

Children Unseen

PERSONAL ACCOUNTS OF LIFE IN FOSTER CARE

————— A collection of blogs from CR's 2014 Fostering the Future campaign —————



Defending America's
Abused and Neglected Kids

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

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

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

That's why Children's Rights steps in.

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

As a result, kids are safer.

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

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

Dear Readers,



Often, when you talk to those who lived in foster care, they paint a pretty grim picture. They say they felt invisible. They felt less than. They felt they didn't have a voice, because speaking out could mean retaliation, abuse or being cast as a liar.

This isn't perception — it's reality. Far too many kids are children unseen. I was one of them. My mother was taken from this world when I was young, and my father spent most of my childhood in prison. I was cycled through several group homes, foster homes and, eventually, the juvenile justice system.

Not every foster home was bad. But the majority were. Some families wanted me only for the paycheck, rather than to love, teach, groom and protect me. Others let their children make fun of me and barred me from being in the same room as them. It made me feel as though the adults in my life simply couldn't see me.

That is why I joined Children's Rights' inaugural *Fostering the Future* campaign last May, and why I will continue to support it every National Foster Care Month. By sharing the blogs of those who experienced foster care, we have a simple means of raising awareness and making sure the voices of foster youth are heard.

Why is this so critical? Ollie writes, "The hardships — like moving around, being separated from my siblings and being on psychotropic medications — were taxing." Shandreka remembers, "When my social worker visited frequently, my new parents tended to my infected and malnourished body. However, once my social worker lost interest, so did they." Vannak lived in 23 houses between the age of 13 and 18; his last placement was a good one: "Without the stability of that home I don't know where I would be today."

Vannak shows that there are happy endings in foster care — but there are too few, and it shouldn't take 23 tries for a state to get it right. We cannot sit idly by while this country is failing children in state care. So please educate yourselves and join us in this fight. We can all play a role in making sure our children are not invisible.

Marvin Bing
Amnesty International USA
September 2014

TURNING PAIN INTO SUCCESS

By DaShun Jackson

“One of the greatest titles in the world is parent, and one of the biggest blessings in the world is to have parents to call mom and dad,” former U.S. Senator Jim DeMint once said.

Like many foster youth, all I wanted was a family to call my own. I wanted parents to tell me that they loved me. I wanted someone to ask me how my day was. I simply wanted someone to care.

But I found that foster care did not build families. It didn't give me the opportunity to be a child. It forced me to mature a lot faster than my peers. It made me live life thinking that “today is the day that I'll be leaving,” so don't get comfortable and definitely don't get attached to anyone.

Before I entered foster care, I was physically and sexually abused by my mother and her boyfriends. When I was 14, my sister told someone at our school about the abuse. My three sisters and I were taken from my mother's home and placed in a county-run shelter for abused and neglected youth. I found safety here,

living in a cottage for teen boys, and attending school on campus. But since courses didn't count toward my diploma, school served no purpose to me, and even though we lived on the same campus, I rarely saw my sisters.

After about two months, my sisters and I were placed in my aunt's home. She was the most beautiful person in front of caseworkers, but was the complete opposite when they were not around. My siblings and I were confined to one room for most of the day, while my aunt's biological children did as they pleased. She forced me to eat off of the ground and sleep on the floor. She kicked me out several times and told police that I ran away. I slept wherever I could find shelter, like on park benches, in park bathrooms and in the shed behind the house.

I remember begging the police to take me to jail, to take me anywhere just to get me away from her home. But I was told that there was nothing they could do, and my caseworker did nothing to help. One day, after a bad fight with my aunt, I decided I had to leave. My caseworker told me that if one of my siblings left, we'd all leave. That was a lie. I was placed back into the shelter, and my sisters stayed behind in this horrible home.



“I USED TO THINK THAT I WAS DESTINED TO BE AN ETERNAL VICTIM, UNTIL I WAS SHOWN THAT I COULD BE ETERNALLY VICTORIOUS.”

I was then moved to a therapeutic group home. I was struck by the cameras in the bedrooms, closets, living room and entryway, the locks on the pantry doors and refrigerators and the staff that monitored our daily lives. At times I felt like a prisoner chained by the destiny and the faults of my biological parents.

But despite the home's flaws, I began to build a connection with the director, the man that I would come to view as a father figure. It would be this man who knew my worth, before I could even understand my value. It would be this man that I would spend years trying to emulate. He stood up for me when I didn't have a voice.

He helped me discover what I never knew was there. He taught me how to give back, despite not having anything but time to give. The relationship has made all the difference in my life. We still talk daily. I now live in a home that I rent from him and I work for him as a program coordinator at a non-profit organization that helps youth and families.

Teachers, church and community members also gave me various types of support, whether it was a listening ear, a shoulder to lean on, a wise voice when I needed help or a home to go to for the holidays. These people filled in the gap that my biological father and mother could not.

I used to think that I was destined to be an eternal victim, until I was shown that I could be eternally victorious. I began my foster care journey silent — I didn't talk to women a lot and I was too afraid of men to even attempt to say a thing. But my pain has turned into success. When I'm not at work, I'm in college, majoring in political science and social work. I also sit on several different community boards that work on important issues like finding mentors for young people, improving how the court system relates to foster youth and empowering foster youth to use their voices to advocate for needed reforms.

To change foster care, I would make sure that youth are being fully equipped with knowledge about the real world, being an adult and the life skills they'll need to be on their own. I would also require better background checks and mental health evaluations for foster and kinship parents, both before and after they receive their licenses.

I want to tell young people in foster care to never give up, to always pick themselves up when they fall and to remember, even in the darkest times, someone loves them. Though they may not be where they want to be, as long as they continue to strive they will eventually reach their goals and have the lives they deserve.

FIGHTING FOR THE FUTURE

By Kaylyn Haberland

I was 16 when I was placed in foster care, and I went through four different placements in as many months. I felt like my life was in complete chaos. Not knowing what might happen to me was terrifying. Where would I sleep that night? How would I get to school? Seemingly simple things suddenly had the ability to destroy the world around me.

Nothing felt stable, and I never felt safe. I had no idea how to cope with feeling so helpless and out of control, and I struggled with self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and an eating disorder. To put it lightly, I was a wreck.

I felt worthless because no one seemed to know quite what to do with me. As my social worker said, it was “just too hard to find the right place” for me. I moved from a relative’s home where I wasn’t given the protection I needed to an

overcrowded group home where I learned to keep my head down in an effort to avoid inevitable fights and confrontation. From there I moved to a foster home divided into separate areas for “family” and “foster kids,” which only further confirmed my belief that I no longer held any value to anyone. I gave up on those around me because if my own parents weren’t fighting to keep me, who would? I struggled, and I struggled hard.

Foster care taught me that I don’t matter, that I am disposable and no one wants me. It taught me that I am “just a foster kid,” a lost cause, a failure, and to trust no one, because promises mean nothing and secrets can’t be kept. You might say that foster care broke me.

Since leaving the system, I have ultimately learned that I was lucky. I was lucky to have had only four placements during the two years I spent in care. I was lucky to stay at the same school despite those moves. I was lucky to escape the abuse I had faced in the past, and I was lucky to receive the mental health treatment

I so desperately needed. I was lucky to eventually be placed with a family who gave me the support I needed to begin to heal. They stood by me as I testified in three separate court trials, and they helped me to finally feel safe, to learn how to trust again.

But these things should not make someone lucky. A person is lucky if they win the lottery or a free trip to Disney World, find 20 dollars on the ground, or get to meet their favorite celebrity. A stable home, supportive and well-trained foster parents, consistent school attendance, protection from abuse, and access to adequate mental health services — things any young person who is not in foster care might take for granted — should never make a child “lucky.”

Foster care is a traumatic experience, despite the best intentions of social workers and foster parents. It infuriates me to think that another child, for no reason other than “luck,” might not have had the same outcome I did, and this injustice fuels my passion for change in the system. I don’t ever want to forget what it felt like to have my life in the hands of strangers because that is what drives me to continue to be an advocate, to fight for more success stories.

Surviving foster care taught me resilience, independence, and determination. It made me into a warrior, fighting for a life I never thought I deserved. Surviving foster care made me empathetic and compassionate because I know what it’s like to be abandoned, to have no faith in an uncertain future. Looking back, I say that despite the odds, surviving foster care built me.

I want the future to be brighter for my foster brothers and sisters who will follow in my footsteps. I want foster care to build them, not break them; I want them to flourish, not simply survive. They are, after all, our future. They will be our doctors and lawyers, our artists and

teachers, our social workers and scientists. They will someday change the world, and they deserve a future built on something far more certain than luck.

“I WAS LUCKY TO EVENTUALLY BE PLACED WITH A FAMILY WHO GAVE ME THE SUPPORT I NEEDED ... THEY HELPED ME TO FINALLY FEEL SAFE, TO LEARN HOW TO TRUST AGAIN.”



BUILDING THE STRENGTH TO SPEAK UP

By Yaya

At age 9, I entered a moment in my life that would change my future. I waved goodbye to the woman that gave birth to me. I was in a police car, on my way to foster care. At that moment, I felt liberated because I would no longer endure the pain of watching my mom suffer down a path of self-destruction. The man that vowed to love her for eternity only knew one type of “love” — the kind where a man beats a woman until she’s lying on the floor, incapable of moving or defending herself. This was my first lesson in love.

My second lesson in love began in foster care. The first family that my sister and I were placed with was loving and caring, but because the

foster parents were elderly, it was a hard transition. This family could have been my escape. However, they were only willing to adopt me and not my sister, and I informed my social worker that I would agree to join my younger siblings in another foster home.

The second foster home that I was placed in was no walk in the park. I found myself acting as a mom to my siblings and the foster kids that followed. I argued often with my foster mother’s adult children. I was often yelled at for forgetting to clean something. I vividly recall being dragged from my bedroom to the kitchen for forgetting to properly clean the stove. Why not speak up? Fear. I knew enough about the foster care system and the circumstances that other foster kids were going through, so I excused my situation by telling myself that things could be worse. This was home for me for five years, until I decided I’d be better off running away. But after being on the run for a month or so I returned to foster care. Despite everything, I wanted to finish high school, and head to college one day.

Upon my return, my social worker threatened me by saying that if I ran away again I’d end up at MacLaren Hall, an institution that held a negative reputation for child abuse and deplorable living conditions. In speaking with kids that were there, I knew that I was terrified of that place, and I would rather live in foster care than be institutionalized. By no means was I the poster child for “troubled children.” I had an attitude just like any other teen, and after many years of not defending myself from my foster

“I VIVIDLY RECALL BEING DRAGGED FROM MY BEDROOM TO THE KITCHEN FOR FORGETTING TO PROPERLY CLEAN THE STOVE. WHY NOT SPEAK UP? FEAR.”



family I arrived at a breaking point. Perhaps if my social worker spent more time on my case instead of worrying whether I signed a paper saying she visited me on a monthly basis, things would have never gotten out of hand.

I bounced to three more homes, until I found the home where I lived until I emancipated at age 18. This last home was a foundation for learning about faith, care and love. I had plenty of challenges in this home, and in the end I learned to accept a few things. I believe that when a foster parent has a child of their own, their child will always come before you. I understand that it takes a good family and social worker to successfully transition a child from foster care to adulthood. Lastly, I know it takes a foster child to build the strength to speak up when there is injustice in the system.

My moment to speak up is now.

I want the children who have been abused or neglected, and all the kids who have been in care or are in care right now, to know that you’re not alone. My heart goes out to you. You are stronger than you think. You have the potential to get through your challenges, complete your college education, and one day form a loving home of your own. Don’t let the circumstances in your life be a deterrent. Use every negative comment or situation to your advantage.

Personally, my heart breaks when I see the statistics that highlight the fact that most foster children end up homeless, teen parents, dead, or abusing drugs and alcohol. We are the people who can change those statistics to reflect positive outcomes. We determine who we are and what we will become. As one of my favorite quotes by Angela Shelton says, “I’m not a victim, I am a survivor.” Remember these words in your darkest moments.

FOSTERING MY OWN ASPIRATIONS TO SUCCESS

By Jessica Maxwell

Before foster care, I lived with my grandmother, my uncle and my older brother. I can't remember exactly what age I was, but as a young girl I decided I would be a lawyer. I lived in poor communities where drugs, hunger and homelessness were normal, and I wanted to help people who were unable to help themselves. I was encouraged to excel in life. I had goals, and I genuinely loved learning.

Then my life began to take a terrible turn. My uncle was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and became paralyzed. My brother was arrested for selling drugs, and my grandmother began to suffer from depression. My uncle was hospitalized for his illness, and shortly after we became homeless. My life had fallen apart right before my eyes.

At 13 I went into foster care. I felt abandoned, and I began to lose hope in myself, and God. Over the next three years I lived in about eight different group homes. Some had as many as 22 girls living there, others had as few as three. The staff were generally all the same, unsympathetic to the tragedy of my life. I began to suffer from depression. I no longer recognized myself. I wasn't motivated to do anything, and skipping school became a daily routine. I was kicked out of my first high school for cutting classes. The school said that if I didn't care enough about my future, why should they?

By the time I was 16, I only had eight credits, and needed 44 to graduate. While my behavior had improved, my educational aspirations seemed far from achievable. My perspective began to change when I enrolled in my fifth and final high school. On the first day of school I met my guidance counselor, who was kind and straight forward. He asked me what I wanted to do with my life and who I wanted to be. I was stunned. It had been so long since anyone paid attention to me — a young person who once loved to read, explore, and who

had big dreams. I told him that I wanted to be a lawyer, and he told me I needed to get better grades, graduate high school and go to college.

