My Foster Truth
RECOLLECTIONS OF LIFE IN STATE CARE

“A collection of blogs from CR’s 2015 Fostering the Future campaign

“FAMILY DOESN’T HAVE TO BE BLOOD.”
“NO ONE ASKED US HOW WE FELT.”
“THEY WOULD RESTRAIN US.”
“KIDS ARE TREATED LIKE CRIMINALS.”
“I BOUNCED AROUND 26 TIMES.”

“My foster parents were kind.”
“I started to lose hope.”
“I wasn’t just some bad kid.”
“There was love and laughter.”
“I barely saw my caseworkers.”

20 YEARS
CHILDREN’S RIGHTS
Defending America’s Abused and Neglected Kids
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 health care 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,

For 14 years, I’ve had the privilege of sharing the stories of foster parents, children in foster care and child welfare advocates as the editor of Fostering Families Today. There is much to be learned within the pages of our magazine, as well as from Children’s Rights’ Fostering the Future blog series, as we work to move the child welfare world forward.

The following first-person accounts of life in state care show how systemic issues — like the overuse of psychotropic medications, sibling separation and institutionalization — affect children. And they put faces to the bleak outcomes encountered by too many of the roughly 23,000 young people who age out of foster care every year. In his blog, Kristopher shared that after leaving care, “my life was reduced to two pairs of clothes, a well-worn backpack and the streets.”

While I believe that today’s foster care system is stronger than it was when I first started in this child welfare world, I also know that there is much more to be done. These stories provide a clear picture of just how much work remains. However there are glimmers of hope in them as well — the mentors, educators and foster parents who have made the effort to help children in need. As Georgette wrote, “My final foster mother ... no doubt saved my life.”

Through these personal accounts, it’s easy to understand the importance of loving, caring, well-prepared foster parents who understand how trauma impacts the lives of children. And while it is clear that high-quality foster parents are critical to meeting the needs of kids, so are the other individuals who step forward to support young people and the families who have answered the foster parenting call.

My hope is that in reading this year’s blog series you, yourself will recognize a need you can fill and will feel compelled to help in some capacity. I encourage you to stand by Children’s Rights and fight to make foster care the kind of safe haven that every child deserves.

Kim Hansel
Editor
Fostering Families Today
October 2015

When children are removed from abusive and neglectful families, they should be kept from further harm.

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Born to a manic depressive mother and a schizophrenic father, statistically I had no chance of “being normal.” Brisk morning turned into terrifying night. Daddy put his hands where they didn’t belong. Mommy kicked him out and sat by the door to make sure I was safe. Family lied and said that she held me hostage. Police and news crews surrounded my house. Child Protective Services placed me with relatives.

You would think it would be easier to live with family. Kinship care was the toughest thing that I ever went through. The first night went great, and then my life changed. At 8 years old I was quickly sent into adulthood, when an older family member began to sexually abuse me.

In the seventh grade I began to cut myself just to feel like I was alive, just to feel something. I also liked to numb myself with pills, so I didn’t have to feel what they were doing to me. I would stay out many nights so that I could feel somewhat free. By the time I reached high school I was very promiscuous, sleeping with anyone that would pay me attention. If he bought me something to eat or let me have somewhere to sleep, then I would be anything that he needed me to be. But if I decided to go home, the rapes and beatings got more severe.

I was hurting, torn between the wild child and the woman I knew I could be. I found an outlet in reading and writing. I excelled in school. I got good grades because I dreamed of one day helping young girls like myself, and thought that maybe those dreams could take me away from the pain.

Everything in me wanted to change, and I found a ray of hope in the people who were there for me, who saw through the hurt and knew that I wasn’t just some bad kid. My army of strong women fought for me when I couldn’t fight for myself. I am eternally grateful to my spiritual mother, Kathy Harris, and my mentors, Lillie Epps, Ms. Hardman and Veronica Thomas. They are the definition of what family should be.

Today I am on a journey to find where I belong. I achieved a 4.0 in high school and graduated from Bryant & Stratton College with a GPA of 3.3. I obtained $11,000 in scholarships. I’m working on a master’s in counseling, and also my memoir, called Mountains Do Move. Turns out that I beat the odds — and I’m not only normal, I’m extraordinary. One day soon, destiny will leave on the porch light as I find my way home.

“KINSHIP CARE WAS THE TOUGHEST THING THAT I EVER WENT THROUGH ... AT 8 YEARS OLD I WAS QUICKLY SENT INTO ADULTHOOD, WHEN AN OLDER FAMILY MEMBER BEGAN TO SEXUALLY ABUSE ME.”
I didn't know anything about foster care before I reluctantly entered it at the age of 14. I was a typical teenager who never thought about what happened to kids if they didn't live with their parents. My parents weren't perfect, but they were always there for me until drugs came into our lives.

I was 13 when my mother and stepfather started using and dealing, then shortly after I started to use drugs too. It was during this time, under the influence, that my stepfather started sexually abusing me. This abuse led me to overdose on cocaine.

I'll never forget that day I almost died. The day my face turned blue, my heart stopped beating and I stopped breathing because I overloaded my adolescent body with drugs. I was addicted to feeling numb since a family member was abusing me in the most disturbing way possible. I was revived and the paramedics transported me to a hospital, which eventually led to an investigation. My mother died of unknown causes shortly after my overdose and before my entry into foster care.

To say I was traumatized is a serious understatement. I was destroyed. Though completely sober at the time of being processed into foster care, I resembled a human zombie. I was there physically, but emotionally and mentally. I was a million miles away from my body, my environment and my foster care situation. Following the life-altering events that thwarted me into the system, I prayed every day for God to kill me. I wanted my soul to disappear indefinitely.

I was already broken at the point of entry, but bouncing around 14 different placements in two separate counties while in care made my chaotic life worse, if that were possible. So much worse that I was driven to write my first book, Foster Girl, A Memoir, on what I went through.

Fourteen different placements in four years sounds like a lot, and it was, but that's par for the course for any system child. It's not that I was some "bad kid," it is just how our child welfare system is geared. Some placements were temporary holding centers; my kinship guardian wasn't reimbursed fast enough to support me and she barely could afford to care for me in the first place, so she had to give me up. I also had a foster parent die of old age, and I was placed at different emergency homeless shelters and group homes. The only time I was kicked out of a home was when I got into one argument with the biological daughter. Not a fight, an argument. The biological daughter didn't want me at the home anymore. So, on cue, her parents called my social worker the next business day, and poof, I was gone.

So with the world crumbling around me, what was critical to my sanity in foster care?

Not being separated from my one and only younger sibling. I had a responsibility to her. The threat of separation was imminent though and used on us at every placement as a way to keep us girls in line — as if it were our fault that we were in the system in the first place.

Ultimately, in addition to staying with my sister, it was my last foster mother who saved me from myself. She was a high school teacher, so she was used to teenagers. She didn't have any biological children and didn't have these great expectations that I should be perfect. She didn't expect to open up my loving arms and connect with her right away. No, she only wanted to stabilize my sister and me by creating a solid launching pad for normalcy. She wanted us to focus on finishing high school and prepare for college or a vocation instead of having us worry where we were going to live day-to-day. She also taught me how to apply and interview for a job, open a bank account, save money and drive a car. She acted like any regular parent would with their child. She made me feel normal.

It was years of moving around in relative uncertainty before I was placed into this last foster home, and my final foster mother, Judith Reith, no doubt saved my life. I wish every foster child had a Judith in his or her life. My heart goes out to the hundreds of thousands of traumatized children who are expected to parent themselves in an outdated system. The current state of foster care is an inhumane way to raise our society's children. We can do better.
I was just 6 weeks old when I was adopted from foster care for the first time. Life with my adoptive family seemed okay, until I got a little older. There is a fine line between discipline and abuse, and that line was constantly crossed in our home. For 10 years, I was tortured day in and day out, and I saw no end in sight.

I specifically remember being beaten by my father one evening. At the end of the night, I looked out my window, up at the night sky, and prayed to God that I would somehow be saved. But that didn’t happen right away. In fact, those nights of being beaten, sometimes with a baseball bat or a two-by-four, went on for a while. I grew up in the church and although I didn’t completely understand God, I knew in my heart that He was real. He is what I held onto, and He is what got me through the hardships. I knew that even if nobody else loved me, God did.

My five siblings were treated the same way, and we tried to protect each other. As we got older, some of my siblings ran away, but I was always afraid to pull something like that. When they got caught, they would answer to the belt, the iron, or whatever else my parents had in mind. Two of my siblings managed to run away and never come back.

When I was about 9, our home burned down, and we moved to a small rural town. Shortly after, something unexpected happened. Within one day, my life completely shifted. My mother called her doctor, and when she was finished, she didn’t completely hang up the phone. Her voice — threatening my brother — was recorded on the doctor’s voicemail. A few hours later, Children Services workers were on our doorstep, removing us from our home.

I was honest. I was scared. Even though my parents beat and tortured me, I didn’t want to go into foster care. I was afraid that I would end up in another abusive home. The social workers tried to keep my three remaining siblings and me together, and for a while we went from home to home because no one wanted four kids. Consequently, we were split up. I spent six years being a ward of the state. The homes I went through were fine, but I never attached myself to them. I knew they were temporary, and to me they weren’t worth investing in. I just wanted to serve my time in whatever foster home I was in and move to the next one.

My life changed when I was sent to a new home for a weekend, and ended up staying for two years — the longest I had been in any placement. This family was different. I trusted them because they genuinely cared about me, advocated for me and supported me. I didn’t have to do anything to earn their love. One day my foster parents sat down at the dinner table and asked me, “Julius would you like to be part of this family?” And I simply replied, “I thought I already was.” Both of my foster parents smiled from ear to ear, and I knew I was theirs and that God had placed me with my forever family. At 15, I was officially a Kissinger, and no longer a Ferguson.

I testified in the case against my abusive parents, and finally felt like I had closure after they were sentenced to life in prison. With my family’s encouragement, I decided I wasn’t going to let my past determine my future. I worked hard through school, and even though it wasn’t easy, I graduated from high school at the top of my class, earned varsity letters in cross-country and track and am now attending Ohio State University. I have also shared my story to help kids all around the world. Last year The Huffington Post broadcast an interview I did for National Adoption Month, and I also spoke at a fundraising event hosted by the Dave Thomas Foundation and Wendy’s Wonderful Kids.

I have gotten to where I am today with amazing support from my family, social workers and some of my closest friends. My experience in foster care made me a stronger person. For the longest time, I didn’t know who I was other than some broken child. But I have realized that everyone has his own cross to bear, and that I was given this life because I was strong enough to live it.

“EVEN THOUGH MY PARENTS BEAT AND TORTURED ME, I DIDN’T WANT TO GO INTO FOSTER CARE. I WAS AFRAID THAT I WOULD END UP IN ANOTHER ABUSIVE HOME.”
Everyone faces challenges in their life. Some more than others, but everyone faces challenges. Somewhere along the line it was decided that I would be the guinea pig for just how many challenges one person can handle.

When I was 4 years old, I was adopted from Romania and came to the United States. I lived in Florida for nine years with my new family. Since my adoptive parents were from Germany, we’d take trips there every year. Those were some of the good memories.

I was 13 years old when the abuse began. My adoptive dad molested me. It happened often, and depended on if he was drinking or smoking. It got to the point where I couldn’t handle it any longer without telling someone. So I told a friend from school and she reported my situation to a teacher. It was really close to Easter. I was in class one day and I was called to come to the office at school. “Oh Lord, I’ve done it,” I thought to myself. Maybe it will all be over.

All of the sudden I found out I wouldn’t be going back home, and that I would have to go live with some strange people I didn’t know. I was 15 years old and in the ninth grade. I had to go through a forensic interview process because of the abuse. It was very scary. Someone from the Division of Family and Children Services drove me to this unusual place. When I arrived, it was a building of blank walls and teddy bears. They put me in a room with a double sided mirror and a tape recorder. I felt intimidated and embarrassed. Naturally, I didn’t want to talk or give enough details, so at this point the case was dismissed.

