing with the same obstacles.

For those of you who are in foster care, I would say stay strong and strive for a better future. Better days are yet to come.

“IT WAS HARD FOR MY SOCIAL WORKER TO FIND ME A FOSTER HOME THAT WOULD HOUSE A TEENAGER FOR LONGER THAN A COUPLE OF MONTHS.”
You’re 5 years old. You’re lying flat on your stomach at the top of the stairs, listening to your social worker tell your foster mom that you have to go to another foster home. This always scares you, and makes you wish you were a normal kid. Most of what happens doesn’t faze you, but what does matter is that you’re gonna have to meet a new family, get to know a new family, be a part of a new family. That’s always the hardest part. Adjusting to their standards, their norms.

You hear the creak of the steps, as your social worker climbs the stairs, to break the news to you. You always listen when your social worker comes. Her name is Ms. Goldie. You’re not even sure if that’s her real name. It just seems to sound nice, and go along with her hair, a shade of gold. She’s always been kind to you. Breaking the news in the most caring way possible. She’d always say something like: “We’re going on a trip. You’re going to meet a new family. They’re going to love you, and you’re going to be able to watch whatever you want on television. Not just Blue’s Clues. It’s time to get going. Get your things together, sweetie.”

Children aren’t supposed to feel this way. They’re not supposed to wonder where they’ll be in a day, a week, a month, or even a year. You put everything you own in a black trash bag. What lies ahead, you have no way of knowing. You just have to brace for it, and hope for the best. You put your black trash bag in the trunk of your social worker’s car. You sit in the back seat, and you fasten your seatbelt.

On that day, you don’t meet a new family. You are left behind at the county agency. The building is cold, industrial even. But you’re a kid, and you don’t notice those things. Your black trash bag is set down, and your social worker buys you a bag of chips. You’re left to sit on a bench, alone.

After an hour, a sheriff’s deputy comes to get you. He doesn’t even know your name. He’s tasked with making sure you have a place to stay that night. He picks up your trash bag, and takes you to his office. You’re fortunate enough to get a sleeping bag, and a space by his desk. Hope is what you need, in every situation. Whatever you have to deal with, just deal with it. One way or another, you’re gonna get through it.

“CHILDREN AREN’T SUPPOSED TO FEEL THIS WAY. THEY’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO WONDER WHERE THEY’LL BE IN A DAY, A WEEK, A MONTH, OR EVEN A YEAR.”

By Dylan McIntosh
Children across the nation are forced into foster care systems with alarming frequency because the people they have grown to love and trust are deported to other countries and forced to abandon them.

Immigration has taken a toll on more than 80,000 Latino youth, according to the United States Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau. I am one of them. I was thrown into foster care at age 13 when my father was deported. To me there is no logic in putting kids in care when they have loving parents — parents who came here to do their best for their families and lack only one document.

For the past five years I've had a real lens with which to examine foster care, and I have seen children become lost in a whirlpool of anger, neglect and despair. They land in child welfare systems that are so overburdened, it feels like kids are viewed as mere numbers rather than individuals with real needs, particularly as the placements and paperwork start to stack up.

This felt especially true for my younger brother. He and I were separated in care. Adjusting to his new life was really difficult, and sometimes he acted out. He was put in placements that were meant to help him deal with our situation, but they were restrictive, lock-down style facilities. Our caseworker would promise to move him to an independent living program when his behavior improved, but when he progressed, he was told there was nothing open. That would cause him to act out more, and he'd get blamed for the shortcomings of the system.

My brother and I have different styles of coping, and I ended up with fewer placements. But that doesn't mean foster care was easy. I remember the first night I spent at the shelter that ended up being my "home" for nine months. I cried. I was lost. I felt abandoned. I balled up on my bed not being able to speak to anyone, not being able to confide in anyone. I desperately needed it to be a bad nightmare. Instead I woke up to staff, to other residents, hearing about medication, curfews. I had never experienced something like this.

I left the shelter to live with a distant cousin for two years, but it didn't work out. I came back into care and was put in a group home in a different county, and I had to start a new school. My caseworker told me that education was not her priority at the time. That she didn't care if my records or my GPA were affected by the move. For six months I was at this group home, then another group home for about nine months. And it did affect my education — my teachers could tell you I was a great student, but the instability in my life meant poor grades and poor attendance on my transcript. This troubled me greatly because all along, the only support I got came from school. It was a haven where I could release all the negativity in a positive way.

If the system did a good job at keeping me close to the family I grew up with, then maybe I would've had some kind of emotional stability. The first time I came into care they moved me about an hour away from where my family was, and for a good six months I had no contact with them, not even my brother. As often as I tried to advocate to see my brother, it would always take three months or more just to be able to see him for an hour. I grew up with my brother as far as I can remember. It would have been better if they kept us together.

The system showed no remorse for taking my innocence or childhood. My father isn't here to support me in the way that I would have liked. He will not get to see me buy my first car or go to my senior prom. Most importantly, he will not be at my graduation when I give my speech as senior class president and receive my diploma. Nor will he get to drop me off with pride at Syracuse University, which I'll attend in the fall on a full academic scholarship. These are the significant moments that any teen, of any background, would want his parents to support.

These are pieces of my life that I will never recover, but despite losing them, I continue to press forward. And there is support. The Multi-Alliance Agency for Children has been there for me as I've transitioned into independent living, and influenced and encouraged me to reach for my dreams. Thanks to them I have made it my cause to advocate for thousands of young people who have and will go through foster care.

By Edgar Carranza
Growing up in foster care from the age of 3 to 17, I don’t know where to start. There were 40 placements, so I was told. I may correct that number later. I can remember everything like it was yesterday; people, names, faces, placements, group homes. I am half Native-American and African-American. I am enrolled in the Omaha Tribe of Nebraska. I also am the youngest of four siblings.

For almost 14 years I was lost. It was a tug of war with the Tribe and the state of Nebraska, and I was the rope. In the late 80’s early 90’s, I don’t think they knew what to do with children that were abused, hurt, alone and lost. By the time I was 8, I was in 12 different homes. Some state and some by the Tribe.

I was never stable. I just got used to hearing, “You’re going to meet a new family today Valena.” So I put on my cute smile and charm, packed my bags and wished to myself this time they would like me or keep me. Not knowing the smile would always fade. I wasn't getting the right treatment and help to deal with all that I had been through. I was able to create a fake mask that was not me at all. It was just to please everyone. It was like I was on the market.

I was in group homes where I felt like a guinea pig. I lost three years of my life being drugged up on meds to see if they controlled any of my feelings or problems. During the first eight years of my life I met some of my real family. I always remembered times with my grandfather and seeing my mother on short visits. It was good and scary to know where I came from. But what hurt the most was getting close and loving so many people that were ripped from my life. Being hurt and broken all over again made me just shut down. I didn’t care anymore.

To make a long, long story short, I raised myself. I learned to live in the day, in just the moment, because I didn’t know what was going to happen the next day. I became a mother at the age of 14. And had a few more after that that the state took because of my past. I am 30 now, still trying to find my path. But God showed me that everything I’ve been through is for a reason. So I can share and relate and help.