While I still didn't have my family encouraging me to succeed in life, I had finally found self-determination. I saw HOPE. I knew I had the ability to succeed in school and I wanted other people to know too. I had everyday reminders from group home staff that "foster care is temporary," and that soon I'd have to take care of myself. I didn't want to be kicked out on the streets at the age of 21 with no education, no home and no hope for the future like many of the other young people I knew that left foster care.

In order to graduate on time, I went to school days, nights and Saturdays, worked part-time and studied relentlessly. I was so behind that good grades no longer came easily to me. I did graduate. And afterward I went on to college, and continued on to receive a Master of Science degree from Hunter College. I spent five years rushing through college and grad school, until I finally realized that it was not important to try and catch up with my peers. I was now ready to enjoy my achievements and go through life at my own pace. I no longer compared myself to other young people my age. My goals were for me, and I now was happy with me.

Today, I work as a Youth In Care Coalition Coordinator at the Children's Aid Society. I am leading the way to improving the poor outcomes for youth aging out of foster care. Although law school wasn't the right place for me, I am still helping people in need by giving a voice to young people in care. Undeniably others' motivation helped, but believing in me was the most important component to my success. I wish for all young adults in care to know that YOU are the creator of your future, and foster care doesn't have to be the negative part of life that you write off and hide.

"I DIDN'T WANT TO BE KICKED OUT ON THE STREETS AT THE AGE OF 21 WITH NO EDUCATION, NO HOME AND NO HOPE FOR THE FUTURE."



PROVING THE STATS WRONG

By Kurt Holden

Dear Foster Brothers and Sisters,

My name is Kurt Holden and I am 27. I was placed in foster care at an early age, early enough that I am unable to recall exactly how old I was. However, I do recall the reason: my mother and father struggled with heavy drugs and alcohol.

While in care, I went to a few different foster homes, some of which were ok, some not so ok. Foster care could be very difficult during holidays when I would see the biological children of my foster parents opening the newest and best gifts (video games, a basketball hoop, name-brand shoes and clothes), and I would only get socks and underwear. It made me feel as if I wasn't part of the family.

Being separated from my own siblings only made this worse. Throughout my time in care I always felt the effects of not being in the same home as my three biological brothers. There were times that we were together, but they never felt like they were enough. I became angry and that led me to being depressed for many years. I isolated myself from others at times and sometimes would fight for attention.

However, at my last foster home, my foster father tried his best to push me and prepare me to be successful. He took me out to eat and talked with me about my future, took me to play golf, and would just take time to mentor me. It was the first time in a long time that I trusted someone, so it was devastating when he passed away before I graduated high school. In the blink of an eye he was gone.

After his death I lost my sense of direction. I did not have anyone else to step up, mentor me and push me. I graduated, but became homeless and "couch surfed" briefly. When I enrolled in college it was because of the dormitories — I needed a more stable place to call home. But I did not apply myself. I was more focused on working several dead-end jobs until I saved enough money to get an apartment with my brother, who was about to go through the same thing when he aged out. It wasn't until I was about to get kicked out for bad grades that I applied myself. I realized that my past was not entirely my fault, but my future was completely up to me.

Approximately 3 percent of foster youth go on to be successful in college. Many times we are told that we will never amount to anything or we

will end up like our parents. We are sometimes judged for things that are out of our control and a cry for help is treated with prescription medication. I want to tell you that our scars, pain and the internal struggle of wanting to know "why me?" can be our motivation and driving force to not become statistics!

Want proof?

I earned my associate degree from Sinclair Community College, a bachelors degree from Wright State University, and will earn my masters degree next year. I am a coach and committee member with the Independent Scholars Network at Wright State, a program that was established to assist former foster youth in becoming successful at college.

I have been happily married to my beautiful wife Amy for six years and I have a 2-year-old son, Jaxon. I know growing up without a strong family unit left me in pain and broken many times. However, I used that to my advantage when having a family of my own. My wife and son get extra hugs and kisses all the time. I take those extra minutes before work or bedtime with my family to read a book to my son one more time or cuddle on the couch with my wife, because I never want them to feel the loneliness or doubt that I felt, and that has never been completely erased.

I also work as a police officer and serve on the K9 unit at the Wright State University Police Department. I work hard in treating all people with kindness and with respect. Growing up I was mocked, looked down on, and judged for things out of my control. I never want anyone to feel that, ever! So working with students of all backgrounds is great because I get to make a difference by showing them the true meaning of public service is serving all people regardless of background.

So work hard! Prove the stats wrong; do not let your pain destroy you. Every day tell yourself you can do it! Go to school, be successful. Whatever it is you want to do in life, know you can do it. You may not have all the help and resources that others do, but the story of how you overcame your "mess" can be the "message" that keeps someone else from giving up.

Take care of yourselves.

Your foster brother,

Kurt

"I NEVER WANT [MY WIFE AND SON] TO FEEL THE LONELINESS OR DOUBT THAT I FELT, AND THAT HAS NEVER BEEN COMPLETELY ERASED."



FROM THE PROJECTS TO PURPOSE

By Maisha Guy

My story is not typical of children who enter the foster care system. My mother was 15 when she had me. We grew up together, her mother raising both of us, in the Los Angeles projects once known as Aliso Village.

I did not suffer horrific family tragedy; on the contrary, we were a very close family showered with love and affection by my grandmother. I lived with them and my two other cousins in a one-bedroom apartment, all of us sleeping in the same king size bed.

While my grandmother was caring for me, one of her kids was secretly selling drugs from that same apartment that we shared. I came home from school one afternoon to find that she was being evicted. The apartment had been raided in a drug bust, and my grandmother was arrested.

And so I was placed into foster care at age 11. The first home I was in seemed nice from the outside, but the other foster children and I were treated like outsiders. Our dinners consisted of hotdogs and rice almost every night and we subsisted mainly on scraps from the refrigerator. It wouldn't have been so terrible if it weren't for

our foster mother and her biological child eating gourmet dinners right in front of us. Hunger gnawed at me constantly and I often snuck into the kitchen late at night to hunt for food.

It wasn't long before I started to rebel and lash out both at school and at home. Eventually my foster mother had me removed, and I went to another home. This placement was better than the first — more comforting, with my foster mother caring for us in the best way she could. As with my own family, however, her son was gang-affiliated. I believe she had a sincere heart and desire to do right by us, but I don't think she considered the dangers of having him in her home, and the risk she was taking by having us there.

I remember quite clearly standing outside with him and his friends, just playing around, when shots rang out. For a moment I stood there in a daze, watching the events. My foster mother's son was rolling on the ground and screaming. I knew then that he was hit. An ambulance wailed and he was taken to the hospital, while I was frozen in place from the shock.

That day has always stayed in my mind. It was then that I realized how badly I wanted to go home, that I was still in an at-risk situation. The foster home turned out to be just as dangerous, if



*“THE FOSTER HOME
TURNED OUT TO BE JUST
AS DANGEROUS, IF NOT
DEADLIER, THAN MY
OWN PROJECTS.”*

not deadlier, than my own projects. I didn't know if there would be retaliation on my foster brother's end, or if he would just recover and make a turn in his life for the better. All I knew was at any moment I could lose my life, and I needed to learn how to survive and take care of myself.

These two foster homes were only a temporary layover in my life's journey, and I wouldn't allow being a foster child to be an excuse for doubt or

defeat. I was not going to allow my circumstances to determine my future. I chose not to succumb to the project lifestyle. I knew deep down I had a grandmother who was fighting for me and a mother who was hurting for me. At times I was extremely lonely, and wanted to give in and give up. But I wouldn't.

It didn't take long before I was reunited with my grandmother. When I think back on it, time went by really fast. Once I was with my grandmother again, she didn't take any time getting us packed up and ready to relocate. I think she had an epiphany. The only way I would survive and have a real chance at life was to move me to her home state of Kentucky.

It took me a while to adjust. I was still finding out who I was as an individual. I would find myself kicked out of schools, fighting and often times running with the wrong crowd. However, not once did my grandmother make me feel like she regretted the fight she had endured back in LA. Even now as I write this, remembering the calm and loving nature of my grandmother brings me tears.

She allowed me to grow through my stages from a youth to a young adult. Not once did she make me feel less than, guilt or shame of any kind. At 17, I moved out into my own apartment. I graduated on time from school. I made a conscious effort to change my life around, and respect the second chance I was given. This new life came at the expense of my grandmother leaving behind her children and everything she had come to know. I owe this woman my life.

If I could say anything to a child in the same situation, it would be to never lose hope. Believe that no matter what, you have a purpose in life. Allow that hope to be an anchor for your faith and hold onto it when you're tossed on life's stormy seas. These tests become the light that you will use to lead someone else out of their dark circumstances. Don't let that light go out.

TAKING A PLEDGE TO HELP KIDS IN FOSTER CARE

By Michael Place

I once lived in an overcrowded, roach infested public housing apartment in Astoria, Queens. From her lack of concern, you would think my foster mom enjoyed the roaches' company. I certainly didn't, and so I reported my discomfort to my social worker. The home was shut down, and my foster brother, Elijah, and I moved to a new one.

Expecting better accommodations, I was surprised to find that the grass wasn't as green as I had hoped. In our new home, I could always count on there being a glistening cold bottle of Smirnoff Ice in the fridge. And one day, out of curiosity, I took a sip. It tasted just like a stronger version of lemonade, to me. Who knew something so fruity could bring the demon out of my foster mom?

"You a**holes. You brought the fu**ing roaches in my house," she would slur from the sides of her mouth in between sips. Elijah laughed. I

didn't find it funny. Yet, it continued ... sip sip slur slur. I was 11 and Elijah was 14.

Our new foster mom was a librarian by day, a verbally abusive alcoholic at night, and one heck of a liar. Just like in the other home, I spoke up about my discomfort to my social worker. An "investigation" ensued and somehow the culprit turned out to be me. I was called a liar and was sent back to live in her home. Thankfully, the abusive incidents subsided, but the damage was done. No more Christmas presents or birthday gifts for me.

So how did I deal, you may wonder. It had been two years since I was put in foster care because of my birth mom's own addiction to drugs, and this home was my third placement. I was exhausted and ready to go back to my mother. I was already traumatized and re-traumatized in the care of those who were supposed to make it all better.

The psychiatric hospital was my escape from the madness. I acted out frequently, threatening to kill myself and doing anything I knew would land me back in the hospital. I found the nurses and the frequent activities to be more comforting

than my reality back "home." The nurses were more consoling than my foster mom. They frequently checked my vitals and made sure I had enough supplies for arts and crafts. Simply put, they cared.

In addition to the hospital visits, I was inundated with medication that was supposed to help control my behavior. But instead of helping, it caused me to gain weight and often left me drowsy.

While these experiences were undoubtedly horrifying, it is because of them, and the injustices I have witnessed since my emancipation, that I have been working tirelessly on behalf of kids in foster care.

I recently worked at a summer camp where many children took psychotropic medication. I saw a boy, who coincidentally shared my name, called out of arts and crafts to take his medication. Michael had been acting like a typical 8 year old, and actively participating in the activities. But the medication changed all of that. When he returned from the nurse, there was a noticeable difference in his energy. He was subdued and not as alert. Even if it was only for a moment, he missed out on a piece of his childhood.

In that moment, I wished there was a way I could directly inform the doctor about what I witnessed. And so I decided to work on a website that would improve communication around the mental health treatment of children in foster care. I am in the process of creating Mind the GaP, which can be found at www.mtgap.org. The site will give doctors direct feedback from teachers, camp counselors and others who work with children in foster care for extended periods of time. With the feedback, I hope doctors will be better able to provide more comprehensive symptom assessment and side-effect management.

Foster care is undoubtedly a complex, multi-layered system. But today, I am taking the

pledge to solve one problem, hoping my efforts, along with those of many other advocates and reformers, will improve the system for disadvantaged children everywhere. Our efforts can be greatly enhanced with your help. Consider lending a hand, because our children's lives and livelihoods depend on it.

"I WAS INUNDATED WITH MEDICATION THAT WAS SUPPOSED TO HELP CONTROL MY BEHAVIOR. BUT INSTEAD OF HELPING, IT CAUSED ME TO GAIN WEIGHT AND OFTEN LEFT ME DROWSY."



PSEUDO LOCK DOWN

By Briana

I'll never forget when I entered my second placement in foster care. It was January 27, 2006, the day I was separated from my sister. I was 15 at the time, and had only entered foster care a month before. My sister (who is nine years younger) was in the car with the social worker, the driver and myself. She was crying her eyes out as she hugged me goodbye. She was off to my grandparents while I was placed in a residential treatment center for adolescent girls. My heart was aching. I never wanted her to leave, though I knew she would be taken care of.

Like many other youth, we entered the system due to abuse and neglect by someone very dear to us. That person was my mother. Luckily, she never hit my sister. I got the wrath of it all. I didn't mind, I could take it. I was more concerned about my sister's physical and emotional well being than mine. After all, I was older and stronger. She was only in preschool.

ACS (Administration for Children Services) in Manhattan was the building where you would go before any placement was assigned. To me, it was both comforting and dreadful. Dreadful because I felt like a lab rat, having to be fed, bathed, and given medicine, all while having to see the psychologist and meet with my social worker at the same time, every day. It felt like we were all there on a punishment of some sort. Psychologists would question us while social workers found a placement. Upon arrival, employees gave you a black sweat suit, in a black or army green bag with a choking white T-shirt. Every single child in that building was now one in the same, a ward of the state.

And yet I also felt comfort. I was being taken care of — something I hadn't felt in a long time.

