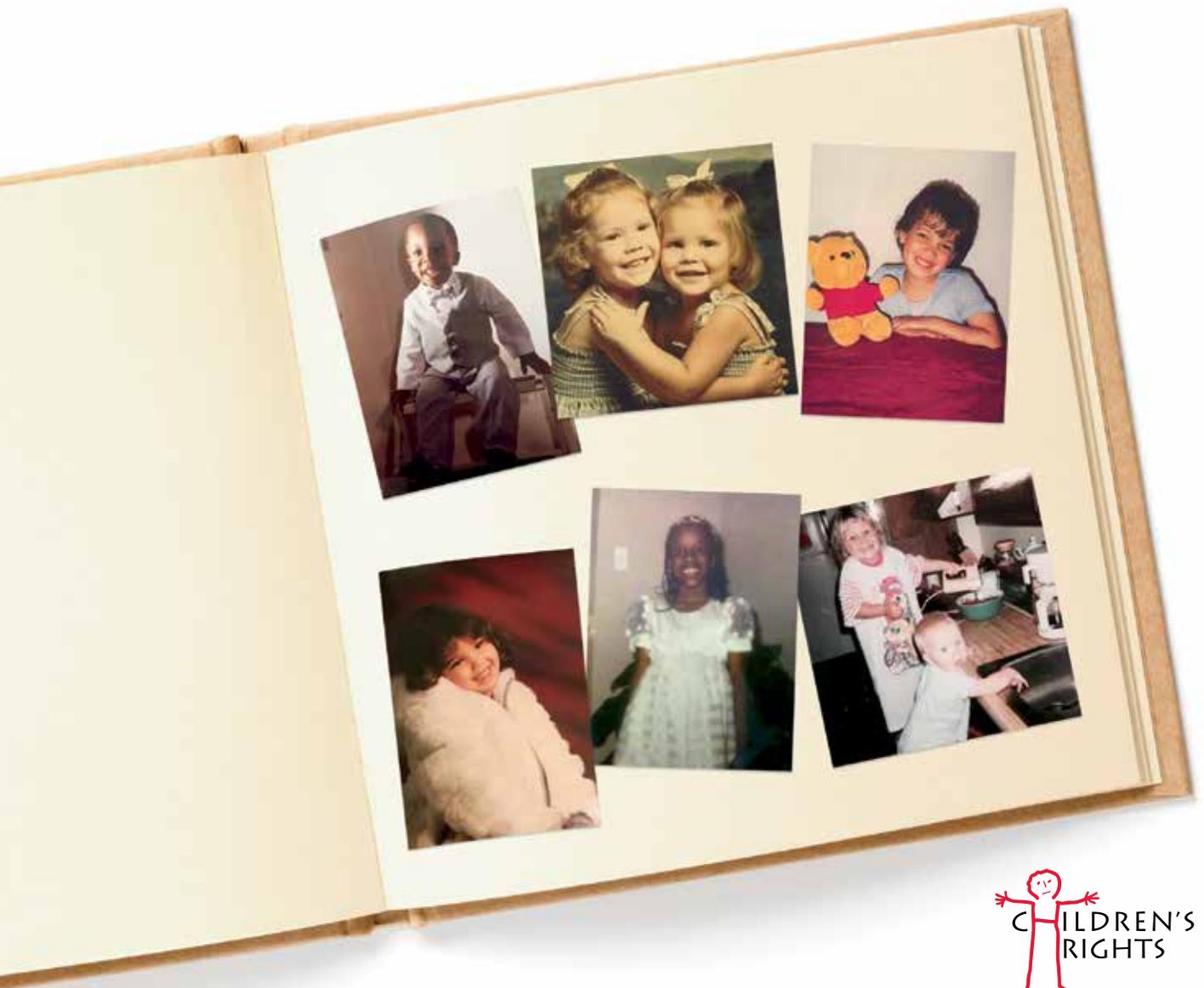


Finding My Way

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF FOSTER CARE

————— A collection of blogs from CR's 2016 *Fostering the Future* campaign —————



Defending America's
Abused and Neglected Kids

At 17, Kyle had already moved through **28 foster care placements**, been abused in care and was left to languish in a detention facility because the state did not have an appropriate home for him.

Another child, Zahara, was just **5** when she was put in a **high-security institution**, where she was given **powerful psychotropic medications and waited months for visits from her grandparents and brother**. She threatened to commit suicide, and described the some six months that she spent there as the “worst time” in her life.

While some children have great experiences in foster care, many suffer — like Kyle, Zahara and the others that Children’s Rights represents.

Their heartbreaking journeys fuel our work.

They motivate us to use the law to hold governments accountable and defend thousands of kids when foster care systems fail.

Inspired by them, Children’s Rights has secured court orders mandating child welfare reform in more than a dozen states.

And that means kids in systems throughout the country are safer. They get the education and health care they desperately need. They move less often. They go from institutions that can’t meet their needs to supportive foster homes that can.

And best of all, children find permanent, loving families more quickly.

Dear Readers,

Because we know that children thrive in families — not institutions or transient, temporary foster care — we make what should be an unbreakable promise to our most vulnerable and traumatized youth. We pledge to them that the day they are permanently separated from their families, we will find them a place to call home, to be loved and cherished, as every child should.

But as we saw in Children's Rights' 2016 *Fostering the Future* campaign, this doesn't always happen. In fact, our country failed more than 22,000 kids by allowing them to age out of care without being adopted or safely reunited with their birth families. Tiffany — one of the young people who opened up for the campaign — shared that she was “grossly underprepared” for life on her own at 18: “I had never used a stove, driven a car, nor managed bills. I didn't even have a high school diploma.”

It is not easy to become an adult without a safety net. Dave Thomas, who was adopted, understood this. That is why he created his foundation nearly 25 years ago to focus exclusively on dramatically increasing the adoptions of children and youth from foster care, many of whom are viewed as unadoptable. Tyler, who was recently adopted through Wendy's Wonderful Kids, a signature program of the Foundation, told us that the day his parents adopted him, he felt his life was given worth.

So we are driven to raise awareness about the more than 100,000 children waiting to be adopted from foster care to dispel the misperceptions that

surround them and to highlight best practices that move many more into adoptive families. As Mr. Thomas noted, “These children are not someone else's responsibility, they are our responsibility.”

It is clear that Children's Rights believes every child has a right to a permanent, loving family. And I am confident that spotlighting the personal journeys of kids who have been in state care is a wonderful way to educate people about foster care, and inspire them to step up and help vulnerable children. If you are reading this booklet, you have taken on this work as your responsibility, too. Thank you.

Now, more than ever, it is time to significantly elevate the conversation with policymakers, business leaders, not-for-profit managers, educators, community organizers, parents and anyone who in any way touches the lives of children in their communities. We can no longer accept the pain of a child as ordinary, the death of a child as common, or the cry of a child as silent to our ears. We must make our communities ones that welcome, treasure and support *all* children.

Rita L. Soronen
President & CEO
Dave Thomas
Foundation
for Adoption

September 2016



FROM TRAGEDY TO TRIUMPH: HOW FOSTER CARE CHANGED MY LIFE

By Megan Holmes

I was placed into the foster care system at the age of 15. Uncertain and afraid, I had no idea what to expect living with complete strangers. Little did I know that December 29, 2009, would be the first of the best days of my young life.

I lived in several homes prior to entering foster care, including my godmother's and, after she passed from stomach cancer, her sister's. Next was my aunt for 2 1/2 years.

When I first moved in with "Auntie M" I was happy. But then a cell phone went missing. I didn't take it, but I wanted peace in the home, so I took the blame — and the punishment. Because of that dishonest confession, I was later accused of stealing jewelry, and the living situation with Auntie M became increasingly intolerable and brutal.

At times I was confined to the laundry room, or had to stand in front of my aunt until she permitted me to use the restroom, eat dinner or to go to bed. I was also given small portions of food — ramen noodles, a can of vegetables, sometimes nothing at all. On an extremely good

day, I would be allowed to indulge in the same meal as my family — but from a small saucer.

To "teach me a lesson," Auntie M didn't give me what I needed to bathe, wash or style my hair, brush my teeth, or even for my monthly cycle. My classmates would say how horribly I smelled. Hearing those words crushed the few feelings I had left, and made me feel like scum.

One morning Auntie M said she was going to put me in foster care. Before leaving, she pat searched me to "make sure I didn't leave with anything that I did not arrive with." When we arrived at the Department of Social Services, she painted a picture of what would happen: "So you want to be placed in a group home and to get RAPED, jumped by all of the girls there...?" After that scare tactic, I was terrified — and endured more abuse at her home.

After an intense beating from both my aunt and uncle, I came to school with many welts on my legs. A teacher made an anonymous report to DSS. The following Saturday, there was a knock

on the door from an on-call social worker — but for some reason she didn't take me away.

Another time, Auntie M took me to the juvenile justice office, threatening me with arrest. I'd finally had enough. When we left we began arguing, and, almost perfectly, a county sheriff drove by. He took me to DSS; the same on-call social worker was there and said, "Okay, this is it! Since you guys have had run-ins with DSS before, we are putting Megan into care." It was the beginning of a new life for Megan Holmes.



*“UNCERTAIN AND AFRAID,
I HAD NO IDEA WHAT
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COMPLETE STRANGERS.”*

That first night my foster mother, Mrs. Boyd, said, “The towels, wash cloths and extra bars of soap are in the hall closet. Here is a set of pajamas for you for tonight; we’ll get you some other things tomorrow. This is your room, and here’s the remote. If you need anything, just let me know.” It was the first time I was able to shower in what seemed like a lifetime. I cried most of the night because I was so thankful. I knew life would be completely different now.

The Boyds helped rebuild my confidence, and made me feel the love that had become so foreign. The first Saturday at their home, my foster dad gave me \$20. “What’s this for?” I asked. “It’s your allowance,” he said. I was speechless. On Valentine’s Day, I woke up to find chocolate, and a card with \$50 in it! I was truly beside myself.

The Boyds have helped me accomplish more than they may realize. I lived with them until my 21st birthday in 2015, and I am grateful for the blessings they have bestowed upon me. The pastor and spouse of my church have also taken me under their wing, and it has helped heal my broken heart.

I have been blessed to travel to Georgia, Florida, and Colorado through the LINKS program, which teaches youth in care about independent living skills. I also visited New York with the Boyds. That may not seem like a big deal, but it was a dream for someone like me. I purchased my first car, and I am soon to graduate from North Carolina Central University, double-majoring in Spanish and Social Work.

I now have the privilege of working with other foster youth to share my testimony of how God blessed me through being placed into substitute care, and how I have grown as an individual from this experience. Although I am not yet where I would like to be in life, I am not where I once was. I am on the right path to seeing myself the way that God sees me, which is unapologetically beautiful.

SURVIVING THE SYSTEM

By Alexis Griffin

My life has always been eventful. My mother struggled with drug addiction for most of it and my father was in and out of prison. I was placed in foster care twice, between the ages of 4 to 6, and then again from 12 to 18. I spent my last six years of being a minor in at least 10 to 12 different homes.

The instability was hard to handle, and led to one of my worst memories. One day I was pulled out of class and picked up by my social worker; it was then that I learned about the seven-day notice foster parents can give social workers to find kids a new place. My foster mom had given our social worker notice, but we were not aware of it; some of our stuff was packed in the back of her car, which was waiting to take us to a new home.

For a system that was supposed to protect and raise children with parents who were deemed unfit, they failed in my eyes. I was accused of stealing and threatened by people who would watch my sister and me. There was the terrible feeling when foster parents treated us differently than their own — we could tell who wanted to make a difference and who just needed the extra income. I was even sexually abused by people I should have been able to trust.

Still, foster care was a unique experience that I have learned so much from. Even though I endured pain in situations where I was supposed to be protected, I am grateful for the chance to have become a stronger person. Foster care taught me how to mask my feelings, it helped me develop trust issues, but it also taught me what statistics to beat. In high school I was told that less than 10 percent of foster kids graduate from college: That was one of the many things that motivated me to exceed expectations.

I have a list of individuals who contributed to my success. It literally took a village to raise me, and even if that village was a bit dysfunctional, I managed to become a better person. I was fortunate enough to have a family friend who was more like my mother. She never judged, always loved me and fought to provide a better quality of life for my sister and me. I honestly don't know where I would be without her. My family was involved as well; my sister and I were able to spend weekends at their houses and that helped.

And we had a few sets of foster parents who loved me and my sister and treated us as kin; I am still in contact with them. Our last foster parents made the lifetime commitment to be our parents, the ones who we can depend on. We have had our ups and downs like all families do — but instead of the seven-day notice, they decided to work on being the parents that we

need. Even though we had a rough beginning they have made our futures brighter, and for that I am grateful.

But it wasn't easy along the way. My anger came in my later years, but confusion came earlier — I was always seeking attention to feel loved, and settling for negative attention because at least I was acknowledged. As I got older, I started to develop a fear of being alone. But I tried to push away those who tried to get close to me because in my eyes, everyone left. Overcoming this was a struggle.

Becoming a mother has been one of my biggest accomplishments. Aside from being close to graduating with a bachelor's degree, my son has added to my life in a positive way. Being a foster child and having to live through that pain has made me appreciate having my own family. I now have the support I wanted all along, and my husband is the dad to my son that I had always needed.

Now that I have a child of my own, I cannot imagine having him go through the pain I had to so young. Knowing that I can protect him from that is what keeps me motivated to move forward. I had this fear of failing as a mom because of my mom, but my son has shown me that only my life choices will determine his beginning, and it is up to me to break that cycle.

Fortunately, I have learned from my parents' mistakes, forgiven them, and decided it was healthier to move forward. If I could send a message to foster youth out there I would say don't look back. The past can only dictate your life if you allow it to. Just because you had a rough start doesn't mean you can't have a successful finish. You CAN do it. Don't let statistics determine your outcome! It will get hard and at times you will feel like giving up. Just know you deserve to break the cycle and overcome your struggles. If you are patient, there will be brighter days.



FINDING MY PURPOSE

By Monroe Martin

Monroe Martin is a stand-up comedian who performs across the country. He has appeared on the Netflix series Master of None, NBC's Last Comic Standing and Adam Devine's House Party on Comedy Central. Martin also wrote for the MTV2 series Charlamagne and Friends.

I don't remember the exact emotions I was feeling when I went into foster care, but it was just like being thrown into a pool and having someone say, "Alright, now you have to learn how to swim."

I went into foster care at the age of 7. Before that, my mother was barely around, and when she was around it was quick. My dad was in and out of prison. I lived with my grandmother for a short time but she was too old to keep me. When I was placed in care, I was immediately separated from my sister — we rarely saw each other until years later. It was hard to be taken away from someone that I was so close with.

I lived in 14 different homes in 15 years. My first foster parent was 78 years old. It always shocked me that I was taken out of my grandmother's home because she was too old to care for me, and then was placed in that exact same situation in foster care.