I was shuffled through seven foster homes and three group homes, one of which was in Valdosta, Georgia, where I stayed for two years. It was a very hard two years for me in the Valdosta group home — mentally, physically and emotionally. I had to work with my social worker to reopen my case concerning the abuse, writing everything down in therapy sessions. Eventually my adoptive father got what he deserved — 30 years in prison without parole. I was dealing with a lot of emotions and felt like I was being overmedicated. At one point I was given too much Zoloft, and was sent to an inpatient and outpatient treatment program while I waited to have my prescription changed. I missed five days of school because of this and had to fight hard to keep excelling in school. There were times where I didn’t have any friends. I spent a lot of time alone. I was forced to teach myself how to make day-to-day tough decisions and right choices. All I wanted to do was finish high school. I worked hard, and eventually I got my well-deserved high school diploma.

Despite this being a hard time for me, there were aspects of the Valdosta group home that I did like. People from the surrounding community would come each weekend to host activities, and I met several mentors who made a real impact on me. When I wanted to give up, they encouraged me. They were always just a text or phone call away when I needed them. One was an older woman, German-born, who invited me to her house to spend time. She once gave me a bouquet of pretty flowers, and I took pictures of them. I still have them to this day. Sadly, she passed away in 2013. I still keep in touch with two mentors.

I’ve been through good and bad times — but I believe it has all made me who I am today. At 21, I aged out of foster care and had nowhere to go. My adoptive mom didn’t want me back, so I had to go to an assisted living home. Then, in March 2014, she passed away from a fatal brain disorder.

In spite of everything I am still standing today. I turned to Job Corps and took the health occupations trade. Eventually, I earned enough money to rent my own apartment, and step by step I’ve worked my way to Albany Technical College, where I’m now studying hospitality management. I’m a supporter of Dougherty Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and GA EmpowerMEnt (an initiative founded by former and current foster youth), a Foster Care Alumni of America member and an alumni of Team in Training: Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. In 2013, I was named an Honorary CASA Advocate. Running has also become a big passion of mine, and I’ve accomplished seven half marathons.

I think my life has been for the best because I am able to tell people about my struggle and offer advice to those who need encouragement. If I could say anything to other youth in foster care, I’d tell them you can make it too.
The black trash bag was heavy as I dragged it to the trunk. My vision was blurred with tears, but I still made out the numbers on the back of the county car. I was scared; probably even more so because the lady was accompanied by a cop. I hadn’t the slightest idea of what was to come. The lady promised my siblings and I would stay together; she lied. The eldest of us three was dropped off at a foster home that only had space for one. So, I dragged my big black bag back into the trunk. This was the first time we had ever been separated and I was prepared to do everything in my power to make it the last. I memorized the streets and freeways we took to reach the next group home. We were processed and taken to a foster home the next day. I was 11 years old. We were taken away from my sister’s home not even a month after we moved in. We struggled to reunite for years after that. There’d be moments where we were all together and other times when one of us was missing. Sibling separation is very common among foster youth, because there are few foster homes that can take in large groups. When kin do stick together, they sometimes are forced to reside in group homes, which can have inadequate education and resources. In San Diego County (where I spent my time in the system), there are approximately 3,112 children in foster care — and 2,849 of them have one or more brothers or sisters. Of those, 508 are separated from one or more of their siblings, according to The Promises 2 Kids Foundation. My situation was one of the many, unfortunately, that contributed to this statistic.

Growing up in foster care had its challenges, yet everyone who inquires about my experience assumes it was a dreadful one. State care, much like any other system, is undoubtedly imperfect, however this doesn’t mean it isn’t rewarding. In fact it can be auspicious when one is able to access and utilize its resources. Many people asked: “What was it like being a foster kid; not having parents or a home to call your own?” Confused, I always answered, “It was just … normal.” I could sense when others got uncomfortable when I announced my dependency status, and I could see the awkwardness within their eyes but I didn’t care much. In hindsight I’ve always felt socially estranged, but my “foster-childness” wasn’t always to blame. In fact before the system my strict household didn’t allow for much social interaction outside of school, so since I was young I’ve been different.

So what was it like being in a foster home? Strange at first I suppose, but I grew to love my foster parents, and well, then there were the group homes. My first foster mother was a great hardworking woman, but we had to leave her because she was losing her house to foreclosure. My next foster parents were great. They were a loving couple that truly cared for me. We only left them for a chance to reunite with our sister but that didn’t work out either. Growing up I established many relationships but for a child with such inconsistent homes it was only natural to develop trust and attachment issues. My big black trash bag got harder to carry; bearing more weight on my shoulders each time.

Currently I am a 19-year-old sophomore at the University of California at Berkeley. I intend to double major in peace and conflict studies and in the practice of art, with a minor in human rights. I am living with my fiancé and I couldn’t be happier. All my experiences have landed me in a successful space today physically, materially, spiritually and even educationally. I’ve grown up in a life I’ve learned to call normal, and with fortitude and resilience I have even learned to appreciate it. I’ve been dealt an unfavorable hand, though without the adversity in my life I wouldn’t have the same unique relationships and opportunities I have today. These continuous blessings wouldn’t have been possible without the foster care system. It’s a burden and a blessing, it’s a hindrance and an impetus, and it is the characteristic that is a part of me but doesn’t define me. So, how was it being in the foster system? It was normal, but what is normal anyway?

**FOSTERING NORMAL**

By Joseph Bakhit

“She promised my siblings and I would stay together; she lied. The eldest of us three was dropped off at a foster home that only had space for one. We struggled to reunite for years.”
I entered Utah state custody in 2001 and aged out in 2010, three months after graduating high school. The nine years I spent in foster care shaped me into the person I am today.

I lived in 14 different placements. Foster care was a mix of horrible experiences and times when I was normal and happy. I learned something new from each home — one foster mom taught me to be independent and do house and vehicle repairs. Another taught me the finer points of dressing and behaving like a lady. But I also learned how selfish some people can be — like the foster mom who kept the $140 meant for my piano lessons.

The lasting effects of state care were mental and physical. I was medicated so much that my endocrine system was damaged. I've never sought counseling as an adult because I am so afraid of it happening again. I stopped taking the drugs because I moved to a new placement and my caseworker never brought them. My behavior did not worsen after being taken off five psycho-tropics, so they decided to keep me off the meds.

Shortly after, I learned that foster mother lost her license because her nephew slept with another foster girl. I got a job at 14 and worked through high school so I could have a cell phone and spending money. The last home I lived in was alright. At that point, being in foster care felt like a business transaction. I grew up as fast as I could so I could get out. It was ironic to be in a system that demands quick independence yet denies the freedom to accomplish it — such as getting a driver’s license.

In my senior year, I had work release from school and a full-time job. I spent the final three months in an independent living program that was supposed to provide me with a monthly stipend to help with expenses. On the day I aged out, my judge asked why I didn’t want to stay for more “support.” I told her why — because I only received one of the three checks I was owed. My caseworker did not file the paperwork on time. The last two payments came after I aged out. I decided to take my chances in the real world if it meant having freedom.

I didn’t know what to study. Getting my general classes done at Salt Lake Community College seemed like a good way to see what I was interested in. I went to school off and on and paid for tuition when I wasn’t eligible for grants. I am graduating with my A.S. this August. Plus, I figured out what I am interested in. I will start working on my B.S. in neuroscience this fall! College gave me more skills to fight for my dreams and find new ways of reaching them. I have learned to be fearless in my goals and step out of my comfort zone. Finishing college after foster care is incredibly difficult but possible. I left the bitterness and anger behind. Going through foster care made me want to help others who are still there. I am an advocate for foster youth. I organize holiday projects and speak at caseworker trainings and youth events. I provide a voice for legislators and other professionals to hear. It takes courage to talk about the dark times. If you are having experiences like I did, I want to remind you that foster care does end someday. You can take control of your life and learn from it.

“ I LEFT THE BITTERNESS AND ANGER BEHIND. GOING THROUGH FOSTER CARE MADE ME WANT TO HELP OTHERS WHO ARE STILL THERE.”

By Catherine Konold

When I was 13, I lived with a family I really loved. I had two older sisters there and my foster mom was awesome. It was the first time I was treated like a normal human being and given opportunities to prove that I was responsible and trustworthy. That changed when I was hastily moved due to outside circumstances — one of my foster sisters was working as a bartender in an adult club, and my caseworker had unfounded concerns about the influence it could have on me. When I left them, I decided I would never love a family again. I became a very depressed and angry teenager.

I moved to a home where I was emotionally abused and exploited. My foster mother accused me of stealing her socks and forced me to use my state clothing allowance to buy her new ones. I had to spend my own money on lunch at school, which was almost always the 50-cent cup noodles. At a check-up, the nurse commented that my blood sugar was very low. My caseworker asked me why and I told her that sometimes I did not eat because I had to pay for it. I asked to be moved, but my caseworker was too busy and thought I was overreacting. I ran away for three days and was finally moved.
I arrived at a row of rundown white single-story buildings surrounded by an old chain fence with overgrown weeds. It was strangely quiet for a place where dozens of children were supposed to be housed. After entering the gate, I crossed an open courtyard with nothing but a lone picnic table and then went into a small room in one of the buildings where M.H. was waiting. Sitting on an old couch and staring at the floor, M.H. didn’t even raise her head when I entered the room.

At 16, M.H. has been in foster care most of her life. In a quiet voice, she explained that she had been in at least 12 foster placements and had suffered abuse in some of the homes. One foster parent choked her and threatened to return her to the foster care agency if she acted up. Now, at this group facility where children are placed in solitary confinement if they misbehave, all M.H. can talk about is how much she just wants to be housed. After entering the gate, I crossed the buildings where M.H. was waiting. Sitting on an open courtyard with nothing but a lone picnic table and then went into a small room in one of the buildings where M.H. was waiting. Sitting on an old couch and staring at the floor, M.H. didn’t even raise her head when I entered the room.

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I became a lawyer to advocate for vulnerable youth, and there is no population more vulnerable than children torn from the only families they have known, then placed into a system that treats them like they have been thrown away and forgotten. At Children’s Rights, our work across the country allows children in foster care to have a shot at secure, safe futures. After spending over an hour describing her harrowing history in state custody, M.H. shared with me that she felt so desperate and rejected that she resorted to self-harm. She described what she had lived through, you could hear the disbelief in her own voice. Too many of these children, just like A.R., go years without adequate medical and mental health care. Children are hurt physically, psychologically and emotionally, and are placed at constant risk of such harms while in state custody.

For all of these reasons, Children’s Rights decided to take action and hold the South Carolina Department of Social Services accountable for these longstanding systemic failures. We are calling on the child welfare agency to build the infrastructure necessary to support a sufficient number of good foster homes, and ensure reasonable caseload levels so social workers can be effective in their work to keep kids safe. And we are demanding that kids in foster care get the medical, dental and mental health services they desperately need.

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During the first few months of 2008, all I could hear was my mother in pain and agony from the life-sucking disease we call cancer. That time was a blur, but I do recall smelling the crisp winter air as I headed to school after I made my mother a traditional Colombian dish of rice, meat, and arepa con queso. A remarkable single mother who created her own opportunities regardless of hard circumstances, she immigrated to the unknown to give me, her only son, the opportunity to reach the “American Dream.” Unfortunately, life sometimes has devastating twists and turns. That spring, she passed away. I was just 12 years old.

When my mother went into hospice, I moved in with a teacher who felt it was her duty to watch over me until I grew up to become a self-sufficient young adult. Her heart may have been in the right place, but she did not know how to take care of a suicidal adolescent who was dealing with grief and the sudden loss of his cultural identity and values. I ended up in a behavioral hospital for 10 days, and her plan to adopt me ended. I was relieved when I signed my hospital release forms. Then I had a brief discussion with my caseworker about a new foster home.

I remember clenching my left fist and holding a small black bag with my personal belongings in my right hand as I walked to my caseworker’s car on a cold, windy evening. The whole ride to my new home left me nauseated and frightened. I repeatedly thought of how terrible it was not being able to meet my foster parents beforehand. Shortly after, I arrived at the residence of a somewhat elderly married couple. I stepped inside their home and said goodbye to my caseworker. I felt very awkward not knowing much about them. I was given just a quick tour before I was led to my room. It did not feel welcoming at all!

This couple tried hard to push their values and morals on me. From my perspective, this was not going to fly. Discussions quickly turned into arguments. I was given “happy pills” like Prozac and Risperdal to help me tame my rage and deal with my grief. I was forced to abide by their ways of living. I had to come straight home from school and was prohibited from leaving the house. I took every order they gave me, and always answered with “Yes Ma’am” or “Yes Sir.”