I’ve been down the drug path, living on the streets, was abused every way you can imagine. And I have every story and situation locked in my head and heart. I am writing a book about my tears as a minor. I have the story of every home, person, who, what, where and how...but could never answer why? I am hoping to help and heal other children who are feeling everything I’ve lived and I want them to know you can survive. I love them without knowing them because I know every tear, every fear. I was them at one time. I want to let other younger foster children know don’t give up.

This first appeared on Fostering Media Connections’ “In My Own Words” blog.

“IT WASN’T GETTING THE RIGHT TREATMENT AND HELP TO DEAL WITH ALL THAT I HAD BEEN THROUGH.”
My foster care experience began when I was 14 years old. For me foster care was foreign and scary and created a lot of complex emotions — many of which I still carry with me. I believe the experience has had a huge role in determining who I am today, both as a person and as a mother.

As someone who entered and exited care as a teenager I can tell you that the situation is not an easy one. I struggled with questions about who I was and the kind of person I wanted to be. When you are a teenager, you are bound to get in trouble. The difference between being in your own home and a foster home is that every mistake is magnified and analyzed by a whole team of people. One mistake can make people's entire vision of you change.

I remember my experience as a time of growth which is funny to me now because at the time I felt like I was being held back. I was very independent and used to caring for myself. Suddenly I needed permission for everything I wanted to do and getting permission (since it had to go through social workers) often took so long I wasn't allowed to do the thing I asked for. I thought I was ready to take care of myself and I didn't want strangers intruding on my life.

I also remember my time as lonely. Yes, I always had sisters or brothers in these homes. but it was not the same, and I found myself constantly missing my own sister and brothers. I missed out on so much of their lives. I don't think that would have been the case without foster care. Even though I was the one who turned my father in for drugs, I missed him and the rest of my birth family. I missed my friends.

But there is an upside to this. I got to meet a huge network of people that have been my support as an adult. And after aging out of foster care, I was reunited with a foster sister I grew very close to when I was adopted as an adult, a situation that makes my story even more special to me. Through my adoption I have gained a lot more brothers and sisters. I might have felt I was lacking in people as a teenager but, now that I am a mother, through this network of people I met, my daughter has an enormous amount of individuals to spoil her and make her feel loved.

My advice to others in foster care would be to try to develop patience. It is a frustrating place to be in and there are a lot of rules that seem unfair and without reason. For example, not being allowed to watch television unsupervised or not being allowed in the fridge without permission. You live with people who have different beliefs, religions, tastes in food and music than you do. BUT you are a part of an incredible network of people who are going through similar situations. I would tell you to become aware of the other foster care alumni and to befriend them. Lastly, I’d tell you all to GO TO COLLEGE! There are so many scholarships and programs to help with this process, do your research and better your life.

My foster care experience was not easy and I resented a lot of the members of the homes I lived in. I felt like they didn’t know me and yet were judging me. I never felt accepted. Growing up though, and working to become a foster mother myself has made me realize that their job is hard too. Opening up your home and your heart to children you know you have to say goodbye to is not without stress and heartbreak and not all parents can deal with this the same way.

Looking back, I have had a lot of difficult moments in foster care and a lot of hardening was done to my heart. I struggle still to trust others and expect everyone to abandon me. Nevertheless, I have a lot of good memories too. Memories of sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, as well as extended family members that I might not have contact with but who have helped me to become the woman I am today.
When I was 8 years old, my mom became a “single mother” — a member of a population recognized for facing numerous challenges. My father’s death, from diabetes complications, brought these challenges. Her mental illness (bipolar disorder, paranoid schizophrenia) only strengthened them. She felt she was under attack from all sides. The culprits ran the gamut, from jealous in-laws and nosy neighbors to the CIA and NASA. One of them was the foster care system, and I remember being told numerous times, “if I can’t take care of you, they’ll take you away!” So I entered my teenage years with the specter of foster care hanging above my head. Not surprisingly, when I did end up interfacing with the child welfare system at age 13 (due to my mom briefly running away from our home in Northeast Philadelphia), I went into it expecting that leaving foster care and returning to live with my mom was both necessary and inevitable. As the months went by however, my mom grew deeper roots in a network of boarding homes and psych wards, and Isettled further into the bosoms of my foster families. I had known for years that something was off. I knew that other parents didn’t have so much paranoia or spend whole days lying around smoking, with their kids relying on frozen dinners. With no friends her own age, my mom treated me as her closest confidante, often sharing way too much information. There were definite positives to my upbringing: she consistently encouraged my academic excellence, and I realized that school was what I held onto throughout the tumult of her and foster care. But once in care, I got to explore new skills and experiences: sports, music, Jewish studies, siblings, healthy eating, anger management, as well as political awareness. After eight months of transition — during which I lived with an elderly aunt of my mom’s, five foster families, and spent a weekend in a shelter — I ended up with my current foster family, whom I still go home to in Philly. I came out as gay two years later at age 16, and they accepted me unconditionally. I’m not sure what would have happened if I were still with my mom. When I told her on one our visits, she broke down in tears, lamenting that she’d never have grandchildren. At art therapy a few years later, she crayoned a scene of me under a rainbow, with the caption, “Why did God give me a gay son?” Yet over time she accepted me, and has grown to love my boyfriend as well. Another possibility if I stayed with my mom: she was so overprotective, I don’t think she would’ve let me go to New York University; I could have ended up living at home, only strengthening the bubble we were in. I’ve always said foster care was good for me, but it was tough in the beginning. I got beat up by other kids at the shelter, who called me out for being “the white boy.” One home had cats, and I discovered that I was allergic — the first night there, during a welcome party the neighborhood threw me, a bout of hyperventilation heralded in a lifetime of asthma management. Another family told me five months into my stay something I’d long known: they didn’t have time to give the love I needed. Aging out of the system in Philadelphia required that I attend life skills classes at the Achieving Independence Center (which would benefit plenty of kids who aren’t in foster care). There I met young people who had less positive experiences; many were neglected and abused by foster families, or were unjustly removed from their biological families and were fighting for reunification. I taught classes there on safer sex and self-advocacy, and once in New York I gave classes to kids in foster care about their rights in the system, through The Door’s Foster Youth Peer Educator program. My connection to the disenfranchised, combined with my foster family’s emphasis on community involvement, led me to become an activist. I’ve been working to make a difference ever since, be it with tenants’ rights, LGBT and labor rights, or participatory democracy. I’ve changed so much, but I haven’t left my “former life” behind. I see my mom regularly, and lately I’ve been finding distant relatives I never knew before. It’s especially rewarding that, in recent years, my mom herself acknowledged that my foster family gave me things she never could, and that we’re both better off in our respective situations. I wholeheartedly agree.
At the age of 35, when I was writing my autobiography, I called my mother. “I need three things to make this more interesting for the reader — how much did I weigh, what time was I born, and at what hospital.” She told me and hung up. About an hour later she called back with my father on the line and gave me the shock of my life. “We have something else to tell you. You were a month old when we brought you home and you were adopted.” That’s when I learned I started out in foster care.

This news, which sent me reeling, also sent me for answers. Finding my birth mother, which was chronicled on a VH1 documentary, was a life-defining experience. But for me it was only one piece of the puzzle. Fueled with curiosity, I started listening to young people—those in foster care and those who aged out of care. Kids in group homes and even in jails and detention centers. I heard their stories. And I discovered a world far darker than I could have imagined.