After that, I was placed in group homes. That transition was rough. I went from having freedom to having a strict bedtime, eating with a bunch of strangers and showering in communal showers. It felt like prison, except I did nothing to deserve to be there in the first place. I didn't like talking to people because I felt like anything I said was going to be used against me. Whenever I expressed how I felt, my medications were upped. I thought, if I can just keep my mouth shut, then it won't happen anymore.

Sometimes I would have to fight just so that people didn't steal my things. At one point I was placed in a foster home that didn't have room for me. The foster parents made me sleep on a cot and kept my stuff in the basement. This is what I call the "bucket phase" of my life, when all of my clothes were in buckets. At night they would lock the door so I couldn't come up to use the bathroom. The moment I tried to tell my social worker what was happening somehow it ended up being my fault. I got in a fight with that foster dad and was immediately placed in an emergency foster home.

Not all places had a negative influence on me. At around 13 years old I was placed in a group home in West Philadelphia, which I liked a lot. There were only six kids and I enjoyed being around them. It was at this age that I started to change my mindset. I started being more conscious of who I was. I stopped hanging around people who lashed out and started hanging with kids who read books and who expressed themselves in other ways. I decided that I didn't want to be somebody who was always holding on to the past. I'm a huge fan of surrounding yourself with people who are better than you. If you want to get good at something, you need to hang around people who you look up to. I learned that in foster care and still have that mentality today.

In many ways foster care saved me. But I want to see a lot of change happen in the system. I want to see less medicine in these kids. I want to see more efforts being made to reunite families. And if they're unable to reunite, the kids should be placed with someone who really cares about them. I want to see kids be able to explore and be creative and have access to programs that they have a real interest in. That's why, when I get to a point in my comedy career where I've done enough to have an influence, I want to start supervised independent living facilities in Philadelphia and New York. I want them to be places where kids who have a hard time expressing themselves can go, to get extended time to really figure things out and get guidance. I would love to be able to introduce kids to their idols and give them the opportunity to meet people they want to be like.

If I could give advice to others in foster care, I would tell them to not be afraid to fail. I was for a long time. I was told I had to do things I didn't want to do because it was supposed to guarantee that I had a good life. Now I'm doing things that no one ever told me I could do. I remember certain staff and social workers asking

why I was doing comedy, and telling me I should do something else. My advice is, do exactly what you want! Do something positive and have as much fun as possible. Figure out your purpose. Someday I want my kids to look at me, know my past and go, you did all of this? And you were given nothing? That's what I want.

“WHENEVER I EXPRESSED HOW I FELT, MY MEDICATIONS WERE UPPED. I THOUGHT, IF I CAN JUST KEEP MY MOUTH SHUT, THEN IT WON'T HAPPEN ANYMORE.”



PHOENIX RISING

By Catiria Delgado

To describe my childhood as extremely difficult is not an exaggeration. Between the ages of 4 and 8, I was repeatedly sexually abused by my mother's boyfriend, who I thought was my real father, and molested by two other men.

My mother and her boyfriend also struck me and my older sister with belts and rods and dragged us across the floor like mops. They would lock us in our rooms for hours, and I'd watch shows that demonstrated what a family should look like and wish the pain would end. Meanwhile, my younger sister was treated like a princess.

Eventually my older sister told a teacher about our home life, and the school social worker pressured me to confront my mother and her boyfriend. Afterwards, my mother fled to Puerto Rico with my younger sister, and my older sister and I entered foster care. I was 8 years old and my world was spiraling out of control. I felt hurt, confused and scared, but also somewhat excited about going to a new home. I thought we'd be treated kindly. It did not take long to wake up from that fairy tale.

Our first foster home was awful. We were bullied by my older foster sister and force-fed by my

foster mother, and I was physically abused by my foster father. Eventually, we were removed and sent to live with an aunt. But that wasn't much better.

My aunt's boyfriend, who was illegally living in the apartment, would beat and torture us. When I say beat, I mean he would smack, punch and drag us. When I say torture, I mean he would strangle my older sister and knock our heads together as if it was a wrestling match. He would force us to stay on our knees for hours, and if we dared move, would make us kneel on rice and then a cheese grater. All the while, my aunt received money from the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to take care of us. But she would use it to buy herself and her boyfriend nice things while we went to school with holes in our shoes and the same clothing every day.

My mother eventually came for us. But when we moved back with her, my older sister was sexually abused by my mother's new boyfriend. Evidently, DCF did not thoroughly investigate him — he had a prior record of sexual abuse towards a minor. My mother physically abused us, and I made several suicide attempts. Again, my older sister and I were removed, and again my mother fled with my younger sister and her boyfriend.

“MY WISH FOR A BETTER LIFE FINALLY CAME TRUE. I MET A TEACHER WHO BECAME MY FOSTER MOTHER. SHE AND HER HUSBAND WERE THE BEST FOSTER PARENTS IN THE WORLD.”



My childhood was so unstable. When I was with my mother, we frequently moved between apartments, and when I was in foster care, I constantly bounced between placements. During my second time in state care, within a three year span DCF moved me 12 times, which included two mental institutions and two shelters, and I attended nine different schools. I was always struggling to catch up on my education. I didn't learn how to read, add or subtract until the third grade. It was all extremely frustrating.

When I was 12, my wish for a better life finally came true. I met a teacher who became my foster mother. She and her husband were the best foster parents in the world. They nurtured me and advocated for me with DCF and the school system. They made me feel safe, special and loved for the first time in my life, and they gave me a reason to want to live. They helped to pick up my broken pieces to try to make me feel whole again.

They were by my side when I testified against my mother's old boyfriend who abused me — he was sentenced to 50 years. They comforted me when I found out my grandfather committed suicide. They were there for the important everyday parts of my life too. We cooked together, they helped me with my homework, and they attended all of my softball games. When it came down to it, they treated me like I was their biological daughter.

My foster parents, whom I call Mom and Dad, have continued to be a godsend in my life. Even though I am now 30, they still guide me and give me good advice. Most importantly, they have taught me that it is never too early to turn your life around. Today, I am a wife, a mother, a medical assistant and phlebotomist. In the future, I hope to “pay it forward” in a meaningful way. The best advice I could give to foster children today is to make education a priority, keep the faith, don't give up on your hopes and dreams, and, as Dad always says, “Keep your eye on the ball.”

I DECIDED TO RISE

By MelissaRoshan (MelRo) Potter

I used to suffer from frequent nightmares about being trapped in the foster care system. I'd be in a room, pounding on a window, and no matter what I'd do, I couldn't escape.

For a long time these feelings stayed with me. It didn't matter that I eventually had a booming modeling career or great friends who loved me. How I felt was internal, and it took years to overcome.

And really, that's not surprising. I was shuttled around to over 23 different foster and group homes between the ages of 10 and 15. As a result of the trauma and horrific abuse I experienced before and while in the system, I suffered from PTSD and believed that I was not valuable because I had never been adopted.

Some of my foster homes were really bad. My worst memory is of a foster father who broke my finger for dog-earing a page of his new encyclopedia. He threw the heavy book at me, and when I put up my hand to protect my face, my finger snapped back and broke. At school I lied and said it happened on the school bus. By this point, I had already experienced sexual, physical and emotional abuse in this foster home, but

this made me hit bottom. Walking around with a disfigured finger made me realize how lost, hurt, empty and drained I was.

Interestingly, my best memory also happened in this home. It's the memory of the camaraderie my foster siblings and I had with each other. We all faced the same abusive situations (even working as child slave labor for this family's business), but we took care of each other the best that we could. On better days, we would play together or swim in a nearby lake. This really mattered to me. We were one another's lifelines.

Eventually, I aged out of care with no real preparation for life on my own. My "survival skills" consisted of being quiet (foster children are conditioned to be invisible) and trying to be loved. In high school I met a boy who told me I was beautiful. That led to me becoming a mom; however the courts almost took away my son when his father became abusive toward us. Luckily I was able to move us into a shelter for homeless teen parents, but I had to struggle to learn basic life and parenting skills while completing my GED.

My plight changed dramatically one day when I was buying diapers and was "discovered" by a well-known modeling agent. With a lot of

hard work, I went from the girl no one wanted to a model on magazine covers and runways. While it was and still is amazing, I learned that no amount of success could erase my unhealed childhood trauma. When I hit bottom I had a breakdown and tried to take my life; however, from that dark place I decided to rise up and stop being a victim. That's when I started on the path of healing my bottled-up pain.

Even though foster care has changed dramatically since I was in the system, stories like mine are still all too common. Children need the ability to express (in private!) how they think and feel about their situations. Adults also need to know the signs of child abuse and must be compelled to speak out. I'm still amazed at the people who either didn't see or ignored the blatant signs of my abuse.

I'm also a proponent of mentorship and that children should have several advocates to ensure their education is up to par and that they have post-high school educational plans. And I strongly believe that all kids in foster care must have trauma counseling.

My trauma has pushed me to be a better person. I focus on empathy and loving people the way I wanted to be loved. I wouldn't want to reject, ignore or abandon someone because I remember how that felt. Above all, my childhood experiences have given me my life's purpose: to be a champion for those who have experienced similar trauma and may still be debilitated by those experiences.

My advice to kids going through foster care is, "Just hold on." Where you are right now does not have to define your future unless you allow it. One day you'll have your power back and at that time, you can choose a happier, healthier life path. Believe there is better out there for you, and one day you will meet your best self if you do the work to get there. Foster care is only part of your journey; it is not what defines you.

Almost no one asks to be put in foster care. Even when a child has great foster parents, no one wants to be put with strangers and feel different than everyone around them. I want all kids in foster care to know that's what makes them special, valuable and stronger than most. You matter. Oh, and you rock!

"I USED TO SUFFER FROM FREQUENT NIGHTMARES ABOUT BEING TRAPPED IN THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM. I'D BE IN A ROOM, POUNDING ON A WINDOW, AND NO MATTER WHAT I'D DO, I COULDN'T ESCAPE."



FOSTER CARE: THE FEELING OF ISOLATION AND OVERCOMING

By John Devine

At 12 years old, my biological mother passed away due to hypertension. My heart felt like it had shattered into a million pieces to where it was impossible to put it back together. I felt extremely depressed, and most importantly, I did not know what the future held for me.

Because no immediate family members could take custody of me, I was placed in the California foster care system.

When my social worker explained to me where I was going to live, I felt anxious and, without a doubt, afraid of entering a new environment with people I did not even know. I remember my first foster mother telling me to not be nervous or scared and to feel like I was part of their family. But did she really understand what emotions I felt, or what thoughts were running through my mind? Did she understand the intensity and how emotionally draining it was to feel like I was an outcast from the rest of the world?

As the state shuffled me through four different foster homes, those questions became more of a blur. I started thinking that the only person who could truly understand what I was going through

was me. School was becoming more difficult. I moved to multiple middle and high schools, and I was experiencing more grief and loss. Throughout the six years I was in the foster care system, 11 other family members passed away. The rest of my family disowned me and I felt that I was alone in the world, different from everyone else.

Questions seeped through my thoughts. Do other people experience trauma such as this? Do other people lose 12 family members consecutively? Why does everyone dislike and hate me?

I did not know how to feel anymore, nor how to express my emotions. I did not know who to turn to, and I did not know whether I would make it in life.

My social worker referred me to a behavioral counselor from Aspiranet — a non-profit organization that specializes in creating permanent, lifelong connections for children and families in California. They also provide services, like counseling, for foster youth. My counselor took me through the grieving recovery process, conducting activities to help me better overcome my grief and loss.

Toward the end of the program, my counselor told me that even though my parents may not be physically here, they will always remain in my heart. As soon as she said that, I reminisced of a time when I was a child and my biological mother would explain to me how she wanted me to be the first Devine in my family to achieve and succeed by earning a degree, working in a career that I loved, adding a foundation to the Devine name and building a family. Through this, I knew that my parents would not want me to be depressed. They would want me to continue living my dreams and accomplishing my goals.

Thanks to my behavioral counselor, I was able to get back on my feet and push through middle and high school. I was also able to attend California State University, San Bernardino, and earn three Bachelor's Degrees in Sociology, Social Services and Gerontology.

Now I am pursuing my master's degree in social work and working for Children and Family Services of San Bernardino. I assist youth and young adults ages 16-21 that are in the foster care system. As part of the Independent Living Program (ILP), we help foster youth by teaching them skills for everyday life so that they can be more independent and successful in their futures. We develop and coordinate different events throughout the year to teach youth about the importance of education, how to do essential tasks such as washing and drying clothes, washing dishes and cooking, as well as how to budget so they can save money. I also conduct advocacy work for foster youth around the world on both a local and national level. I have dedicated my career to helping foster youth make sure they get the services and support they need in order to live healthy and sustainable lives.

With so many foster youth living in the world, I realize I am not the only one who has experienced total isolation. I know there are others out there



“WHEN MY SOCIAL WORKER EXPLAINED TO ME WHERE I WAS GOING TO LIVE, I FELT ANXIOUS, AND WITHOUT A DOUBT, AFRAID OF ENTERING A NEW ENVIRONMENT WITH PEOPLE I DID NOT EVEN KNOW.”

who might be living through that experience right now. If you are feeling that way, I want to let you know that you might be afraid, you might be having mixed emotions from the traumatic experiences you may have witnessed, but no matter what, you are still you, you are a strong individual that can accomplish anything. From someone who has overcome similar challenges, I ask that you be strong and persevere, and I promise you will succeed through anything that life may hand you. There is nothing in this world that you cannot accomplish.

HOW NAVIGATING COMPLEX FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS HELPED ME HEAL

By Sarah Pauter

It's been almost 10 years since I emancipated from the foster care system. I remember sitting across from an independent living caseworker, combing over the details of what my transition to adulthood would look like: part-time employment, full-time school at a 4-year university, transitional housing support, and a myriad of other resources to fill the gaps. These conversations went on for months as my birthday and high school graduation inched closer, like doomsday preparations, with meticulous attention to details about time management and financial responsibility.

While the services and supports fostered my independence, the message wasn't entirely happy or optimistic. You need to learn to take care of yourself because you have no family to depend on. And that was the truth; I was "aging out" of the system that served as my sole caretaker for 17 years.

My journey through foster care started when my mother, who was 22 and had three young children, dropped us off at a babysitter's house and never came back. She was attempting to flee an abusive and drug-riddled situation with my father, and needed to lay low until he could be served with a restraining order. She felt it was in our best interest to leave us at a location where we couldn't be found, but after several

days, the babysitter became worried and made the fateful call to CPS.

My mother's drug addiction intensified after our removal and she eventually served a prison sentence for possession and distribution. I was nearly 9 years old when she was released, and to say we didn't really know each other would be an understatement. We spent the following years attempting to form a relationship despite geographical and emotional separation. There were months, and even years, when we didn't speak. I viewed her as the woman who abandoned me, and she struggled to understand why I did things to push her away.