In this situation, without a doubt, I was unable to cope with my grief over my mother’s death. I reached out to a teacher at my middle school and told her I did not feel safe in my foster home. She made it her duty to talk to our school’s case manager, and I was finally moved.

In my last placement, I started hearing the words “high-risk,” a term that still bothers me. Being labeled that way made me feel like I was doing something wrong and I would never have the opportunity to grow and develop like other kids. To this day, I still correct people when they use the term.

Ultimately, foster care was both a blessing and a curse and I will tell you why. Some foster parents and children I lived with made me believe I was a problem to them, my caseworkers and anyone else who came onto my path. I had sid effects from the anti-psychotic medication I was forced to take throughout my teenage years, and I felt the impact of emotional and mental abuse. It all got to me. Day in and day out I kept having this crazy desire to leave foster care. So I worked hard academically. I graduated from high school early. I moved onto college and lived on my own in student housing.

Now I am growing each day, and hope to become a successful entrepreneur. I know my development would not be achievable without the contributions of others and my willingness to have the right attitude. Over the years, I have spoken with many adults, not just about employment opportunities, but also about their lives, and they have helped broaden my perspective on the world. I know I was very lucky to have a mother who instilled in me early on that an appreciation for people and an enthusiastic attitude can create positive outcomes in life. To sum it up, here is one of my favorite quotes by Joseph Campbell: “Follow your bliss and the universe will open doors where there were only walls.”

“TURING ADVERSITY INTO AN ASSET”

By Diego Conde
Some choose their destiny and for others, destiny chooses them. I never would have chosen my path, but on it I have found myself.

I went into foster care when I was 10. After being abused and neglected, I wanted to be loved and adopted, but things rarely work out the way we hope. Foster care was a whole new world. I went from feeling invisible to being in a place where people were hyper aware of where I was and what I was doing. It all made me extremely anxious. I searched every facial expression, word and body movement for signs of approval. I was consumed with the thought that if I could prove I was smart or helpful, then I would be wanted and kept.

But instead, I bounced around 26 times in the system. Mostly, I was moved because of behavior. I was in the gifted program, and was sweet and affectionate, but thanks to the trauma I experienced, I could also be smart-mouthed, manipulative and emotionally demanding. I was the kid who yelled, “You can’t touch me! I’m a foster child!” It never sat well.

I always wanted someone who wouldn’t give up on me. I wanted to lay it all out, and have someone say, “You are okay! I still love and want you!” But people gave up easily, and I learned to hide and be a chameleon. If they couldn’t handle the “edges” of me, I was certain they couldn’t handle the core.

My last stop was a children’s home. At first, I excelled in a rule-driven environment with clear boundaries. I learned what was expected of me and enjoyed the privileges associated with being good. But I also knew that being there meant I was no longer family material, and I felt like I was unworthy of love, like I was too lost to be saved. I began cutting and thought about dying more than living.

Ultimately I didn’t trust that the system had my best interests at heart, so I filed for emancipation and it was granted when I was 17. I thought this was the end of my journey, but it was actually the beginning. I was sexually abused by a trusted female friend, married and divorced, had a child out of wedlock, lost a child in utero, had trouble staying employed and dropped out of semester after semester of college. I feared I was mentally ill, and I overdosed and nearly lost my life.

But I was determined that life would be different for my daughter. It took a long time, but healing came. I graduated after 11 years with my bachelor’s degree and went on to obtain my child welfare license to work with specialized foster children. I became a foster parent and took a child into my home who virtually mirrored my own struggles. It helped me realize how hard it is to reach a child in the midst of the storm and to deal with trauma-related behaviors. But by offering my foster daughter what I always needed, it was like I offered it to myself. It has been amazingly redemptive.

The system is a necessary evil. We hear horror stories of kids who have fallen through the cracks. In many ways I feel I was one of them, but I know I fared better in care than I would have out of it. I had food and shelter. I was healthier and had access to dental and eye care. I was able to attend school regularly. I moved often and struggled emotionally, but I wasn’t beaten or sexually abused.

There are things that need to change in foster care. There’s a need for more quality foster and adoptive parents, workers who are supported so they don’t burn out and programs for youth aging out. But there are also amazing people involved at every level who have dedicated their lives to the kids. And in the 20 years since I have been in care, I do see that strides are being made.

If someone asked me today what my greatest accomplishment in life has been, I would say, “I broke the cycle!” It was breathtakingly hard. I almost didn’t make it. Now I am married and have four beautiful children. I never dreamed life could be this good. As life goes on, I learn more and more what an accomplishment that truly is … and in it, I continue to heal.

I would tell those in foster care what I tell my daughter, whom we are currently adopting: “Nothing about what you have been through is fair or your fault. As with anything we go through, we have a choice about whether our experiences will win or we will! It’s worth the fight!” Beauty can come from ashes and a time can come where you honestly become thankful for what you’ve been through and survived.
I vividly remember the day that I went to live with my foster parents, and the shame and guilt I felt as we stood in their garage and went through my clothes. My foster mother held them up in the light, and her jaw dropped at the rips and holes. She clicked her tongue and said, “These obviously have to go in the trash. We’ll get you some new ones.”

I know she didn’t mean anything by it, but apart from bad memories of my childhood, the stained shirts, ripped sports bras and dirty pants were all I had. I was 15.

I had experienced years of social service calls, name calling, drunken fist fights and chronic episodes of homelessness, but it wasn’t until I got hung up on some misdemeanor marijuana charges that the state opened a child protection case. As many teens in chaotic households do, I acted out the only behaviors I knew. Drinking, using, fighting, giving up in school. Every drink I took, every fist I threw, was because I didn’t know what else to do.

There are no words to describe the feelings I carried around as a traumatized child. I heard a lot of, “You do this, you did that, go to school ...” Nobody ever told me, “You’re beautiful, you are strong, you can do whatever you set your mind to.” I had to find that out for myself.

I spent quite a few months in a home for adolescents with substance abuse problems, with a family that was nothing short of amazing. They gave me my first glimpse of what a healthy family looked like, from 6 p.m. supper to hockey games on the weekends.

Then I moved into a therapeutic foster home, designed for children needing higher level care than a traditional foster home. My foster parents were kind, consistent and caring, and for a while I thrived. But I had no experience with that kind of stability. I started feeling like a caged bird. Going from having no rules or expectations to being in a healthy, stable home was too much for me. I started to get into trouble again, and eventually decided to run away and live on my own. When I found out I was pregnant at 19, I had to draw on my brief experiences in a safe and nurturing environment.

From the day that I learned I was to be a mother, I thought of nothing else but giving my child more than I had. By the time my son was born, I had my GED, and I started college shortly after. I majored in social work because I wanted to change the world. But it was the world that changed me. As I progressed through college and devoted myself to my son, I started to find joy in helping others. I became employed at a homeless shelter, volunteered for various organizations and helped my friends and family any chance I got.

At 24, I became licensed to provide therapeutic foster care, and within a few months, the state placed two children with me. At 26, I became a mother for the second time when I adopted a 5-year-old girl who came from a family much like my own. Over the past few years, I have cared for children ages 5 to 16, and I recently started providing adolescent substance abuse care through the same program I was in as a youth.

I encourage you, the foster parents, to be patient with your kids. They didn’t ask for this. You have the power to make a lasting difference in their lives. And, I encourage you, the foster children, not to let the past define you. You are all beautiful, and you have the power to change the world.
I can remember clearly when Jaylin was born. I was 8 years old. I was at a babysitter’s house, and when my grandmother came to pick me up, she told me that I had a little sister. I already had two younger brothers, so I was ecstatic.

My grandmother adopted me, and had custody of my two younger brothers. Our parents had serious drug problems and were in and out of jail. My grandmother was starting to have health problems and couldn’t care for a newborn baby, so Jaylin was put into foster care.

Twice a week we would see her at Little Flowers agency for several hours. All through fourth and fifth grade, I would come after school to play with her. I watched Jaylin learn to walk and to babble a few words. I was always so excited to see her. One day, when I was 11, my grandmother explained that Jaylin’s foster mother had adopted her. There weren’t going to be any visits at the agency.

Hearing this news, I felt distraught. Nobody had asked me my opinion. I never met with any lawyer or caseworker before this change happened. I worried that maybe I wasn’t going to see my sister again. And shortly after Jaylin was adopted, the excuses started. Jaylin was asleep, she was sick or she was visiting their family in another state. Oftentimes, her mom wouldn’t answer the phone.

All through middle school and high school, I would call her house from different numbers so she wouldn’t know it was me. As she got older, Jaylin would sometimes answer. I tried to use these short calls to get to know my sister. I learned that she liked vanilla ice cream and Hannah Montana. I would record our conversations using my phone. If I lost my cell it was like I was losing my only connection with my sister. But I never forgot Jaylin’s number. I never stopped trying to reach her.

I had so many emotions during these years. I wanted to ask, “What did I do to deserve this? What did we ever do to you?” I knew Jaylin’s mom might be afraid of my parents, but I had a very different life. I was resilient and kept a positive attitude, but not being able to see my sister hurt me deeply.

It was my grandmother who suggested that we go to court. At the time I was too young to file on my own, and my grandmother was too sick to make it. After she passed away, I could hear her voice in my head, telling me “don’t forget about your sister.”

So I filed for visitation. I had never known their address, and I needed one to serve Jaylin’s mom with the court papers. Luckily, I had memorized her home phone number. Using Google, I was able to do a reverse address look up.

The first time I saw the judge, she shouted at me like I was a deadbeat dad. She said, “Where have you been all these years? Why are you here now?” I wanted to yell back, “What do you mean where have I been? I was eleven years old! I did everything I knew how to do!” The judge assigned me a lawyer, who thought I was a victim of the system, and that I was being punished because my parents had lost their rights.

One day, many months after I filed the case, her adoptive mom walked into court with a 12-year-old girl. She asked, “Do you know who this is?” I knew right away that it was Jaylin, that I was finally seeing her. Later her mom explained that she was scared that Jaylin would resent her, that she didn’t want her to feel different from other kids in the family. She planned to tell Jaylin at 16 that she had been adopted. But she realized that I might be a role model and help. Jaylin succeed in school. She also had started having health problems, and wanted Jaylin to know her other family.

Since that day I’ve been seeing Jaylin whenever I can. I am grateful that I can mentor her and guide her. If I could question the judges and attorneys on Jaylin’s case, I would ask, “Were you thinking of how your decisions might impact my life for the next decade?” I would ask them to think ahead, and imagine what would be best for Jaylin not just when she was 3 years old but for the rest of her life.

This issue affects many adopted children — but in a sense I was very lucky, because I was able to bond with Jaylin when she was still in foster care. Often this is not the case. Roughly two-thirds of children in foster care also have at least one sibling in care, and a significant number of them are split into different homes. So, so many have to fight just to get occasional visits with each other.

It’s traumatic enough to be in the system without losing your only ties to everything you once knew. The law should be changed to help kids like me. Children should have a voice about whether or not they want connections with biological family. When parents lose their rights, grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles shouldn’t lose their rights along with them. Why should we be victimized for actions that aren’t ours?
On February 5, I aged out of Washington State’s Foster Care to 21 program. Ten years of foster care, and on this day I was finally leaving for good. Now that I was 21, exiting seemed uneventful, not like when I was poised to age out at 18.

Before I signed the contract to extend my time in care another three years, I was scared. I had no idea what I was doing and I knew I wasn’t ready to be on my own. I felt like I was going to have to figure everything out by myself. The extra time really helped me prepare for adult life. I learned how to be independent and handle new responsibilities, like doing taxes, budgeting and balancing my social life with school and work. And I had the assurance that if anything unexpected happened, I had a place to turn for support.