After being discharged from ACS intake for the second time, I was placed in a DRC, or a Diagnostic Residential Center. The residential center was supposed to be temporary — a three-month stay. But I was there for eight months. When I arrived, a woman took my inventory. I had a handful of belongings to my name. It felt like a lock-down facility. You weren't allowed out alone because staff were afraid you would go AWOL.

Many were there under a PINS (Persons in Need of Supervision) warrant. That meant that they

were either a threat to themselves or others. However, luckily for them, they were able to go home on the weekends and come back during the week. I wasn't entitled to that freedom because I had no family to go home to at that time.

I must say, foster care saved me in many ways. When you're in care, they evaluate you and give you the physical and mental health care you deserve. I was in poor physical and mental health before I arrived. I had mononucleosis, suffered from severe asthma attacks, and didn't go to the doctor. It wasn't until I was in care that I realized how sick I was, and was able to get treatment for both. I would not have gotten that otherwise. A psychologist also saw me twice over an eight-month time-span. The first time I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. However, after being reevaluated, it changed to Generalized Anxiety Disorder. I felt calmer after being diagnosed with GAD. I was able to accept that diagnosis over bipolar. I wasn't given any medication for either diagnosis. I thought this was a good thing, I didn't feel like I needed it.

Before foster care as a teenager I had no parental care. I didn't even have a jacket. I would hang out in the streets and steal wine coolers from the deli at the age of 13. It seemed I was going down the wrong path in life, and I didn't even know it.

Now, I am in graduate school and will receive my master's degree this December. I love every aspect of life that comes my way. I'm living with my grandparents during the week and my sister and father during the weekends. I'm currently an NYC substitute teacher and trying to positively influence the youth just like some extraordinary adults positively influenced me.

I truly believe that being in foster care saved my life. For that, and for anyone who has contributed to my overall development — Thank you.



“EMPLOYEES GAVE YOU A BLACK SWEAT SUIT ... WITH A CHOKING WHITE T-SHIRT. EVERY SINGLE CHILD IN THAT BUILDING WAS NOW ONE IN THE SAME, A WARD OF THE STATE.”

MY ONLY WAY OUT

By Sixto Cancel



“IMAGINE A CHILDHOOD LIKE MINE. ONE IN WHICH YOU ... ARE TREATED LIKE A SERVANT IN A HOME WHERE THE FAMILY WANTS YOU ONLY FOR THE MONEY YOU BRING IN.”

I was 11 months old when the state took me away from a home where my mother used heroin and strange men paid the bills. How could a woman struggling with drug addiction possibly care for the fifth of her eight children? The state decided I would have a better life in foster care. They scattered my siblings. One brother was soon after buried, felled by a bullet to the chest when the streets became more of his home than school.

By age 9, I had been shuffled through seven foster homes, and landed in the home of a woman named Gladys. She adopted me, yet seemed to hate me. She called me “nigger” and “faggot.” She dressed me in donated clothes, shoes that didn’t fit and bruises. By the time I turned 13, the sight of me made her “sick.” She would lock me out of the house for days at a time. I slept on the occasional couch or floor. Other times I slept in the street.

Two years passed like this. So did several unsuccessful investigations by child services and the police. Then one day Gladys moved. I came home after school to find the house empty. I landed back in foster care.

Imagine a childhood like mine. One in which you cannot touch the refrigerator; you sleep in a filthy room and are treated like a servant in a home where the family wants you only for the money you bring in. I was screamed at, beaten with a belt, and with fists. I have been choked, slapped and starved. How easily I could have slipped into the same life my mother lead.

But for some reason I didn’t. In spite of attending some of our nation’s worst schools, I learned that an education was my only way out. I was accepted into Virginia Commonwealth University. But that was just the beginning of my journey.

I was unprepared for college. An adult mentor took me to Target and grabbed two shopping

carts. Two carts turned into 11 by the time we had assembled everything I would need: a book bag, sheets, towels, laundry bag, paper, pens, dishes, a pillow, a lamp, etc. I didn’t want a handout. I wanted to stand on my own two feet. But what kid at 17 is asked to stand alone? I realized how much this person believed in me. I was not a charity case. This family was investing in my future. They were providing me with the basic tools that I needed to start college right. In addition to the shopping spree, they had pooled their money and gave me \$1,500 to rent a moving truck for the trip to my little apartment near campus. I was able to focus on my grades and adjust more quickly to my new environment.

I became a leader in campus organizations and still managed to get A’s and B’s. I may not have parents to answer to, but I found myself feeling accountable to those people who invested their time, trust and money in my success. When I did not feel like going to class or messed up on a test, I thought about the group of adults who went out of their way to help me build a better life.

Every young person in foster care needs support. When we don’t have the proper support, we are being set up to fail. I was lucky. A group of adults cared enough to help me grow. I know if my older brother had found a similar group of caring adults, his story might have ended up differently. He may have been alive. The smallest gestures have the power to knock down the highest, thickest barriers.

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

AN ANCHOR

By Carrie Dahlin

My son Robert went through a lot of instability in his first year. My husband and I first met him when we brought him home from the hospital at just 2 days old. The plan was for Robert and his sister Katie, whom we were already fostering, to stay with us for a short time and to then be adopted by a relative. But after the kids left our care, there were some bumps in the road, and they ended up in separate foster homes.

When we let Robert and Katie go, we thought it would be best for both of them. We never intended for them to be shuffled through different homes. But the reality is that kids in foster care get moved often, and for many different reasons. There are good homes and not-so-good homes. Life happens, illness takes over, good intentions become regretted decisions, and these all have a huge impact on the child.

Robert's new situation was heartbreaking. He wasn't being cared for properly in his foster home — he was often left in his playpen or high chair and not bathed on a regular basis. The family was busy with jobs and obligations and Robert seemed like a side note, a paycheck placement.

My husband and I had never stopped loving Robert or his sister. When we learned that they were available for adoption, we began the process to make them part of our family.

We were incredibly thankful when Robert, then 1, and Katie, then 3, moved back into our home, joining our two biological daughters, Laura and Mia and our son Jabar, also once our foster child. But it wasn't an easy transition. Robert now had attachment struggles — he hated to be touched, held, kissed or hugged, and would often refuse a meal simply because I asked that he take a bite.

From his experiences, Robert's view of a mother was one that left him disappointed and angry. He needed to learn that I was not going to abandon him and this would take time.

I decided to focus my attention on providing for Robert's basic needs. I changed his diapers, gave him food and simply offered my presence. After a while, and a handful of attachment therapy sessions, the boy who once screamed every time I touched him started to lean against me as I sat on the couch. Before long, Robert was holding my hand as we walked to the bus stop instead of cautiously walking a few feet away. I will never forget the morning I went to wake him up and as he stood in his crib, heard him eagerly say, "I love you."

As foster parents, we are asked to not only care for the basic needs of a child, but also sit alongside them as they digest the hurt and damage they have undeservingly experienced. We need to remember that these kids — even the littlest ones — who come into our care are hurting and struggling to digest the interruptions in their lives.

The reality is, whether the abuse and neglect come from birth families or fellow foster families, the impact on the children will have lasting effects. I believe we need more loving families who are willing to become foster parents to raise the standard in which we place these precious children. And I want to encourage future foster parents to seek support for themselves, in order to be an anchor for the children they welcome into their homes, their hearts. It is our job to show kids a new kind of love, a love that is strong when they can't be.

This Mother's Day I will enjoy my breakfast in bed with a smile. Not because life is easy, but because I am surrounded by my five beautiful kids, as they try to make their way under the covers and steal a bite of my waffles. Mother's Day is more than a day off from chores around the house or being pampered with flowers. It is a day to be thankful for our children, because without them, there would be nothing to celebrate.

It is my prayer to spend the rest of my life showing Robert, and each of my kids, the kind of love they deserve from a mother. I hope to show them that we are more than our beginnings.

"THESE KIDS — EVEN THE LITTLEST ONES — WHO COME INTO OUR CARE ARE HURTING."



FROM CRIME TO COUNSELOR — AND HOW FOSTER CARE HELPED

By Vannak Kong

Growing up in the cold, hard streets of Lowell, Mass., it was easy to get wrapped up in some kind of trouble. I always looked up to my older brother so it was inevitable I started gang banging just like he did. It was all we knew.

Living in a lower-class neighborhood with immigrant parents meant we were always babysat by grandparents or the television while they worked dead-end positions. I know my parents tried their hardest, but at the end of the day the streets raised us. We ran around doing crazy things, stole out of boredom and got into fights with whoever the enemy was at that time. My parents, never given a handbook to help adapt to “American” culture, ended up grappling with alcoholism, post traumatic stress disorder and financial worries while we, the children, tried desperately to belong.

After years of witnessing domestic violence at home I started to lash out against any and all. As kids were going home with straight A’s, I went home with black eyes and teachers asking my parents to discuss my “outrageous behavior.” My mom, who had enough, didn’t know what to do and resorted to physically disciplining me. She needed help and put me in a program called C.H.I.N.S (Child in Need of Services), which led to involvement with the Department of Social Services.

But I continued to get arrested or kicked out of school on a weekly basis. By age 10, I was being bounced from one juvenile detention center to another. After being “rehabilitated,” my caseworker thought foster care would be best. Between the ages of 13 and 18 I lived in 23 houses. It was a nice change of pace from the ghettos of Lowell, but I ran away every chance I got, knowing I’d be caught by police officers or my caseworkers.

I just wanted to be close to my family, even if it meant hiding in the attic for just a few days or hours. I was so affected by the trauma I experienced, I wet the bed until I was 13. One time, when I was around that age, I even stole my foster parents’ expensive bicycle, riding 32 miles on a cold December morning in urine-soaked pajamas just so I could get home.

I had many questions: why would I go to a family if I had one of my own? Would they take care of me? Would I switch schools? My emotions were all over the place — I was angry at my mother for letting me go without trying to get me back, sad because my actions caused all of this, happy to be experiencing new surroundings. I was confused and ultimately broken, because it seemed like everyone had given up on me.



There should have been more home checks to see if the houses were safe. Some homes didn’t have adequate food, and a lot of these parents who were supervising kids weren’t stable themselves. One time I was made to switch homes after being settled for 7 or 8 months because the foster parent was involved in some kind of realtor-embezzling scheme. Seven months of schooling, friends and stability, all down the drain. And I remember a home where I roomed with an infant, made to watch and feed the child while the parents attended church on a daily basis.

You could tell off the bat when the parents would be fostering children as a “job” and when they genuinely wanted to give a child a better future. I experienced all kinds of homes, met many people from different ethnicities and cultures, ate microwavable ramen with one family and enjoyed prime rib on a boat with another.

My life permanently changed for the better when I was moved a few hundred miles away to a foster home in a small suburb where I spent most of my teenage years doing just that, being a teenager. I was moved a few hundred miles away to a foster home in a small suburb where I spent most of my teenage years doing just that, being a teenager. At first I messed up all the

time. I was angry and I still missed my family. But my foster mother, Connie, took the time to teach my foster brothers and me valuable things like cooking, writing and how to find employment. I have to admit, she taught me how to be a man. Without the stability of that home I don’t know where I would be today. We need more foster parents like her. Being sent to her home was a miracle; looking back, it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

Eventually, between Connie, my school friends, sports and other positive supports, I felt myself changing. Without those people who stepped up I can honestly say I don’t think I would be alive today. Others aren’t. Over the years I have met hundreds of foster children like myself. A few have committed suicide. Others are in prison.

I had to go above and beyond to get where I am at today. I worked countless nights, knocked on numerous doors and drove many miles to become a mental health counselor. I now help other at-risk kids, and continue to deal with people who struggle with the PTSD, alcoholism and depression, as my parents once had. After all I’ve endured I can say I once was a foster child, and I am absolutely okay with that.

One love.

A CHAPTER IN MY LIFE

By Ollie Hernandez

Ever since I was a kid, I knew that I wanted to become something great — whether it was a doctor, a lawyer or a princess. It always seemed that I was meant to accomplish something big. However, life isn't easy and, at a young age, I got thrown one hell of a curveball.

My entrance into Nevada's foster care system is a blur. I was enduring abuse at home that at the time seemed normal to me. At 9 years old I became a ward of the state, and I literally had no idea what was happening. I ended up in a foster home where I felt quite content. Then when I was 11, my biological mother passed away and my relatives gained custody of me. But their home was not safe for me, and at 13, I went back into care.

After my mother passed away, I went through a long period of withdrawal that was filled with anger and angst, until I began to realize that I would have to step up and be a responsible older

sister to my younger sister and foster siblings. I was the oldest and it wasn't easy. I was often held to a higher standard than the other kids and had to sacrifice a lot of free time to help out around the house. As a result, I became a natural leader and still feel the need to take charge in my personal, academic and professional life.

In total, I spent nine years in foster care and I lived in nine different foster homes. The hardships — like moving around, being separated from my siblings and being on psychotropic medications — were taxing. But I was lucky enough to have a fantastic group of caseworkers — whom I fondly refer to as my “soccer team of workers” — to help me through. They never gave up on me or my goals, even though there were times when I wanted to give up on myself. Despite being moved between homes, they ensured I stayed in the same high school for three years, until I unexpectedly entered independent living before my senior year.

I had been living in a particularly difficult home, where my foster parent wanted me to be somewhat sheltered from the outside world. All I wanted was to have a normal life, a reasonable

curfew, visitation with my siblings and a normal sense of independence. Since my foster parent and I had different views of what independence was, my caseworkers and I decided that I should transition into independent living. I only had one year left before turning 18 and aging out of foster care, and we felt that I needed some real world experience.