As I grew older and learned about generational trauma, addiction, and domestic violence, I felt a deepening sadness for the things she endured. She was born in Taiwan to a mother who was conceived out of violence, and a military father who struggled with alcoholism and disappeared on a regular basis. There was a defining shift in my attitude toward her. Suddenly, I began to view her as an unequipped teenage mom rather than a cold-hearted and selfish individual. I felt the urge to reconnect and form some sort of semblance of relationship, but how? Was it too late? At 24 years old, I had no remaining services or caseworker to guide the process and I felt unequipped to carry the emotional toll.

It was my older brothers who were instrumental in helping me finally come face-to-face with our mom. They encouraged me to take things slowly and focus our early conversations on the future rather than the past. We spent our first afternoon together barbecuing and talking about our mutual affection for dogs. It wasn't an earth-shattering conversation, but it was a start. Two years later, we speak almost daily.

“MY JOURNEY THROUGH FOSTER CARE STARTED WHEN MY MOTHER, WHO WAS 22 AND HAD THREE YOUNG CHILDREN, DROPPED US OFF AT A BABYSITTER’S HOUSE AND NEVER CAME BACK.”



Looking back, I'm disheartened by the lack of attention paid to my emotional permanency and the missed opportunity to teach the skills necessary to rebuild relationships with the family I was removed from. Research indicates that by age 24, nearly 79 percent of former foster youth have weekly contact with their family of origin. This number increases to 81 percent by age 26. While it's clear that many former foster youth wish to reconcile family relationships, they often need support navigating these emotionally challenging situations.

Forgiveness doesn't come with an instruction manual, and in a lot of ways, I am still grappling with how to navigate our new relationship. Just a few months ago, I became a mother to a beautiful baby boy. Like any first time mom, I fretted over the safety of his crib and finding the right pediatrician, but I also worried about bigger questions, like what would I tell him about my childhood? How might it change his perception of the grandmother he has come to know and love? While I don't have all of the answers to these questions, I am learning that grandparenthood is an important second chance for my mom to experience all of the moments she missed out on. It's also an opportunity for us to heal together.

I can almost guarantee the caseworker sitting across from me ten years ago never once thought about what my life would be like now as a new mother, or how important it would be for me to have a relationship with my own. Her vision was short-sighted and ended with an apartment and college degree. It's important for foster care alumni and caseworkers to recognize that navigating complex and challenging familial relationships is just as vital to long-term independence as basic life skills and employment. While it took many years and a lot of heartbreak to develop a positive relationship with my mom, I find peace knowing that both my son and I will be better off because of it.

ONE LITTLE WORD

By Christy Irons

In our family's life, saying yes brought on an engagement. A marriage. Two young people (one of them being me) said yes to life together, whatever it may bring. And let's be entirely clear, we were completely young. And we were sure we knew completely everything.

We didn't.

In our first year of marriage we said yes to foster parenting. I grew up with foster siblings. My biological parents began fostering when I was about 12 years old. My husband was adopted at the age of 7. We had some experience. I was absolutely positive we knew exactly what we were doing.

We didn't.

We launched our family into the belly of state-run child services. The day we were certified, we said yes to an 18-month-old boy. A battered, broken boy, brought into care via the hospital where he was treated for skull fractures, bite marks, broken ribs ... it was discovered that he had been shaken and beaten by his 15-year-old mother. He was the fourth generation in his family to become entangled with the state. I found him precious beyond measure, in a screeching, tantrum-ing kind of way. I loved him instantly. I love him still. He was adopted into our family at the age of 3. Our now thirteen-year-old son will spend his lifetime managing the effects of a traumatic brain injury.

We continued to foster, adopting again, a teeny 1-year-old girl. Sweet Mia was the third-born

daughter to a young mother with a penchant for meth and abusive men.

Then, along came a sibling group of three. They bounced back and forth between their biological family, group homes and foster homes. This finally ended with their adoption into our family in 2008.

The day we said yes to our first foster son was the day the world changed. We absolutely went to war. For justice. For his rights, his needs, his education. We fought for him ... and paradoxically, we were thrust into fighting social services. The system that promised to help actually did the opposite.

I was confused. And furious. But, in my naïveté, I assumed that our first adversarial encounter with this system was the exception, not the rule.

In all of our dealings with foster care, I tried to remain somewhat optimistic. I was sure the system that claimed the serious banner of Child Welfare Agency would work for our children. I was positive that safe and necessary outcomes would occur. I was certain that appropriate resources would be made available for physically and mentally harmed children. I just knew sweet-hearted adults would come oozing from this place called social services and attempt to help and heal.

And that was partly correct. Many caseworkers were comrades-in-arms, working to aid children within a dysfunctional system. These dedicated individuals were also underpaid and grossly overworked. The sheer number of caseloads often flung at them was impossible to handle.

And that left a lot of unanswered questions. So young, dumb newlywed was replaced by obnoxious, loud, attorney-calling, argumentative, explain-it-to-me-again-in-a-way-that-makes-actual-sense foster (and then adoptive) mom.

Over the next several years, I found that saying yes to foster parenting meant saying yes to entering arenas in which I was exceedingly uncomfortable. It meant repeatedly confronting systems and policies that were illogical, but seemingly impossible to modify. There were road blocks in every direction.

This is when I was introduced to Children's Rights. Lead by a group of brilliant attorneys that could easily have enormous salaries, company cars, corner offices, these people (I want to kiss their faces) said yes to advocating for children. Children wounded first by their guardians and, many times, again by a social service system erroneously claiming to provide protection from harm. CR's judicial reforms are now poised to remove the roadblocks I could never seem to get past in my home state, and are breathing new possibility into social services. For that, I'm grateful.

Because someone needs to stand up for these kids. Publicly invisible. Legally voiceless. Foster children. My children. And there just aren't a lot of adults willing to say yes.

When my husband and I first thought about fostering, we assumed we would be instantly good at it, that it would only ever be sweet and precious. And that just isn't always the truth. There are sweet and precious moments, there really are. But, there are also times of heartbreak and frustration.

But, even in those trying times, our journey has been entirely worth the effort. Our resilient kids are overcoming their tumultuous beginnings. They are beautiful, wonderful, creative, hilarious



“THE DAY WE SAID YES TO OUR FIRST FOSTER SON WAS THE DAY THE WORLD CHANGED. WE ABSOLUTELY WENT TO WAR. FOR JUSTICE. FOR HIS RIGHTS, HIS NEEDS, HIS EDUCATION.”

children. We have found them to be sensitive and compassionate because of their pasts. They are the light that survived the horror. And it is our joy and pleasure to traverse this life with them.

Fostering has taught our entire family what our yes really means. And sometimes we stick with it only because we said yes. It's an excellent life lesson, yes isn't always easy. In our family, yes means we are committed, no matter what. Through behaviors, through special needs, through learning issues. Saying yes means not giving in or giving up on a child—a hurting, lonely, scared child waiting for us, the grownups, to say yes.

Christy Irons, a mother of 9, is on Children's Rights' Advisory Council.

INVISIBLE LOVE NO MORE

By Christian Delacruz

Ever since I can remember, I have been involved in some way or another with the foster care system. I was placed in state care the day I was born. My biological mother, who became pregnant with me after being raped, was mentally unstable and suffered from a severe drug addiction. Because of her addiction I was born with a muscle defect and needed more than one year of physical therapy, otherwise I would have been permanently physically disabled. I lived with her on and off until around the age of 2, and ultimately wouldn't live with her again until I was 12.

Moving from group home to group home and foster house to foster house is what most of my early childhood looked like. I never felt like I was part of the loving, supporting family that I longed for. At just 4 years old I was repeatedly sexually abused by a foster sibling. Every time my parents would leave the house, it happened. It was an experience that I will never forget, occurring at a time in my life where all I should have been focusing on was playing with matchbox cars and eating Little Debbie's by the pool.

From there, I bounced between several more foster and group homes and wound up living back with my biological mother. The emotional and physical abuse became more frequent during this time period. She would come home drunk and exhibit violent behaviors. There were times that I was hit in the face until I was bleeding. She would hit me with lamps and ashtrays — anything she could pick up. One time she held a dish over me and smashed it above my head. My own mother made it very clear to me that if she could have aborted me, she would have.

On top of all of this, my education was suffering. I went to school up until 6th grade but at that point my mother pulled me out. She attempted to home-school me, and she'd tell the social workers who came to my house that she was, but eventually she stopped. I missed over six years of schooling, and although I eventually worked hard to earn my GED and make up for lost time, I struggled. When I enrolled in college, I didn't know things that I should've known, and professors weren't equipped to deal with everything that I had missed.

By the time I was 16, I finally realized that running away was the better option and possibly my only chance at living a happy life. So away I went, off into the night on a bus. I was seeking help from anybody who would listen. During

“LIFE WAS HARD AND AT TIMES VERY DARK, BUT IT’S MADE ME UNIQUELY ABLE TO HELP AND ADVOCATE FOR OTHERS.”



my time wandering the streets I met many folks who seemed helpful and full of love, but all they wanted was sexual pleasure for themselves and saw me as an easy target. Eventually, child welfare got involved again. They allowed me to be discharged to my mother against my wishes. When I saw her I was shocked. I froze. I wasn't sure, should I turn around? Should I run? Should I scream? She told me things would get better but the neglect and abuse continued. I knew that I had to run again, so it was just a matter of waiting until I had the chance. One day, when my mother was going out to run an errand, I left.

I remember running as fast as I could with a suitcase. I was homeless for a short time again. On Valentine's Day that year, my mother signed her rights away, saying she no longer wanted me. From then on until I aged out of state care I spent my days in group homes that were run by inexperienced caretakers and overseen by people who were only in it to make a quick dime. Life wasn't much better. I was picked on and bullied in every placement. Slowly I realized that I was going to have to toughen up and portray myself as a mean kid who hated everyone just so that I would be left alone.

Eventually I was able to turn my life around, but not every young person is able to do the same. Life was hard and at times very dark, but it's made me uniquely able to help and advocate for others. Today, I am a Youth Leadership Coordinator for the Parent Support Network of Rhode Island, and going into my second semester of college majoring in social work and law. In the future, I see myself excelling beyond measure and making a difference. If I fall down, I'm always ready to get back up. I'm proud to be an advocate for others in foster care who are going through similar struggles. Every child deserves the right to live a happy life and be loved unconditionally. Sometimes that's all that they're looking for.

SUFFERING AND DELIVERANCE

By Esther Mulder

I've always had a sense of surrealness about my existence. I remember having these existential moments as a 7-year-old, when the questions of "Who am I? Why am I here?" overwhelmed me. My place in the world — the meaning of my existence — was an open question for me.

The question of belonging is especially poignant for foster kids. As a child, your sense of value and identity is grounded in the people closest to you. Children are vulnerable and precious — and at the mercy of the adults in their lives. The people closest to me, who were supposed to help me figure out my place in the world, sent me the message that there was nothing I could do to earn their love and acceptance; I didn't belong with them.

And to be honest, I didn't want to belong to them. My mother is a woman broken by her struggles. Her own childhood tragedy combined with high-pressure schooling drove her to the brink. The fallout was tremendous. My mother didn't want me to face the pressure she had, so she went to the opposite extreme. She had no goals for me, no expectations. I remember asking her, at some point around sixth grade, if she was ok with me dropping out of high school as soon as I could. She said yes. I despaired. I didn't want to be like her, but wasn't sure how not to be.

Neither did I want to belong to my foster parents. There was a harshness of spirit in that house that sucked out any chance of real love or connection. I lived with my foster family from infancy to toddlerhood, had respite care over the years and went back again permanently from seventh grade until after high school graduation. I tried to earn their love; I was a straight A-student, played in orchestra, held down a job, did community service and was involved in church. Yet

they seemed to think that unless they exercised distant, authoritarian control over me, I'd be a total mess. It was not a happy place, and I was hell-bent on finding a way out and forward.

In part, my drive and ambition has certainly come from this search for belonging and meaning. Since leaving my foster home, by all worldly accounts I've been wildly successful. I graduated from a liberal arts college with honors and accolades and close relationships with peers and professors. I joined Teach for America and spent three years teaching middle school in Jacksonville, Florida. Then somehow I landed at Harvard Law School and dedicated myself to a career in public service. Now I have my dream job as a public defender back in my hometown. None of this was planned — all of this happened because I worked hard and wasn't afraid to take risks. I had nothing to lose. Nothing could touch the pain of my first 18 years of life.

Despite all my success, of course no achievement healed my wounds. My first year of law school was an incredibly lonely and disappointing period. I had a hard time investing in relationships — I could take all sorts of professional risks, but interpersonal risks? To open up to another person, to be vulnerable again? I didn't want to deal with the pain of relationships gone wrong. I was used to being alone and I thought I wanted it that way.

I'm still a work in progress, but being alone with myself has forced me to confront the fear and pain in my heart. I am learning the truth of the aphorism “no man is an island.” A few years ago, I finally began to search for the answer to a question I didn't know was still within me.

The answer has come slowly and unexpectedly. Aristotle extolled the primacy of experience over reason. My experience has taught me that nothing in this world will satisfy this longing



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within me. Even the moments where I am most transported, moments of communion with others and with nature, leave my heart aching with the awareness of its incapacity to truly take in this joy. The most beautiful things in this life point me towards something else. The greatest truth I have encountered is summed up in the instruction to “love God, and love your neighbor as yourself.” All good in life seems to flow from here.

LIVING A LEGACY

By Victoria Black

When I was a child, my parents struggled with mental health issues and substance abuse, which led to me being placed in foster care at the age of 3. At that point I had a mom, dad and four siblings. My family was fractured by foster care and I was separated from my older siblings and my mom for 15 years.

We were shuffled through many homes. We started in a facility for abused and neglected children, lived with our grandma for a short period, and were reunified with our dad. Our dad really struggled to keep it together. He is mentally ill and addicted to drugs, and he believes in corporal punishment. Our needs were secondary to his need for drugs. At 16, my dad's issues resulted in police intervention, and we were sent back into state care.

Foster care was a blessing in my life but I can't sugarcoat it, it was scary and isolating to be removed from my home, abandoned by my mother and have no way to connect with my

siblings. The most traumatizing episode of my life was not the abuse I endured as a child, but being separated from them. We were so close in proximity, and yet so far away with all of the barriers and roadblocks imposed upon our relationship. Siblings are the people you should be able to share your entire life with, but in foster care you have to fight just to see them. You have to fight for phone calls, and spending holidays together. It isn't right. If it wasn't for our Court Appointed Special Advocate volunteer Anja, I would have spent far less time with my sisters.