Don’t get me wrong — foster care is positive for so many kids. There are a million stories of amazing foster parents. There are a million stories of children who were adopted by wonderful families, like mine. But there are also a million stories of horror. A lot of young people come out of the system worse off than when they went in.

More than 650,000 children spend time in foster care in the U.S. every year, and tens of thousands are abused, neglected and shuffled between homes, shelters and institutions. Many don’t get the medical care or emotional support that they need. Because of the instability in their lives, less than half graduate with a high school diploma.

I learned more, I saw just how lucky I was. I was adopted quickly. My parents supported me every step of the way. They sent me to good schools. I was able to attend college. I had stability, and I knew I was loved. When you look at me and my accomplishments, this is what I represent: what happens when you give kids in foster care the opportunity to fulfill their purpose and destiny.

So I decided to do something. I helped found The Felix Organization/Adoptees For Children to enrich the lives of children growing up without parents, and Camp Felix, which provides foster children with outdoor summer experiences.

But even that wasn’t enough. For years I wished there was an organization that would fight for the rights of these children. Then Children’s Rights heard my story and said, “You represent what we fight for every day … Will you join us?” I said, “Cool, let’s do it.” And I became a member of their board of directors.

What I saw at Children’s Rights was tough legal advocacy that turned failing foster care systems around. And by turning them around, it gave kids an opportunity to be the next great you and me. The next great doctors and lawyers and CEOs and entertainers and athletes. These children, regardless of their situations, have the right to be the next great people in this wonderful universe that we call ours. As far as I’m concerned, we all have a responsibility to them.

That’s why I am proud to stand with Children’s Rights. For almost 20 years they have used the power of the courts to defend the civil rights of children in foster care. As a result, these kids get the medical attention and mental health services they need. They are institutionalized less, and placed in stable foster homes. They have fewer caseworkers. And they are safely reunited with their families or adopted more quickly.

I asked my birth mother why she gave me up. She said, “So you could have a chance.” If we band together, we can give every child in this country a chance. If there’s something wrong with your water system, you fix it. If there’s something wrong with your cable, you fix it. Now think about America’s abused and neglected kids. Is there anything more important than giving them every advantage in the world? Let’s fix what’s wrong with foster care and give these kids every opportunity they deserve.
Completing high school while in foster care is not easy. I was placed into care after my mom was diagnosed with a mental illness and wasn’t able to adequately care for me anymore. I had to encourage myself to do my schoolwork while transitioning through the foster care system and dealing with problems that could easily keep any student from earning a diploma.

I entered foster care during my freshman year. I had to take night classes and work hard on my grade point average while traveling three hours to and from school by bus until I was placed at my second foster home. Unlike students with the luxury of waking up an hour or two before classes started, I had to leave my foster home at 4:30 a.m. to get to school on time, but this motivated me and made me realize that I could do anything I put my mind to. I used the long ride to finish assignments, do homework, read, listen to music and free my mind from everything that was going on around me.

I lived in a foster home with bolt locks on the refrigerator, where mice ran across my chest while I slept. Both my home and my foster home were in underprivileged areas in Queens, where riots between rivaling schools were common and gang violence ran rampant. Several of my friends were murdered.

Although I grew up with many young people who were involved in violence and exploitation, I exerted my energy into more positive things. I was able to balance my academics, be co-captain of my high school’s gymnastics team, and intern at a day care center and at a local paralegal’s office where I learned basic office skills all while attending school full time.

None of this would have been possible without the support of people who saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself. My gymnastics coach motivated me to maintain my grades because we had to have a certain GPA to compete on an individual and state level and the director of the internship program was always there for me to talk to when things seemed overwhelming.

In high school I dreamed of attending an Ivy League school one day, but I was not encouraged to pursue my dream; instead I was steered away to a local community college by people who were supposed to encourage me to strive for my highest ideals.

In my opinion, everyone has the right to be successful. In order for youth in foster care to be successful we must remove the stigma of being labeled incapable of performing academically, socially and economically because we are in the child welfare system. If anything, young people who survive the foster care system have demonstrated that they have the ability to overcome extraordinary circumstances. If provided the resources and support to attend the colleges they dream of attending — even a top college if accepted — they will succeed.

I am now working towards a bachelor’s degree with a double major and minor, am a member of one of the largest historically black Greek sororities in the nation — Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated — am the Vice President of all the historically black Greek organizations at my university, am on the Executive Committee for the SUNY Albany chapter of the NAACP, am an ambassador to promote higher education for youth, and also work for the Office of Children and Family Services.

It is vital that former youth in care who have had a successful transition as well as child welfare staff work diligently with young people to encourage every young person to strive for their highest ideals. With self-determination and motivation, we all have the ability to succeed and flourish to our full potential.
Some people would guess that foster care would have been the best thing for me. Life with my biological mother was tough. I never really had stability. My mother used and dealt drugs, and she neglected us. We moved all the time. We were never really in school, and I was very behind in my education. I have five siblings, and we pretty much raised each other. And that is what led to me being put in foster care for nine years, until I aged out at 18. I lived in 20 places. Foster homes, group homes, shelters, institutions, you name it. I felt very alone, because I never could stay somewhere long enough to make friends, or get close to anybody. It was also the first time I experienced real abuse. I felt my first hunger pain in foster care. When I was 10 my foster mother put my head through a wall. By the time I was 13, I was so angry. I didn’t understand why this was happening. What did I do to deserve it? Why didn’t anyone love me? Why weren’t they there for me? And instead of getting help, instead of somebody trying to help me cope with my situation, I was put on medication. I knew I didn’t need it. It made me feel numb. I didn’t even know who I was. I was diagnosed as bipolar and having ADHD. Bipolar disorder comes from a chemical imbalance in your brain. If you’re bipolar and you have to take medication for it, you’ll have to take it for the rest of your life. It is not like the flu. You don’t have it and get rid of it. I was put on medications starting at 13 for these diagnoses; yet now I am doing fine, and I don’t take anything but vitamins. In my opinion, foster kids do not have the mental health support that we need. If you think about it, in one day, you lose your whole family, you lose everything you know — whether bad or good, it is what you are used to, it is what you know. And then you are thrown into something different. It may be better, and sometimes it’s worse. It’s scary. And when you are so young all you know is your whole world just got flipped upside down. You have no one to talk to. You might be a couple hundred miles from where you are from. You are just in a totally different world and it’s like we are left to deal with that by ourselves. I know and have lived with three people who committed suicide, and I feel like it could have been prevented if somebody was there to help them.

Moving around, I learned how to survive, but I didn’t learn anything about living on my own after foster care. You pretty much get thrown out. When I left foster care I didn’t know anything. I didn’t know how to drive a car. This past year I learned quick. But I am determined. I am not going to be a statistic. I am going to succeed and I am going to be a great mother for my kids. I’m going to give them the love and support they need. I want them to understand that they are always going to be accepted. That’s something I would have killed for growing up.