I have to say that foster care is not perfect. During my decade in care, I struggled with feelings of being alone and out of place no matter where I went. I tried to figure out ways to hide, or avoid the fact I was in care. And I struggled with the feeling that nothing was permanent in my life. Based on my experiences, I think there are some important things that need to happen to really help youth in care; we need to make sure those who are not adopted or reunified with their families are prepared to age out. I also believe:

- We should not have more caseworkers than we have family members. Streams of caseworkers should not come in and out of our lives. One person should stay and be consistent, and it’ll make a world of difference. I remember three of my caseworkers, but I know I had at least 10. There were so many times when I was made to feel like I was just a case file, and not a real person.
- We should never feel alone. Youth have the right to feel that we have people in our corner to help us along and tell us the world is not falling down. The few times I felt truly welcome were when I spent time with other foster youth. It is essential to give young people opportunities to connect with others in state care.
- We should be connected with resources. It is a struggle to access the opportunities that are out there for us. Every day it seems I find another resource which, had I known about earlier, may have changed my life. Things like YMCA’s independent living program or the educational training voucher that someone told me I was not eligible for, and I later found out I was.

What I’m trying to say about the foster care system is this: We are the children of the state. The state is our parent, yet we are sometimes treated like transactions when we should be given the opportunity to live something like a normal life.

Still, as I look back, I know that I have come a long way and foster care has helped me do some great things. In the past, I was often so caught up in my fear of failing that I didn’t have faith in myself. But I changed so much because of the experiences I had in foster care and the people who encouraged me to reach a little bit further than I believed I could.

Without being in care, I would not have had the opportunity to succeed as much as I have. I am attending a university and pursing my Bachelor’s in Social Work, even though I thought I was not smart enough. I am independent even though I thought I would not be able to survive alone. I learned to keep fighting for what I want, to not give up on the things that I believe in. I learned the importance of others in my life, like my foster parents and those who inspire me. And I learned that what I want so much is to learn more. I now work with several non-profit organizations to advocate for foster youth in the United States and internationally, and I plan to pursue a master’s degree.

To the current and former foster youth that may be reading this, I want to tell you that you are strong enough for anything that comes your way. You have the ability to make a difference. You have so much potential. Even if you feel like the odds are against you, or that you have no opportunities, never give up. Reach out, and reach high.

A Home Within’s therapy for foster youth, YMCA’s independent living program or the educational training voucher that someone told me I was not eligible for, and I later found out I was.

By David Inghlish

"THERE WERE SO MANY TIMES WHEN I WAS MADE TO FEEL LIKE I WAS JUST A CASE FILE, AND NOT A REAL PERSON."
Every child deserves a home. Yet the child welfare system does not have a sound record of developing best practices for serving children and youth waiting to be adopted who have been identified as “difficult to place” — older youth, children with mental or physical challenges, children in sibling groups, children of a minority culture or race and/or youth who identified as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual or transgender (LGBT).

And we know that there is an elevated risk of these children aging out of care simply because of who they are, what they have experienced or the borders that define them.

For example, children self-identified as LGBT in the United States today remain at risk for intolerance, bullying, abuse and homelessness. One study found that more than 30 percent of LGBT youth reported suffering physical violence at the hands of a family member after coming out. The National Network of Runaway and Youth Services has estimated that 20 to 40 percent of LGBT youth reported suffering physical violence at the hands of a family member after coming out. The National Network of Runaway and Youth Services has estimated that 20 to 40 percent of LGBT youth reported suffering physical violence at the hands of a family member after coming out.

Jonathan was one of those children.

Just after Jonathan turned 10 years old, his father was incarcerated. Although initially placed with his grandparents, they ultimately notified the children’s services department that they did not feel comfortable keeping Jonathan because of his openly transgender presentation. He was returned to foster care and began a long journey bouncing from foster home to foster home, with a total of nine placements. Jonathan lived each day knowing that whatever current placement he was in, it was tenuous at best. Something he would do or say would end in yet another move. This had become his life; believing that staying in a place long enough to unpack and feel a small sense of belonging would result in losing it all at a moment’s notice.

Eventually, Jonathan’s caseworker contacted Sandy, a child-focused recruiter supported by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. You see, a decade ago, the Foundation shifted its focus from supporting “business as usual” to practices that more effectively serve children and youth who are most at risk of aging out of care. We developed a groundbreaking child-focused recruitment model to serve youth who are older, part of sibling groups, or have special needs.

Jonathan was home and he began using the name Erica, the name that will be printed on her adoption papers. Scott’s family had a long-standing tradition of everyone wearing new pajamas on Christmas Eve. Scott’s parents were so thrilled with Jonathan that they wanted him to participate in this tradition. His “grandma” asked thoughtfully, “Do we get Jonathan boy pajamas or girl pajamas?” For the very first time, Jonathan was loved and accepted for the person he was.

Over time, Scott carefully and lovingly involved Jonathan with extended family members and some friends Jonathan now refers to as his aunties. They gave him a makeover, helped him pick out a new wardrobe and gave him guidance on how to remain safe in the community. Jonathan made new friends and kept them. Jonathan was home and he began using the name Erica, the name that will be printed on his adoption papers.

On Father’s Day, Scott emailed the recruiter saying how surprised he was that Erica just said she loved him and wanted him to be her dad. When it came time to terminate parental rights, both Erica’s mother and father were in attendance to give their blessings. Erica’s dad had been clean from substances and wanted to apologize for the pain and heartache that his choices created throughout her life. The road was cleared and a new family was formed.

At the time, Sandy had recently met Scott, a potential adoptive parent who was interested in adopting siblings under the age of 8. After she shared a little of Jonathan’s history with Scott, he instantly wanted to meet him. The recruiter carefully avoided stressing the concept of adoption; preferring instead to allow the relationship to blossom naturally. Jonathan was very loyal to his biological family and felt adoption would be disrespecting that loyalty. On Christmas Eve of that year, Jonathan moved into Scott’s home.

Scott’s family had the children of a minority culture or race and/or youth who identified as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual or transgender (LGBT). And of the more than 100,000 youth ages 12 to 18 who are in foster care, an estimated 10 percent are LGBT. Youth in foster care are by default in a unique and difficult situation. Children and youth who are labeled as “difficult” or “unadoptable” simply because of age or circumstance no longer have to wonder if they will have the birthright of every child — a family and a home — when served by child-focused recruitment.

It’s our duty as Americans to take care of children. Our children. Children who have suffered abuse and trauma, sometimes just because of who they are. But they’re just kids. Kids who need love and support to grow, thrive, and eventually contribute to society.

Who needs the love and support of family? Not just some children. Every child.

Rita Soronen is president and CEO of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. This first appeared on The Huffington Post.

“EVERY CHILD DESERVES A HOME.”
My name is Crystal Bentley and I’m 23 years old. Most people would say that I am too young to have truly lived. The truth is that I have lived plenty. I grew up in foster care and while some foster youth, if lucky, have fairly normal childhoods, the great majority of us struggle. I was taken from my mother twice, once at 2 and for good at 5. After I was sexually abused by her boyfriend, she had a choice to make — me and my three brothers or him. She left us in a parking lot where we were coaxed into a van by a child protection services worker with fruit snacks. Over the next six years, I lived in six abusive homes and temporary shelters. In some, I was beaten or verbally abused by foster parents. In others, I was molested by their children. The more abuse I experienced, the worse the next placement was. I really lost all hope when I was raped and sodomized in a home that was supposed to be safe. I was only 8.

Three years later, I was adopted by your storybook family. I was a gift from God, until they had their own child. Then I was the pebble in their shoe. I was dumped at a residential treatment center (RTC), where I spent my teenage years trying to fit in with damaged, hardened children and being overlooked by insensitive staff. I just wanted someone, anyone to love me. At 17 I got pregnant. I lost most of my scholarship opportunities from prestigious schools, was kicked out of the RTC and forced to live with my daughter’s father.

From day one he abused me. I ran away, he went to jail, and I was on the streets, going from pillar to post. Not surprisingly, I was not able to take care of myself. After all, I was raised in a system where I barely saw my caseworkers, and where foster parents easily covered up my abuse. If I reported it I was moved out of the RTC and forced to live with my daughter’s father.

Children don’t choose to be abused, neglected or orphaned, and it is definitely not their fault that they are raised in systems where they are at risk of being exploited, then cast out at 18 to fend for themselves. But I am a very small part of something so big. It will take ALL of us to make foster care a better place. Please share these blogs, spread the word about Children’s Rights’ Fostering the Future campaign, and do whatever else you can to protect the rights and lives of kids in state care.

By Crystal Bentley

“I REALLY LOST ALL HOPE WHEN I WAS RAPED AND SODOMIZED IN A HOME THAT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE SAFE. I WAS ONLY 8.”
THE RACE
OF MY LIFE:
A RUNAWAY KID’S STORY

By David G. Daniels

“I WAS ANGRY — I DIDN’T ASK TO BE IN FOSTER CARE AND I SURELY DIDN’T CHOOSE THIS LIFE I WAS GIVEN.”

I am a former foster youth from Houston; I spent years in state care. My story is like many others, but with a little twist. I was born a “drug baby” and was placed into child protective services (CPS) immediately upon my arrival into this world. My parents were drug addicts, and my father abused me and my mother.

Rewind, right? I know you’re wondering how I was abused and witnessed my parents doing drugs if I was in foster care from birth. Well, when I was 5 years old I was returned home. My mother was drug-free, or so everyone thought. For years after, my father abused me and my mother neglected me. Sometimes I went days without bathing. I would miss school because of the bruises on my body. I was terrified of my father, and tired of being in crack houses with my mother.

At the age of 11, I ran away from home while going to check the mail. I went to the police department, but they assumed I was a troubled teen, so they sent me back home, where my father beat me. My saving grace didn’t come until the next day at school, when a caseworker pulled me out of class to investigate my abuse and neglect.

On December 7, 2000, I went back into foster care. I might as well have stayed at home. For the next few years I lived in a series of violent foster homes. In some my foster parents abused me. They took my clothing voucher for their biological kids, who were allowed to physically assault and belittle the foster kids. The ultimate manipulators, my last set of foster parents made me think that if I was ever to reveal what was going on, no one would believe me. I would just be labeled “troubled” and sent to a group home.

It’s kind of what happened.

When I complained, my journey from group home to group home began. I was treated like a “throwaway kid” — a burden and prisoner. There was no privacy. The staff were only there to collect a check. In one home, they would restrain us aggressively whenever they got mad and wanted to demonstrate their power. Once it was so bad that I went to the doctor with pulled ligaments in my back.

I developed this chip on my shoulder. I was overwhelmed by constant stereotyping, not seeing my family, psychological evaluations and heavy medication. I was angry — I didn’t ask to be in foster care and I surely didn’t choose this life I was given. I ran away from that home; there were so many things wrong with it that I would not have survived if I had stayed.

At 15 I decided that if I wanted any chance at life, love and success, I would have to leave foster care. I went to live with my mom (my parents had divorced by then), but her welcome was anything but warm. My mother complained that she didn’t want me in her house. When we disagreed, she always wanted to put her hands on me to make a point. Yet when I moved out to go stay with a cousin, my mother made such a fuss that I went back home. And on my prom night my father came over, started drinking and tried to fight me.

For the next few years I bounced between family members’ homes until I left to attend college. I didn’t know that running away at 15 would keep me from receiving financial assistance. CPS said they wouldn’t help me because I was not in the system on my 18th birthday — never mind that I spent years in the system.

I’ve spent many nights sleepless and crying, and was suicidal for a few of them. But I pushed through. I applied for the Linda Lorelle Scholarship Fund, which required me to write an essay about the obstacles I had overcome in my life. I had too many to choose from. That scholarship alone not only saved my life, but also changed my perspective on life.

Now, in 2015, I’m a graduate of Prairie View A&M University, where I earned my B.A. in Communications Studies. I’m currently pursuing a Masters in Counseling, and I’m the communication specialist for a non-profit organization. In my free time I advocate whole-heartedly for youth in foster care. I speak at agencies, churches, galas and to state workers, raising awareness about the system.

I’m not perfect. I’ve done many things that I’m not proud of, like drugs, skipping school and fighting. But I never stopped striving to be better. And I have learned that sometimes you have to heal yourself and forgive the unforgivable to reach your happiness. I can’t count the number of apologizes I didn’t receive. I can’t tell you how many times I was told I would never amount to anything and would end up like my parents. Fall, my brothers and sisters, but don’t you dare GIVE UP! You will see that life gets greater later.
The first 10 years of my life were like riding a roller coaster with a blindfold on, not knowing when the next tragic event was going to take place.

Growing up I didn’t always have the best luck. I was not dealt a royal flush. I was raised by a single mother along with my five siblings. My mother, on and off of welfare, employed and unemployed, did her best with the help of my grandmother and other family members. Still, when I was a child she meted out emotional, verbal and corporal abuse. I never thought anything of it because all my siblings were going through the same thing — I thought that was the life I was given.