Some teenagers would jump at the chance to live with a roommate and not have a grown-up supervising their every move. For me, however,

“I WAS LUCKY ENOUGH TO HAVE A FANTASTIC GROUP OF CASEWORKERS ... TO HELP ME THROUGH.”



it was terrifying. Between balancing grocery shopping, therapy, three Advanced Placement classes, an honors class and marathon homework sessions, I wasn't sure if I was going to graduate on time. There were many times when I begged my caseworkers to let me drop out of school and get my GED or just switch to regular classes. But their answers were always no. When I fell behind, they held weekly meetings with my teachers, and when I graduated, most of my workers attended.

When some kids enter foster care, they just give up. But I was taught that foster care was just a chapter in my life. It wasn't going to last forever. I should make the best of it. I'm thankful I did.

I aged out at 18 and I am earning my certificate in medical assisting. In the fall, I will be returning to a traditional collegiate setting to earn my bachelors' degree in international relations and Arabic, with a dual minor in conflict and peace studies and women studies. Eventually I would like to attend graduate school in the United Kingdom to earn a masters' degree in international relations. Later on in my career, I'd like to work for a nongovernmental agency and research and report human rights violations and war crimes.

To all the current and potential actors in the child welfare system, the piece of advice that I have for you in order to make the foster care system better is to not treat foster youth like we're disposable. Yes, we come from traumatic backgrounds, and yes, we may not be the easiest kids to raise in a loving environment, but the fact is, we are kids. All we want is a little love and understanding.

When foster youth receive guidance and love, we learn to let our walls down and let people in and, as a result, we learn to forget our trauma and become the people we hope to be.

FOSTER CARE IS A CRUEL TEACHER. MAKE ITS SURVIVORS PART OF THE SOLUTION

By Melissa Fortner

I once read that the average amount of time a kid spends in foster care is something like three years. It's a piece of trivia that still floors me. I spent so much of my own childhood in foster care that I can't remember anything that came before it. I entered the system when I was 2; it would be the only constant in my life for the next 20 years. Placements and families came and went, but the system remained. Some parts of it never leave.

In small ways, the system crept into my world before I even understood that I was a part of it: getting pulled out of class for weird visits with a woman who used too much hairspray and made me call her Mommy. The unsettling knowledge that I didn't look like either of the grownups I

lived with, who were my real parents, as far as I knew. They loved me and my two siblings like they loved their own sons. Then the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) van came to move us, and I finally understood.

The placements after that were a revolving door of abuse and degradation. I spent five years with a lady who blew the monthly stipend from DCFS on her own kids while we lowly fosters got to eat maybe once a day, if we were lucky. But she was very generous with the beatings, which often bordered on torture (making us kneel for hours on uncooked rice seemed to be her favorite). My ticket out, ironically, was a suicide attempt that sent me to the psych hospital for a whole summer — there were bars on all the windows, and I couldn't go outside, but I felt like I'd been rescued. Then came other homes, where I learned to expect nothing and accept favoritism and other blows to my self-worth because at least they were not real punches.

The one upside to spending my life in foster care is that I got to file for financial aid as an

independent; I attended the University of Illinois almost for free. But I didn't graduate. College felt impossible to get through without a family to call up anytime for support, or a home to return to during break. I spent the holidays alone in my dorm room. And I was so ashamed of being a foster kid that I hid it from all my college friends. I lied like crazy — what else could I say when they asked me what my parents do for a living?

*“IF THE SYSTEM IS
A TEACHER, THEN
SHE IS INCREDIBLY
CRUEL.”*



I'm not convinced that drug dealing qualifies as an actual job. Feeling like I didn't fit in, and bending under the pressure to succeed, to be one of the few foster youth on the right side of the statistics, I left and never went back.

I'm not sure what lessons there are to learn from experiences like mine. If the system is a teacher, then she is incredibly cruel. How do we prove child abuse is happening when the foster parent is so good at hiding it? Is it even possible? Some problems are up to society to tackle: how do we prevent kids from needing to be “rescued” by the system in the first place?

But maybe we can fix some things. Sometimes reunification isn't the best thing for a child. In my case, the courts gave my parents ridiculous amounts of time to prove themselves before moving to terminate their parental rights. My mother got 10 years to get her act together; her rights weren't terminated until I was 13. By then, my shot at adoption was long gone — who wants a damaged teenager?

Keeping siblings together shouldn't always be more important than finding each kid a good home. Once, there was a decent couple who was interested only in me; naturally, it fell through because my siblings and I were a package deal (my mom, who still had her rights, lobbied hard for that).

And foster care survivors — from all educational backgrounds — should really be recruited into child welfare jobs and internships, perhaps as advisors. Significant positions in the field usually require a degree — which shuts out 97 percent of us! We're your greatest resource and we have so much to offer: courage, passion for change, and we know the system in a way that your average caseworker or policy wonk could never understand. If you're serious about reform, then foster-care survivors need to be omnipresent.

MY PAST DID NOT DEFINE ME, IT DESIGNED ME

By Shandreka Jones

Hello, my name is Shandreka Jones, and I'm a survivor of the New York foster care system.

My 17-year-old mother was in foster care when she had me. She left me with her mother, whom she ran away from years earlier because of abuse. My grandmother carried the abuse down to me and I still have a half-inch scar above my right eye from when she pushed me into the dining room table. I was about 6, and she got mad because I couldn't tie my shoes. When I was 7, she used a key to cut my back when I coughed in an elevator, something she didn't want me to do. My teacher found out, and I was placed in a foster home in Mount Vernon, New York.

My first foster family seemed to be sent from heaven, until my social worker visits became less frequent. The family abused me mentally and physically and neglected even my basic needs — like ensuring I bathed properly. They restricted me to their attic and wouldn't allow me to interact with their biological children. When my social worker made sporadic visits, I cried and begged her not to leave me with “the mean

people.” She promised she would come back as soon as she found me a new family.

To this day I can't understand why my social worker left me there after what she witnessed. My clothes were always dirty and my hair was never combed. I developed ringworm on my forehead and scalp. After a few more months of abuse, I was moved to another home in New Rochelle, New York.

But it wasn't any better than the first one. In fact, it was worse, and I was forced to live there for the remainder of my adolescent years. When my social worker visited frequently, my new parents tended to my infected and malnourished body. However, once my social worker lost interest, so did they. Again I was treated differently from their children. I was beaten and called names. I was constantly reminded that my “own mother” didn't want me, so I should be grateful that they had taken me in. After a few years living with them, they talked me into being adopted. I wasn't sure why they wanted to adopt me — they hated me. Years later I learned that they continued to receive money for my “mental disability.”

But to me, the only thing that affected me mentally was living in that home. I ran away numerous times and tried killing myself by taking a bottle of over-the-counter pills. I stayed angry all the time, which caused me to fight anyone who dared to get in my way. When my adoptive mother held a knife to my throat, I left for good. I was like a newborn baby again, but this time I was responsible for my well-being — nobody was there to help me or check in on me. I didn't have a mentor, guardian ad litem or Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer to steer me in right direction. I didn't have a clue how to be young lady. I didn't know how to love or receive love.

My low self-esteem caused me to use my body as a tool. I was playing Russian roulette with my life with excessive drinking and reckless relationships. I abused alcohol to escape my insecurities and myself. I began believing I was mentally retarded just like I was told for all those years. My anger turned into depression. I didn't think I was pretty or worthy enough to be around others who seemed to have it all. I hated myself for not being what I thought I should be.

I lived from couch to couch, including my biological mother's, until I couldn't take my life anymore. I knew I was destined for greater things — I just didn't know how to reach them. I got on my knees and asked God for his strength and guidance. The following month at the age of 20, I enlisted in the Army and never looked back.

I carried hatred in my heart for many years toward those who hurt me. I still wonder about my foster families' reasons for being so cruel. However, in spite of it all, I have done great things. I have a loving husband and son, who love me for me. By the grace of God, I was able to break the cycle of abuse and neglect that seemed to infiltrate my family for decades.

I'm currently pursuing my Master of Social Work degree at the University of South Carolina and writing my memoir. I'm grateful for my dark past because it made me the person I am today. I believe I am a survivor for a reason, and that my story will help someone else heal. I certainly don't have all the answers. But I can tell anyone that has been through experiences like mine, God has greater things for you.

*“I BELIEVE THAT I AM A
SURVIVOR FOR A REASON,
AND THAT MY STORY WILL
HELP SOMEONE ELSE HEAL.”*



ENSURING KIDS GET THE CARE THEY DESERVE

By Joshua Rosenthal

*“WHEN A CHILD’S NEEDS
ARE IGNORED, THE IMPACT
CAN BE DEVASTATING.”*



When he was 6 years old, James* entered foster care after the state heard that his brother had been physically abused. Over the next two years, his life became increasingly uncertain as he was shuffled through 12 different foster care placements in four different counties and was assigned a revolving door of caseworkers. James spent a significant amount of time over this period in emergency shelters, settings that typically house dozens of children, rather than in a family home. He was separated from his brother and at times went months without seeing him.

James would also go months without receiving a visit from his caseworker. In his first two years of foster care, the state received six different allegations that James had been abused or neglected by foster parents, once after he reported that a foster parent had whipped him with a belt. After one such allegation, a state document urged that “he needs to be somewhere safe.”

When a child’s needs are ignored, the impact can be devastating. This is especially true for children in foster care, whose entire lives are at constant risk of change or loss. Children’s Rights

knows that the converse is also true: when you demand that all children receive the attention that they deserve, it can have a tremendously positive effect on their lives. Since its founding, Children’s Rights has brought numerous class action lawsuits on behalf of children in foster care just like James to make sure that they get the care that they need.

Having seen in my own life the impact that care and attention can have on a child, I decided to become a staff attorney at Children’s Rights in 2012 and joined a group of dedicated advocates. One of the great privileges I have had since then is witnessing the courage that kids in foster care bring to impossible circumstances. That determination is on full display in this year’s *Fostering the Future* campaign. As our contributors demonstrate, all children in foster care bring their own needs, strengths, and history to their experiences in the system. Each child has a unique story to tell.

But even amid this diversity the failings of many foster care systems are predictable.

A permanent home remains elusive for many in state care. Countless clients of ours, just like James, have been moved through dozens of foster homes, shelters, hospitals, and even beds in state office buildings. And when there aren’t enough foster family homes available, many children are unnecessarily left in institutions for years or even for the remainder of their childhoods.

Consistent visits from their caseworkers also remain beyond reach for many. In nearly all of the systems we strive to reform, many caseworkers are assigned caseloads two or three times the size of national standards. Imagine the most work you could possibly handle at your job — then triple it. With so much to do in a day, even the best caseworkers simply can’t make sure that all these children, for whom

they are the last line of defense, are receiving the attention they need to be safe and secure.

Many children don’t know whether they will ever see their sisters and brothers again after they are put into separate foster care placements, or moved to different cities, for the sole reason that the right foster home — one that can care for all the siblings — isn’t available.

And far too often, children suffer beatings, sexual assault, rape, or neglect after they enter foster care. These stories of abuse are enough to leave you speechless. It is unacceptable that any child in the care of the state would have to wonder, “Will I be safe today?”

At Children’s Rights, we know that these children deserve better. Moreover, children in foster care have a legal right to better, and we bring their stories to the courts to demand reform. Through hard work and committed legal advocacy, we have won court orders and settlement agreements across the country. These victories have led to on-the-ground reforms, including the hiring of more caseworkers so children receive frequent visits, moving kids out of shelters and institutions and into family foster homes, recruiting more foster families to keep children close to their homes and communities, and changing systems to ensure that kids are safe in state care.

But there is more work to do, and we need your help. Please continue to share these stories and help raise awareness of what needs to change. Remember, when we post first-person accounts of foster care online each May, the simple click of a mouse can make a world of difference in making sure that children have safe and stable childhoods.

Joshua Rosenthal is a staff attorney for Children’s Rights.

**This name has been changed to protect the child’s identity.*

A STORY OF RESILIENCE

By James Williams

I lived in foster care for the majority of my life. A police report in my file indicates that when I was about a year old, my father was driving under the influence with me in the back seat. No family members wanted to take me, so I went into state care.

I was adopted when I was 5, and at first I had a rather good relationship with my adoptive parents. But a couple years later, everything seemed to spiral downward when they started to hit me. I wish there had been follow-up by social workers to see if things were going okay. When I was 12, my adoptive parents “re-homed” me by sending me to live with my biological grandmother. My biological father also lived there, and since his parental rights had been terminated, he wasn’t supposed to have any contact with me until I was 18. He didn’t say a word to me, he just came in drunk. I ran away, and my adoptive aunt helped me get back into foster care at 13.

This experience made me realize that life was not all green pastures and smiling faces, and that sometimes the people that are supposed

to love you will hurt you as well. Over the next few years, I moved through foster homes and group homes and experienced even more abuse and neglect. By the time I aged out at 19, many foster parents had told me I was stupid and that I would never amount to anything.

I remember staying at one home where the foster dad made derogatory remarks about other races. After he saw me hanging out with an African American friend, I got the worst demoralizing, dehumanizing punishment that I’ve ever experienced.

I remember it vividly. He hit me, my head tilted forward and I saw my blood splotch my crisp white socks. It congealed for a second then spread like a blot of ink on paper. He pushed me out of the room and towards the front door. I gasped when the late December air hit me in the face. He threw open the screen door and I grasped on the doorframe. My hands burned when he ripped them off; I screamed into the night. I heard my scream fade and all that was left was a ringing silence. I knew no one would come to help, so there was no use in calling for it.

He dragged me over the icy grass. He squatted on top of me while he clasped the collar around my neck and cuffed one of my hands to the metal confederate flag rail in front of the doghouse. I stayed there until the following morning, with no clothes. When he came back, he told me, “If I see you hanging with that ‘N word’ again, you will be out here for a week.”