Foster care is so wrong and it needs to change in a big way. Kids need stability. We need love. I stand with Children’s Rights because I have seen how they can change foster care systems. How they can actually make foster care helpful, when a state takes you away from the parents who are wronging you already. That way when we come out of foster care we can be better people. We can live our lives better. We can understand how to cope with the situations that we went through. No child should endure what I had to endure — and there are thousands across the country just like me. As we close out National Foster Care Month, let’s band together and help change that.
I came into the child welfare system at 12 years old, and I had no idea what to expect. I suffered severe emotional and physical abuse at the hands of my mother and stepfather; as a result I began to run away from home. This only led to more troubles, as by the time I entered foster care I had already been raped and sexually assaulted by people I thought were my friends. Needless to say there was no safe haven for me, and my mind had been programmed to believe that if I didn’t hurt others, I would be the one getting hurt.

I entered my first group home placement and was immediately dubbed the name “Sheba,” short for She-Beast; I had emerged from my toxic shell a very violent and angry little girl. Having my mother abandon me to this concrete jungle surrounded by wild animals had turned me into one. I was transferred from group home to group home, fighting everywhere I went. No one sought to understand me and no one cared. It’s disturbing that workers stood idly by and watched as pimps targeted young girls in the group homes. I had a “swing first, ask questions later” mentality. Because I dressed like a boy the pimps didn’t bother me, instead they paid me to beat up other girls.

In foster care, even our most basic needs went unmet. Nobody cared enough to keep up with our doctors’ appointments or made sure we were in school. I spent most of my teenage years in a procession of uncaring, unruly, unstructured New York City group homes fighting for survival.

Then, on May 11, 2003, my best friend committed suicide as I slept next to her. She told me she was really depressed and the pain wouldn’t stop. The next morning I found that she had overdosed on prescription medication. My entire heart crumbled into pieces, and I began to withdraw from the world. I dropped out of school, had no hope for the future and no will to live. Even with these circumstances, no one did anything to get me the help or services I needed to flourish and move past this. The staff did however get me locked into a psych ward, and doped up on medication just so they didn’t have to walk around in fear of me.

After spending nearly a year in and out of mental institutions, I decided to start getting my life together. I realized that the same world that had beaten down my friend until the point she killed herself could NOT beat me in the same way. My fighter spirit had begun to put me on a positive trajectory. I obtained my GED at 17, and began to look into options for college.

Through this, I was very lonely and in search of the love and companionship I never had. I found myself pregnant with my daughter, Alexandria. I had Alexandria in September 2006 at 19 years old and by January 2007 I enrolled in college. My daughter motivated me to set the bar higher, and although her father, who had promised to be there, was not, I could care less. Having Alexandria was the most joyful feeling in my life.

I had gotten my act together, yet the Administration for Child Services continued to fail us. They didn’t get me child care services, they didn’t provide any assistance with anything whatsoever — and when it came time for me to age out in December 2008, Alexandria and I were homeless. Although I had stable employment and a college degree, due to negligence in planning, my daughter, my son (who I gave birth to in 2009) and I had to live in a shelter.

Today, in 2013, I am fighting to advocate for young people like myself. I feel no young person should come out of foster care and face homelessness. I currently work with the Child Welfare Organizing Project and Legal Aid Society to build better initiatives to aid young people in foster care. I have developed a supportive housing program, which may save a lot of young people. I know one day people will know my story, and I pray every night that I can help change a system that is so broken.
State custody saved my life; it also ruined it. Inside, I’m a mess but I do my best to make sure you would never know it if you saw me.

I was in and out of the foster care system from the time I was 3 years old, until I finally left for good when I was 19. Two weeks before I first went into care, my grandparents took a photo of me, a cute, innocent, blond-haired, blue-eyed little girl in a red, white and blue dress. What you can’t see: that my grandma worked for two hours putting makeup on my face to hide the massive bruise my father put there.

When I was removed from my parents’ abusive house and placed in a foster home, it was the first time I slept through the night — I guess I must have felt safe. Then new horrors began to come around. I was molested by other foster siblings in different homes and abused by the ones who were supposed to look after me. And I lived more places than I can count. Not knowing where I would live from one day to the next would have been terrifying to anyone, let alone a child as young as I was.

The constant changing of case workers meant that my pleas were going unheard and unnoticed. Standing up for myself and telling others to stop hurting me made me an unruly child. Fighting them off of me only labeled me as aggressive. Telling my case worker what was happening cast me as a lying, attention-seeking child. No family wanted an unruly, aggressive, lying, attention-seeking child in their home. So off to group homes and treatment centers I went. I was terrified. I had every reason to be.

The medication could really only be credited for turning me into a living zombie. I was doing everything in a half-awake, half-asleep state. Due to all the medication I was forced to take, in just a short two months I went from weighing 120 to 240 pounds. I still struggle today to get the weight off. Needless to say, the time I spent in state custody definitely changed me forever. Some ways are good; others would make for a great Stephen King novel.

Even though I have been on my own now for 10 years, I know that drastic changes are still desperately needed for all of the innocent children who are currently in state care, through no fault of their own. Things like foster parents who actually want to help children heal and not just collect their monthly checks — they are in urgent demand. Better child treatment centers and many more volunteers. Transitional living centers for teenagers who are aging out. More programs for children to develop social and independent living skills so they are better prepared when they exit custody, knowing the things that other children learn naturally from their parents. When I left, it was with $650 and a wave goodbye, I had nowhere to go, and ended up in homeless shelters for years.

More people who have been in the system need to speak out and volunteer to be the voices of these kids. Very few can hear their cries for help, but former foster youth have the ability to speak out and use tools like YouTube, Facebook, campaigns like this one, to make sure the thousands of youth in care can hear our voices. If we as a society really want a better and bright future for them, we have to do everything we can to make that change happen.

I am still affected by what they did to me. I will always be affected by what they did to me. If by writing this, I can save one child from sharing my fate, then I know that I am doing the right thing.

“I AM STILL AFFECTED BY WHAT THEY DID TO ME.”

A 13-year-old child has no reason to be locked up in a mental hospital where she can hear screaming adults and fights day in and day out. Yet, there I was, lying awake at night, too afraid to close my eyes. I was put on powerful psychotropics to “help the behaviors and to sleep.”

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I am still affected by what they did to me. I will always be affected by what they did to me. If by writing this, I can save one child from sharing my fate, then I know that I am doing the right thing.
Our past shapes our future. It allows us to appreciate the blessings, joys, and pains that are before us now. I am writing this blog from one of the world’s most renowned institutions, The University of Chicago—School of Social Service Administration (SSA). I am currently a graduate student, pursuing my Atrium Magister (AM) in Social Work with an emphasis on Poverty and Inequality Public Policy. I love saying that because it is something that I never thought in the 22 years of my existence would be possible.

To understand where my confidence comes from, you first have to understand where I have come from. I entered the foster care system at the age of 12. Like many foster youth, I carried with me the hatred, hopelessness, and sadness that entering the system brings. Throughout the first two years in the system, I was placed in several group homes and residential treatment facilities. By the time I reached age 14, I had been in nearly six different placements. No placement, however, was better than the other. At each facility, the boys would bully me for being openly gay, and oftentimes, I would be the only openly gay male there. Due to the number of transitions, I was never able to reach my fullest potential mentally and emotionally. Despite the difficulties I had at my placements, I still carried a passion for pursuing my education. I excelled in my studies, and won the praise of my teachers. For me, my education was my safe haven away from the problems that existed in my life.