I have a lot of emotional scars from foster care but it gave me something I had always wanted—a stable family. Rob and Kamy, my foster parents, are wonderful. They love me unconditionally and treat me like I've always been in their family. They've always respected my original family, and encouraged me to keep my bonds to my family strong. Even when I decided to cut certain people from my life, they suggested I reconsider. More than anything they gave me love when I really needed love. They pushed me to make goals and achieve them and they carved out a permanent place in their family for me, all things they didn't have to do. I hope one day I can be half the mom my foster mom is.

After leaving foster care I started joining programs to access resources for college. It was then that I found my passion — to be an advocate. I went to college at the University of Colorado in Denver and I graduated! I have a bachelor's degree and I am dedicating my life to helping kids like me find success and most importantly, find their voice. I have worked on over 20 pieces of state legislation and I represent foster youth on two boards. The first piece of legislation I worked on gave foster kids the right to see their siblings, which is the issue I am most passionate about.

My advice, to both current and former youth in foster care, is to be your own advocate. Speak up for yourself, find your voice and find your strength. If you do this, you have an incredible opportunity to speak up for kids who cannot speak for themselves. Nothing in this messed up system is going to change unless WE CHANGE IT! A broken system cannot help broken families. Everyone who experienced foster care has a common thread woven into the fabric of our lives, we are all connected. I see the kids in foster care, and alumni, as my brothers and sisters. I would do anything for my brothers and sisters and I will never stop fighting for them.

Today, at 26, I am still working towards finding success and being the best big sister I can be! I work for Advocates for Children-CASA coordinating the Legacy Project, a positive youth development program for teens and young adults. The teens in the Legacy Project are the next generation of Colorado's foster care leaders, and I am making sure they are prepared to be the best advocates they can be. One day I want to be a senator or a representative so I can have a bigger impact on foster care legislation in my state. I'm also working on writing a memoir and becoming a motivational speaker. I hope my story can inspire others and dispel the myth that your past predicts your future.

*“I HOPE ONE DAY
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MOM IS.”*



THE JOURNEY

By Demetrius Napolitano

Last October, I turned 21 and aged out of the system that had raised me — for better or for worse — for 20 years and 10 months of my life. Growing up, my hopes and dreams for stability and a “forever family” — something all children need and are entitled to — were constantly thwarted by multiple foster care placements, broken promises and a failed adoption.

I was placed into foster care due to severe neglect and drug abuse in my home. The first several years of my life, moving from home to home, are still a blur. I remember being tied up in the basement of a foster home, and being forced to walk across hot rice. For years I thought this was a dream, but my older brother told me it was real ... these were some of the first memories of my childhood.

When I turned 10, my birth mother died of cancer. While she was on her death bed, Mrs. Johnson, who had already adopted my older brother and me, promised that she would protect and take care of us. After three years of enduring non-stop abuse, I ran away, then was put back into the system. It felt like a repeat of losing my biological parents. I blamed myself for everything. And I was angry.

My self-confidence plummeted and any feelings of self-worth I had left were ripped out from

under me. The resentment I carried towards the Johnsons left me unable to trust. I started acting out and getting into a lot of trouble, my way of coping with the pain and anger. My actions led to me being placed in a non-secure juvenile detention center for 3 months.

Just as I was about to lose all hope, my life completely changed. It was the day my social worker, Ms. Toni Ince, told me: “Demetrius, you will leave me before I leave you.” A feeling of security and reassurance began to permeate like never before. They say it takes a village to raise a child, and that is true. But it takes one person to change the trajectory of a child’s life. My social worker was that one person.

I started working hard and graduated high school with honors. I was one of three to speak in front of former Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and soon after received a full scholarship to St. John’s University to get my associate degree. I recently was accepted to NYU, my dream school, to finish my undergrad. I became a public speaker for child welfare organizations like Lawyers for Children, The Jamel Robinson Child Reform Initiative, the New York State Citizens Coalition for Children and Children’s Rights.

With accomplishments piling up, I felt great, but there was something missing — a family. In

the six years since juvenile detention, I lived in approximately 25 foster care placements. Some homes weren't supportive. Some were even abusive. Others didn't last because I would not give them a chance. I was terrified of possibly being rejected and would leave a family before

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they had a chance to leave me. I would test my foster parents and siblings until they kicked me out. Time after time, they did.

Until I found the Greens. I was placed with them when I was 19. After every argument I would tell my foster father, “Go ahead, call the agency. Tell them you want me to leave.” He would always say, “No. If you want to call them, then call them, but I’m not going to. I don’t want you to leave.” With time, I finally believed him, and I know in my heart that they will always be a part of my “forever family.”

In April 2014, a mentor introduced me to John and Katie Napolitano, a couple who had already committed to two brothers in foster care. The months went by, and one evening they told me to hold out my hands. Inside they put the keys to their home, alongside a key chain with the letter “D.” “Demetrius, we want you to know that you always have a home, and just like the Greens, we are your forever family.” In that moment, I sensed something that my past had never allowed me to feel: peace. Inspired to give adoption another chance, I asked John and Katie to adopt me — and they said yes.

There was one other thing I needed to heal — to reconcile with Mrs. Johnson. Every time I returned to her home I was rebuffed; my eyes would meet with the pavement as I tried to fight back the tears. I decided to return with my hand offered in love and forgiveness. I told her I was sorry, that I would never give up on her and she should not have given up on me. Before I knew it, we both were crying. As I walked away, she called out, “Demetrius, I am proud of you. Whatever you are doing, continue, because you are making your mother proud.”

Walking to the train that afternoon I learned a valuable lesson: Through faith and forgiveness even the past can be healed.

THEY DON'T KNOW THE LIFE OF A FOSTER CHILD

By Sophia Williams-Baugh

My upbringing has affected my life in many ways. Growing up in foster care isn't the prettiest story. When you are forced to live with one person after another, you never know what life has in store for you. You don't know what tomorrow will bring, literally. You can think that all is well and that you have finally found your forever home, then discover that once again you just didn't fit the bill.

Growing up in state care led to struggling with stability as a young adult. I was never taught to work through any problems when I was in the system. If there was a problem or a difficult situation, the foster mothers would just kick me out. Being in eight different foster homes, and

having a broken adoption, affects my ability to accept that I am now an adult. It's hard working through any serious circumstances because I never had to deal with anything too long while I was a ward of the state.

My worst memory in foster care was being wrongfully accused of getting drunk. My foster mom thought horribly of me. She allowed me to go over to someone's home, and I ended up catching the flu. I walked home sick. I was throwing up and dizzy with a major stomach ache. She ranted and raved about me drinking. She called my social worker and told her that I'd gotten drunk and was hung over. But it wasn't true. I'd never had alcohol a day in my life. A few days later I was placed in respite care for two weeks. When I got out, I was sent to a group home in another city.

My best memory of foster care was having a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA).

She came into my life right after my adoption broke due to the child abuse I'd experienced for 7 1/2 years and I had to re-enter the foster care system. She visited me and took me out for dinner, movies and shopping. During the holidays she'd take me to her home. And at Christmas-time, she had as many gifts under the tree for me as she had for her grandchildren. She always told me that she knew I was strong enough to never give up and that I would make it beyond the statistics. She stayed by my side from the ages of 14 through 18. I am still in contact with her and see her from time to time.

I could not wait to age out of foster care. I had been maintaining a job and was taking independent living classes my senior year of high school. I was excited to embrace life on my own. I was ready to prove to the world that I could survive no matter how many people had tried to break me down. Leaving foster care was a huge sigh of relief and a weight taken off my shoulders.

I had to motivate myself to do the right thing and stay on the right path in foster care. I believed that life could get better if I just kept going. I knew I wanted more out of life than what I had been handed and I was going to do whatever I had to do to make it. Thinking about my hardships being temporary gave me strength to keep going no matter what. Now at 28, I am married with three kids and own a home. I'm a published author of an autobiography, "I'm Good," which talks about my life and thoughts growing up in foster care and my broken adoption. I'm a nonprofit business owner whose organization — Can We Talk Inc. — encourages storytelling as a way of healing, learning and growing. I certainly created a new example of what a foster child can accomplish and removed the stigma placed upon us.

Foster care needs to change in many ways. I believe counseling, constant monitoring and

monthly reviews should be mandatory for applicants who apply for a foster care license and receive a child. I also think a child ought to be able to give a review of his or her foster parents. I've experienced a lot of mentally unstable foster parents — I don't think they were aware of what they were getting themselves into. Or they were, and just didn't care because they knew it would be easy to get rid of me.

To all foster children that are suffering in silence, dealing with unacceptable emotional or physical abuse, SPEAK OUT! You are important and someone does care. Don't give up on yourself just because someone else did.

“LEAVING FOSTER CARE WAS A HUGE SIGH OF RELIEF AND A WEIGHT TAKEN OFF MY SHOULDERS.”



FINDING YOUR PLACE IN THE FOSTER CARE PUZZLE

By Crys O’Grady

The first time I entered foster care was on Thanksgiving Day in 2002. It was midnight, and I had just called my middle school teacher from the only pay phone in my rural town, when the police arrived at my mother’s house to investigate a noise complaint. I was the reason for the noise complaint. My mother had spent the majority of the night telling me that I was an awful child. I was 13 years old and in seventh grade.

When the officer approached my mother to ask about the reason for the call she responded by throwing the rope she had used to tie me up in his face. The officer decided that I would spend the early hours of this Thanksgiving morning at the police station waiting for my CPS worker.

At 5 a.m. that morning, I was placed in my first foster home. I was not allowed to take any of my

belongings with me and would spend the first week in this placement in the set of clothes I arrived in. Holidays were never a happy time for me, but this experience just solidified how alone I would feel on every Thanksgiving and Christmas to come.

Each year, approximately 5,000 youth enter foster care in the state of New Jersey, according to the Child Welfare Information Gateway. Thousands spend a holiday away from home — either in a foster family home, congregate care facility or kinship placement. Holidays with strangers or extended family can be filled with anxiety and loneliness. The experience can feel like you’re a puzzle piece that does not seem to fit.

In my third foster care placement I was with a family with three biological children. All of the children had their own rooms upstairs and I lived in the basement. I was never involved in family outings — I was the downstairs outsider. In all four of my placements, I never truly felt integrated into family activities.

While struggling emotionally, I was also stressed about my achievement in school. I always had thought that education would be my way out, my chance to break the cycle of poverty and drug abuse in my family. To further complicate

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matters, the winter holiday schedule between Thanksgiving and Christmas made it difficult to transfer my school records to my new school. Many youth in foster care face similar education gaps and struggle to attain credit or partial credit for completed coursework. In December of 2002, I missed three weeks of seventh grade, including the periodic table of elements in science class. I had to revisit this in tenth grade in order to succeed in chemistry class.

Despite the initial struggles I had in foster care, I was able to succeed academically with the support of the dedicated teachers. They served as my biggest advocates. When I was placed in another foster home closer to my original school district, they lobbied the administration to pay the costs to transport me to my school of origin. My guidance counselors created safe places for me to retreat to during the school day, and teachers and school staff pooled resources to give me presents on my birthday. Although my foster care placements were not always supportive, I could count on my teachers. I graduated high school with a GPA over 4.0. In my senior year, I was accepted to Stanford University in California on a full-tuition scholarship.

This March, I graduated from the University of Washington School of Law in Seattle, Washington with a J.D. During my time in law school, I clerked at the National Center for Youth Law, worked at the Center for Children and Youth Justice, and volunteered as a Court Appointed Special Advocate at Washington Family Law CASA. Through these opportunities I have been able to work on a variety of issues that impact foster youth — from educational access to sealing of juvenile court records. Youth are in need of allies. As a legal professional, my goal is to expand the legal rights of youth so they can thrive in adulthood, despite involvement in any child welfare or juvenile justice system.

LIFE

FACING FOSTER CARE

By Jaquan Melton

I feel like I live in a world where my voice has never been heard. But every voice has a story. I ask you, are you listening?

How is it right that I suffered because I was born into a family where love was not given nor proper care shown?

The good times I've had — can I honestly say any of them happened when I was younger? No. I have been in more than 15 foster homes. It's part of the reason I know as many languages as I do — half of the houses I went to didn't speak English, so I learned Spanish, Creole and Patois.

In one house all of the foster youth were taking medication. I think that this foster mother, the most abusive of all, exaggerated our emotions and behavior — so she would get extra money for the more complex cases, and so she could cover her actions. The caseworker chalked up our complaints to behavioral or mental health problems and didn't believe us. If asked how we

were doing, we knew to lie. I wish caseworkers were better trained to look past the words to the children behind them.

Eventually I got adopted into that family. I didn't know what it meant. No one explained it to me. I thought I was on my way to a banquet. So when the judge said "Do you want to be adopted?" I said, "Yes your honor," but I didn't exactly know what was going on — I was expecting food to be at the thing.

It sounds funny, but the only time we were safe was when our adoptive mother was in a relationship. Because then she behaved herself — I wasn't getting hit by an extension cord, a 2x4, bottles, a coffee pot.

When I was 11, a neglect petition was filed for me and five other children, including some of my biological siblings. We were all removed. My adoptive mother gave my sister Ruby back to the system. Two other children went to other family members. The rest of us were all returned. To this day I don't know why.

Once, when I was 14, I called 311 to ask how I could go about being “unadopted.” They just told me to go to my agency, but it had closed. Another time when my adoptive mother threw me out, I went out in the cold with no sneakers trying to seek help.

Eventually we moved to Maryland, and I was kicked out of what was supposed to be my “forever” home. At 17, I was working at McDonalds, going to school and trying to pay rent ... it wasn't easy. When I applied for welfare the guy told me, “Oh, you're not approved because you're receiving some sort of income.” With a dumb look I said, “I work, sir, this is all the income I'm receiving.” He said, “Not according to these papers.”

*“TOO OFTEN CHILDREN
LIKE ME ARE ADOPTED
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AND THEY AREN'T EVEN
WELL CARED FOR.”*



Turns out my adoptive mother got an estimated \$38,400 even after she kicked me out! I didn't even know she was getting money to care for us. We always wore donated clothes. When I brought a child support case, I found out she also got money for other children that were no longer in her care. For years I was treated not as a child but a means to a paycheck.

Too often children like me are adopted just for the money — and they aren't even well cared for. Adoption should be treated like an auto lease. You should have to renew every few years, just so caseworkers can make sure the child is ok and the family has everything they need. And money should not go to adoptive parents who no longer care for their children.

They say that two out of three children who age out of foster care end up homeless or in jail. I say that the outcomes for some adopted kids may not be much better. And no one wants to be a percentage in a negative outcome. While I don't feel life owes us anything, I do feel we are not given a fair chance to change the outcomes in our lives.

Can you imagine growing up in a house where you're constantly reminded you don't belong and you are of no kin to them? There were times when I had no one to turn to. I feel love has a limit — if you never got it young you will be confused when you get older. You will question everyone's motives and feel they want to bring you nothing but pain.