The family lost its foster care license, because they failed to attend a court hearing concerning another abuse allegation, and I moved to a group home, but this traumatic memory never left me. My innocence was gone. I closed myself off, and distrusted others. It was easier than making the mistake of trusting and getting hurt again.

Eventually I learned to trust my caseworker, Kenya Papillion. She took me seriously when I brought up issues in my placements, and talked to me about what I wanted to do with my life. If it weren’t for Kenya, and a few others, I may have gone down a different road. They helped me understand that I could either fall within the cracks of the system, or flourish. I grew to realize that my circumstances equipped me with the tools, and burning passion, to make certain other foster youth do not experience what I did.

I graduated from the University of South Carolina, *magna cum laude*, with a bachelor’s degree at the age of 19. I am now 21, and today I am graduating from the University of Southern California (USC) my Master of Social Work degree. It took a lot of hard work and support to get here, and I still struggle. Without my support system at USC, I would probably be homeless right now. As I face the gap between graduation and finding a job, staff like Vice Dean Paul Maiden, Dean Wendy Smith and Alexi Waul are helping me transition from living on campus to an apartment. I have to give them credit. They have done so much for me.

I want foster youth to know that they can prevail, despite the odds. I hope to inspire many with my story of resilience. I always felt that I was a target to foster parents and group home providers because I questioned the system, instead of being silently obedient. Now, I realize that there were many other kids in similar situations, and young people are still struggling within foster care. Knowing this heightens my resolve to advocate for foster youth today.

*“MY CIRCUMSTANCES
EQUIPPED ME WITH THE
TOOLS, AND BURNING
PASSION, TO MAKE CERTAIN
OTHER FOSTER YOUTH DO
NOT EXPERIENCE WHAT I DID.”*



STRUGGLING WITH THE SYSTEM

By Kelly

Being a foster family was both a rewarding and frustrating experience.

My husband and I heard about babies being placed in overcrowded, unsafe shelters and wanted to help. We were ready to love and take care of these infants, and provide them a safe, stable home. But we had no idea about the struggles that we would encounter. Just getting the most basic care for our new family members was trying.

Most of the babies we picked up from our local shelter needed medical care that the state failed to provide. They suffered from ailments like scabies, lice and dehydration. Twenty three of the 27 babies we cared for required medical attention in the first 24 hours in our home.

In order for the children's medical care to be covered, we had to provide doctors with their state-issued medical numbers. But it was very hard to get this information from the state. I made many calls in an attempt to gain it, but my efforts frequently went nowhere. I knew the babies needed treatment, so I often ended up

paying for expensive medicine that would have been covered by the state.

I tried to make sure the babies received everything they needed to help them have a better life. Sometimes, what they needed was to see siblings or parents, but my efforts to advocate for these visits were often blocked. The visits were set up and supervised by state social workers, so when the social workers dropped the ball, there was nothing I could do to help. Even my calls to their supervisors would go unanswered.

My heart broke every time we had a baby for a month or more who had no visits, then was removed from our home. These little ones did not have any memory of their parents and got comfortable with us, only to be ripped from our family and placed in another home. And some of them continued to move from home to home after they left our house.

It was tough. The worst part was that I didn't feel like the state did what was best for the child all of the time. I heard one little boy was in the shelter and four different homes within his first week of foster care. He left our home because he



“I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE THE STATE DID WHAT WAS BEST FOR THE CHILD ALL OF THE TIME.”

had autistic tendencies that I was not told about or trained to care for. Another time, the state had me hand over a little boy without filling out any paper work. For weeks I received inquiries from doctors and lawyers who didn't know where he was. I was scared for his well-being.

But for one little sweetie who was placed with us, it all worked out exactly the way it should have. Her transition home happened with the least trauma possible. The child had been abused by her father, but she had a good mom who fought to get her back. I bonded with her mom, and we were able to have visits and slowly transition the baby back into her care. It was a beautiful thing to work together as a team for this baby. This kiddo thrived. It just saddened me to know that out the 27 kids we cared for, she was the only one who transitioned to a permanent, loving home the way she was supposed to.

Another child who touched my heart came to us after being shaken. The little boy had pretty severe traumatic injuries — he was very stiff and his eyesight was poor. But while he was with us, his body loosened up, and he was able to make out shapes and expressions. He also began to laugh and giggle. He even started to roll over at our house. It was amazing to me how much he changed.

Because our life circumstances changed, my husband and I are no longer fostering, but nothing can take away the sweet memories I have with each little baby I had a chance to love. I got to celebrate big milestones in their development and the progression of healing in their bodies. There are so many tender moments to treasure. I would never change any moment I had with the adorable little ones. I hope I changed their lives for the better. I know they changed mine.

GETTING A SECOND LIFE THROUGH ADOPTION

By Michael Howard

I was in foster care for the first four years of my life. Calling it difficult would be an understatement. Even from that young age, I was already watching other children with their parents and trying to figure out my identity: Will I ever have a family? Will I find my biological mother? Who did I belong to?

I was in at least four different foster care homes during that time. I remember the last two. I had to leave one because the foster parents decided to adopt my biological sister, but not me. It was emotional, and I wondered whether I would see my sister again, but my main focus was on needing a mom.

After that I was in a home with anywhere from 12 to 15 children, a mix of biological and foster kids. I was second to youngest. There were times I would go to bed, not starving, but not full either. I would feel lost and neglected amongst all those kids. I hurt because I felt like an outcast without my own family. When you're a foster care child, you feel separate from the world. You have no family, no guidance and you feel like no one can understand you. At least that's how I felt.

I have been told that fewer foster parents are stepping forward, but this could be a good thing: I have heard of and seen countless instances of foster parents abusing their power. Some foster parents see nothing but money when they look at foster care children. I would hope that wasn't the case when I was in the system, but who knows. I'd rather there be fewer foster parents taking care of the children for all the right reasons than to have more ignorant ones collecting checks.

I was lucky to have my name in the local papers and on local television channels broadcasting my urgent need for a family. Well, lucky might not be the best word, because I remember families coming to the foster care homes and scoping me out, contemplating whether they wanted me to be a part of their family. My guard was up and my hopes were never high, but the thought of being part of a family never vanished.

And then my mother found me. It took her six to eight months to adopt me, maybe even longer. She had to go through a strident approvals process. Her life was an open book. She had to be interviewed and go to workshop classes. Her

biological daughter (now my sister) was interviewed. My mother said it was like hell, and she questioned whether it was all worth it.

But I am happy she did. She is the best mother, the love of my life, the reason why I'm speaking out today. She raised a young boy into a young man, and couldn't have done a better job. She always had high expectations for me, and even

“SHE IS THE BEST MOTHER ... I FEEL LIKE I OWE HER MY LIFE BECAUSE SHE GAVE ME A SECOND LIFE — A NEW NAME, A NEW IDENTITY, THE CHANCE TO THRIVE.”



sent me to private schools. To this day, I feel like I owe her my life because she gave me a second life — a new name, a new identity, the chance to thrive. Being a single parent was difficult, but she juggled bringing up her biological daughter and me, spending equal time on both of us.

I wish all prospective foster parents were required to do at least this much, if not more. The system should make it very difficult for a foster parent to become authorized, certified and licensed to take care of a child. Where they work, who their friends are, how much money they make, how many kids are already in the household — this all needs to come to the surface. Child welfare workers should consider why potential foster parents want to foster, because they need to spend at least as much time with foster kids as their own. If they're just in it to collect the monthly stipend, that's selfish, and emotionally damaging.

Every foster care child deserves the same outcome I had. Around 400,000 children are in foster care on any given day in this country — 400,000! That number has to decrease significantly, but it is not going to if people don't know the real facts concerning foster care and the importance of adoption.

I reach out and share my journey about foster care to everyone I can. Even though I didn't suffer too much, the public needs to know that overall it's the foster care children who see more violence, more abuse than almost anybody else. Those boys and girls are the real heroes. The fact they have all that baggage with them and still somehow live a normal life impresses me to no end. Society has no clue what they go through, mentally or physically. They deserve more respect from adults.

My story is just one of many. I just wish all foster care children could be so fortunate.

NO CHILD IS TOO OLD FOR A FAMILY

By Lexie Gruber

When I entered foster care at the age of 14, I wanted nothing more than a family that could provide me the stability and nurturing I needed so desperately. I envisioned a foster family that would replace the cycle of chaos I once lived with, a safe home where I was loved. However, I soon learned my fantastical idea of foster care was far from reality.

I was informed that foster families preferred infants and toddlers to teenagers, and my age rendered me “used goods.” The only solutions for me were short term, because foster homes for teenagers were in short supply and already occupied. I could not understand why someone in my community wouldn’t step up and take me in. At one point of desperation, I begged my social worker to allow me to write a paper about myself so that potential foster parents would realize I was a kid worthy of their love. Despite my prayers, I shifted among placements until I turned 18.

Bouncing from home to home could have interfered with my ability to obtain a stable education,

and I refused to forfeit that for the remote possibility of a stable placement. I learned that under the McKinney-Vento Act I could stay in the same high school I had started in, as long as I fell under the act’s definition of “homeless.” I chose consistent schooling and decided to stay on at the youth shelter where I had already been placed.

It wasn’t an easy decision. I remember when I arrived there; the shelter staff watched me struggle to carry three trash bags filled with clothes and books as they lead me to my new bedroom on the second floor. It was filthy. Many of the girls at the shelter were newly released from juvenile detention or jails, and my small stature made me the perfect target for their physical aggression. They used everything from their hands to a hot pan.

Meanwhile, staff treated us like second class human beings. Cabinets and fridges were locked, and we could only eat at “feeding times,” like animals at the zoo. We struggled to sleep when summer nights reached temperatures of 100 degrees or more. Cockroaches infested

our living spaces, and the bedrooms were in desperate need of repair. However, the first floor, which held staff offices and a meeting room for visits with social workers and lawyers, was immaculate and temperature-controlled.

I cycled in and out of shelters until there was no place else to stay. I eventually was allowed to stay in a group home for my senior year. It was a model for what good congregate care looks like. The staff at the home always believed that I would become a successful high school graduate. They encouraged me to work hard at school and congratulated me when I succeeded.

Still, as I planned for college, I was concerned about becoming a legal adult without a permanent family to fall back on. While my peers spent their summer before college celebrating and enjoying time with family, I was searching for a basement to place all my items that could not fit into the dorm room that would become my home. I went off to college completely on my own; I spent much of my first semester barricading myself in my room and crying.

When I asked my social worker about housing during academic breaks, she informed me that “given your age, a shelter is usually what is sought by calling 211 for information on available shelters in your area.” I refused to become homeless again and searched desperately for a permanent home, even trying to reunite with my biological parents. I ended up spending many nights on a friend’s couch.

After two years of college I still deal with emotional and physical ramifications from my upbringing, but I finally have foster parents who provide me with the support that has saved my life. I’ve also found a home within the House of Representatives, where I have been given the opportunity to use my experience in foster care to work on child welfare policy and educate legislators.

I now have the resources and support to become the healthy adult I had always dreamed of being, but in 2012 nearly 24,000 children turned 18 and aged out of the foster care system to face a bleak future. Many of these youth end up homeless or incarcerated within a few years, while only 3 percent graduate college. No child is too old for a family. It is absolutely essential that we not only recruit more foster homes, but ensure that there are enough foster homes for older youth. Until we accomplish that, we will ensure the failure of countless children.



“I SOON LEARNED MY FANTASTICAL IDEA OF FOSTER CARE WAS FAR FROM REALITY.”

JOINING THE FAMILY BIZ

By Hank Marotske

As early as I can remember I knew what “the belt” meant. It meant my mom was drunk, angry and “Henry was going to get it.” My mother’s anger toward me was always transparent; I was a boy and men had done her wrong. For that I would pay. Verbal, emotional, and physical abuse highlighted my earliest memories. My sister was four years younger than me and did not experience the abuse.

My first experience in foster care was when I was 5. After beating me, mom returned to the bars leaving my sister and me alone, in an empty trailer, sleeping on cardboard boxes. A neighbor must have called the authorities. We were placed in foster care for a few weeks then returned home.

The next five years were filled with beatings, verbal and emotional assaults that shaved every ounce of my self-worth. When our mom was between jobs or boyfriends we would live with friends in Minneapolis, whom my sister and I called “Grandma” and “Grandpa.” I was safe, as they wouldn’t tolerate my mother beating me, but it never lasted long.

I was with my mom on June 21, 1987, when I was beat with the belt to the point neighbors called the police. We were removed from her care again. I was placed in a shelter at St. Joseph’s Home for Children in South Minneapolis and my sister soon returned home. Because “Grandma” and “Grandpa” were not blood relatives, the court would not allow me to live with them.

In October, I went to a foster home. While I was safe from my mother’s physical abuse, her emotional abuse continued over the next three years — in our therapy sessions and during my weekend visits home. Eventually I told the judge that I did not want to see her.

For four years, I lived with the same foster family. I called them “Mom” and “Dad” and begged them to adopt me. One day, I returned to find my bags packed and was told I was “visiting” a potential new home. My feelings of self-worth and sense of belonging deteriorated completely. That weekend visit turned into my final foster home, where I would eventually age out of the system. I told my new foster parents that I would eat, sleep and shower at their home, but I would not consider them my family. The next three years I kept busy outside of the home — keeping busy has always been my coping mechanism.

Despite all this, I knew I deserved better. I wasn’t gifted academically, athletically or in the arts. I had to work hard for any success. One thing I did was surround myself with positive role models. They taught me that college would be an avenue to independence. Despite poor test scores and grades, I was accepted to one school my senior year.