You would think that I no longer believed in hope because of my numerous placements, but fortunately I did. One day I attended a council meeting for foster youth, and I met a social worker named Ms. Alice Westery. As she spoke, I remember having an overwhelming sensation of security and support. For this reason, I knew she was different from the other social workers I had encountered. From this point on, I developed a strong and vibrant relationship with Ms. Westery. To this day, Ms. Westery and I are extremely close, and she continues to be a strong aspect of my support system.

Eventually, I was finally placed in my first foster home. Although this foster placement did not work out, it at least provided a stable placement for me. In addition, it allowed me to understand the faults and imperfections that existed within myself. I was finally able to excel in the community and in school. When I moved to my second foster home, things would ultimately change for the better. I came to understand the meaning of a loving, caring, and supportive family.

With this newfound support, I entered and completed my undergraduate degree with a sense of confidence, support, and compassion. I was able to reach out and connect to wonderful people that helped my development, not only as a scholar, but also as an individual. By taking advantage of the resources and support systems available to me, I was able to enhance my quality of life, my academic assimilation, and my professional network.

To finish, I want to say boldly and proudly that I am a product of the foster care system. No, I am not homeless. No, I have never been in jail or prison. No, I do not have any kids. No, I am not mentally ill. So, let us just say, that I am not your “typical” foster youth; the type of foster youth society has been exposed to. I believe that is what makes me, and my fellow foster youth peers, so unique. We are all very different. No research study or newspaper article gives us a face. The only thing that we all share is a unique story.

I would like to end by saying something inspiring, or encouraging to other foster youth to achieve something magnificent, but that is too average. Instead, I want to end with one of many quotes that continue to drive me to achieve greatness. “Never underestimate the power of dreams and the influence of the human spirit. We are all the same in this notion: The potential for greatness lives within each of us.” — Wilma Rudolph

“FOR ME, MY EDUCATION WAS MY SAFE HAVEN.”

By Sean Lamar Hudson
I once read that the family is the project of the person. Family is the space in which human life begins, and in which it is nurtured and cherished. It is the place in which a person first learns what it is to love by being loved — where a person learns what it is to have dignity by having dignity extended to them. Family provides a sense of community. And community is where a child can begin to visualize their place and belonging in the world.

I could write about statistics for foster children, like more than 650,000 children experience out-of-home care every year in the U.S. and that only 2 percent of foster children ever graduate from college, but Children’s Rights has done a good job of documenting these unfortunate and mostly preventable facts. What you are instead reading is what those statistics look like as the lived experience of the child, because I am one of those data points.

I write this blog as a former technologist who lived in Paris, and on airplanes. I write as a former global business executive and consultant who lived in Paris.

I write as a cancer researcher and future physician with projects in the U.S. and Africa … and I write as a former foster child who had five sets of parents before the age of 18.

I know very personally what it can be like to have a family disintegrate — to be vulnerable, to be abandoned, neglected and abused — to not know where to fit in or belong.

I will never forget the day when a car pulled up and we were told to put some things in a brown paper grocery bag and get into that car with a stranger. This was the day child protective services took custody of us. However, they could not take us to a foster home because they did not have one available. Nor could they take us to a children’s home because they were full. So they took us to the juvenile detention center.

My sister and I were separated from my brothers. They took my brother to a children’s home because they were full. So they took us to the juvenile detention center.

My sister and I were separated from my brothers. We were processed through the standard juvenile detention center intake process — disrobed, deloused, and cleaned. Whether we were clean or not did not really matter. Then we were sent out to “play” in a field with a very high chain link fence with barbed wire around the top. And so the journey began … I was 4 years old.

In cancer research and medicine, we are learning that the environment plays a very important role in disease processes, sometimes even more than genetic susceptibility. For example, someone can have the gene for height, but due to the environment the individual grows up in, they can develop to be of short stature.

The same can be true with the impact of abandonment, neglect and abuse. It is clear these experiences can be embodied in all people, whether foster children or not. The difference is that foster children are repeatedly exposed to excessive and prolonged neglect, exclusion, and abuse that often lead to the dismal reality of their deteriorating mental and physical health.

But, the good news is, if we change the environment, we can affect the outcomes. When children are surrounded by environments where they are loved and feel a secure sense of belonging, the outcomes change.

When I had the opportunity to experience environments of love, encouragement, and inclusion at different points in my childhood, I was able to forget what the statistics said about who I would be or could be, and what I could do or would do having grown up in the unfortunate circumstances of being a foster child. In those moments I remember feeling for a short time that maybe I was like other children. I felt proud instead of ashamed, I felt like I belonged instead of feeling excluded. I felt like I could do anything, and dared to dream of what could be. It was these experiences, these people who came alongside me and supported me, loved me, and believed in me and my potential at various times in my life that have allowed me to successfully transform my dreams into reality.

So the next time you meet foster children, don’t talk about the disadvantages from being neglected, abused, and abandoned. They know these much better than anyone else ever could.

Tell them about the potential you see in them, about their unique talents and strengths. Tell them you believe in their potential and who you see that they can be when they are loved, valued, and included.

And you never know — the child who benefits from your love and support may grow up to be like me, pursuing my lifelong dream of becoming a doctor — or they may grow up and change the world.

“I WILL NEVER FORGET THE DAY WHEN A CAR PULLED UP AND WE WERE TOLD TO PUT SOME THINGS IN A BROWN PAPER GROCERY BAG.”
The sun slowly stretched over the horizon and I was still awake, packing my bags. As the break of day crept nearer, my anticipation, and eagerness, peaked. “What would my life be like over there?” My foster parents called me weird. I just wanted to be prepared. After all I was going to live in yet another foster home, my third in just one year. It was part of my normal routine of hoping for the best, yet preparing for the worst.

My mother was taken from this world when I was very young, and my father spent most of my youth in prison. My paternal aunt took me in as her own, raised me as her own, and hoped my foster family would request that she wanted us to reunite. I started to act out and hoped my foster family would request that I be removed, so I could live with my biological family. After being in so many foster homes you tend to think that you know how to work the system. I started arguing with the other kids, disregarded the rules and didn’t do my chores. I thought my plan had worked, but it’s funny how things backfire. I didn’t end up with my grandmother; instead I was sent to a group home. I was then placed in with an African American family, who were Seventh-day Adventists. I never heard of any other religious ideology other than Baptist, and the change in religion was another adjustment. But the family had a nice home, and several children of their own. I was there for several years, attended a good elementary school, and later a good junior high school. I played football and basketball and made good friends.

I would have stayed at this home but my grandmother said my father would be released and I would have stayed at this home but my grandfather had nothing to do with me, and everything to do with my circumstances. I was then placed in with an African American family, who were Seventh-day Adventists. I never heard of any other religious ideology other than Baptist, and the change in religion was another adjustment. But the family had a nice home, and several children of their own. I was there for several years, attended a good elementary school, and later a good junior high school. I played football and basketball and made good friends. I would have stayed at this home but my grandmother said my father would be released and she wanted us to reunite. I started to act out and hoped my foster family would request that I be removed, so I could live with my biological family. After being in so many foster homes you tend to think that you know how to work the system. I started arguing with the other kids, disregarded the rules and didn’t do my chores. I thought my plan had worked, but it’s funny how things backfire. I didn’t end up with my grandmother; instead I was sent to a group home.