I was sexually abused for the first time at age 4. The drug use of my mother, the molestation by her boyfriend, and worst of all, the betrayal when she didn’t stop it from happening, were devastating. At this young age I didn’t understand, I was scared, and I felt alone. My life began to unravel. The assaults continued nightly. I hoped, wished, prayed that they would stop.

When I was placed into the care of the court, I didn’t even understand what it meant. I later knew that I was in foster care, a ward of the county. I was placed into the home of Tiffany, who later became Mom. I remained in her care for eight years. Hers was my only foster home. Never having to relocate was the best thing I could ask for. While in my biological mother’s care I changed schools and homes at least twice annually. I never had the opportunity to finish a full year with my friends. Moving to a new home or school was the worst. When I was placed with Tiffany I asked her to do her best to keep me in the same school as long as possible. She did.

I am my angel. My mom, a real mom. She is the best at telling me the truth and guiding me the right way. When I tell my mother something she always responds with, “I love you no matter what. I’m going to tell you what I think and you can decide after that.” She is family-oriented, always putting her own goals on hold to help others achieve theirs. She is always there for me. She is also young. Growing up with a mother figure only nine years older meant I couldn’t be sneaky, so I told her just about everything! As I got older we developed a close bond.

When I was 18 my mom explained to me that I was no longer a ward of the court. I didn’t receive aid from the government. I didn’t have medical coverage. But after aging out of the system I remained with my family. My mom, dad and younger siblings continue to be a part of my life even though I am considered an adult. This doesn’t always happen with kids in foster care.

I’m not angry anymore for being placed into the system, because it forced me to be a better, stronger woman. When I went into care I felt alone a lot of the time. I never felt like I belonged to the family that I was part of. I was always afraid that I was going to be sent back to my biological mother. But over the years my foster family took care of me like I was their own, and it became clear that I was theirs forever. I love them.

God didn’t give me society’s view of a good life, but he didn’t give me more than I could handle either. I’ve stood strong in my values, my morals and my faith. I fight for my own happiness. I fight to see the humanity that is left in the world. As a foster kid I had a difficult time trusting others, but who can blame me? After a while I began to open up and let people in my life. I had to stop re-reading a chapter in my book and start writing my next chapter.

Life is what you make it. You survive — even if you’re alone, keep fighting. I promise you one day someone will care. We weren’t dealt the best hand, but if we work hard enough we can earn our own.
The many years I spent growing up in foster care took away any chance I had at a normal life. During my time in the system I lived in over 20 different homes — sometimes moving every six to eight months — never staying in one place long enough to create support systems, build community or establish roots. I think that at times this was for the better because almost all of the 20-plus homes I lived in were imbued with abuse. By the time I aged out of foster care I had been raped and beaten more than I want to remember — often by the very people the state of Texas was paying to “care” for me. Barely an adult and fresh out of the system, I was homeless, forgotten, abandoned and alone. My life was reduced to two pairs of clothes, a well-worn backpack and the streets. By day I begged strangers for their change and by night I was turning tricks for a place to stay, a shower, a hot meal or whatever I could trade my body for. That was my reality.

On the streets, I found out very quickly that there aren’t a lot of resources for homeless youth in Houston, especially if you’re gay. So I learned to make due with what I had. Most nights, I would wander in Montrose until someone picked me up. Sometimes I’d get lucky and he’d let me spend the night, but more often than not, I’d be forced to sleep on the roof of a shopping strip in the north side of Houston — no more than 10 blocks from the group home I was living at when I aged out of the system and into homelessness.

I spent the next six months on the streets doing this over and over again, living day-to-day, surviving through the street economy — alone, ashamed and guilt-ridden. One day in August of 2010, I was in downtown Houston searching for an air-conditioned space and a restroom and ended up wandering into the University of Houston-Downtown.

That day, the course of my life changed.

Youth who age out of the foster care system in Texas are eligible to utilize a waiver that covers the complete costs of tuition and fees at state-funded institutions of higher education within the state. It was on that fateful day in August that I found out about this waiver, and with the help of university staff I registered for classes and applied for financial aid. I spent the majority of my first semester homeless and struggling to keep up with my course work, but eventually I would receive a refund check for about $2,000 that I used to get my first apartment. I live in that very same apartment today, and in May of this year I will graduate from the University of Houston-Downtown with a bachelor’s degree in social work.

My life was, still is and will always be valuable. I wasn’t a lost cause, a degenerate or a waste of space. I was a young person who, because of my life’s circumstances, ended up on the streets. But with the right opportunity, I was able to surpass those circumstances and accomplish so much in such a short period of time.

I’ve advocated for greater protections for foster youth — testifying countless times before committees in Congress and the Texas legislature, I’ve worked to elect progressives to public office — most recently working for Senator Wendy Davis’ gubernatorial campaign, I’ve won national leadership awards from the Human Rights Campaign and the National LGBTQ Taskforce. I’ve even had the chance to intern on Capitol Hill for Senator Patty Murray and after sharing my personal story with her, she was moved to introduce the 2014 Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act.

Yes, at one point in my life I was a foster kid, but by the grace of God I am now a strong, resilient and intelligent contributing member of my community. I am worth something, and so is every other foster youth.

My journey illustrates the capacity that education has to change lives. Children in foster care deserve to have the promise of a future that only an education can provide. Without it we are almost certainly doomed to repeat the cycle of poverty, abuse and disenfranchisement that has already plagued our lives over and over again.

We are the future. Invest in us, value us, recognize our worth, and watch us soar to unimaginable heights.

“BARELY AN ADULT AND FRESH OUT OF THE SYSTEM, I WAS HOMELESS, FORGOTTEN, ABANDONED AND ALONE. MY LIFE WAS REDUCED TO TWO PAIRS OF CLOTHES, A WELL-WORN BACKPACK AND THE STREETS.”
We escaped from my mother's abusive second husband in the middle of the night – just me, my little sister, my mother and our dog in a small black coupe. After more than a year of severe physical and emotional abuse, my mother couldn't take it. We drove cross country, Ohio to Colorado. When we got to Colorado my mother was arrested for a DUI, and my sister and I were placed in foster care for six weeks while she was in rehab. When she got out, we thought she was better and that was the end. But we were wrong. My mother frequently left my sister and me at the home of a family “friend.” He sexually molested me, and my mother didn't believe me. I spent many nights wide awake on the man’s fold-out couch, waiting for him to come down the stairs. I excelled in school, but was constantly terrified at home. As I tried to do homework, my mother would scream at me about how fat and ugly I was. She punched, hit and threw me down stairs, and I was locked in the basement when I tried to fight back. I have memories of being chased with a butcher knife, of hiding in closets and running away with my little sister. My mother took me to two different psychologists and medicated me to the point that I pulled out my hair and picked off my skin.

I went into foster care for the second time at age 9 after my mother gave up custody. I was terrified, fully convinced that I was worthless and had only a plastic bag with a few personal items.

There are so many people in the life of a foster child. I went through five total foster placements, and had 11 foster parents, at least 10 therapists, over a dozen caseworkers, three guardians ad litem, and many judges and child welfare professionals who came in and out of my life. The only thing I was certain of was that they wouldn't be around forever.

There was one person I was sure of, though. I had a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer when my second case was opened.

CASA volunteers are appointed by a judge to advocate for an abused or neglected child in the court system. My CASA volunteer was the first person to be a consistent presence in my life. I never had to work for her love. She championed my every achievement and supported me through my failures. She made me feel worthy of her time, and I never had to work for her love. Her commitment was unconditional.

We lost touch after I left care, and eventually, at 15, I ended up being placed with my best friend's family. It was the first time I'd ever felt truly safe, and sure that the man in the house wouldn’t creep into my room. They actually grounded me when I broke the rules! I learned that that was love — setting appropriate boundaries and asking me to follow them was healthy. I just never knew.

I’ve been speaking on topics of child welfare and foster care advocacy for about six years, and I recently asked my best friend’s parents to adopt me. They said yes. Soon, I’ll have a last name I’m proud of. None of this would be possible if I hadn't had a CASA volunteer, and later, a family who never had to be biological to show me that they loved me.

I ended up graduating from high school early, going to a private college on a full scholarship and am now a professional in the child welfare field. But before any of that could happen, someone had to truly care about me.

Family comes in many forms. Many foster children end up in prison, or having children before they’re ready, or on state or federal assistance. We can avoid these all-too-common outcomes, but only if someone tells us we’re worth it. Someone told me — and now, I’m in a position to tell others. The advice I have for current and former foster children is simple: You are worth it. You are worth your peers' time. You are worth your family’s time. But most of all, you are worth your own time. Love yourself and your family will find you.
As I reminisce about my past, I remember a child who was lonely and afraid, who longed for a family, but mostly, wanted nothing more than to be loved. I was brought into this world with few options. My parents separated before I was born. My mom fell into drugs, and fell in love with a man whom she chose over her own kids. She loved him so much that she forgot who she was. She let him abuse me and my siblings, and she allowed Child Protective Services to take us away.

At the age of 6, I went to live with my grandparents. Things went well in the beginning, but I started to act out to the point that my grandparents couldn't take care of me anymore. My aunt and her boyfriend decided to take me in. That is when I became the Cinderella Boy — every morning I woke up early to do chores, went to school, came home and did homework, ate dinner, did more chores, took a shower and went to sleep on the floor. Meanwhile, their kids didn't do any chores, and got to play whenever they wanted. I was bullied by the kids, and abused by my aunt and her boyfriend.

My best friend at the time was a Siberian husky named Sheeba. As I did chores outside, I often spoke to Sheeba, pretending I was living in another world. It was my way of escaping the turmoil and pain. I finally got the courage to tell someone I was being abused, but they didn't believe me. I was harmed for three or four years before I was removed from my aunt's care and placed in a foster home.

I was actually happy to be going to a foster home. I felt like it was my chance to find a family, but that was not the case. I was only in the home for about two months before I was moved again and reunited with my brothers. In my next home, my behaviors escalated to verbal aggression and temper tantrums. I remember laying on the top of the bunk bed crying, and my foster mom came in, and held me. I cried out loud, saying, "No one loves me, no one loves me, I don't have a family." She held me in her arms saying, "We love you, we are your family." I knew deep down she did, but she could no longer take care of me. I was eventually moved to a behavioral institution for wanting to jump out of a moving car.

My behavior got worse. I would say rude and vulgar things to anyone who pissed me off. I got into a lot of trouble in school. I moved to placement after placement. I started to lose hope. So many people were in and out of my life. I cried time after time — when staff left their jobs or when I was placed in another group home. I couldn't trust anyone or anything. I was never a bad kid, I was acting out because I wanted to be loved. The only attention I ever knew was negative — and I did anything and everything to get it.

Then, in 2004, God sent me a guardian angel, my Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer. I remember our first meeting when she picked me up from one of the group homes to take me out to eat. She said, "Manny, may I call you Manny?" I told her no one had ever called me that, but I liked it. She said, "Manny, you may not believe this, but I want you to know, I will always be in your life, unless you don't want me here anymore." I am proud to say 10 years later, she is still with me. She stood by my side during rough times, always invited me to family functions and gave me birthday and Christmas gifts. She took me to New York for my high school graduation and she paid for four years of books and supplies for college. But it wasn't the material things that made me love her. She is genuine and sincere. She showed me care, commitment and dedication, and that I can be anything in life if I work hard. She and her friends lift my spirits. They are all rooting for me to succeed.

I still struggle, and have side effects from being in the foster care system for so long. Even though my guardian angel is always there, I still have a void that needs to be filled. Only in time will I heal. I am a human being who is dealing with years of trauma. I have downfalls, but as I get older I have become stronger. I currently work with the County of Riverside Department of Public Social Services, in the Children Services Division, mentoring and advocating for foster youth — a job I am very passionate about and great at. I do a lot of public presentations on the foster care system and share my life story, and I am currently in the process of writing a memoir. I realize that just because I wasn't able to have a family back then, it does not mean I can't create my own family now. My destiny is in my control.