“I CALLED THEM ‘MOM’ AND ‘DAD’ AND BEGGED THEM TO ADOPT ME. ONE DAY, I RETURNED TO FIND MY BAGS PACKED ... MY FEELINGS OF SELF-WORTH AND SENSE OF BELONGING DETERIORATED.”



My life changed the day I was dropped off on campus. I remember seeing my foster parents’ van drive away while other families hugged and kissed their kids. I believed I would never see them again. I was alone, and it was up to me to thrive or struggle. I dealt with lonely holidays by working. I had nowhere to live in the summers, so I worked as a camp counselor to put a roof over my head and make money.

Through a lot of hard work and commitment, I thrived in college. I earned journalism and theater scholarships, represented my school at the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) marathon championships, was captain of the lacrosse team and graduated with honors. These successes started to rebuild my self-esteem. College was the best therapy!

My foster parents and social worker slowly weaved themselves back into my life. Over the past few years the woman that was my social worker and whom I thought I’d never see after high school graduation has earned a spot as “mom” in my heart.

Adult life hasn’t been without failure. I’ve been divorced, fired and made poor financial decisions. But the resilience built as a child prepared me for life as an adult. Last year I finally fulfilled two of my dreams. I graduated with an MBA and built my house. For the first time in my life I have somewhere permanent to live. I’m back in foster care, but now as a part of an organization’s leadership team. I call it “the family biz,” like so many foster alum who end up giving back as social workers, community leaders and foster parents themselves.

As foster youth we must overcome our challenges, surround ourselves with the right people, and build our own “family” with people that want the best for us and from whom we can learn positive life skills from. We can’t let anyone stop us from following our dreams.

‘WORKING HARD ON MYSELF TO GROW PAST THE PAIN’

By Rosie Perez

“EVERY CHILD SHOULD HAVE A LOVING AND STABLE UPBRINGING.”



Photo by Eric Johnson

Rosie Perez is best known for her acting chops, cutting-edge choreography and dogged activism. But until now, few people knew that the Oscar-nominated talent spent much of her childhood as a ward of the state of New York. Her mother, who suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, seized her at age 3 from the aunt who had cared for her since birth and put her in St. Joseph’s Catholic Home for Children in Peekskill, N.Y.

*Rosie recently penned her memoir, *Handbook for An Unpredictable Life: How I Survived Sister Renata and My Crazy Mother, And Still Came Out Smiling (With Great Hair)*. In it, she relates in sharp detail her experiences at the Home and two St. Joseph’s-run group homes, before being reunited with her beloved aunt as a teen.*

In the book’s preface, Rosie, a recipient of the Children’s Rights Champion Award, describes coming to terms with her tumultuous past. We are grateful that we have the opportunity to excerpt the following:

The abuse and neglect from my mother and the time I was forced to spend in Saint Joseph’s Catholic Home for Children, aka “the Home,” have affected a big part of my life. And I’ve hated that fact. I’m a forward-moving and positive-thinking person, and it was hard to have that albatross hanging around my neck. I’ve hated my past so much that I’ve spent countless hours downplaying or even hiding bits of the truth of my childhood in an attempt to make it seem less severe, less hurtful, less shameful than it felt.

I hated the fact that my mother was crazy. I wanted her to be normal. Even when she acted normal — something that many mentally ill people can do, despite what you see in the movies — I was always walking on eggshells, waiting for the insanity to hit. And when it hit, it hit hard and fast — leaving deep emotional and physical scars.

People who are “normal” as a result of good parenting — even just decent parenting — are very lucky. Yeah, I know, everyone’s hell is relative, and blah, blah, blah, but those people are very fortunate. Am I bitter? No, not at all. Every child should have a loving and stable upbringing. There would be less violence and hate, for sure. But most of us didn’t, and regardless of what the experts say, trying to get past your past sucks. Most of us would rather just ignore it or numb it with any or all types of drugs, legal or illegal. Those of us who are a bit stronger — and I say that without judgment — try to avoid those options and deal with our past legitimately: through psychoanalysis, psychiatry, medications, spirituality, whatever. Truth be told, even when you work every day to do so, it’s hard to not lose it, or give up, or worse, fall into a depression.

That’s the worst — depression. I’m a relatively

happy person who also happened to be clinically depressed for years (sorry, that just cracks me up). I know that it’s probably hard for most people, especially those who know and love me, to fathom that, because I’m a person who’s usually in a good mood, cracking jokes or telling funny stories. And the good moods are absolutely, 100 percent authentic. It’s just that there was this underlying feeling of blah, or sadness, or even fright, which at times I was aware of and at other times I was not. I refused to let this hold me down. I wanted to move on. I wanted to fully enjoy the wonderful life I’ve worked so hard to obtain.

I finally resorted to seeking professional help, the one thing I had resisted for years. When my shrink diagnosed me with dysthymia — a sneaky, chronic kind of depression — I was actually relieved. God bless America two times for that, as my Tia Ana would say. It’s most common with people who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Yeah, I had that one too. Still do. But now at least I had a starting place and could take some kind of ownership of the healing process.

After a couple of years of therapy, and I don’t know exactly when or how it happened, I noticed that my depression wasn’t there and the PTSD subsided considerably. I felt joyful, secure, and empowered. My inner strength and sense of self had never been stronger. I guess I allowed time to play its role, and I did my part by working hard on myself to grow past the pain. Gosh, I sound so full of shit there. Let me be more honest: I grew past most of the pain and continue to do the work. Every day gets better.

*Excerpted from *Handbook for an Unpredictable Life* by Rosie Perez. Copyright © 2014 by Rosie Perez. Excerpted by permission of Crown Archetype, a division of Random House, LLC, a Penguin Random House Company, New York. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.*

STIGMA CAN HURT

By Jeannette Miller

I remember the day I gave birth to my son, Joshuwah. It was inside my sister's apartment. I went into labor, but was sent back from the hospital because I wasn't far enough along. I was angry they told me to go home when I knew I needed to be there. But that was nothing compared with what came next.

The Administration for Children's Services (ACS) decided I wasn't equipped to handle parenthood and took my son. It ripped my heart out. I wanted nothing more than to be with him. I used to walk over an hour from one Brooklyn neighborhood to another in the dead of winter just to see him.

Those walks gave me plenty of time to think — think about how my future mirrored my past. I grew up in foster care, after my mother killed herself in front of me. I spent all of my teen years in institutions and group homes. The system bounced me all over the place, trying to decide where to put a girl who had been beaten, yelled at, sexually abused and was severely depressed. I was put in a psychiatric center in upstate New York, then was transferred to a foster care facility all the way in Florida, which is where they shipped the "hard-to-place kids" back in the day.

It was like coming out of the frying pan and into the fire. The abuse didn't stop once I was in care,

and you weren't allowed to say anything or stand up for yourself. If I questioned what was going on, the response was, "shut up, you're stupid." If I wasn't hearing it from staff, it came from my peers. They suffered the same abuse that I did, and it had a huge impact. I had never met girls like that. They walked around with more negativity and attitude than I'd ever seen. I walked around with a Bible and did a lot of praying — but those experiences still affected me deeply.

When I was 15 years old, Marcia Robinson Lowry, an attorney, came to Florida to see me. She was trying to get justice for kids like me, who were shipped far from New York when the state couldn't find anyone to take them. She may not know this, but by the time I met Marcia I was about to kill myself, I had all my Thorazine saved up. It was Marcia, who later founded the organization Children's Rights, who made me see things differently. She was the only positive person I'd met in my life. She'd say, "Jeannette, your civil rights are being violated." I didn't know people like her existed, except on TV. She stood up for me and really, she saved me.

She also won her lawsuit, and made sure I was returned to New York City for the rest of my teen years until I aged out of foster care. I wouldn't say things were ideal, but it certainly

was better than being warehoused in Hialeah, Florida, so far away from my birth family and everything I knew.

So two decades later, when I couldn't get Joshuwah back after three years of jumping

"[MY SON AND I] ARE GRATEFUL THAT WE GOT YEARS TOGETHER THAT COULD HAVE BEEN TAKEN FROM US. THANKS TO CHILDREN'S RIGHTS."



through hoops for ACS, I knew I had to call Children's Rights. I felt so powerless. I had already done everything ACS asked me to do. I attended a drug rehabilitation program for a year. When I was finished they still kept him, because I was living in my sister's apartment and didn't have a home in my name. So I got my own apartment. I had a daughter who I raised since she was born, without any intervention from ACS. I went to school and became a home health aide. Still they didn't give me my son.

What made it even worse was my lack of access to him. Once my son was in foster care, ACS never gave me a visitation schedule or even told me what agency he was placed with. I had to fight like crazy to get the name of the agency, and then I only got to visit him for one hour every two weeks. I was supposed to have an opportunity to go in front of the court every year to fight for my baby. That never happened. Meanwhile Joshuwah was being physically abused in care.

Stigma can hurt. I believe that ACS made the decision to stereotype: I came from a dysfunctional family, and therefore I wasn't going to bond with my son. In fact, they thought, I shouldn't have had him in the first place. When people make big decisions about your life like that, it's horrible. I was very angry for a long time.

Children's Rights took the time to listen, and when they went to bat for me, do you know what they found out? The state's custody of Joshuwah had lapsed, meaning that it wasn't even legal for him to be in foster care! I can never thank them enough for standing up for me as a parent even though the odds were against me.

Now Joshuwah has graduated from high school and is attending college. We are grateful that we got years together that could have been taken from us. Thanks to Children's Rights.

FINDING MY BREAKTHROUGH

By Gilbert Howard

It started when I was 3 years old. I was taken away from my biological parents in New York City and put into a foster home in upstate New York along with my brother and sister. Being so young, I had little memory of being with my real mother and father. I thought these people were my family.

I'll always carry the memories of the abuse that I had to go through while I was there.

My brother and I were frequently tortured by our foster mother. If we didn't perform well in school, she would punish us. On a few occasions, she would put duct tape on our mouths, tie our arms around our backs, and tape our feet to the bed. This happened three or four times. Sometimes we wouldn't eat for days.

I remember several nights, when my brother and I were both laying in bed sound asleep, that she came in and hit us. I had so many scars on my

body. I remember thinking, "These people are my family. What am I not doing right?"

By the time I was 9, I left the foster home to live with my biological father in the Bronx. We were told he was ready to take care of us again. It was really hard for me to leave my foster home because I didn't understand what was happening.

As soon as I moved back with him, the abuse began again.

It became a routine. Every Friday, my father would get drunk. When he was drunk, he turned into a different man — he'd get mean and hit us. Sometimes he'd use a belt. Other times he'd use his bare hands. He'd tell us that we were stupid, and that we would never be anything, or become anybody. I became so sick of the abuse. Eventually, I got to the point where I just couldn't take it anymore.

So at 15 I ran away. Throughout the next several years, I found myself running from place to place, desperately trying to find somewhere to call home. I eventually went back to my father's for a short time. From there, I ran away to Covenant

House, which housed homeless youth. I liked it there. It almost felt like a dorm. They fed you three meals a day and people seemed to really care, and really listen. But it wasn't a place that I could stay permanently. From there I bounced around multiple group homes, and an independent living program, before I wound up where I am now, living at my biological mother's house.

When I first arrived at my mother's I was 22 years old, and at that point, I had no high school diploma or a GED. I fell into a deep depression. At night, I would sit in the park and drink. I was hanging out with all of the wrong types of people. I was lost and felt like I was searching for some type of closure.

But then one day, I heard a voice telling me that this was not who I was supposed to be. I cleaned up my act. I got my high school diploma, and auditioned for a film in New York City called "Know How," which featured real foster children telling their life stories on the big screen. I landed the part, and loved every single minute of it. After that, I enrolled in JobCorps, where I was certified to work in any hospital as a receptionist. I also joined AmeriCorps, which allowed me to travel across the country helping people in need.

I was able to turn my life around, but others aren't so lucky. I believe that the foster care system needs to be improved. People in care are taken advantage of, and don't always know their rights. I want the next young person to have a better experience in foster care than I did. I want them to know that they have rights, and to not let the system break them down. I stand tall and I'm here right now representing hundreds of thousands of people who can relate. I want to tell those who are still struggling to NEVER give up. You are here for a reason. If you feel like you are in a dark place, know that your breakthrough is just around the corner.

*"I WAS ABLE TO
TURN MY LIFE
AROUND, BUT
OTHERS AREN'T
SO LUCKY."*



DESTINED FOR MORE

By Marcellia Goodrich

Growing up I did not have what you would call an ideal childhood. My mother was on drugs from the time I was a baby and she was not in her right mind to take care of herself, let alone a child. I felt like my mother did not want me when she left me with anyone who would take care of me, usually a family member.

One day, when I was 10 years old, my family could not care for me anymore, so they called the Department of Social Services, and I was placed in foster care. I stayed there until I aged out at 19.

Life in foster care was very hard. I felt like the world was against me. I asked myself, "Why did this have to happen to me?" I would beat myself up and say that it was my fault I had to be there. I was separated from my brother and moved

seven times. It was challenging because I never knew what new foster parents would think of me. I was living with strangers, and some of them acted like they cared when they did not. Some just saw me as a paycheck. There was no love.

One of my worst memories was coming out as a lesbian to my foster mom. I have been attracted to women since I was 11, but growing up, I was in denial about my sexuality because I felt like my peers would judge me. When I was 17 I had my first relationship with a woman, and my foster mom at that time talked bad about me to her own family because of my preference. When I was a high school senior she said, "I am not going to pay for a gay prom." I took a job at a pizza place, so I could save up and buy my own prom dress.