It was there that the term “only the strong survive” became real to me. The youth that occupied the group home ranged from ages 13-18, with girls on one side, boys on the other. It was like living in a zoo. Anyone could walk into your room and take your belongings. Kids would wear each other’s clothes without permission, so fights would break out. And developing our minds and life skills was never the priority. We just sat in a room after school and watched TV.

So often, people do not see the collateral damage foster care has on a young person. The thought that your family doesn’t want you, or that you will never attend any of your real family’s reunions, causes mental and emotional trauma for a young person trying to find an identity. Compound that with families who only want a check — as several of my families did — rather than to love, teach, groom and protect you, and it’s a rough system. Not every foster home is bad. But if the system doesn’t surround you every step of the way with the education you need, the mental health support, the life skills, the compassion, then they all might as well be deficient.

So who knew growing up in the foster care system would be the first step in changing my life? I opened my eyes into a world that statistically defined people like me as failures. I found a remedy to beat those statistics. I worked hard and surrounded myself with peers and mentors who understood the gift of a chance and allowed me to grow amongst them. I experienced different religions, different cultures, different races, and different ways of life, which broadened my perspective. I accepted the fact that my past could not be changed and ensured my future was bright by working tirelessly and diligently until a goal of success was in sight. Overall, I realized that my tragedy was really a blessing in disguise.

I consider myself one of the fortunate ones who ended up with the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but let’s think about the ones who end up homeless, in jail, on drugs, or just alone in this world. Where is their justice and support? I tell my story because if anyone can comfort the hearts of the thousands of young people who feel hopeless and alone, it’s former foster youth. It is important to encourage the children in foster care and let them know that they are valuable and are worthy of our society’s investment.

Marvin Bing is the Northeast Regional Director for the NAACP.
The foster care system is the number one establishment in this nation that was built specifically to protect children. In my case it took more than five years of verbal abuse, neglect and rape for me to finally get my protection — not just food, shelter and clothes, but a real loving family who I knew would never hurt me.

In late 2002 my brother and I moved into our first foster home, where the foster mom’s two grown sons spent all the money she received. We never saw a dime of it. Within six months I was urging my social worker to get me out of there. It took him another six months to make it happen. Half the time we didn’t even live with our foster mother! We lived with her son next door. It was wrong for her to lie, and bizarre that the social worker didn’t find out.

In 2003 my brother and I moved into our second foster home, where he lived for two years until he aged out of care, and I lived for five. I can honestly say that those were and forever will be the worst years of my life. At first everything seemed fine. I was 11 when I moved in and was treated like a princess. I shared a room with their youngest daughter and we ruled that house. Whatever we wanted for dinner we got. Whenever we wanted new clothes we got them. Life couldn’t have gotten any better.

It didn’t. I was about 13 when the verbal abuse came out of nowhere. My foster parents called me big nose, pimple face, no butt, you name it. They would say my mother didn’t love me and that I was so ugly I’d never get a boyfriend. I was in that prime age of building my identity and they built it for me — a negative image of myself that I completely believed.

I literally became their slave. I cooked and cleaned on demand. I was even made to sleep in the garage for a month because I had an “attitude.” I didn’t tell my social worker anything because he was not the best at addressing conflict. Once, my foster mom was mistreating me and I reported it. Instead of speaking to us separately, he sat us down together and said, “So Steffanie tells me you are being mean to her. You can’t do that.” He left it at that, and afterward she yelled at me till I was in tears. I was afraid to report her again.

My foster mother seemingly developed a hatred for me that I could never comprehend. One day her husband saw me crying while I was washing dishes. He said he was sorry that his wife was so mean, and gave me a comforting hug — then demanded a kiss. My heart dropped. I said no and pushed myself out of his arms.

One week later he came early in the morning, scooped me up, and took me to the back room. With a stern voice he told me to get in the bed. As I did he undressed himself, crawled in and undressed me while I cried. He whispered in my ear, “I’ll be gentle.” I was 15 and no longer a virgin and he was 45 and had no remorse. For eight months straight he raped me daily. At one point I asked why he was doing this to me. He said if his wife already thought he was, he might as well do it anyway.

I moved the day that I reported the rape and never saw them again. The new home was decent. My foster mother was a nice lady but she gave us foster kids the bare minimum, and for two more years I was on the hunt for that real love of a family.

In February 2011, my senior year, I was offered the chance to move again. The people had been named Foster Family of the Year, had nine kids and were Christians. I was not into the whole religion thing but I thought I would give this family a try. Within a few months I could feel something different. Bob and Ellen never referred to me as their foster child. I was their daughter. And they were my mom and dad. This love made me cry tears of joy. They told me it was because of the love of Jesus. I gave my life to Christ in August of 2012, and it was the best decision I ever made.

The foster care system ultimately did its job but it took until just after I turned 18 for it to happen. I was subjected to more abuse during my first five years in the system than the whole nine that I lived in my “unstable” and “not safe” home with my biological mother. Once I was in care I needed unscheduled visits from my social worker, and visits outside of the home, to help protect me. If he showed up on any day other than the scheduled visit, he would have gotten a very different picture.

Social workers are overloaded — and once they’re overloaded, you become a number. Because I was the “good child” in my second home, which had three other foster kids, I got ignored. Teachers and friends would approach me to ask what was wrong, but not my social worker. The one person who came to the house to check on my well-being wasn’t seeing anything.

I went through a lot of hardship and abuse to get to where I am today, but I’m making it. I’m in university, studying communications, with plans to graduate in 2015. I’m proud that, despite everything I endured, I’m able to maintain excellent relationships with all types of people without fear or nervousness — even with older men. I thank God for everything I went through because it gives me such great strength, and the chance to give hope to other foster youth.
I spent the summer I turned 13 homeless because my mother thought I was gay. She kicked me out of the house and told me to never come back because she didn’t want a “child of Satan” in her home. I didn’t really understand what was going on at the time, I just knew I had to start looking out for myself.

I spent most of the summer either sleeping over with friends or whatever family members were willing to take me in for a night. When one of my teachers found out I was homeless at the start of the school year and reported it to the school’s social worker, I was placed in foster care. By then I knew for sure I was gay, but didn’t tell anyone because I was afraid of how they’d react. Besides, being moved into foster care meant I had enough stuff to deal with as is.

The first home I was placed in was a disaster. I didn’t have any grand expectations because my mother was abusive to me pretty much my whole life, but that first foster home was run like a military school. My foster parents made me and the other kids they were fostering do chores all day while they sat around. If any of us spoke up or did something they didn’t like, we’d all get whipped with belts and be denied food. I was eventually moved around a few times and while not all of the homes were that bad, I never felt like anyone cared about me.

It didn’t take long for me to lose any hope of being adopted or ending up in a “good” home. It’s hard to feel like you’re worth anything when the people who are supposed to care about you treat you like garbage.

By the time I turned 18, I lost contact with all of my family and knew that I wasn’t welcome in their homes anyway, since they all had the same negative view of gay people my mother did. Despite that, I knew I wanted nothing to do with the foster care system anymore and decided to try to make it on my own. While I did graduate from high school, I couldn’t find a job that I could support myself with and quickly became homeless. Things could have gotten much worse from there, but I was lucky to have been put in contact with The Door, which helped me get my life back on track. Now I’m enrolled in community college, working part-time and feeling a lot better about myself and who I am.