"SO MANY PEOPLE WERE IN AND OUT OF MY LIFE. I CRIED TIME AFTER TIME — WHEN STAFF LEFT THEIR JOBS OR WHEN I WAS PLACED IN ANOTHER GROUP HOME."
Lucky to be a Foster Kid’s Kid

By Ashley Watts

“MY MOM GOES THE EXTRA MILE BECAUSE HER OWN MOTHER BARELY WENT THE EXTRA CENTIMETER.”

Be warned: You may finish this article wishing my mom was yours. That’s okay, I can share. In a sense I already do, with scores of youth from Ohio foster care.

I guess the first thing I should mention is that my mom herself is a former foster kid. She spent 18 years in the system, bouncing from home to home and eventually aging out. Throughout her foster care experience, she was abused and neglected in multiple ways. However, that’s the very thing that pushed her to be the best mother that she could be. Although I was disciplined, my mom never hit or spanked me, because it was important to her not to repeat the history of violence.

My mom goes the extra mile because her own mother barely went the extra centimeter. And although my ideas were, she made them possible. My school lunches were cut into cute little shapes and always included a note from her.

I’m especially grateful for my mother’s life experiences and determination. I’d say her battle with cancer takes the cake as the most inspirational. I barely remember visiting her in the hospital because I was so young, but I’m told she fought twice as hard for me because if she let cancer win, I’d probably wind up in foster care myself. Once she had a little girl to take care of, she became the Hulk. She picked cancer up, threw it in the dumpster and dropped a few elbows on it before leaving the hospital to recover.

But there were some awkward times. I guess the most different thing about us was the confusing family tree. I had difficulty differentiating between my real family and my mom’s foster families. I didn’t get to spend time with most of my biological family because of the long periods of disconnect between us. In fact, on Grandparent Day at my school, my step-aunts had to come in place of my grandparents. I had a blast but it was weird explaining the situation to my friends. Meanwhile, mom kept close ties with most of her foster families, which made for many exhausting Thanksgiving visits. Most of my friends had two families; I had at least five!

There were other things, too. I remember how my mom suffered and sweated through many summers; she was thrown into a bath of boiling hot water as a baby and it burned over half her body, so she wouldn’t wear shorts. I never thought my mom was any different from the other moms. That changed the moment I hit elementary school. I was bombarded with questions about the different sizes of my mom’s eyes. Oh, I knew the answer alright. I just found it a little difficult explaining the fact that mommy was stabbed in the eye as a kid to my fellow 6 year olds. So I just gave the widely accepted “I dunno” shrug and went on eating my PB&J.

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In short: I’ve been on many playdates in my day and I’ve met plenty of moms, and I can confirm that mine has a spot in the Motherly Hall of Fame. My mom is radical, and I am grateful to her.
I’m Rodney Humphrey, a 25-year-old man. I spent 17 of my first 20 years in Child Protective Services. While in state care, I experienced my share of ups and downs — some worse than others. I had physically and verbally abusive foster parents. Sometimes my body was bruised by belt buckles. When I was just 6, I got whipped with switches from the rose garden — with the thorns still intact. I was moved about nine times. I lived in foster homes, shelters, group homes and a couple of hospitals. I felt unwanted and became a social outcast and an introvert.

When I was 12, my sister Serenity and I were separated. I remember that day, my foster mom packed all my things and dropped me off at a shelter. Serenity and I shared the longest hug goodbye. I didn’t trust anybody after that.

To make things worse, I was thrown into a residential group home with kids who were much older than me — everyone else was between 16 and 18. I was picked on, manipulated and at one point I was almost molested by an older child. I was laying in my bed and he came and held my face in the pillow. I was kicking and screaming, basically fighting for my manhood.

From that point on, I started skipping school, stealing things, following the same unproductive path of young men in foster care do. I was becoming a statistic. I was headed down a path of destruction and I didn’t even care. I figured no one cared about me, so why should I?

I continued to get into many fights, and was eventually sent to an alternative school. It was a scary place — there were metal detectors, police officers and K-9 dogs everywhere. I continued to do cruel acts like stealing from the teacher’s purse, picking on weaker children and being disrespectful to authority figures. That year I repeated the sixth grade due to my behavior.

One of the staff members at my group home happened to be married to my cousin Tina, whom I had never met. He introduced us, and Tina started taking me to church with her. When I was 13, I accepted Jesus Christ as my savior. After years of being forced to go to church and sleeping when I got there, I finally heard the truth. I was in the dark all those years and didn’t even realize it. Things didn’t change for me overnight. I was still unruly, but I was a work in progress. A couple years later, my best friend Isaiah Jones was gunned down due to street violence. It made me realize how short life is and how quickly it could be taken away. I didn’t want that for me.

My sister and I were reunited when I was 16. And at 17, I met the woman who changed my life forever. Her name was Gwendolyn Thomas — Ms. Gwen for short — but she became “Momma” to me. She was a single foster parent with a huge burden to carry. She had 11 foster children. To this day I still can’t see why she dealt with me. Maybe it was faith, maybe God predestined it.

Momma showed me all the love I was deprived of; so naturally I returned it. She cooked meals for us every night and encouraged me to be whatever I wanted to be. She bought me clothes and shoes. I never really wanted for anything. When I acted a fool she told me to get it together. I wound up graduating from high school — something I thought I’d never do — and attended the University of Houston-Downtown. Now, I’m a hip hop recording artist going by the name “Pro-Found.” If you know the definition of profound then it’s fitting. I make conscious music and I tell my life story through it. It’s deeply inspiring and motivating.

What I would say to other kids going through foster care is “you’re not alone.” I’ve been where you are and I know what it’s like. Set small attainable goals for yourself, and you can achieve whatever you put your mind to. Success is more than just wishing, it’s a process. Sometimes we go through things in life to strengthen us. Believe me, I wouldn’t change anything I’ve been through or anything I’ve seen. But I would change something about foster care. States should conduct more thorough investigations on the people they allow to foster children. Sometimes, people will give the illusion that everything is all fine and dandy, but behind closed doors they are the worst people to let care for kids.

As for me, my life wasn’t always pleasant, but it made me who I am. Now I can face the world, and say “I refuse to be another statistic, I won’t be anything less than great!” Keep God first, and there will be nothing you can’t do!
All my life I knew there was a reason for me being in foster care. Maybe this is it, to get my story out there. I was just 18 1/2 months old when I was removed from my biological mother and placed in a foster home after neighbors reported that my brother and I were being neglected. Things were even worse in foster care. I was sexually abused in my first foster home. It was unclear who was actually abusing me, since I had two father figures in my life at that point — my biological father and my first foster father. I was so young that I wasn’t able to effectively explain to the state who was abusing me. No one was ever charged and there was never a case. The state was supposed to be protecting me; instead I was being molested. The state tried to cover up the abuse by moving my brother and me. We were more like slaves in this home and did all the cleaning. As I got older, that’s when the sexual abuse started again. It took me a little while to tell someone because I was scared. I didn’t know where they would send me. I feared that my foster father would get me pregnant, but my biggest fear was that he was going to kill me if I told anyone what was happening. To make things worse, I was worried about the little girls they were planning to soon adopt, who were like sisters to me. I finally told, and the state removed me. My foster father denied everything at first, but he eventually came clean. They got to keep the little girls and he pretty much only got a slap on the hand — minimum time in a correctional facility. I on the other hand wasn’t allowed to have contact with the girls or that foster mom. I was treated like the perpetrator.

We were moved yet again. I didn’t feel like it was the right home for me and everything started to take its toll. I threatened to overdose on pills if I wasn’t removed. Well, I was removed — and sent straight to the mental hospital. I was labeled as crazy when it really was post-traumatic stress disorder. I stayed in the hospital for about a week and was then discharged to a new home. I started to feel different, like something was wrong with me. I never knew what I did to feel this way.

“Please God, help me find the right home,” I thought. I finally was placed further away in another county with a family that had a little boy and girl who were in foster care too. It was nice. I wasn’t alone and I loved kids, so I was excited. At this point in my life, I wasn’t sure how to behave or act. My foster parents helped me to realize that I was the victim. They showed me what it was like to be a part of a family, and not feel different. They listened to my problems, encouraged me to work hard and supported my dreams. I begged them to have my brother come and stay with us too, and they did. These are the parents I look up to. They had my back from day one. They allowed me to have their last name even though I wasn’t eligible for adoption. They still, to this day, include me in everything and accept my children as well.

In total, I went through eight different foster homes. I try not to be discouraged by what happened to me. These are pieces of my life that have made me who I am today. Being in foster care has shown me the good and bad, how to be an awesome mom to my two children, how not to give up during the difficult times. I also learned that family doesn’t have to be blood. If I could say anything to current foster youth, my advice is to speak up. If there is something going on in your home and you’re scared, lost or hurt, tell someone. Don’t let others take you for granted. God has a plan for your life and ultimately you are where you’re supposed to be. The storm passes and you will be out on your own before you know it. We don’t have to become abusers just because we have been abused. We should all work together to make the world a better place to live in, and give our children the life we never had.
I still remember the chaotic day when my seven siblings and I went into foster care. My mom left to go drinking, and my 2-year-old brother was locked in the house by himself. The rest of us could not get in. Fire trucks and police cars came, officers broke in and we were taken away. I was 6.

Once in foster care, we moved from home to home, each carrying one big black plastic bag with all of our belongings in it. I navigated through about eight different placements, and had to call all of my foster mothers “Mom.” Mom became a weakened term after having so many. Some acted how a mother should and took care of me like I was one of their own, but others treated me differently than their kids. Sometimes, you definitely know when you are a foster.

When I was 14, we moved back in with our biological mother. There was no structure in her home, and all of the sudden I went from being a kid to having to act like a disciplinarian. My siblings went wild, from getting into fights around a kid to having to act like a disciplinarian. My roommate couldn't pay his, the landlord kicked me out. Another mentor told me I could stay with him for the duration of high school. If anyone deserves to be my mom, it is her. She saw a struggling kid trying to survive, and reached out. She had a few rules: I had to go to school; I had to attend church; and I had to leave the state for college — to move away from bad influences.

College wasn't always easy. I remember sneaking in and out of the dorms illegally, because they were closed during the holidays and I had nowhere else to go. And even though I prided myself on being the first in my family to attend college, there was not enough pride in the world to overcome my feelings of abandonment and loneliness. Although I was crowded with emotions during these times, I had to press on and complete what many said was statistically unachievable.

I have come a long way since my time in foster care. I have a bachelor’s in mechanical engineering and a master’s in industrial technology. I am a former engineer within the nuclear defense industry, having worked as a lead engineer at Northrop Grumman Newport News, engineering and designing the nation’s premier nuclear aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines. I eventually left the industry to work as a patent-examining engineer for the United States Patent and Trademark Office. I recently earned a law degree from Wayne State University Law School, and now endeavor to practice law as a patent attorney, as well as advocate in the areas of family law and juvenile justice.

I always wanted to know where I came from, so I sought out information about my extended family. I discovered relatives who hadn’t known about our situation. Meeting them was the reunion I was waiting for. Now when I need help, I reach out to people like my great uncle, great aunt, extended cousins, cousins who are also fraternity brothers, engineers and lawyers. I didn’t grow up with them, but they embrace and love me nonetheless.

I now understand that some people are not meant to parent. They just can’t seem to get that part of their lives together. Although reunification did not work out for the best for my siblings and me, I was never bitter. I forgave my parents, but I didn’t forget the situation. And I promised myself to never put any kid in the same position. I have become a single dad — not by circumstance, but by choice. I take care of my nephew, helping him with his school work and assisting him with his growth into manhood. He is 16, and I’m his uncle/dad, if you will — a sacrifice I would make any day.

Now I share my story with foster youth to inspire them to focus on their education. I am the founder of the Michigan chapter of the Foster Care Alumni Association of America and a part of several other foster care related advocacy groups. To those still in care, I say, you can do something different. You don’t have to settle for being one of the 97 to 98 percent of foster kids who don’t graduate from college. Seek support, find your mentors and you’ll go far.
Growing up in foster care can be challenging. It can also be a good thing, as weird as that sounds. Some children come from terrible situations within their biological families and they will be helped in a home where there is love and support; at times foster care can provide more opportunity and a better quality of life than a traditional family. For me, it was a mixed bag. I had both good and bad experiences during my 12 years in state care.