I had another foster mother who told me I would not amount to anything. I wanted to prove her wrong, so I set out to do well in school. That was the best revenge I could have. I also did not

want to end up like my mother. I knew that I had to do something better for myself and that I was destined for something bigger.

I graduated from high school, and went onto college. It wasn't easy. Transitioning into adulthood from foster care was tough. I felt like I was left on my own. But I am making it. I have a full-time job and I am going to be the first generation in my family to graduate from college. That is a big accomplishment for me.

I also joined California Youth Connection (CYC). We advocate for current and former foster youth, working to make a better future for them. My hope is that when it comes time for other foster youth to attend college, they will not have the same struggles and worries I did. Since I have the opportunity to make a change for the better, I will. It is all about empowerment.

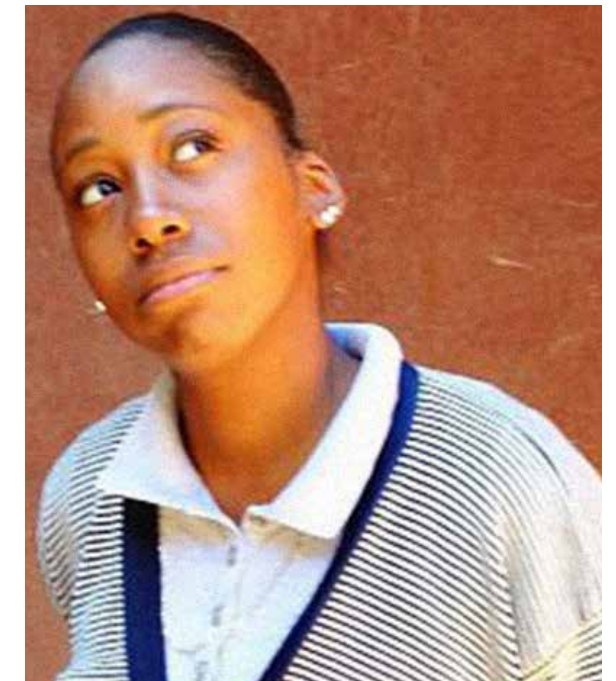
I believe that in order for foster care to be a better place, social workers should not have heavy caseloads, and should do surprise visits. Foster parents should be evaluated quarterly, and children should be able to visit their siblings. Youth should also be informed of all of their rights. People need to know that foster youth need love and care just like other children. We may need a little more guidance, but we are still human.

To the youth who are in care now, I would tell them to continue your education. It will take you far in life. No matter what, life will have its ups and downs, but it is about the way you deal with those encounters that make you the person you are. Believe me, life does come back around. Hang in there. You are going to love the person you become. The sky is not the limit — go past that. Always have an open mind and be open to experiencing new things. In the end everything you have gone through will make you that much stronger.

When I was younger, I always wondered why my mother acted like she didn't want me. But as I

got older, I came to realize that it was not that she did not want to be there for me — she just could not. She was an addict, and incapable of being the mother I needed. Once I understood this, I took responsibility for myself and my future, and it has made a big difference in my life.

"PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW THAT FOSTER YOUTH NEED LOVE AND CARE JUST LIKE OTHER CHILDREN."



INSTABILITY

By Dylan McIntosh

My foster father always had a stressed look about him, the look that told me he had to try hard to make ends meet. He gave me a lot of freedom while he was busy working as a lawyer and consultant. But even with that freedom, he'd ensure I'd make the right choices. If my grades slipped up, he'd scold me. If I had to do a science project, he'd put his busy schedule on hold just to help me, even if it meant staying up all night. He didn't always have time for me, but when it was the right thing to do, he was there.

In October of 2007, after living in his home for nearly five months, he asked me if I wanted to go to Chicago. We had gone several times prior, because he had family there. The day before he invited me, I'd heard him on the phone, talking with someone who seemed important. I thought nothing of it, and said yes to the trip.

When we were there my foster dad took me to Six Flags, bought me some new clothes, and even took me out to a really expensive restaurant. While we were at dinner, the Chicago Bears football team walked in, and proceeded to sit down. It was amazing, and I was having the time of my life.

But at dinner I felt the rug pull out from underneath me when he told me he had accepted a job in Washington, D.C. At first I was super excited. Then he said, "I have to move and thought bringing you to Chicago might soften the blow." I couldn't contain my sadness. I started crying. Although I never told him, I always hoped he'd be the one to adopt me. I thought he'd rescue me from an unhappy life I couldn't control, one where I was bounced from home to home.

I was 14, and I was angry. I was mad because the person I thought would become my dad was choosing a job over me. He hurt me, and I hated him for the longest time after that. But he was being offered the job of a lifetime. Who wouldn't take it? He had the opportunity to pay off his debt and make his life something wonderful. You couldn't really blame a guy for trying to get ahead.

I felt endlessly conflicted. I experienced intense anger because even after I moved to a new home, he thought he could still have a say in my life. I started acting out, being rude and disobeying orders. When he found out, he came



"I ALWAYS HOPED HE'D BE THE ONE TO ADOPT ME. I THOUGHT HE'D RESCUE ME FROM AN UNHAPPY LIFE I COULDN'T CONTROL."

to see me and told me to cut it out — that I could do things well, or not do them at all. He always had high expectations for me, and talked me down from my behavior, but that incident upset me even more. He left, yet continued to have a stake in my life. It wasn't fair.

Being tossed around without anyone to hold onto was the foundation of my childhood. I bounced around between 23 different homes during my time in foster care. I was placed with a family at the age of 13. I lived with them for nine months. We were even discussing the possibility of adoption. Then the family told me "Dylan, you weren't the boy we wanted you

to be." Just like that, I was living somewhere new. Despite being rejected and repeatedly abandoned, I clung to hope that one day I'd be adopted. I viewed that as being loved. What child wouldn't? But the person I had the highest hopes for let me down, like everyone else did.

A RELEASE DATE FROM THE PAST

By Cherish Thomas

Over 13 years is what I served in our nation's foster care system. At an early age, I was removed from my birth mother. She was just a teen, and already struggled with an addiction to men and drugs, which she sold and used. My father, well, he was non-existent. At the time of my birth he was in prison. I didn't grow up knowing what a father was, neither did I realize I missed having one.

I was born an orphan. I may as well have not existed to my parents as they were caught up in their addictions. My needs and my life weren't significant enough for them to change. When you grow up not having a set of parents to give you a portrait to reference love, truth and purpose, you feel like you missed something. I grew up watching the examples of other people's lives, feeling I was looking from a doubled-sided glass mirror that I could see out of, but no one could see into.

From around ages 1 to 4, I was bounced from one home to the next. I was adopted by the time I was 5. But instead of a bright beginning it was another road filled with instability, insecurity,

abuse and loss. It is like I never left the system. At around 11, I returned to foster care, moving between foster homes, shelters, group homes and detention centers, from one failed placement to the next failed adoption. I was shipped from the South to the North, living in care in two different states.

I had approximately 20 different placements. I carried all I owned in black garbage bags. In between placements I was homeless — I slept on random couches or in abandoned apartments, and spent sleepless nights wandering in parks dark enough not to be spotted. Sometimes my homelessness was self-imposed because I knew no one wanted me. I ran from the abuse and the callus that grew from not being able to even feel anymore. Honestly, I was tired of being reminded that I was unwanted.

No one wanted to foster a teenager, unless it was for supplemental income, a babysitter, to do chores or serve as a placeholder for their pain — the punching bag of their emotional wounds, a sexual toy for their pleasure. I attended 14 different schools. Nothing in my life lasted very

long. Nothing was predictable except constantly feeling rejected and unloved.

My life was marred by pain that seemed to get deeper and deeper. I remember many people saying "I Love you," but rarely did I ever feel love. I suffered in silence repeatedly through sexual, physical and emotional abuse. It seemed like a cycle from which I could not break away, no matter what home I was placed in or whom I encountered. No safety came from the arms of the system.

"IN BETWEEN PLACEMENTS I WAS HOMELESS — I SLEPT ON RANDOM COUCHES OR IN ABANDONED APARTMENTS."



I went through so many experiences, my memory had been impaired to the point that I had no timeline of the things that occurred in my life — memories seemed to bleed into each other. I didn't have pictures or a recollection of memories reinforced throughout my childhood because even they were scattered among the multiple people and places I had bounced between.

Still, thanks to the kindness of a friend and her family, I was able to fight my way through and finish high school. My early adulthood was spent trying to put the pieces of my life together so it could make sense, give me some frame of reference, and help me find me, find who Cherish was. I had to read about a lot of my life in foster care from documents that I requested when I was 18. It is funny having to learn about yourself through written assessments from workers who visited you for not even an hour a month, if they showed up at all.

Then there was my release. I had finally grown out of the system. I found my birth parents, and while they weren't what I expected, I learned to forgive and I have a relationship with each of them. I was blessed with a full ride to a Big Ten school. I became the first in my family to complete high school, college and graduate studies. I work in the field that I felt kidnapped and imprisoned me, to make a difference and represent hope for children who feel unloved and marred by negative experiences. I was just like them, but I was determined I WOULD NOT be another statistic, or represent the demeaning title of "state ward" or "system child."

It is not what you go through, it is about not allowing your circumstances to become your future. Just like a camera takes new pictures, you can create new memories that develop a better portrait of the life you choose to live. There is a release date on your pain and freedom from your past.

FROM FOSTER TO FAVOURED

By James Brown

At the age of 3, I was taken from my biological mother. She had run away from home to escape sexual abuse at 13, and had me by the time she was 15. For the first nine months of my childhood, I was with her at an institution for pregnant, troubled youth. She later wound up in prison on drug-related charges. At that point I was put up for, and eventually was, adopted. I never found out until later in my childhood.

From the age of 3 until around 7 or 8, everything was great. I was a very happy child. I had an older brother and we grew up playing sports, going to family reunions and vacations to the beach every year. I loved my family, especially my brother. But at around 7 or 8 I figured out I was adopted. Things drastically changed from there on out. I was shocked and had many questions. I became rebellious, and that didn't sit

well with a stern Vietnam veteran and a straight-laced woman from a small town in West Virginia.

For the next few years I endured endless amounts of emotional and physical abuse. I was forced to eat to the point of throwing up, then had to eat my own vomit because I ate too "slow" according to their standards. If I was "caught" eating chips past bedtime, I would get the whooping of a lifetime.

Despite everything I endured physically, what hurt the most was the emotional abuse. For years I was told I'd never amount to anything, or that I'd be dead by 12 or in jail. A few days before my 12th birthday I was taken to the local pastor's house, and I would never again see or talk to the only family I ever knew. I'll never forget that day. It was the ultimate feeling of abandonment. Soon I would arrive at my new home — a foster home.

I spent the first day in care crying in the room. A million questions ran through my head, not to mention that I was feeling like a prisoner. The room had a camera and a door alarm that went off as loud as five sirens. As time went on I adjusted in the home, but not so much to the

people around me. I was in a small town where I was one of the very, very few people of mixed complexion.

Over the next few years, I went through many foster homes. Things would soon change for the better. When I was 14 my caseworker called me and said she had a family in Tennessee who wanted to adopt me. I was against it — I didn't want to go through another adoption — but she was adamant that this was a good fit for me. I agreed to give it a shot only because of the love, respect and trust I had in her. At age 15 I was adopted again by a highly educated man whom I will forever proudly consider my dad.

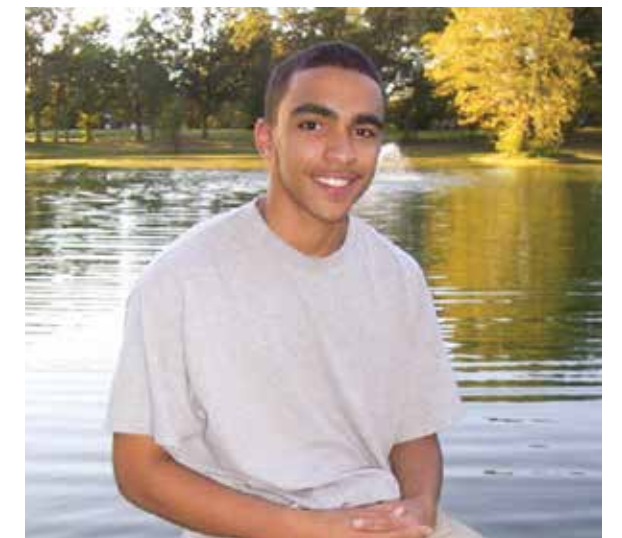
Ultimately, foster care saved my childhood and possibly my life. I have both good and bad memories from the experience but overall I am very grateful for the system. Being in foster care taught me how to be strong and be thankful. I was also very fortunate to have a great caseworker, probation officer and a judge who had my best interests in mind. Because of these amazing people in my life, I didn't give up. They wouldn't let me. I remember my caseworker Ann telling me, "James you're going to make something out of yourself one day, you're special and are going to go on and do great things in life." As I sit remembering this, it makes me cry. It's because of those words that I didn't give up on life. She saw something in me that I couldn't see in myself.

I am now a proud father of a beautiful 7-year-old little girl. I've developed a relationship with my biological mother after 16 years of being separated, and I am very proud of her for overcoming the adversities life threw at her. After college I accepted an internship at a fortune 500 company out of Dallas, Texas where I've been employed since 2009, but I am transitioning my focus to working with those who are less fortunate. I'm a motivational speaker and am

currently working on writing a book titled "The Lost Boy — Memoirs of a Foster Child."