I know that my family probably won’t come back into my life, but going through everything I’ve been through has made me stronger. And now I’m finally on my way to doing things that no one ever thought I would. No matter what, it feels great to be happy with my life and where it’s headed. It’s not something I’d ever felt before, and I look forward to feeling that way for the rest of my life.

From Homeless to Hopeful

By Felix Heredia
One early afternoon, I was sitting under a small flowering mimosa tree in our yard when our neighbor Brenda walked briskly up the road carrying her infant. As she got closer, I could see that Brenda was covered with blood. She explained that she had stabbed a “friend,” that the police were coming and that she needed me to care for her baby, Michael. I took him in my arms, not sure what would happen next.

As I sat under the mimosa, I realized for the first time the need for a good foster care system. I didn’t actually think “foster care.” It was more like, “This little baby needs some kind of safe place to live.” Brenda once did too. She had grown up in dangerous foster care situations and then juvenile detention.

Now, 25 years later as an attorney at Children’s Rights, I have met countless dedicated foster parents that could have helped Brenda and thousands of others like her. But I also have parents that could have helped Brenda and their story seeming to come to a despairing end.

Abuse and neglect in foster care leads to additional trauma, serious emotional and psychological pain and “acting out,” which is when psychotropic medications can come into play. There is no question that some children need medication. But many describe psychotropic overmedication that had them feeling like “zombies,” failing school, unable to carry out normal daily functions. One young woman told me of being placed in care after her mother died, only to be separated from her sister for years. She said she was put on psychotropics to deal with these losses. She wondered why they simply hadn’t let her see her sister instead.

Thankfully, we can do something about all of this at Children’s Rights. We bring legal cases that protect children, so they are not harmed after they are brought into foster care. Our work allows these children to get the help they need in myriad ways, including: making sure child welfare systems recruit and support a sufficient number of high-quality foster homes; ensure reasonable caseload levels so social workers can be effective in their work; and provide careful oversight of foster care institutions, for kids who really need them. Foster care can be safe, and children in foster care can thrive and become happy, healthy adults.

I like to think that Brenda and her baby Michael could have benefited from a stronger foster care system.

Several hours after Brenda left her baby with me, she came back from the police station to retrieve him. In a couple of months, the child was removed by the local child protection agency. Brenda had been feeding the child undiluted formula because, having difficulty reading, she didn’t understand the instructions. The child was put on psychotropics to deal with these losses. She wondered why they simply hadn’t let her see her sister instead.

By Stephen Dixon

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**GIVING KIDS IN FOSTER CARE A FAIR CHANCE**

One boy told me that when he was 9, a son of a foster parent tried to rape him. He defended himself with a knife and ended up stabbing the son and the foster father — his innocence gone forever. Far too many are unable to fend off sexual assaults.

So many of these young people recount being moved through a seemingly unending series of homes and institutions, never completing a school year where they started it, never making friends. One young man spoke of being moved four times during the 9th grade, three times in 10th grade, twice in 11th. The number of placements we have heard of for a single child is mind-numbing: 10, 15, 24, 47, 60. One young person summed up the emotional damage when she told me, “I felt like no one loved me and nobody wanted me.”

Too many caseworkers are overworked, have few resources, and spend long hours on weekends and evenings to try to accomplish their tasks. It can be an impossible job when caseloads are out of control, which explains why they have little incentive to remain in their low-paying jobs. Some youth have told us about having 10 to 15 different caseworkers. A number have said that caseworkers show up at court hearings, having never met them before that day.

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“So many … recount being moved through a seemingly unending series of homes and institutions.”

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“Fostering the Future...”
I’ve been alive for 20 years and most of them have been a real challenge to get through. The biggest reason is that I was placed in New York City’s foster care system when I was just 3 years old. My father had become abusive and my mother shared his drinking problem, which made it impossible for me to stay with them, but that’s not something I understood until years later. I don’t remember much about my early years in foster care other than the constant anxiety that comes with the unpredictable moving around from home to home and family to family. Up until I was 10, I was lucky to say that all of the families I had lived with treated me well enough. None of them seemed to love me and only a few went out of their way to show they cared, but I was fed, clothed and sheltered. After losing my family at such a young age it seemed like enough to me, since I had no memories of what it felt like to be with a “real” family.

Around the time of my 10th birthday, I was forced to deal with a new set of problems. First, I was moved into a foster home that was abusive and neglectful. I was forced to wear ratty, hand-me-down clothing and my food was strictly controlled. When I threatened to tell my case worker about my treatment, my foster father brutally beat me and then kept me out of school for several days so no one would see the bruises he had left all over my body.

The other issue crept up on me so slowly I barely even noticed. I was born Samuel Gomez, a boy, but something inside me made me feel like that was wrong. At first I thought I might be gay, but the more time passed the more I felt like I was not supposed to be a boy. I had no idea what it meant to be transgender at the time and as the abuse became more and more routine, I tried my best to keep what I was feeling hidden from the world.

After two years of constant beatings and mistreatment, I was finally moved into a new home that was more in line with my past foster care experiences. I was mostly left to my own devices and as I hit my teenage years, I set aside whatever dreams I had of being part of a happy family. Even if I did somehow get adopted, what family would want to keep me once they figured out my secret? What family would want a transgender freak like me? Those were the thoughts that I most remember having all through my teens.

It didn’t take long for me to become an emotional wreck, and it showed as I became more and more withdrawn and began to ignore my schoolwork. Nothing seemed worth it anymore, so I ran away, figuring that if I was by myself, I wouldn’t have to deal with anyone else’s problems on top of my own. I was 16 and a year later I was all but broken. I’d been taunted, jumped and raped all while trying to find a way to make it through to the next day.

That’s not a situation I ever thought I would be in, but I now get to wake up every day feeling happy and grateful for everything that I’ve done for myself over these last few years. While I would have loved to have had a family there to support me, it feels good to have created a life for myself by starting from scratch.
Good day to all, my name is Dameon “D.” Pichetrungsi, and I am a former foster youth from Los Angeles, Calif. I was 8 years old when a friend’s mother noticed some bruises on my face and arms from a recent beating by my father. The next thing I remember is being taken by the police and placed with relatives in Hawthorne. From there I was bounced from one foster care facility to another, going from Long Beach to Compton to Panorama City to Pacoima. I don’t even remember the names of some of the cities; there were more than 20 by the time I was 12. Just as I would acclimate to my surroundings, a new social worker would visit and take me somewhere different, leaving me lost and disconnected once again.

After a short stint of reunification with my biological father, which only resulted in more emotional, mental and physical abuse, I was back to bouncing between placements until I was 14 years old and put in a group home in Granada Hills. After several months I grew tired of the resident staff withholding money, locking me up food and constantly inflicting various forms of abuse. I ran away and lived life as a teenage transient.

The best education I ever received was during my time on the streets. Hard lessons, life lessons, all the lessons a misspent youth can endure. I learned in the streets of Los Angeles. I connected with a group of gang bangers and drug dealers, who welcomed me into their unique “family” with open arms. I started dealing, stealing cars and beating people up for them. I’d stay at friends’ houses, or in their parents’ cars, or break into homes under construction where there was running water, and sleep in there. I remember going through the aisles of the supermarket, opening up the bread package, then going to the meat aisle and grabbing a few cold cuts. That’s how I would eat, for a long time.

At the same time I was still going to class every day and I was on the football team, excelling. Nobody knew.