Sometimes I want to give up. And after everything I've endured, it makes me wonder if I am doing right by my children. But I am making my own way. I have managed to stay on the right side of the law. Never have I been convicted of a crime. I now have good work as a security guard, and no matter what, I will be a better father to my beautiful baby girls.

BECOMING THE ADULT I WISHED FOR

By Greta Munns

*“EVERYTHING ABOUT
MY LIFE SEEMED TO BE
A PUNISHMENT — FOR
WHAT, I DID NOT KNOW.”*



I had a lot of adults in my life at 16 — a social worker, a guardian ad litem, therapists, a psychiatrist, biological parents, foster parents, a judge, and more whom I’m likely forgetting. I’m grateful for those people, but I had to share my story a lot, hoping to be understood. Times were confusing. Things would appear to stabilize, then reverse course. I was overmedicated for desperate behaviors, with increased types of mental health diagnoses, based on the lack of explanation (to me) of what was happening in my life.

Shortly after I had stabilized, following six inpatient mental health hospitalizations, my foster care journey began at a locked group home facility. A social worker I had met only once came to my home to inform me that I had 10 minutes to fill a bag with what I would need. I had no information about how long I would be gone or where I was going. “Where I was going” was a place referred to by a childhood friend as a “kid jail.”

I was 15 when I was diagnosed with clinical depression. I had never been in detention, smoked a cigarette or been in serious trouble.

A majority of my time for the next three months was spent in that “kid jail” facility. I no longer went to my public school, but to the school in the facility (whose credits didn’t transfer to my public high school. I did two consecutive summer school terms to make up lost time). I lived in the facility, without evaluation of my situation, with a bipolar roommate who tried to strangle our pregnant counselor.

The little freedoms I took for granted were suddenly gone. Eating awful cafeteria food, opening mail in front of staff, and not being able to have drawstrings in my pants were just the beginning. I was able to interact with the outside world, but only on trips in the big blue van. I felt like a criminal. Whenever I wanted to see my little sister (whom I protected from harm at home), we were in a beige conference room with a strange man taking notes. This didn’t feel like healing or healthy helping behavior, intended to help me “rise above” my circumstances. It felt punitive. Everything about my life seemed to be a punishment — for what, I did not know.

After a few months I was reluctantly placed with a foster family. I attended summer school in the facility, hoping to graduate with my class. I had come to terms with this new institutionalized way of living and frankly, I didn’t want to go anywhere unless it was my family home. Social workers tried to convince me I was going to the best foster home in the county. I didn’t care. That home was not MY home.

As the Foster Youth Liaison at a public university, I now interact with young people who have survived really difficult situations. I can and do demonstrate that thriving is possible. I remember when surviving felt like a chore. Here are the little things that made a difference to me then, and that I try to offer now to young people transitioning out of foster care:

1. Provide youth the power of choice. The more meaningful the choice, the more voice the youth should have as the No. 1 stakeholder in their own lives. I often felt helpless as a teen because so many people had power over my life. Even small choices meant a lot.
2. Stay at the same level as youth. I try not to assume prior knowledge, or intentional wrongdoing. If anything, assume positive intent.
3. One of the best things someone did for me as a teen was introduce me to volunteering at the animal shelter. Teaching relationships through volunteering helps create a sense of community and fosters responsible citizenship. Volunteering can include doing things youth are passionate about and may place youth in proximity to other civic-minded people. Volunteering can provide a sense of belonging and contributing to a greater good.
4. Provide concrete opportunities for foster youth. For me that meant a scholarship from Foster Care to Success, interning with Foster Club, and getting involved in advocacy with my state Youth Advisory Council.
5. Listen and take youth seriously. No one wants to be on the outside looking in, particularly a youth who is unsure of the future. Let us do the adult thing and invite the youth to pull up a chair to their own table of life.

Charlotte Ayanna defines fosterness as “The feeling of not quite being in solid. The sense of non-commitment. The state of temporary.” When youth are not sure where the next life shift is coming from, it is our responsibility as adults to meet them where they are. Instead of writing youth off as disengaged or disrespectful, remember that this state of fosterness is not something anyone can be prepared for, and they are doing the best they can.

FIGHTING FOR KIDS TO BE SAFE

By Nawal Traish

From age 9 to 18, it was somewhat of a ritual: scan my bedroom, identify all the things I felt I couldn't live without, pack my backpack to the brim, and head off to the other side of Belmont, Mass. — my mom's house. After three days there, I'd do the same thing, but this time, I'd be on my way to my father's. As a kid, I viewed this back-and-forth as a terrible inconvenience — I'd inevitably leave a textbook at one house and then need it for homework the next night at the other.

But after working as a paralegal at Children's Rights for almost two years, and becoming acquainted with the stories of young people who have endured childhoods spent in foster care, I now realize just how naive my assessment of that time really was. What was an "inconvenience" to me — having not one, but two families in the same town, and not two, but four parents who cared about and supported me — is something that many youth in state care might envy.

In college, my peers and I frequently reminded each other to check our privilege. At Children's Rights, while reading testimony of youth who've been abused in group homes or speaking with emotional parents struggling to reunite with their children, I have daily opportunities to actually do so. It's impossible not to be disturbed

by the disparities in privilege and safety often caused by social and economic forces outside of children's control.

Children don't — indeed, can't — consent to being born. It's a choice others make for them, and they can only trust that we're welcoming them into a place that's, at the very least, safe. Child welfare systems exist because some children find themselves the victims of maltreatment by those who made that choice on their behalf. The fact that abuse and neglect then often occur within foster care systems, compounding children's trauma, is reprehensible, and is why child welfare reform is so urgent and necessary.

Public institutions such as social services agencies can only be as effective as engaged citizens care to make them. Although we vote for our legislators, we do not vote for the administrators who ultimately run the institutions that are so vital to keeping kids safe. As a result, it is easy for these agencies to become "black boxes" whose inner workings are only brought to the public's attention when something goes horribly wrong, such as the death of a foster child.

Fortunately, our team at CR continues to achieve swift and concrete reforms for the kids who

rely on these systems. Over the past year alone, our case in South Carolina has secured a set of tangible changes for its foster youth: no longer will kids in the Palmetto State have to sleep in motels, state offices, or detention centers while waiting for an appropriate home to be found. And in Texas, foster care reform has catapulted into the spotlight as a legislative priority for the upcoming session, with Judge Janis Graham Jack's December 2015 ruling in *M.D. v. Abbott* adding force and urgency.

Recently, CR has been taking a closer look at the unique needs of specific groups in state care, including LGBTQ youth and those who are involved in the juvenile justice and foster care systems simultaneously. These youth may face a higher risk of abuse in care, limits on visitation with loved ones, and a higher likelihood of vulnerability once they age out or exit state care. For instance, studies have found that almost 40 percent of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ, and that many of these youth were previously in foster care or in homes that rejected them.

Physical and psychological well-being shouldn't be a matter of luck. They shouldn't be a product of what family a child happens to be born into, what neighborhood he happens to be placed in, what political party is in power, or what religion her foster family practices. They should be a given. This is idealistic, sure, but shouldn't it be what we aim for? Law and public policy are some of the best tools we have to chip away at the injustices kids face, and Children's Rights wields them to make sure the playing field is level for all children.

What I've learned from my colleagues and from foster parents and former foster youth all over the country has solidified and strengthened my resolve to pursue a career in child welfare. The past two years have proven to me that there are few causes more important than protecting the most innocent and vulnerable among us — kids. They need as many committed advocates as they can get. So please do your part to lift them up and fight on their behalf!

“THERE ARE FEW CAUSES MORE IMPORTANT THAN PROTECTING THE MOST INNOCENT AND VULNERABLE AMONG US — KIDS. THEY NEED AS MANY COMMITTED ADVOCATES AS THEY CAN GET.”



I AM NOT A STIGMA OR STATISTIC

By Kaysie Getty

I remember it like it was yesterday. A worker from the Department of Child Protection and Permanency (DCPP) knocked on the door, and when my mother answered, the worker said she was there to remove my siblings and me from our home. My father wasn't there because he had just taken my older sister to the high school ball. I immediately ran upstairs and used the phone in my parents' room. I called my best friend to let her know that I was being taken by the state and that I didn't know why or when I would return.

My mother came up the steps and told my younger brothers, sister and me to pack a set of clothes for the weekend. After doing so, we said goodbye to our mother and got into a van where we all began crying hysterically. From there, we went to where my sister was to notify her that she wasn't going to be picked up by our dad, but by a DCPP worker. We then went to the hospital and sat in the emergency room for hours waiting to get physicals done. After I watched my younger brothers and sister get dropped off at different foster homes, I got to mine at 1 a.m. What I thought was going to be a weekend stay

turned into seven years. I would never live with my parents or siblings again. I was 14 at the time.

I was born into the foster care system because my biological parents chose to be a part of the crack cocaine epidemic to the point where I had it in my system when I was born. My biological mother signed a voluntary agreement that she was unable to care for me, so into the system I went. When I was 5 months old I was placed in a foster home with the Getty family and a couple years later they adopted me. They also adopted four other children, two boys and two girls, who are my adopted siblings. I lived with the Getty family for 14 years until the state came and took us away. Their reasoning for removing us was corporal punishment — physical and emotional abuse. Looking back, I now believe my siblings and I experienced these things, but it doesn't compare to the trauma or the emotional abuse that the state's foster homes caused.

I lived in 12 placements while in foster care, including six foster homes, two shelters, one residential treatment facility, one transitional living facility, one independent living program and my godparents' house. I never called any

of the foster parents mom or dad, it was always “aunt” and “uncle” because they couldn’t replace my adoptive parents. Some of the foster homes were good, but a majority were not. Unfortunately I was only in the good homes for a short period. Most of the time I had foster parents that didn’t care about how I felt, what I’d been

“MOST OF THE TIME I HAD FOSTER PARENTS THAT DIDN’T CARE ABOUT HOW I FELT, WHAT I’D BEEN THROUGH OR WHAT I WANTED.”



through or what I wanted. All they did was talk about me, tear me down and complain about how much they didn’t get paid to deal with me. There were times when they would treat their children better than they treated me. In one home, a foster parent attacked me and we wound up fighting.

My best experiences were in residential programs because I actually felt like a human being. The staff taught me so many things that I still use now, such as learning how to cook, creating a résumé and how to manage money. They helped me achieve independence through learning life skills so that I could have a chance at living on my own. They were the ones who believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself.

I eventually aged out of the system at 21, but prior to that I got involved in The Center for Family Services and The Camden County Youth Advisory Boards (YABs). I became president of both, and was able to advocate for giving youth in residential programs a voice about the programs they live in, and for changes within the foster care system as a whole in New Jersey. These opportunities shaped me into the leader that I am today and helped me learn the true meaning of leadership and advocacy.

Today I am stronger, confident, resilient and a proud alumni of foster care. I say proud because without the system and the people who helped me get where I am today, I wouldn’t be able to help others who are in the system now. I am currently a student at Rutgers University Camden School of Social Work studying to get my bachelor’s and master’s. I have spoken at many different events to help educate people on state care and I tell my story as a way to help other youth realize that they are not alone. I tell every youth who is placed in foster care that this is not the end all be all, but a stepping stone to get to where you want to be.

CRAVING KIN

By Kevin West

I'm writing this blog from my Pappy's (grandpa's) house in Pennsylvania. I came out here to visit my brother JR, who lives with Pappy, for JR's birthday. The last time I was out here was 4 years ago, when our grandma was dying from lung cancer. The time before that — It had been 18 years since I had been home to see my family. I lived with them in a kinship placement until I was 8, when my biological mother regained custody of me. She remarried a man in the military so we moved, and I re-entered foster care out-of-state not too long after that. Meanwhile, my brother stayed back home with Pappy and our grandma. Thanks, Mom (sarcasm).

Things have sure changed between us, my younger brother and me. We used to be thick as thieves (literally, we stole food from the neighbors through their doggy door as kids). Now he is like a stranger who looks like me. After almost 20 years, reconnecting is hard. I look through photo albums and see how close we used to be and it makes me sad to know there is no way to get back to that point, no way to get those years back. I know JR loves me, but the way he shows it is different than I do. He's a quiet man, calm, cool and collected, while I am a loud, outspoken,

sensitive and crying-while-I-write-this-blog mess. The differences in the way we show our love, added to the years of distance between us, makes me feel even more like we are strangers.

A couple years ago I met my younger sister, Lindsey, for the first time. She was 24 and I was 28. The. First. Time. We. Met. She was, again, a stranger who looked like me, but I've known about her for her whole life. We could and should have been connected at a much younger age; sibling visitation could have prevented us from being foreign to each other. I haven't seen my youngest brother since he was 5 years old and I was 13; he is 22 years old now and I am 30. I don't even know where he lives. My three younger siblings don't even know each other, though they all know they exist, as we all share a birth mother.

It weighs on me and breaks my heart. Brothers and sisters should be your first and oldest friends but mine are hardly more than strangers, and frankly, it's not fair. What did we do to deserve to not be in each other's lives? Nothing, it was all done to us — and even as adults it still hurts and affects our lives. It is not something one gets over easily.

Every time I meet someone new and I am asked if I have brothers and sisters, it tugs at my heart, which breaks once again. Do I say no and ignore the relationships, or do I say yes and delve into the story of my broken family to make sense of why we do not talk much? It's not like there is bad blood between us; it's just that blood is all we have holding us together. We have very little in common and almost no memories to look back on.

Now, that is not to say I don't have loving people in my life who I consider siblings, because I do — but it is not quite the same. Having biological bonds would help me feel more complete as a person and not alienated from my family.

I think that as wards of the state, the system should insure that these bonds are not broken. It is nearly impossible to place everyone together,

but all efforts should be made to keep brothers and sisters in each other's lives. It can reduce grief and loss, improve mental well-being and behaviors, and help keep families intact — which should be the goal of children's social services. Parents may not be able to care for their children but that is not the fault of the kids. And often older siblings play parenting roles to the younger ones when the parents are otherwise absent. Keeping brothers and sisters together as much as possible is healthier for all involved.

Being back home and seeing JR is nice, but I wish I knew him better. I wish I knew my sister as more than just a Facebook friend. I wish I knew my baby brother. I wish for a lot of things to be different, but most of all I wish for current foster youth to not have to suffer through the grief and loss that's unnecessary and so easily preventable.

“BROTHERS AND SISTERS SHOULD BE YOUR FIRST AND OLDEST FRIENDS BUT MINE ARE HARDLY MORE THAN STRANGERS, AND FRANKLY, IT’S NOT FAIR.”



FROM GROUP HOME TO DORM ROOM TO COURT ROOM

By Chelsea Faver

At 16 — after the mental illness of a parent, paired with an unwillingness to seek help, slowly tore apart my family — I was placed in a group home an hour away.