I went into my first long-term placement when I was 7 years old. I stayed there for about five years, but they weren’t the most pleasant years. At first, I was the only girl in the home, with three boys. By the time I was moved, five years later, there were six boys there, and I was still the only girl. Only one of the boys was my biological brother. During my time in that home, I was physically and sexually manipulated. So many things went on there, but only my outbursts were reported to my social worker. I even was put in the home of a different member of that family so that the foster parent would continue getting paid.

I spent the rest of my seven years in state care constantly being moved from home to home. I was put in group homes and in — and quickly out of — “first time” or “trial” foster homes. In at least five of my homes, I lived with foster parents who were newly licensed or ones who had never had foster children, much less a teenager who had been emotionally, physically and sexually abused.

I discovered that so many people get involved in fostering for the money and not to make a lasting impact on a child’s life. But I had a few good short-term, or respite, foster parents, and they are the ones who are still in my life today. To me, the foster parents who didn’t want to foster full time were better mentors and parents. The lady I call “Mama” today was one of my short-term foster parents. I was 18 and pregnant when I went into her home. She made me feel so welcome. She gave me my own room, called me “daughter” and cheered me up when I was sad. I was moved from her home after a different parent had finished her training hours to be licensed and wanted to try fostering. “Mama” continued supporting me after they moved me by picking me up to run errands, checking on my son after he was born and taking me shopping. I still spend holidays and special occasions with her, and she is still a positive role model in my life.

Throughout my time in care, I also developed close relationships with some of my social workers. I had one who talked to me as if I were a younger sister and I found I could trust her. That was a big deal for me, because one of my biggest challenges was learning to trust people.

My advice to anyone going through the foster care system is to utilize the services offered to you. Counseling is beneficial, and although different cultures speak against emotional therapy, it can have a major impact on success after care. For me, I would never talk to anyone and I channeled my anger through defiance and opposition. It is traumatic to be placed into a system where you don’t know who you’re going to be living with, you’re not familiar with their culture or beliefs, and you feel as if no one understands you. Talk to a therapist so that you can be placed with the best available family and possibly be adopted.

I always knew that one day I would be grown and would no longer have to live in strangers’ homes. Although I have the privilege of being an adult now, sometimes I wish I could be a kid again. But remember that your current situation won’t last a lifetime. One day you will be able to make your decisions for yourself and you will be accountable and responsible for doing so. Don’t rush that.

My life could have turned out differently had I not made the best of the better circumstances. I had a lot kept in contact with those few good apples, I could have become a victim of the system but instead I remain victorious. Today I am an undergraduate at the University of Alabama, majoring in social work. I hope to earn my Master of Social Work degree, and do some public speaking and coaching for teenagers in foster care. I want to show them that no matter where they came from, they can succeed.

“IT IS TRAUMATIC TO BE PLACED INTO A SYSTEM WHERE YOU DON’T KNOW WHO YOU’RE GOING TO BE LIVING WITH, YOU’RE NOT FAMILIAR WITH THEIR CULTURE OR BELIEFS, AND YOU FEEL AS IF NO ONE UNDERSTANDS YOU.”
I spent most of my small-town Kansas childhood on the fast track to a life destined for failure. My parents were plagued with addiction, and because of that, I was surrounded by drugs, alcohol and depression at an early age. This created an environment of limits — limited prosperity, limited stimulation and limited expectations. I only knew what I had experienced, and those experiences were about to become my future.

Fortunately, I was removed from my home before I became ensnared in the vicious cycle that was my family’s legacy. I was a frightened eighth-grader when, without explanation, I was loaded into a car and deposited on the doorstep of my first foster family. I didn’t realize it then, but I was one step closer to building the life I deserved.

Overall, foster care had a powerful and positive influence on me. I was surrounded by a great community that took the time to make sure I received the best possible care. I learned to embrace the opportunities provided by the system. And although I felt that as a foster child people sometimes expected me to fail, I learned to use that negative stigma to my advantage.

That’s not to say that foster care was always easy. I spent years being bounced back and forth between parents, grandparents and foster families. I witnessed suicide and death at a young age. But as difficult as these experiences were, they provided me with a resilient mindset that has been a major asset in my career. The foster care system provided me lessons learned that I now carry into my profession as a captain in the United States Army Reserve, the greatest organization in the world.

My success can be partially attributed to the mentors I found in the quiet little town of Kensington, Kansas. Here, a loving foster family, Mr. and Mrs. Bob Bearley, inspired me to think positive and never give up. Clella Hahn, my Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), and her husband, Lowell, encouraged me to develop a close relationship with God. These people, and many others like them, looked past the anger and resentment I exuded as a young teenager, and they loved me anyway, nurturing me and giving me the life-building skills that I just didn’t have before I entered foster care.

I am living proof that the foster care system can offer children more than just a safe haven; there is opportunity within the system! Time and time again I witnessed my mother and father making destructive choices. Once I was in foster care, the families I lived with were determined to keep me from making those same destructive choices. Being removed from that toxic environment allowed me to break the cycle of failure and focus on investing in myself. The more distance I put between myself and my biological family, the more I began to see that I could make a brighter future for myself with the help of the foster care system.

I know that being in foster care can bring with it a negative stigma and feelings of embarrassment. I remember vividly my first week in foster care. During basketball practice at my new school, one of the boys on the team asked innocently about my parents, what they did for a living, and why I had moved to town. He was only being friendly, but I was too ashamed to admit the truth — that I was in foster care — so I lied to him. In those early days in foster care, I felt doomed to fail, and I felt the scrutiny of others who expected me to fail. But I’ve used these feelings as fuel for my fire, and I encourage all foster children to do the same.

We foster children are some of the most resilient people in the world. My advice for young people currently in care is to find positive influences such as foster parents, teachers and members of the community, embrace the awesome opportunities the system provides and use the foster care stigma as motivation to rise to new heights, dream big, think positive and take action! I did just that when I wrote my first book, Succeeding as a Foster Child. Frank Sinatra said it best, “The best revenge is massive success!”

If you’d like to learn more about how foster care has affected my life, you can visit www.jamieschwandt.com.

“IN THOSE EARLY DAYS IN FOSTER CARE, I FELT DOOMED TO FAIL ... BUT I’VE USED THESE FEELINGS AS FUEL FOR MY FIRE.”

By Jamie Schwandt
I once read a quote that stated, “A strong woman loves, forgives, walks away, tries again, and perseveres ... no matter what life throws at her.” By that definition, I am a strong woman. My mother is also a strong woman, and I love her more than I can fathom, but when she became too weak and life’s burdens were weighing on her, I had to leave with my siblings.

I'm a survivor of an alcoholic, abusive parent. I've been beaten on, broken down, and have suffered emotionally at the hands of alcohol. But one thing never changed: my hope and my determination. My sister, at the age of 24, took me and my siblings in after two years of intervention by the Administration for Children’s Services, when my mother's alcoholism got the best of her. At 24, I don't think most people have their lives together. I mean, they're just starting their careers, they're still going out to bars and clubs every now and again, but to take in and care for three of their younger siblings? That's not on anyone's list.

It was rough at first. We lived in a small, suffocating apartment. We didn't have any money to get a bigger one, and our other relatives were very unsupportive and unhelpful. But with hard work, determination and perseverance, we got a nice two bedroom that we now call home.

At first, I couldn't forgive my mom. How could she allow things to get this bad? But understand that taking care of three kids — one a rebellious teenager, and two middle school kids, one of whom has autism — living in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Brooklyn, constantly facing eviction, and a thousand and one other problems that you feel are unfixable, can break the strongest camel's back.

I tried to keep that perspective in mind, but I also thought about how my mom made me laugh. How I would sit in her room, and rant on and on about my thoughts, hopes and dreams. With each tangent, my mom had her own stories, her own experiences, and we'd share them until the wee hours of the morning. I smile at those thoughts. My mom isn't a bad person, not even in the slightest.

Still, I feel very fortunate to have entered foster care. I have a super-supportive law guardian, an attorney appointed to look out for the best interests of the child. She resembles the beautiful and intelligent Amal Clooney in my opinion. When my foster agency refused to reimburse me for a semester of room and board, my law guardian made phone calls, sent out e-mails, wrote petitions and endured backlash and criticism, just so I could get that funding back. When I was going to give up, she kept trying, and eventually we won! She helped me get my passport after I told her that one of my dreams in life is to travel. My law guardian has been rooting for my success since I stepped foot in her office, and I thank her for that.

I've also found support in a program called Education and Training Voucher (ETV), which annually provides college students who are in the foster care system with a grant to either pay tuition or to cover living expenses. Each month the student must make contact with a coordinator to talk via phone about academic goals, challenges, and ways to overcome those challenges. Through ETV I participated in the Academic Success Program, which provides each student with a mentor. Jane encouraged me to be a winner, when I felt the opposite at school. She urged me to go to a National Broadcast Society convention in Atlanta, which my foster agency graciously paid for. She reassures me that I don’t need her as much as I think I do, because in her eyes, or should I say ears, she sees me as the strong, resilient woman I am.

Currently, I’m working on my Bachelor’s of Science in TV and Video Production and I minor in Broadcast Management and Radio at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. I am the curator for Urban Royals NYC blog, which provides a unique perspective on social injustices, as well as lifestyle advice and commentary on pop culture, while providing a space for artists and entrepreneurs to gain exposure.

I turned my pain into a way to connect with other young people who’ve experienced similar circumstances, but I’ve also become a hope dealer in the process. I want everyone to know that their narratives don’t end with foster care. Life gets better, and what may feel like weakness now will only make you the strongest soldier later. Hang in there and keep believing.

By Kamilah Badiane

“"I WANT EVERYONE TO KNOW THAT THEIR NARRATIVES DON’T END WITH FOSTER CARE. LIFE GETS BETTER.”"
Foster kids know “Imposter Syndrome” better than anyone. New families, schools, dynamics, politics and rules make finding yourself and trusting who you are a near impossibility. We learn to mistrust authority by having parents who couldn’t parent. We learn to question ourselves by having no stable place to explore identities and personas. I learned early to question systems and policies that make life harder on the people who have the hardest lives. I still ask too many questions.

The biggest one is still this: When are they going to figure out that I am just a clever foster kid, masquerading as an upstanding citizen, trauma informed? Foster care was easy on me, but as I watched my fellow sisters come and go, I was shocked at how often kids were treated like criminals. It must have been easier to move them like furniture if you didn’t acknowledge their vulnerability and deep need for care. I started asking questions and became stubborn and demanding about my rights and what all of us were entitled to. I pushed back and got answers. I survived.

I spent the last 15 years helping nonprofits do better work, serve more at-risk youth and families. I learned everything I could about systems change, trauma and brain development and what families need to survive toxic stress. Now, I own my own coaching and consulting firm. I am building my reputation as an educator, advocate and strategic leader in trauma-informed best practices for all sectors. I am the expert voice from the outside.

To youth in care now, especially those loud girls and quiet guys, the pissed-off silent types and the ones nicknamed “Mouth,” I offer this: At this time of your life, when you are caught between innocence and responsibility, this is merely a prologue. Nothing is wrong with you. You are not damaged goods. But today, before you are fully released to guide your own fate and make your own mistakes, consider this: People become toxic for a reason. Those who fail us have been failed. And we will fail sometimes, too.

You will write your own story. And though it may be shaped and informed by trauma beyond your control, you can choose how many pages it takes in the masterpiece you are creating. Choose wisely and never EVER apologize for how you survive. The foster kid might never fade. And that is OK. Let your strength, beauty and resilience walk into every room before your trauma does. I believe in you. I see you.
I never thought I would say it, but you must go through something in order to gain experience for your true calling. Going through foster care affected my life by making me stronger.

My mom was an alcoholic and heroin addict who would eventually die from her addiction. She would lose track of time and leave us alone for long periods. She would think, “Oh, I left the pancake batter there for them a few hours ago … they have enough to eat.” In reality it would have been weeks, and we couldn’t cook because the electricity had been turned off — we had to add water and drink the batter. Eventually my aunt called Child Protective Services because the skin on my bottom was eaten so badly by roaches and mice. That’s how the state got involved.

I went into foster care at age 5 with a sister who is three years older than me, and my younger brothers, Mark and Robert. Rob and I were the only ones who stayed together. Mark, who was a newborn when we entered care, got adopted when he was around 3. I remember the caseworkers telling us, “Say goodbye to your brother … He’s young enough to forget about everything, to forget about all of this and have a normal life.” We were like, “Why would he want to forget about us?” I remember feeling, “Oh, it CAN get worse?” We thought that the worst was being taken from mom. I’ve never reconnected with him; I’ve been looking for him forever.