Except, that is, for one teacher at Kennedy High School, Mr. Blum, who pulled me aside one day and told me that I was in serious jeopardy of going to jail or dying before I was 18. That just happened to be what my father told me the last time I saw him. Not long after that, one of my close friends got shot and killed right in front of me, and I thought, “Yeah, this would be a good time to retire from this life.”

Eventually, I called an old foster brother, just to talk, and he told me that there was an opening at the group home where he lived, Journey House in Pasadena, and how different it was from any other place we’d been to. I spoke with Journey House’s director Tim Mayworm, who asked me one question: “What do you want to do with your life?” I told him I just wanted to go to school like a regular student, and the next day I moved in.

However, after emancipating from the system, there would be plenty of obstacles that I was not prepared for. There was no training on how to feel when you have to face your demons on your own. There was no training on how to integrate yourself into a setting that looks at you differently, mostly with pity, because you were a foster child. Until eventually, all the stereotypes and stigmas get to you, and you shell yourself into your self-loathing, and cut off everything and everybody.

To sit here at 38 years old and tell you that all the pain and scars of a turbulent past have been healed would be a lie. However, I have learned that if you focus all your life on the pain and scars and what other people may think of you, then you can never truly appreciate the blessings that are trying to heal you. For me, my healing came in the form of my writing, my wife and my two beautiful children. Their pure joy and laughter erases any notion of feeling unwanted, voiceless, abused, and especially, boiling rage.

My daughter, Deeana, and my son DJ, not only serve as motivation and constant reminders to do more for the greater good, but they also serve as the best therapy money can pay for.

There comes a time when we have to let go of what is holding us back from fully living our lives. Never forget the past, but rather, use it to motivate you to overcome whatever it is that is posing as an obstacle. That’s the message that I want to leave with every foster youth, former and current: No matter how painful your past, you owe it to yourself to make something of your future. Now, go LIVE.

“EVENTUALLY, ALL THE STEREOTYPES AND STIGMAS GET TO YOU, AND YOU SHELL YOURSELF INTO SELF-LOATHING.”

By Dameon “D.” Pichetrungsi
I had an “identity crisis” during my first year of college. Back home I never had time to reflect. I was always in survival mode. If I wasn’t in school, I was working. If I wasn’t working, I was contacting my caseworkers to make sure they were doing the things I needed them to do. Once I was in college, and not worrying about where I was going to sleep or what I was going to eat, I had a lot of time to reflect on my experiences in foster care.

I entered the system in my early teens and never had a steady home. So when other people at my predominantly white, upper-class, small liberal arts college talked about missing home, I couldn’t ever relate. And no one on campus could relate to my experiences. I was a minority on campus because I’m black, Latina, and poor, but there were communities on campus dedicated to those identities. Where was the space on campus dedicated to making me feel safe? Was being in foster care even an identity?

It sure felt like it. Most of the time I felt completely alienated when talking about my personal life on campus. I was casually talking to a girl one day and I brought up being in foster care. She quickly apologized for my parents passing away. I corrected her and told her they were both alive. She looked at me, with the most confused look on her face, and said, “Didn’t your parents have to die for that to happen?” It was shocking to me she didn’t know what foster care was. She was from a big city, how could she not know about foster care? But as I spoke to more and more people, I realized most people had no idea what being in foster care was really about.

To the people in and close to foster care, it’s no secret the current system is failing. Every year more than 20,000 young people, some as young as 18, “age out” of foster care. Many of these young people are without high school diplomas, are unemployed, and will become homeless. Some young people in care are subject to abuse and negligence at the hands of their foster parents and sometimes even the agencies that should be protecting them. Like many other institutions in the country, foster care disproportionately affects communities that are already at risk for other types of discrimination. Even though people of color are a minority in this country, they are most affected by foster care. LGBTQIA youth are already at a high-risk for becoming homeless, and that number rises when they are in foster care. So what do we do? It seems our struggle is silent. Foster care is only on the agenda when there is a tragedy. That needs to change. And I think I know how.

Youth in care need to be given back their voices. We need to be empowered. We need to understand that their stories are valuable. We need to tell those stories to people in power and tell them the best ways to help. People in power have to be willing to listen and collaborate with youth on these efforts. If they aren’t willing, they need not be in power. Most importantly, we need to engage people, like the girl in my school, who have no idea what foster care is. I did a film with the Possibility Project called Know How, which is filmed, written and performed by youth like me, based on the life experiences of the cast. Know How tells the story of foster care by youth who were actually in foster care. People on the outside need to see the system for what it really is, and the consequences it has on the youth that come in contact with it. Only then can they step up and help.

Until then, here’s to the little girl packing up her belongings in a black duffel bag, unsure of whether the room she will sleep in tonight is safe. Here’s to the boy attempting to articulate his needs to his caseworker, even though his agency, the people who are supposed to protect him, have never listened to his needs in the past. Every single person who has entered this broken system is a hero. Finding the will to survive each and every day is a testament to their determination. When you enter foster care, whether you were in care for months or years, you carry a piece of it with you every day. So here’s to strength. Happy National Foster Care Month.

By Gabrielle Garcia
As our inaugural Fostering the Future campaign comes to a close, we have had the privilege of sharing 24 first-hand accounts of life in state care, as well as the perspectives of several dedicated advocates. Some people describe how foster care provided the foundation to become happy, productive adults. “I now have awesome supporters, a loving environment, and encouragement when I need it,” wrote one. Foster care can be a safe haven; we always are gratified when the system has worked.

But our May initiative also highlighted, time and again, just how much needs to change:

• “By the time I turned 18, the road to college was a distant memory.”
• “I wasn’t getting the right treatment and help.”
• “These are pieces of my life that I will never recover.”
• “I never felt accepted.”
• “I was 15 and no longer a virgin and he was 45 and had no remorse.”
• “It didn’t take long for me to lose any hope of being adopted.”

No child should endure these experiences. When young people enter foster care, they already have been devastated, and often damaged. Some have parents incapable of caring for them. Some are being abused, physically or sexually, or witness abuse in the home. Those who aren’t maltreated certainly experience trauma, such as the loss of a parent or another caregiver.

These kids deserve nothing short of the best treatment. States should do everything in their power to protect them, and help them heal. But far too often they enter foster care only to suffer doubly. It is why I founded Children’s Rights almost 20 years ago, and why we are dedicated to reforming failing child welfare systems across the country.

Our bloggers, many of whom have overcome long odds, also have shown remarkable bravery in sharing their lives with the world. Their voices are critical, because far too often horrifying cases can get swept under the rug.

There are many times when it is necessary to remove children from their families, even if temporarily. They cannot be left in unsafe homes. But we need to hold foster care systems to an even higher standard than their parents. We are depending on them to protect and heal children whose lives have been devastated, and use wisely the 25 billion in taxpayer dollars that are spent annually on child welfare.

As we close out National Foster Care Awareness Month, our writers have demonstrated just how unconscionable it is to stand idly by when children are maltreated in foster care. We are so appreciative to them for sharing deeply personal stories. They serve as the voice for those still in care, whose collective stories are the underpinnings for some shocking statistics and sad realities. We thank them, and you, for following us on this month-long journey.

Marcia Robinson Lowry is the founder and executive director of Children’s Rights.
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