For me, the child welfare system was a positive and welcome change. It gave me the opportunity to take hold of my future and pave my own path. Instead of feeling like every day was a fight against an overwhelming current, I was surrounded by supportive adults who genuinely wanted me to succeed and gave me a chance to do so.

However, even the most ideal transition into foster care is not without challenges.

One of the most difficult things about my time in care was losing contact with my younger half-brothers. I only saw them a handful of times while at the group home, and lost touch with them in the years following since they were in my parents' custody. For years it had felt like my

youngest brother was the only person I really cared about and would do anything to protect. The loss of that bond haunted me.

But I found that having other strong relationships made care less lonely. At the group home, I lived in a dorm-style wing with girls around my age. No matter where we came from, we were all facing similar life challenges. This common understanding created a type of safe haven. When one of the girls had a difficult visit with family, we were ready to support her. When I had a disappointing court date, I was able to share my frustrations with peers who genuinely understood. Now, not every day was perfect. We had our fair share of arguments as any teenage girls do. Yet, through thick and thin, we had each other.

I also had the tremendous support of my group home case worker, Sue Swope. Sue was the first person I met when I entered care, and she was the first person I felt actually understood the struggle I had been facing for years. She did everything in her power to give me a chance to succeed. Finally, there was my educational

counselor, Kathy Weinzapfel. Without her I never would have found the courage or motivation to finish school and pursue college.

Personally, I found it difficult to leave the group home and the strong bonds I formed over those nine months. At 17, I graduated high school and was accepted to Indiana University. Even though

“FOR ME, THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM WAS A POSITIVE AND WELCOME CHANGE. IT GAVE ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE HOLD OF MY FUTURE AND PAVE MY OWN PATH.”



I was still in care, my judge granted me permission to leave the group home, move three hours away, and pursue my degree. However, I still maintained my friendships and remained in close contact with my support system of group home staff and case workers, who proved instrumental in my transition out of care. It still was not easy, but with the right resources in place I beat the odds. I finished college and recently graduated from law school.

The child welfare system worked for me, but that does not mean our advocacy should stop. Even when a young person has a positive experience and improved livelihood from foster care, there are still ways to make the system better. So, should foster care change from how it was while I was there? Absolutely. Not because it was ineffective, but because a system that does not evolve or continuously try to improve itself will fail our future foster youth.

One of the strongest ways we can improve child welfare is through the voices of foster youth themselves.

To the alumni: Your experiences can impact the world. Use them to help the child welfare system continue to progress, whether it be through advocacy, mentoring a youth currently in care, or any of the many other ways you can help create better lives for foster youth.

To the young people currently in care, I say this: You are unique. You are resilient. You are amazing. Seek out mentors and form bonds with other youth in the system. We have to keep building up and supporting our brothers and sisters in care. And I want you to know that life gets better.

Just this past Christmas I had the chance to see my youngest brother and have a conversation with him for the first time in nearly ten years. It takes time, but patience, strength, and motivation can heal many wounds.

A FOSTER CHILD'S LIFE

By Lisa Wallace

As a foster child, experiencing different families, new rules and the constant feeling of not bonding with my caretakers made it nearly impossible to trust people.

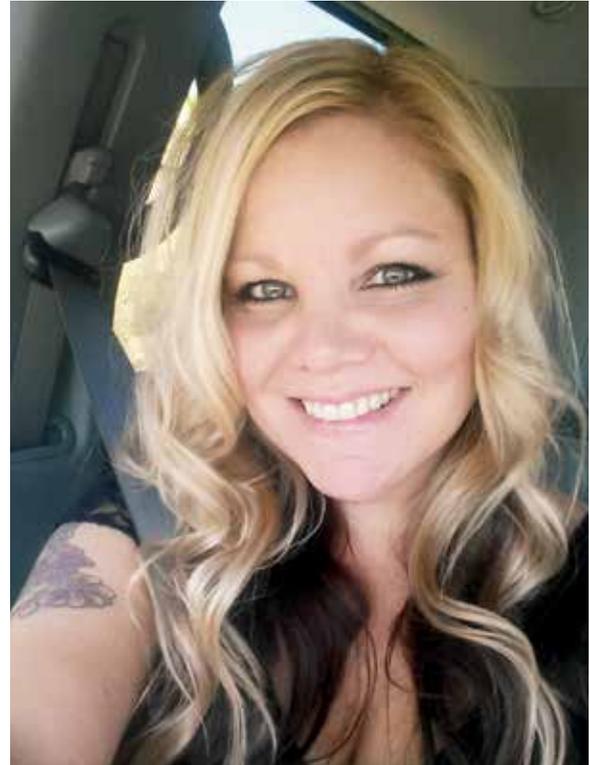
I was 2 years old when I went into foster care. My birth mother was homeless and had a mental disorder. She would abandon my sister, brother and me for days at a time. As a result I went into foster care and had six different homes — some very abusive, even worse than the one from which I was originally removed. We were placed in one home where the woman who was supposed to care for us would leave for work and lock us in the closet while she was gone all day. We also were abused in a family that eventually adopted us. To this day, I have a fear of the dark and don't trust people.

My seven years in state care were rough, but I was lucky enough to go through the experience with my sister. She was with me the whole time, and we were eventually adopted by a family that had already given my baby brother a forever family. Being able to stay with my sister throughout foster care helped me feel a little bit more secure. I knew that I at least had a part of my family with me, and that we were able to help each other.

I remember sitting in front of a judge when I was in fourth grade; I was there to tell him I wanted to be adopted. I was happy because I would be with my siblings, but I was also scared because of our adoptive parents' son's cruelty. I thought we would be harmed no matter where we went, and figured it was normal, so I never said anything. We kept quiet to stay together. He would abuse us prior to and several years following our adoption and, when we did speak up, was never prosecuted for it. To this day, our parents don't believe their biological child did this and it has divided our family.

I'm now an adult, with kids of my own. I still carry around the feelings I harbored as a child. I have an overwhelming sense of worry sometimes, that people will find out how imperfect and different I am. I don't know my parents or whether my birthday is actually my real birthday. I feel like a lost soul and question everyone and everything, even my ability to parent correctly. If they find out I have no idea who I really am or where I came from will they wonder how I have the ability to care for my own kids? Or how I know how to bond with them? I am in constant fear that I am not good enough, and that eventually the people I love will just leave me. After all, that's what everyone did when I was a child.

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I am also obsessed with taking pictures of my kids. I fear that I will forget what they look like, because I have no idea what I looked like as a baby. I always record every happy moment, because I fear it may all go away someday. I am sure this is due to my experience in foster care and changing homes so often.

But I have also learned by being in foster care. It has shaped me into a strong person and has taught me to see the positive in every situation. We are not the product of our past. We can be whoever we want to be. Even though I have been abused in the worst of ways, I am a good person.

Children need to know they are loved and they have a safe place to turn. I feel the foster care system needs to provide counseling and safe

homes for all foster kids. The people who work for the system need training on victim and child psychology so they are well-equipped to handle the kids. Also, those who are licensed to be foster parents need to be doing it for the right reasons, not just to get a paycheck out of it.

My advice to kids currently in foster care is to know that your past does not define you! If you have biological parents with mental illness, this does not mean you will have it. Just because you were abused does not mean you will become an abuser. You are capable of being a good parent. You are capable of knowing how to love and be loved — and you will find people who are good and who will love you back. Remember that you are not different, you are beautifully UNIQUE!

GROWING UP A FERGUSON

By Valnita Ferguson

I was just an infant when my mother put me in foster care. In a few short months I was adopted. As a young child my life was great, but as I got older, my adoptive parents, the Fergusons, soon became my worst nightmare.

They would beat me and my five adoptive siblings with anything they could get their hands on — belts, baseball bats, two-by-fours, shoes, fists, hammers. We were burned with clothes irons, on the stove, with a curling iron. They would beat us while we were naked, duct tape us to a chair or our beds for days, and hold us over a banister by our feet — then drop us. Sometimes they starved us. We were forced to drink urine, hot sauce, drink from the toilet. They pushed us into the clothes dryer and turned it on. A few of us were held under water. They even urinated on some of us and forced us to eat our own excrement.

My brothers and sisters were my best friends — we took care of each other, and I hated seeing them get hurt. Two of them managed to run

and never look back. I was sad they weren't with us, but happy that they were able to go before someone was killed. Because if we didn't get out when we did, we might all be dead.

When we were finally removed, I spent my first two months in foster care with my four siblings. It was the best two months I'd had in a long time. Then we were split. My older brother Jermaine went into one foster home, and my other siblings and I into another.

I was 10 years old, scared, confused, and most of all lonely. I wanted so much to belong with a family, but how do you trust people when you're sure that they won't stay in your life? I rebelled because I feared being let down by those who said they loved me. What made it worse — I had three different counselors to help me address my trauma. Every time I finally felt like I could open up, I was moved to someone else.

I had my last chance at adoption when I was 15, but my fear took over: They were already abusing an adoptive child. Not wanting to experience

the same thing twice, I purposely sabotaged my chances of adoption. I was sent to another foster home where I waited to be adopted; however, I ended up aging out when I was 18.

It felt like I was thrown to the wolves, not having parents to rely on. I had to figure out everything myself, which ended up backfiring. I purchased a car, but since I didn't have my license, I put it in the name of the person I was living with. When I eventually left — it was no longer a healthy environment — I had to leave my car behind. I just didn't have the support I needed to make sound decisions. Even now it can be hard. I recently had a handsome baby boy. I wanted mothering comfort and answers for all my questions, but I didn't have anyone to turn to.

At one point I envied my siblings with families. Two of my siblings had been adopted and my brother Jermaine was with foster parents who acted like he was theirs. I knew I should be happy for them, but felt like I deserved to be happy too. Sometimes I blamed Jermaine. I told myself if he was here looking out for me like he used to, I would be okay. I know it's cruel to think that way. I realized that I wouldn't want anybody to not have parents, because it is the hardest thing. I'm now very proud and happy for all of my siblings; we have all come a long way.

Some things could have been done differently in foster care. All teens should get Driver's Ed and get licensed before they age out. And we should be taught the basics. I never learned how to do important things like schedule a doctor's appointment, write a check, pay bills, cook, call in prescriptions or file taxes properly. My foster parents helped me with some things, but overall the foster care system could have done a better job.

Still, foster care was a blessing. Everyone who was on my team — caseworkers, lawyers and judges — all wanted me to succeed. They got me

the help that I needed in school so I could thrive. They encouraged me to get involved in sports and school activities. They taught me to be myself — that no matter what anybody told me in my past, I could be anything I want.

Now I'm 20 years old and have my son. I don't have my own parents, but I do have family. I will fight to ensure my son grows up with both of his parents because of the toll it takes on someone who doesn't. Life has been difficult, but I'm surviving because I'm a survivor.

“I ENDED UP AGING OUT WHEN I WAS 18. IT FELT LIKE I WAS THROWN TO THE WOLVES, NOT HAVING PARENTS TO RELY ON. I HAD TO FIGURE OUT EVERYTHING MYSELF.”



HEADS OR TAILS?

By Jermaine Ferguson

When I was young, life was good. I have many fond memories. But seemingly overnight, our household became very violent. The people who adopted six children from foster care of their own free will went from loving to very abusive.

To the outside world, we appeared to be the “perfect family.” No one believed our parents could be capable of committing evil acts. Several investigations were started but they always fizzled out. Given our family’s reputation, it’s not surprising that the two children who attempted to run away and speak out were labeled as troubled — then removed from the home and given juvenile records to protect the “family image.”

The abuse ended after seven years because of a phone call. “Get the knives out of the f—ing sink before I stab you in your f—ing yellow chest,” my adoptive mom said to me, not knowing it was recorded on a voice mail message. That day was the last day we were captives of an abusive, oppressive life.

It was a week before Thanksgiving and the local agency wanted to keep the remaining four siblings together during the holidays and for the traumatic transition into foster care. After the New Year, we were split into two homes. Eventually, I was placed on my own.

This family was very loving and understanding. They set standards, held strong family values and held me accountable. Within one month they made sure I had new clothes and school supplies. I was behind the curve in school but my foster mom scheduled meetings with my teachers and helped enroll me in the classes I needed to catch up. My family went to church on Sundays and allowed me to attend youth group with their own children.

My family encouraged me to become involved in extra-curricular programs at school and supported me by paying for various camps and athletic wear. I suddenly became a three-sport athlete and was fortunate to become track team captain my senior year. My family also instilled in me the value of hard work. They provided opportunities to do odd jobs for the family business, and allowed and encouraged me to work. They helped me save my hard-earned money by setting up a savings account in my name. I was able to use some for incidentals, youth-group trips and other recreational activities, but they made sure I saved most of it. Eventually, I emancipated out of foster care with a solid job history and close to \$4,000 in my name.

Most importantly, my foster mom acted as my personal advocate. She would plead with the

foster care agency to help provide new clothes and school supplies each year. She made sure I was available for sibling visits. She made sure I completed driver's education before I was 18 and ensured I was enrolled in an independent living program that bought a car and put it in my name upon my 18th birthday. My foster mom

“BECAUSE OF MY FOSTER FAMILY, I WAS ABLE TO DEVELOP AND MATURE PHYSICALLY, MENTALLY AND SPIRITUALLY AND OVERCOME THE STATISTICAL BOX THAT CAPTURES MOST CHILDREN WHO EMANCIPATE OUT OF FOSTER CARE.”



educated me on what programs I could utilize as a foster child, and then during my transition into adulthood.

Really, it was the ideal foster care experience. But when it came to my youngest sister Val, I had a lot of questions. She was the last to emancipate out of foster care, just after I served as a Marine living in Okinawa, Japan for three years. During my conversations with Val, I was often frustrated to learn about her transition process. Before the school year was over, she had left her foster home after an argument and was living with a classmate. How did she manage to go to some random family when she was supposed to be in state care? Later, I would find out that Val purchased a car out of her own bank account and put it in name of this classmate's parent, then was never able to get it back.

Somebody needed to act as a mentor and help her through the transition. Her caseworker did help her enroll into college and even drove her down to campus, but still, Val was 18, out of foster care, going to college, without a car or a driver's license. Two weeks later Val found herself leaving campus to live with a family of strangers because of another traumatic event. She was alone again, and felt it. Why was her transition a harder road than mine? Why she was not prepared? Sometimes it feels like a game of heads or tails — and she lost.

I believe foster parents should not only provide a home but also do everything they can to mentor and prepare the child for life ahead. My foster family invested their love, time and money into my future. It was not always easy. Everyone has issues, but because of my foster family, I was able to develop and mature physically, mentally and spiritually to be able to overcome the statistical box that captures most children who emancipate out of foster care. Would it not be wonderful if more families become foster parents who advocate and invest in the future of our foster youth?