I also was separated from my sister after she tried to protect me from three boys in one of our first foster homes. She landed in a group home where a group of girls held her down and burned her with cigarettes. We used to visit her until she started running away. She had to get out of there. She grew up on the streets.

In many ways I had a more positive experience in care. But I endured years of sexual abuse by two older foster brothers (I called them foster monsters). My rapes were treated lightly, covered up. When I received my records years later, they said, “Tanya is experimenting with her foster brothers.” They never mentioned I was used as a sex slave for years.

It’s somewhat ironic that I faced sexual abuse in foster care. Though my mother had major issues, she never let men near us — my aunt and I suspected that she had been molested herself, because she was extremely protective in that way. I could have been adopted by my foster family, but chose not to because they had adopted one of my abusers. So there I was, aging out of care for the first time, without even a bank account. I was given the option to “go to the military” or sign myself back into state care and go to a girls’ residence. I chose the residence.

This place actually saved my life! Sister Lillian, a nun at St. Helena’s, and a counselor, Gamilah, taught me how to love myself, how to turn pain into art. I discovered my many hidden talents and learned that I can help others going through similar experiences. I also learned not to focus on the bad things that happen but the good things — like living in a neighborhood where I no longer faced the challenges of Brooklyn group homes, and having a family that never called me “foster” — most of my friends had no idea that I was in state care.

I aged out for a second time at 21, got a modeling contract and later went to Paris to model. I am thankful for those days as I discovered the world! I also found good people who taught me how to live a life with meaning.

For years I was used to hotels and traveling, so I never set up a permanent home until my first daughter was born. She inspired me to earn my Bachelor’s of Applied Science from New York University. And Rob inspired me to help abused and neglected kids. I wrote Surviving Foster Care and Making It Work For You, to give advice to youth in foster and group homes. I also started FosterKidsUnite, Inc., to help aged-out foster youth and those without parents who are seeking higher education. We provide scholarships and send gift boxes during December exams.

My best advice to kids going through foster care: Know that you have a divine purpose and everything you experience will make you stronger — if you maintain your sanity and get therapy. Even if you’re going through abuse, applaud yourself for sticking around and not bailing out on life. Once you get proper help, this too shall pass and then you can help others heal with your talents or gifts.

Sister Lillian and Gamilah helped me break my angry shell and get to the good of Tanya, of me. You can’t hold onto anger or past hurt. Talk or write about it, release it and let it go! The best thing my foster mom ever said to me: “Sometimes your parents are only a vehicle to get you here!” You will meet many who will help carry you through, but you must do the work to get to your destination.

“I ENDURED YEARS OF SEXUAL ABUSE BY TWO OLDER FOSTER BROTHERS.”
GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

By Herman Thomas

Childhood is supposed to be a time of discovery and innocence. But it doesn’t always work out that way. It didn’t for me or my sister.

We grew up in foster care in a loving home out in the country. We had a big back yard, chickens, pigs, fresh vegetables to eat and caring foster parents who had already raised children, and decided to take in foster kids because they had space and much love to give.

For the most part, life was good growing up. From what I was told, I arrived still in diapers at 18 months. My sister was 2. Thank God, we weren’t separated. Our foster parents treated us, and the other children in foster care, like real family. We always had breakfast, snacks, lunch and dinner. Our foster mom even made homemade ice cream. We were encouraged to do well in school and taught that education was the key to success. Those memories are some of the happiest I have.

As I got older, I realized that I was not like other boys. I was into different things that boys weren’t supposed to be interested in. I loved dancing, singing and being the center of attention. And my foster mom embraced every part of me, and the other children in foster care, like real family. We always had breakfast, snacks, lunch and dinner. Our foster mom even made homemade ice cream. We were encouraged to do well in school and taught that education was the key to success. Those memories are some of the happiest I have.

As I got older, I realized that I was not like other boys. I was into different things that boys weren’t supposed to be interested in. I loved dancing, singing and being the center of attention. And my foster mom embraced every part of me, with no judgment. She even signed me up for dance class and gymnastics.

But the home was not perfect. I was molested by another foster child from around age 3 until I left. Nobody ever asked me if I was being touched inappropriately. The caseworker came when I was too young to articulate what was happening. As we got older, those visits seemed to be few and far between, and by then I didn’t think to say anything — I just expected the abuse to happen.

I met my biological mom a few times over the years, not really knowing who she was. Sometimes when we would get into trouble, my foster mom would say, “I can’t wait until your mother comes to get y’all!” She would sometimes explain that we were not going to be with her forever, even though she would love to keep us. But when you’re a child things like that don’t register.

Then one day I found out that my mom had been awarded sole custody. I was devastated. I didn’t know who this lady was. How could they decide to take away the family I had known all my life? I didn’t know how we would have a future.

I told my mom that I had been molested. She told me that she didn’t know what to do. She didn’t want to go to the police. She didn’t want to leave her job to go to the police. She didn’t want to go to the police. I was too young to understand the gravity of what I was saying.

My foster mom came to visit us sometimes, but eventually those visits stopped. I later learned that my mother was difficult to communicate with. But then it seemed like she abandoned me. I called Child Protective Services constantly, trying to get them to send me back, but each time I was turned down. Soon after, my relationship with my mom turned violent. The police were called every other day. By this time I had discovered I was gay. I told my mom that I had been molested. She told me that I probably asked for it.

I was finally placed back in foster care, but it didn’t work out because I only wanted to be with my first foster mom. Meanwhile, I was bullied non-stop at school and dealing with abandonment issues from both my moms. I felt like I wasn’t good enough. So I took the first way out — I ran away from everything that was causing me so much pain. But that led to prostitution, drugs and stints in jail and rehab. I couldn’t get it together.

This happened because the system failed. There was no help when my sister and I made the transition back to our mom’s home. There should be more resources for children who have experienced state care. Some people desperately want to recover from their pasts, but it is extremely difficult with no education, no job and no support. And as a result, cycles of addiction and violence repeat themselves over and over again.

My mom passed away last April, while I was incarcerated. Not being able to go to her funeral, that was a tipping point. I didn’t recognize myself, and realized I didn’t want to die without accomplishing anything. After years of false starts I’ve now been clean for months. It’s hard living in the moment. I’m like a newborn learning to walk again, at 36 years old. So much is still tentative. I’m staying at a shelter through a city-funded program and working two jobs, fighting to create a future for myself.

In my story, I’ve attempted to convey what I thought could help someone struggling with the same issues as I have. There is hope for you. You have to fight and be strong, and accept that no matter what others did to you in the past, you are responsible for creating your future. This is what I’m working on, so I’m ready for my golden opportunity when it appears.

“THE DAY WE MOVED BACK IN WITH OUR MOM WAS THE WORST. THE OFFICER LITERALLY HAD TO PRY MY HAND FROM AROUND MY FOSTER MOM’S WAIST. I CRIED FOR DAYS.”
My name is Ernesto, and I’m a 24-year-old gay man. I wasn’t always open about my sexuality. I spent years in foster care, afraid to come out of the closet.

When I was 13, my little brother and I were put into state care and placed in a shelter. I was scared, the guys were mean and called me names. But it wasn’t anything new, others had called me “gay,” “faggot” or “queer” before. I had known I was gay since I was 5. I liked boys. But people don’t accept that and you get bullied for it. Once we were at the shelter, I didn’t talk to anyone other than my little brother. Then, after three months, we were moved to a foster home. I played sports to make myself seem normal and make friends. I dated girls that I had no attraction to so people would stop asking me if I was gay. I never dated a guy in high school, and I hated that I wasn’t brave enough. I wish I knew what it was like to be young and in love and to make silly decisions over a summer fling. I wish there was an adult who saw that I was suppressing something and told me it was okay to be who I was. Someone to tell me that no one was going to hurt me.

I loved my foster parents. I felt safe with them, but behind closed doors my foster brothers picked on me and did stuff like write “faggot” on my duffel bag. There were so many days I cried in the shower or late into the night. I even tried to trick myself into thinking I wasn’t gay. We went to a Christian church, which made me feel worse about my thoughts about guys. There were a few times when I came close to telling my foster parents, but I was afraid they would move me out of the house and away from my little brother. Then, after three months, we were moved to a foster home. I played sports to make myself seem normal and make friends. I dated girls that I had no attraction to so people would stop asking me if I was gay. I never dated a guy in high school, and I hated that I wasn’t brave enough. I wish I knew what it was like to be young and in love and to make silly decisions over a summer fling. I wish there was an adult who saw that I was suppressing something and told me it was okay to be who I was. Someone to tell me that no one was going to hurt me.

The challenges I faced should not be a part of a youth’s experience in the child welfare system. If I had to rate foster home life, it would have to be negative because of all the mental and emotional abuse I felt. Never will I say that being in foster care was the worst, because it was not. I graduated from high school and attended college. Foster care enabled me to reach other personal goals, but as a LGBTQ foster alumni, I feel that LGBTQ youth need rights and placements where they can feel safe.

I think foster parents need training and support systems to turn to when they have a youth who is LGBTQ. In the South where I’m from, the resources are rare and youth are often left to fend for themselves or to live in fear. We need to be able to say, “I have a right to be who I am without any discrimination, without feeling afraid.” We need people to step up and say, “We will help, we will open the doors.” There should be no gap for youth, but instead a community that is reliable, safe, and well educated on current issues. No youth should ever have to go through what I did.

This first appeared on fosterclub.com as part of FosterClub’s #FosterEquality campaign.
My son Julian spends hours racing his toy cars, sprints to be the first when the doors open at school, and slowly nibbles his dinner to savor every morsel — and delay bath time. He also listens, watches and absorbs everything that goes on around him. Julian, 7, is a quiet, sensitive kid. A stern word from me, a mild insult from his 10-year-old sister, and his big brown eyes well up instantaneously. Thankfully, that is about all the hurt Julian experiences. He lives in a stable home, with two imperfect but loving — often doting — parents. As I read the first-person accounts of foster care highlighted in Children’s Rights’ 2015 Fostering the Future campaign, I couldn’t help but think of my son. At one point, all of the people who shared their experiences were kids too, but their childhoods were glaringly different than Julian’s.

State care was a safe haven for some, like Diane, who described her “angel” foster mom as “the best at telling me the truth and guiding me the right way.” But others were victimized by the very system meant to protect them. When Rodney was just a year younger than Julian, he was hit with belt buckles and “whipped with switches from the rose garden — with the thorns still intact.” It happened in a foster home — a place that was supposed to be safe. And when another boy, David, was just 5, the child welfare system returned him to his biological parents, where he “went days without bathing” and “missed school because of the bruises on my body” before he went back into foster care.

The bloggers — all of whom are now adults — also described being torn from their siblings, overmedicated, institutionalized and bounced from home to home — things that still happen to children in care today. In fact, many of their experiences mirror those of the kids Children’s Rights represents. Kids like J.M., who went into state care at 6, and in just 2 1/2 years has already lived in at least 13 places, including four different group homes within a four-month period. And children like Zahara. At 5 years old, she was in a secure institutional facility designed for children with severe mental health needs. While there, she was put on powerful psychotropic medications and waited months for visits from her grandparents and brother.

It is obvious that child welfare systems are failing our young people. That is why Children’s Rights steps in to hold government officials accountable and compel change. We’ve shown that it is possible for more kids to stay with their siblings, for systems to recruit safe, caring foster homes, and for children to be linked with permanent, loving families. But more work needs to be done: We must join together to propel this fight to the next level. We can no longer allow foster care to be shrouded in obscurity, for kids in the system to remain invisible. We must bring awareness to their suffering and demand that they are safe and have stability.

To our bloggers, thank you for being brave enough to share your stories. You have given hope to thousands of children and opened up so many eyes to the issues faced by young people in foster care. And to those of you who have followed along by reading, commenting on and sharing the posts, I want you to know that we hear you. You are all helping to create a movement for reform, to lift the veil of secrecy around foster care. Thanks to your support, we not only hit our goal of 1 million social media views, but surpassed it. In turn, we are reading your comments and listening to your feedback, and we’re using it to inform our work.

Sandy Santana is executive director of Children’s Rights.
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