COMING OUT AS A FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

By Amy J. Peters

When I aged out of foster care at 19, I swore I would never look back. After nearly six years in the system, I was tired of feeling different than my peers. I couldn't wait to start over with a clean slate — college, my own apartment, and a dream of law school. I had no desire to talk about my time in care and believed the only way to live a “normal” life was to hide my broken past from the world.

Slowly but surely, my perspective changed.

I was struggling to make ends meet, so my aftercare worker helped me get a job with an organization that served system-involved youth. Shortly after, I attended a meeting to discuss a potential new program. Present at the meeting were several people from a partner organization, including a well-dressed, 20-something-year-old woman who spoke about the importance of including the youth voice in the new program. To my complete surprise, she stated openly that she, too, was a former foster youth, and shared her story of being empowered as an advocate and finally having a voice.

That moment changed everything. Here was this woman who was effectively in a position of power, who carried herself with the utmost professionalism — yet she spoke of her foster care experience in a completely unashamed and unapologetic way. The people in the room did not think negatively of her; rather, they praised her. Most importantly, she was persuasive — the organization took what she said to heart and immediately began plans to implement a council of current and former system-involved youth.

Although I had no idea what to expect, I became involved with the council. For the first time in my life, I met a network of people with similar experiences and finally felt like there were others who could truly understand what I had been through. With the support of the council, I eventually went public with my story in an effort to change the system.

Today, I am a law school graduate and foster care advocate who has shared my story many times at both the state and national level. Nonetheless, the fear of being stigmatized by my past sometimes resurfaces. Often, I find myself

waiting until the last possible moment to “come out” as a former foster kid when getting to know someone new. Although I am passionate about child welfare reform and 100 percent willing to share my story with lawmakers when I think it will lead to positive change, I still find myself worrying what my colleagues will think when I am unexpectedly featured on the news.

Having worked as a mentor for other foster youth advocates, I realize that I am not the only one to experience these feelings. In reflecting on my experiences, I have come to several important realizations.

First, as long as stigma remains, so will the fear of stigma. Moreover, much of the stigma associated with foster care is caused by misperceptions that must be confronted head on. For this reason, it is just as important for foster youth to share their stories for the purpose of raising awareness as it is to persuade a lawmaker to pass a bill. Perhaps coming out as an alumna of foster care will inspire someone with similar experiences to feel less ashamed, or maybe it will help change perceptions of those who have never been exposed to the system.

Second, it is incredibly difficult to shield an experience as pervasive as foster care for long. After all, a well-intentioned question as simple as “what are you doing for Christmas break?” can be difficult to dodge for someone who has no family to spend the holidays with.

Lastly, I have learned that as long as I refuse to allow foster care to define me, so will others. Most of the time, people really don’t care that I was in foster care. Although they may be surprised and slightly curious about my past, many have expressed that they do not think any less of me. Foster youth are so much more than their foster care experience — they are an entire package made up of their personalities, values, beliefs and interests. When foster youth recognize this of themselves, others will recognize it as well.

This National Foster Care Month, I am committed to fully embracing my foster care experience. I hope that other alumni will join me to confront the stigma, raise awareness, and help others realize that they are not alone. Additionally, I hope that people who have not experienced the system will listen to our stories with an open heart and an open mind and understand that sharing this part of our lives with the world is not always easy.

“OFTEN, I FIND MYSELF WAITING UNTIL THE LAST POSSIBLE MOMENT TO ‘COME OUT’ AS A FORMER FOSTER KID WHEN GETTING TO KNOW SOMEONE NEW.”



PAYING IT FORWARD...

WITH INTEREST

By Ronald Draper

I cannot remember a time that my adoptive mother wasn't in my life — and that's a godsend. From what I know, my biological mother was a drug abuser, so going into foster care was an instantaneous thing. I guess my biological mother didn't have any rights, so my grandmother stepped in. There was a lot of back and forth about whether my biological or adoptive family was going to have me.

Eventually my foster family prevailed. I remember signing my adoption papers when I was 4. There's a picture my foster-turned-adoptive mother has of me signing them. I remember what I had on and everything. I had a white shirt with a little gray suit. From then on, I knew stability.

My younger siblings also came from state care. My brother and sister are blood-related and share the same mother, but they still had two very different experiences. My sister had the real back and forth — with my adoptive mother, her biological parents and her paternal grandmother. They all fought for her, and she was in and out of our home.

Meanwhile, nobody fought for my brother. It comes to a point where you think, "Is it better

to have loved and lost or not loved at all?" My brother loved and lost because he knows his biological mother but doesn't have her. My sister lost because of all the back and forth. For me, if I walked past my mother on the street, I wouldn't know her. Would I ever want to trade so I could have known who she is, even though I might have had the back and forth? If that is what it cost me to know her, is it worth it?

Not having a connection left a lot of questions. I remember in sixth grade, they had a project about our nationalities. I didn't even know where my biological family was from. But I knew my adoptive mother, she's black and Italian. I did a whole poster board on Italy and I remember people were so confused..

I was confused too, and sometimes still am. Even though my adoptive mother, Beverly Draper, is MOM, there's an empty part of me. I would like to have the adult conversations that help bring closure to my entire childhood. If I could talk to my biological mother now, it would be different to me now that I'm an adult. What she did still has an effect on who I am, but it's no longer a burden. Maybe she wanted to sever all ties; I just don't know.

Still, I hope my biological mom knows my new name, and that she might be hearing that name somewhere. Hopefully my work is loud enough, my success as an artist is loud enough that she hears it. If she's still alive, that she's like, "Wow. This is my child and I let him go and look at what he became." I want to make sure she knows that it's the worst mistake she's ever made.

It is my art that allows me to take that confusion and anger and turn it into something productive. I am the Director of Contemporary Art and Culture at Harlem Hospital, where I was born, and am very involved with Take Care of Harlem, which creates community prosperity through the arts, culture and entrepreneurship.

I also teach "Art as Activism" at a high school in Brownsville, Brooklyn. Some of my students have confided in me about their home lives — talk about the real *real* back and forth. A lot of my boys are in shelters, foster care or couch-surfing. Their experiences have been the opposite of mine: moving from home to home, some every six months, and a kid can't build anything on shaky ground. It's gratifying that I can encourage them to do what I do — use their art as self-therapy.

And I owe all of that to my adoptive mom. She is the one who pushed me creatively. She knew far, far, far before I did that art would be my salvation. But even if I hadn't become an artist, she would still be my biggest supporter. When I was young, if I wanted to try something new, she made it happen, from baseball to Boy Scouts. And she encouraged excellence in whatever I chose. If I wanted to be a garbage man, she'd say, "Go ahead, baby, be the best garbage man you can."

Really, I am a by-product of everything that is *right* with foster care. I want to give hope to those who still need hope, and shine a little light where there still needs to be light. Foster care may be a mixed bag, but so many good things

can come of it. I want people to see, wow, there is a change that I can have on somebody. If my story helps create one more loving home than there was before, then I have done my job.

"I AM A BY-PRODUCT OF EVERYTHING THAT IS RIGHT WITH FOSTER CARE. I WANT TO GIVE HOPE TO THOSE WHO STILL NEED HOPE, AND SHINE A LIGHT WHERE THERE NEEDS TO BE LIGHT."



AUTHORS OF OUR RESILIENCE

By Sarah Perry Johnson

*Resilience is in
My resplendent smile
Imploring you to listen-
Come, stay for a while.
Resilience is in
My upright spine
Bent but not broken,
Fortified by the divine.*

There is something sacred about resilience. Resilience is transformative in its power to create a compelling story and manufacture a new legacy. Resilience is characterized by an ability to “bounce back” in the face of challenging emotional and environmental conditions and serves as a universal resource that can be evoked in times of great adversity. Resilience is a quality that is intimately understood and richly experienced by the millions of foster youth who have endured the foster care system and survived. There are many young adults that exit state care and remain institutionalized in their minds, demoralized by their life circumstances, languishing within the confines of limiting and unfair stereotypes. Conversely, there are also many among this population that thrive, maintaining a sense of hope and transcending their adverse circumstances. My story falls within the latter category. I am a first-generation

college graduate and the recipient of both a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and a Master of Social Work degree from California State University, Bakersfield. I am also an alumnus of the foster care system.

At first glance, my story might appear to be filled with insurmountable obstacles. After my father’s untimely death, my mother began to anesthetize her grief with drugs, alcohol, and unhealthy relationships. Her chemical dependence caused her to forsake what should have been her first priority: the physical and emotional well-being of her children. Shortly thereafter, my sister and I were removed from her custody and placed in foster care. I was seven years old; I remained in state care until age 18.

Unfortunately, the foster care system does not always “foster” an encouraging and supportive environment for the children it has been entrusted with caring for. I had four different placements in the first five years. In some, I was targeted for relentless beatings and vicious verbal assaults. Following one particularly savage beating, my abuser told me that I was “nothing” and that I was “unwanted.” The conflation of placement instability, abuse, and stigma resulted in self-doubt, eroded trust, and depression.

Thankfully, we are much more than our circumstances, the “book covers” that seek to summarize our life and value. My resilience, in tandem with determination, scholastic aptitude, and a loving support system, helped me to overcome life’s challenges and thrive brilliantly. My first placement was with Mama Judy, a white woman from Texas who integrated my sister and I into her family and taught us that love transcends racial distinctions. My uncle and my grandmother maintained contact throughout our time in care and were our guardians in our final four-year placement. They saw past my adverse life circumstances to discover the articulate, intelligent individual that existed beneath the “foster kid” label.

“I HAD FOUR DIFFERENT PLACEMENTS IN THE FIRST FIVE YEARS. IN SOME, I WAS TARGETED FOR RELENTLESS BEATINGS AND VICIOUS VERBAL ASSAULTS.”



Due to my experiences in state care, I possess the power of testimony and relevant scholarly data to bring foster youth issues to the forefront. Research has shown that children in state care have endured devastating traumas, such as neglect and maltreatment. These traumas are sometimes replicated in state care or exacerbated by placement instability and a lack of consistent guardianship. The insidious aftermath of these traumas is evident in the psychological, developmental and adjustment problems that render foster youth objects of stigma, pity and derision. Despite such challenges, many young adults in foster care display amazing resilience. Allies can enhance the lives of foster youth by eliciting resilience and facilitating empowerment both through traditional therapeutic interventions and by positive interaction that conveys love, respect, and unconditional positive regard.

The secret to personal resilience is the recognition of one’s power to become the sole author of his or her life trajectory. My difficult childhood taught me lessons that a schoolbook could never have conveyed; yet, my scholastic aspirations saved me from a desolate life. With relentless optimism, I battle stereotypes without anger and an upraised fist, but with compassion and an enlightened word. I represent the fulfillment of my fervent belief that if young people in foster care are given the necessary resources and are treated with unconditional positive regard, we can become the standard-bearers of resilience. We can become the citizens, the tastemakers, the industry leaders, the scholars, the AUTHORS we’ve always dreamed of becoming.

*Resilience is in
My fighting stance,
My pen and paper complicit
In my transcendence.
Resilience is in
My “Standing Strong”
Knowing that resilience
Was indwelling all along.*

OVERCOMING **DISCRIMINATION** IN FOSTER CARE

By Mark Casas

Childhood is supposed to be the most joyful time of your life, but my childhood was dark, full of pain, and traumatizing. Growing up, my mother suffered from a mental illness. My stepfather was physically and emotionally abusive. I used to watch him hit my mother and after he was done with her, he would turn to me. He would come and go whenever he wanted. Each time he left, we had to find a new place to live. My mom could not afford a stable place so we stayed in motels, shelters, and if we got lucky, on the floor of someone's garage.

During this time, I was exploring my sexuality. I knew I was different and that others saw me that way too. I remember when I was accepted into the Gate Program, an educational program for students identified as gifted and talented. My stepfather would laugh and make fun of me for being in it. I can still hear him say, "Ha, he's in a GAY program." As a child, I took this to heart. I couldn't even be proud of being academically involved and successful.

At 13, I ran away to escape the abuse. I stayed in an abandoned house. After missing a week of school, teachers became concerned. I was placed into foster care with my seven siblings. In junior

high and high school, guys used to make fun of me and tease me. I remember someone spitting on me when he found out about my sexuality. Even though people would make fun of me, I never let it affect who I really was. I was the first openly gay guy to run for prom king and I won even amongst prom queen jokes. I never let my peers bring me down. I embraced who I was and didn't take anything to heart. But even though I stood up for myself in school, I didn't have the strength to do the same in my foster home.

After living in a temporary group home, I was placed in a foster home with my older sister. It was supposed to be a safe place that provided care and love for me. But my foster parents did not know how to be supportive or understanding. When they found out I was gay, they were angry. My foster dad said that I couldn't be gay in his house. They did not speak to me. They grounded me for weeks, leaving me alone in my room on New Year's Eve because of their ignorance and pride. One of the family members would throw the restroom trash all over my bed and constantly call me "faggot." No one was there to defend me. My foster dad constantly reminded me that I would die for being gay saying, "You will eventually catch AIDS and die."

He said I would not go far in life and no one would want to hire me because I was different.

Both my foster family and caseworker constantly intimidated me about going back to the group home or being separated from my sister. As my foster parents scared me into staying passive, my caseworker reminded them of the money they were getting to foster me.

The day after my high school graduation, I moved out of that home and into a transitional housing program — once again to escape abuse. This time, I was finally going to prove everyone wrong.

I am currently a senior at Cal State Fullerton. I am majoring in psychology with a minor in art. I spend most of my time giving back to my community and advocating for other foster youth. After graduation, I plan on obtaining a master's degree in global social work with emphasis in child welfare. My goal is to create a nonprofit that serves populations that are not given equal opportunities.



I have worked hard to be where I am today. I never let the ones who hurt me get the best of me. I know some people don't change, but my foster parents actually did. They apologized for everything. I was able to prove to them that you're born with your sexuality and there is nothing anyone can do to change it. By succeeding and moving on with my life, I was able to have an impact on my former foster parents and prove that we are all equal. It took a while for them to learn, but now they are accepting and loving, and have admitted to their faults in the past. I was their first exposure to a LGBTQ person.

My advice to those now in foster care is to be who you are and not let anyone force you to change. You have the power to inform others. Work hard, live your own life and do your best.

This first appeared on fosterclub.com as a part of the #FosterEquality campaign by FosterClub and the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's All Children — All Families (ACAF) project.

“MY FOSTER PARENTS DID NOT KNOW HOW TO BE SUPPORTIVE OR UNDERSTANDING. WHEN THEY FOUND OUT I WAS GAY, THEY WERE ANGRY. MY FOSTER DAD SAID THAT I COULDN'T BE GAY IN HIS HOUSE.”

STANDING WITH FOSTER YOUTH, NOT AGAINST THEM

By Tiffany McGrady

I often hear people wishing that they could be kids again, but for me, there is nothing good to go back to. Those were agonizing years that I never want to repeat. When I was two, my mother abandoned my father, sisters, and me in exchange for her new boyfriend. Then in kindergarten, my father moved out of our apartment while I was at school. He took everything with him ... everything except for his children. But that was the easy part for me.

Over the next 14 years, I was placed in nearly 20 different foster homes. I quickly learned that foster homes are like fingerprints: No two are ever exactly alike. On one end of the spectrum, I enjoyed pool parties, riding ponies and cuddles. On the other end, I felt like I was serving a prison sentence for a terrible crime. I was restricted to my bedroom for weeks at a time, under the guard of a motion sensor. I was also locked in closets. One foster family didn't even allow me in the yearly family portrait.

My sense of self-worth plummeted. I was choked, smothered with a pillow, and had my face slammed on the floor more times than I could keep track of. One foster father touched me

inappropriately, and at another home I woke up with the foster mother's boyfriend on top of me. I was even brainwashed to believe that I never saw my sisters because they hated me. These things destroyed my psyche and by the age of 11, I began praying to God that He would take my life and not wake me up the next morning. When he didn't, I began attempting suicide.

Eventually, I opened up to a psychiatrist. My claims of abuse were reported but they seemed to have been swept under the rug. I genuinely believe that I would have been safer with my own father, had he not abandoned me, than I had been in foster care. However, once I grew up and escaped the havoc, foster care gave me purpose in life. It gave me the ability to cry for children that I do not know and to speak up for others because no one ever spoke for me. Today, my dreams are for the children. Without foster care, I would have grown up without this passion.

Finding and retaining placements for an overflow of children should not be done at the expense of the children's safety. The approval process could benefit from serious modifications that ensure faulty individuals no longer sneak in to

the system. And I wish the Department of Social Services (DSS) understood that it is better for children to live with their siblings in a group home than away from them in a foster home. Secondly, the success rate of children in foster care would skyrocket with the support of a mentor or advocate throughout their entire stay in the system, not just during the court process. All children need someone to help ensure that they remain safe! Thirdly, it is important that children have a voice in life-altering decisions.

At the age of 18, I signed myself out of foster care. I had never used a stove, driven a car, nor managed bills. I didn't even have a high school diploma. I was excited about being "free," yet I was grossly unprepared. Today, my success can be credited to one thing: the painful feeling in the pit of my empty stomach I felt when I had no food. Hunger drove me to "keep my head above water."

The most influential person during my 14 years in foster care was a foster mother who introduced me as her "daughter" and not her "foster daughter." It was such a simple gesture, but it had a huge impact on me. I was 14 and had never been called anyone's daughter before. I was no longer a trophy but a human being. Her love influenced me to change my life. She was a devout Christian and I soon joined her wholeheartedly in the same spirit. Through love, I was transformed.

Foster children should know that there are more people standing with them than against them. God has a special place in His heart for orphans and foster children — they have a relentless defender! They do not have to be a product of their upbringing. There are no limits to the greatness they can achieve — Just believe, go forth, and never settle! This is only a short season in life. It will soon be over and then they can show the world what they are made of!

"FOSTER CARE GAVE ME PURPOSE IN LIFE. IT GAVE ME THE ABILITY TO CRY FOR CHILDREN THAT I DO NOT KNOW AND TO SPEAK UP FOR OTHERS BECAUSE NO ONE EVER SPOKE FOR ME."



HOLDING THE POWERFUL ACCOUNTABLE

By Gina Pearson

"This really should not be happening. Statistically, as a foster kid, Gina Pearson was more likely to wind up behind bars than under a mortarboard. And yet here she is, graduating from Rutgers University in New Jersey with a degree in social work — with a Master's ahead of her and so much baggage behind her." — Steve Hartman, CBS News.

That was the transcript of a CBS On the Road special, which aired just over two years ago. Just a week ago, I graduated with my Master's degree, while working full-time, per diem, and mentoring foster youth. The following week, coincidentally on my 25th birthday, I attended my first law school class. As I reflected upon my graduation, it was at the forefront of my mind that the individual(s) there to support me were family by neither birth nor adoption; they were my hand-selected family and I was more than okay with this situation. I realized that family extended far past a last name and a bloodline. My family consisted of those individuals who never left my side despite the many difficulties that ensued.

Nonetheless, the tattered wounds remain of the broken home life that I endured. See, at one month old, my siblings and I were placed in foster care when, then DYFS (now Division of Child Protection and Permanency) were unable to gain entry into the home after hearing a baby and a couple of toddlers crying for an extended period of time. Upon gaining entry via police, workers noticed the apparent drug and alcohol use and neglect throughout the home.

That short-lived foster care experience included siblings being locked in rooms and myself being kicked down the stairs and having a nail go into my head. We were then reunited with our birth mother after a couple of years.

Our time with our biological mother included: poverty, drugs, alcohol, neglect, overcrowded living conditions, frequent absences from school, living with a convicted sex offender, etc. Consequently, our momentary time with our biological mother came to a halt as we were, again, placed in foster care. I bounced from one home and school to the next; I would come to live in over 30 placements total. At age 14, I pulled up to a foster home and the caseworker stated, "This is your last home before a shelter." Shelters and group homes were commonplace. The trauma endured in those settings forced me to stay in a home with a woman ill-equipped to care for herself, let alone children.

At that point, it was solidified that my ephemeral joys of childhood would forever be gone. After two weeks, my foster mother stated that she was adopting me and that the paperwork was en route; I sat in silence. Almost a year later, with minimal visits from a caseworker, I stood in the courtroom when the judge asked me to write my desired name on a piece of paper and slide it to him. Once again, I had been rendered silent. I could not understand why I was not being listened to. More importantly, I was never asked. I had no say. No one ever asked if I wanted to be adopted. My law guardian introduced herself

to me the first time on the day of my adoption. I was appalled. I was voiceless. What often goes unnoticed is that the voiceless individuals are often screaming on the inside.

After graduating from high school, my adoption failed. She told me I was her babysitter and, therefore, my services were no longer needed. The monthly checks stopped and so did my relationship with this woman. I was angry, alone, and hurt. My adoption failed. That is what they call it. But who failed? Who is to blame? Societal stigmas of foster youth are negative, so of course it was my fault. I internalized this information and slowly began to deteriorate. My nightmares and flashbacks intensified, I began engaging in unhealthy behaviors and continued on a downward spiral, which is what clinicians would diagnose as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. I now wear my PTSD like a badge of honor.

“I BOUNCED FROM ONE HOME AND SCHOOL TO THE NEXT; I WOULD COME TO LIVE IN OVER 30 PLACEMENTS.”



My PTSD symbolizes the various foster homes, schools, towns, and cities I have lived in. It symbolizes resiliency. My PTSD is an emblem of the adversity endured. It symbolizes neglect, physical abuse, mental/emotional abuse, sexual abuse and stalking. My PTSD is challenging, but not unbearable — despite how it feels at times. My PTSD is being afraid to sleep at night, but being even more afraid to lay there awake. My PTSD, just like me, has the capability of being healed with time and tender love. My PTSD is a compilation of my entire foster care experience, which is one that will never expire.

So often people tell us to “get over it”; it happened X many years ago. Why do we take pictures when on a trip? Positive experiences are meant to be carried around forever. But, what happens with the negative ones? Indeed, they too remain. In fact, these negative experiences are so deeply rooted it is almost impossible to get them all out — think of an iceberg. So do not tell a foster alumni to get over their experiences and, with the same breath, state “back in my day.” STOP SILENCING FOSTER YOUTH!

Foster youth and alumni so desperately want and need to be heard. They are the experts in their lives, not outsiders. These young people understand foster care on a deeper level. Why not utilize that information? Besides it is the young person’s life that is directly impacted, not any of the workers, advocates or judges. Some young people are not brought to the table for discussion out of fear or discomfort. Young people deserve to have their voices heard in a manner that is appropriate and comfortable for them, not the receiver. Young people are placed in the most uncomfortable settings. They live uncomfortable lives every day. Can stakeholders, staff, advocates, judges, and workers not be brave for once? Can they not be uncomfortable for once? If not for anyone, for the young people?

18 AND ADOPTED

By Yasmine Koenig

I grew up in what I thought was a typical family for the first 15 years of my life. I was born in the United States to religious Muslims from Palestine. When I was 6, my two older sisters were told they were going on a vacation to Palestine to visit family. When my mother told me that they decided they wanted to live there, I was upset and I missed them, but I accepted that's what they wanted.

I went to school until eighth grade, but my mother never enrolled me in high school. Then, shortly before my 15th birthday, I was asked on a date, and lied to my parents to go. They found out and after two weeks of lockdown, my parents insisted that we go to Palestine to visit my older sisters. We left on the 27th of August 2012. A month later I was forced to marry a 25-year-old man I had only known for two weeks. The day after the wedding, my parents returned home to Illinois.

He worked from 9 to 5, and I would spend my mornings cleaning our house and watching MTV Arabia. Around 2 p.m. I would go a block away to my mother-in-law's to help her clean and cook dinner. There I would ask to use my sister-in-law's laptop to "talk to my mother." In reality, I was on Facebook communicating with

friends back home. One advised me to call the U.S. Embassy. Being a sheltered 15-year-old, I didn't even know what an embassy was. But on October 14, I called the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem, and together we planned my escape.

In the extremist Muslim culture, a woman can barely leave her house without her husband. Before the marriage, my grandmother warned me if I ever tried to run I would be killed, but I didn't believe her. If I had known that the various stories she told me were true, I'm not so sure I would have fled.

On December 5, I risked my life by calling a cab and meeting U.S. diplomats in a hotel parking lot. It was nerve-wracking — my driver asked me multiple questions because I was on a cell phone speaking English to an Embassy representative. I wasn't sure if I was headed in the right direction, or whether he would actually take me to the hotel. I was so relieved when I finally got there, paid my driver and got into the Embassy's car. That night, I was on a plane back to Illinois where I was put into foster care.

While I was a ward of the Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) I lived in four foster homes. Each one was a safe place to sleep and better than my original situation, but

my first three foster parents were very unreasonable. The first had a lock on the pantry and only she had the key. Most nights, we were left to feed ourselves Ramen. Other nights she was at church until 10 or 11 at night, leaving my older foster brother and I locked out in the winter without a key.

My second foster parent was wonderful for the first few months; she helped me with homework, encouraged me to do well in school and get a job, and we ate dinner together every night. Then, in the blink of an eye, she woke me up early, told me to “pack my shit” and go to the neighbor’s house. I never found out why.

My next foster mom was an older woman, and I was the only child. She was very religious; she said she did not trust me alone in her house but also did not want me out with someone she didn’t know. She forced me to go to church with her, then kicked me out because she couldn’t live with someone who didn’t believe in the same things.

Then I moved into my final home. This family laid down their reasonable ground rules and welcomed me with jokes, laughter and food. Carrie and Marv,

who adopted me at 18, are very understanding. Like every teenager, I’ve had my fair share of rule-breaking. They didn’t threaten to kick me out. Instead, they treated me as one of their own children and grounded me — which I didn’t like, but was much better than the alternative!

Besides them, the only people I felt truly supported me were my Guardian ad Litem (GAL) and my therapist. They gave me advice about everything from boys to tolerating my foster parents. They encouraged me, telling me that one day I’d be a successful young woman.

Overall, I’m glad I entered DCFS. It changed my life for the better. I found an amazing home, with amazing parents, even if it took me over a year and three foster homes to find it. To any foster child going through the system, your GAL, therapist and caseworker are all there to advocate for you. But make sure to speak up — they can’t help you if they don’t know how you feel. Whether or not the system manages to find you great foster parents, you still have the potential to do great things. You have so much life experience. You’ve already been through the worst — it can only get better from here.

“I RISKED MY LIFE BY CALLING A CAB AND MEETING U.S. DIPLOMATS IN A HOTEL PARKING LOT. ...THAT NIGHT, I WAS ON A PLANE BACK TO ILLINOIS WHERE I WAS PUT INTO FOSTER CARE.”



THE POWER OF SUPPORT

By Sandy Santana

As *Fostering the Future* 2016 comes to a close, I want to thank everyone who has followed along by reading, commenting on and sharing the first-person accounts of state care throughout May. Your engagement is a vital part of raising foster care awareness.

I also want to thank our incredible bloggers for courageously opening up about your time in care, in hopes of making it better for the next child. Please know that your voices are so valuable, and you are all catalysts for change.

You, our bloggers, have inspired us at Children's Rights in a big way. Reading your personal stories has helped us realize that we can do more to support young people leaving foster care. To that end, we have decided to create an internship program at CR for those who have aged out of care and aspire to be attorneys.

As many of this year's bloggers can attest, making your way as an adult, following a childhood spent in foster care, is far from easy. One of our bloggers, Valnita, put it this way: "I felt like I was being thrown to the wolves, not having parents to rely on. I had to figure out everything myself." Another, Tiffany, wrote that when she left care at 18, "I had never used a stove, driven a car, nor managed bills. I didn't even have a high school diploma ... Hunger drove me to keep my head above water."

Unfortunately, hardships like those faced by Valnita and Tiffany are all too common. After all, only 4 percent of youth who age out of the system earn a four-year college degree by age 26. Nearly 31 percent find themselves homeless or couch surfing. And as many as 74 percent of men who lived in state care report having been incarcerated.

So what is the key to beating the odds? As we learned from some of our bloggers, having a strong support network, or at least someone to rely on, certainly helps.

Catiria survived an abusive, unstable childhood and found refuge in the home of her foster parents. “They made me feel safe, special and loved for the first time in my life, and they gave me a reason to want to live. They helped to pick up my broken pieces to try to make me feel whole again,” she wrote.

Another blogger, Chelsea, who recently graduated law school, shared that her caseworker, educational counselor and the other young women in her group home helped her tremendously. “The child welfare system worked for me, but that does not mean our advocacy should stop,” Chelsea wrote. “Even when a young person has a positive experience and improved livelihood from foster care, there are still ways to make the system better.”

At Children’s Rights, as we use the power of the courts to reform state care, we get to know many brave young people who advocate to make state care better for their foster brothers and sisters. We also meet committed individuals who want to be part of a child’s support system and change the trajectory of a young person’s life. For the first time, we are marrying the two with our new legal internship program. The initiative will offer invaluable career experience to former foster youth right in our own office, and allow them to interface with some of the most passionate and skilled attorneys in the non-profit advocacy world.

If you are thinking about ways to become more involved in the support networks that help young people thrive after foster care, please consider making a gift to the project by clicking the “Donate Now” link on our webpage. Small contributions have the power to make a big impact. Together, we can ensure that our internships are accessible to ambitious young people who strive to make a difference in the world, and not just the ones who have a financial cushion.

We can help them achieve their goals—and, in turn, empower the next generation in state care.

Sandy Santana is the executive director of Children’s Rights.

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