If I could say anything to my beloved brothers and sisters in state care, I would want them to know to not give up. Find love from within and forgive those who have wronged you. If you can make it through foster care, you can make it through anything. You have a special purpose on this earth that is much larger than you could ever imagine. You are loved, special and worthy of a good life. It'll get better, hold on strong and don't take life for granted.

"ULTIMATELY, FOSTER CARE SAVED MY CHILDHOOD AND POSSIBLY MY LIFE."



WE KNOW HOW TO CHANGE FOSTER CARE

By Juan Carlos Piñeiro Escoriza

In 2010 I got a call from the founder of a nonprofit called the Possibility Project, requesting a meeting — they wanted to make a movie that would empower a group of foster care youth to tell their stories.

Originally I thought the film might be more of a hybrid between documentary and fiction, but the point was to give the youth a platform to tell their own stories. The film, called “Know How,” is a musical drama based on foster care youth’s real life stories.

Before I sat down with the foster care cast, I really didn’t know that much about foster care other than bits and pieces I’d read in the news. We sat at that round table five or six hours straight, story after story, one youth’s voice leading into another, heart wrenching and hopeful at once. It was an eye-opening experience where I learned about a system that had underserved them and many other foster care youth.

Their stories began at home, parent’s drug abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, stealing to survive, skipping school for months at a time,

finding ways to overcome difficult odds. Then they were taken from their homes, and dropped into a system where they were seen as numbers, with lawyers and judges who they didn’t fully understand, caseworkers who didn’t advocate for them, abusive foster parents who didn’t give them enough money to live, treatment centers that overmedicated them with prescription drugs, and the list went on. Grievance after grievance piled up, one on top of another, and it was difficult to respond. How did we let this happen? How could their voices have gone unheard?

At first I sat, I listened, I asked questions and more questions. A multi-protagonist plot line formed that weaved in and out of each other’s lives. Sometimes they were deeply involved in one another’s world, and sometimes they just glanced off for a moment. Somehow we ended up with a 124-page foster care epic.

Today those youth are some of my closest friends. We know and understand each other in a way that is unique to having made a movie together. After years hanging out I’ve taken a few things away from being a part of their

lives. First and foremost, they’re some of the bravest individuals I know, willing to show parts of themselves that are raw and difficult to talk about. These youth are survivors who have been through an enormous amount and found ways to cope with pain, grief, and a myriad of crises that most people won’t live through in their lifetimes. They’re also some of the funniest people I’ve ever met, and when we’re together I never stop laughing. Their unique perspective on life is hopeful and they want to succeed as much as anybody else.

If we give foster care youth the tools to excel, I have no doubt we’ll see more rise up and become leaders in our society. These individuals are tenacious and want to make the world a better place for themselves and for others.

Here’s what I think we can do:

- Get more people involved in the lives of foster care youth as advocates and mentors.
- Have more great adults become great foster parents.
- Create more leadership programs for foster care youth to be empowered.
- Develop peer-to-peer mentorship programs where youth who aged out can come back and contribute.
- Humanize youth who are currently in the system so they don’t feel like numbers.
- Give youth in the system more responsibility over their lives.
- Raise the age for youth to “age out” of care to 21 nationally, if not 24 years old.
- Make college free nationally for foster care youth after they’ve already aged out.

Today, a few years after aging out of foster care, only 50 percent of young people will complete high school or a GED, 60 percent will be convicted of a crime, 75 percent will receive public assistance, and only 6 percent will complete a college degree, according to several studies. A system producing these results needs to change.

“IF WE GIVE FOSTER CARE YOUTH THE TOOLS TO EXCEL, I HAVE NO DOUBT WE’LL SEE MORE RISE UP AND BECOME LEADERS IN OUR SOCIETY.”



THE POWER OF SUPPORT

By Sanni Brown-Adefope

My experience in foster care was a roller coaster ride.

At 15, I was placed in foster care, when my mother's struggles with mental illness elevated to the point that she could no longer take care of me and my younger sister. I lived in two foster homes with two totally different outcomes. The first catered to younger children and left me with very negative feelings toward the system. The second served teens, and changed my mind about foster care entirely.

When I think about my first home, the word "prison" comes to mind. It never felt like a home to me and I think the other kids that lived there would agree. We lived under the constant threat of being sent to a shelter, often for doing things that normal kids do. If I came home a little late from after-school activities because practice ran over or I missed the bus, I was accused of doing "something sneaky" and threatened with being kicked out. I never referred to that place as

home. To me, it was just a house where my sister and I slept and ate and waited to be reunited with our family.

A lot of negative incidents occurred in that place, but one of the worst was when my sister was forced to fight another child in the garage. They were around the same age, and like little kids do, they'd bickered about everything under the sun. When my foster guardians grew tired of it, they forced them to fight out their differences. I've always tried to protect my sister. I never imagined she would be put in such an extreme situation, while living in a place that was supposed to be a "safe" home. Wasn't this the very thing that foster care was supposed to shield us from?

Despite the instability in my life, I ended up excelling in school — I was on the honor roll, cheer captain and lead in the choir. The county was working to reunite my sister with our family, but I wanted to stay in the same high school, where I had one year left before graduation.

At 16, I moved to my second home, this time without my sister. I lived with a stern but laid-back woman whom I call "Granny." Although we disagreed about a lot of things, she had the kind of nurturing home and heart that I needed.

My first weekend at Granny's, she did something that would have never happened in my previous home: she took my boyfriend and me tubing. I'm not sure if she knows this, but in one single trip

"I HAD A VOICE WHEN I WAS IN FOSTER CARE, BUT NOBODY LISTENED."



Granny had shown me acceptance and support; things I'd never received in my first home. She was also there for me when my boyfriend broke my heart and when friends turned their back on me. Granny supported me in activities like becoming a debutante in the 2000 Cotillion Ball with the Minneapolis-St. Paul Chapter of the Links Incorporated, and becoming prom queen. She also helped me get into college.

In my adulthood, Granny revealed to me that my previous foster parents had "warned" her about me. Together, we proved them wrong. Support, acceptance and guidance can take a child to unimaginable heights. I eventually got my own apartment. I struggled for a few years before I really got on solid ground. It was hard, but I did it. I now have my own radio show on KMOJ in Minneapolis. I am back under the same roof as my sister and mother, who has received help to manage her mental illness. My daughter and nephew also live with us.

I do believe that foster care should change. No child should ever feel like their home is a prison. Children should have a safe place to discuss how they really feel about their placement and whether it's working out for them. I believe in this so much, that I've accepted a speaking role on behalf of The Children's Law Center of Minnesota to spread the word about the importance of giving foster youth a voice.

I had a voice when I was in foster care, but nobody listened. Now as a radio personality and public speaker, I can use my work as a platform to speak about the uncomfortable and unseen issues of foster care. Hopefully my online voice can do the same with this blog I wrote for Children's Rights. There are definitely some good homes and families out there for our children. We should do everything in our power to make sure that these homes are the rule and not the exception.

THE SURROGACY FACTOR

By Alain Datcher

“I’m never leaving this place.”

I will never forget the discouragement and hopelessness behind Marcus’ words. He and I had bonded during our time at MacLaren Hall — an asylum-like facility for Los Angeles County’s abused and neglected children. He had just heard the news that I’d be leaving in a week, to be placed with a relative. I would stay in this arrangement, known as kinship care, until I emancipated at age 18.

Even though our lives took different paths, Marcus and I are both alumni of a peculiar academy, where graduates receive no diploma and the optimism of the future is replaced by an inexplicable apprehension. The academy is called foster care. The commencement process is known as aging out. And for so many that cross its proverbial stage, it becomes a journey down a difficult road.

My journey began with an all-too-familiar narrative for foster children: I was born to two drug-abusing parents and, along with my four siblings, would spend most of my childhood surrounded by gang violence, prostitution and poverty. My mother frequently was incarcerated while my father, though present, was physically and verbally abusive when not under the influence. I was at risk of becoming a statistic: gang member, incarcerated or dead.

However, my trajectory changed because of the opportunity to live in kinship care. Unlike many foster children, I had an older sister who was willing to take in my siblings and me. I also had a Christian community that became an extended surrogate family. I was able to graduate from high school and college with a support network I obtained because of my sister’s sacrifice.

In many ways I am viewed as a foster care “success story.” I agree. I have been fortunate enough to impact foster care policy as an intern at both Los Angeles City Hall and Capitol Hill. However, even with the support of others, it was still extremely difficult to be in foster care and even more difficult when I emancipated. I was a young man dealing with the residue of a broken childhood and the constant reminder I would never return home to my parents.

And as lucky as I was, kinship care isn’t perfect, particularly because the caregivers often don’t get resources adequate enough for raising the children in their homes. That is why it is essential that children who spend a substantial amount of time in foster care or emancipate from its system obtain support specified to meet their needs.

Many times foster children are like nomads, kept in a limbo of foster and group homes with little stability. For too long children have been

told “be patient,” “wait,” and that their desire for a forever family has to be delayed until the process of lawmaking runs its course. How can we tell children the bureaucratic process is too difficult and the resources too scarce to provide them with safe, loving and permanent homes?

Our nation lays witness to the outcome for thousands of children who exit foster care with no consistent support network. We are essentially subjecting them to a system that, more often than not, produces ill-prepared men and women. Fewer than 50 percent of former foster youth are employed 2½ to 4 years after leaving foster care, and only 38 percent have maintained employment for over one year. Statistics concerning education for foster youth are even more dismal, with only 2 percent of foster youth obtaining a bachelor’s degree or higher. Every child who ages out of foster care without a support network is a child that our system has failed.

The term “foster” is synonymous with temporary or makeshift. What children aging out need isn’t temporary care — they need surrogates. They need a host of long-term, stable connections with individuals committed to improving the educational, emotional and vocational outcomes of these youth. I would call this process “Systemic Surrogacy.” Advocating for surrogate care at a systemic level would not only improve outcomes, but identify a sustainable network for children to help support their aging out process. This system, tailored to individual youth, could help alleviate some of the adverse outcomes associated with emancipation.

I think of Marcus often, wondering what became of him. What I do know is that thousands of children like him age out of a system with nothing more than the clothes on their backs and the uneasiness of their futures. I couldn’t bring Marcus with me then, but I believe I can make the transition process much more successful for others now.

“HOW CAN WE TELL CHILDREN THE BUREAUCRATIC PROCESS IS TOO DIFFICULT AND THE RESOURCES TOO SCARCE TO PROVIDE THEM WITH SAFE, LOVING AND PERMANENT HOMES?”



FURTHERING OUR MISSION

By Marcia Robinson Lowry

Foster care is often discussed in statistics: about 640,000 kids spend time in care each year; nearly 15,000 children have been waiting for five or more years to be adopted; at least 25 states do not meet the federal standard for keeping kids safe while in care.

But when it comes to raising awareness about what state care is really like, numbers just aren't enough. It is crucial for the public to hear directly from those whose lives have been affected. That is why Children's Rights launched our second annual National Foster Care Month campaign — to amplify the voices of those who have experienced state care.

I am glad to report that more people are paying attention.

We've heard from 30 people whose lives have been touched by child welfare. The first-person accounts from former foster youth,

foster parents and advocates have gone far to educate the public on the impact — good and bad — that foster care has on kids. Both Univision and New York City's National Public Radio affiliate covered the campaign. When we shared the blogs on Facebook, the posts received nearly 18,500 likes, double those of last year. Throughout the month, our Facebook page received 2,500 new likes, more than triple those of last May.

As a result, thousands of people have been exposed to the realities of foster care, a crucial first step in creating change. We are profoundly grateful to our *Fostering the Future* writers for helping to make this happen.

Some described the silver linings of state care: "My foster mother, Connie, took the time to teach my foster brothers and me valuable things like cooking, writing and how to find employment ... Without the stability of that home I don't know where I would be today," Vannak wrote. Another blogger, Ollie, said she had "a fantastic group of caseworkers ... They never gave up on me or my goals."

"CHILDREN'S RIGHTS USES LEGAL ADVOCACY TO EFFECT CHANGE, BUT WE ALSO KNOW THAT RAISING PUBLIC AWARENESS IS CRUCIAL TO MAKING FOSTER CARE A BETTER PLACE FOR KIDS."



Others provided more grim details: "I went through four different placements in as many months. I felt like my life was in complete chaos," wrote Kaylyn. "Not knowing what might happen to me was terrifying."

"My brother and I were frequently tortured by our foster mother. If we didn't perform well in school, she would punish us. Sometimes we wouldn't eat for days," Gilbert wrote.

"For four years, I lived with the same foster family. I called them 'Mom' and 'Dad' and begged them to adopt me," wrote Hank. "One day, I returned to find my bags packed ... My feelings of self-worth and sense of belonging deteriorated completely."

No child deserves to endure experiences like these. Unfortunately, this is what life is like for far too many kids in foster care. It is unconscionable that, all too often, child welfare systems fail to keep kids safe or address their needs.

Children's Rights uses legal advocacy to effect change, but we also know that raising public awareness is crucial to making foster care a better place for kids. It takes a brave person to emerge from struggles, and tell the world what they've endured. I want to thank our bloggers for being so courageous. It has been a privilege to share your stories.

Thank you to all the people who followed along with us, and took the time to read these highly personal accounts, share them with friends and family, and help us raise awareness about what life can be like for the hundreds of thousands of kids who must spend time in state care each year.

Marcia Robinson Lowry is founder and director emerita of Children's Rights.

TO LEARN MORE

about supporting Children's Rights,
please visit our website at
www.childrensrights.org
or call us at **212.683.2210**

**CONTACT
CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS**

Children's Rights
330 Seventh Avenue
New York, NY 10001
212.683.2210

Like Children's Rights on **Facebook**
Follow us on Twitter **@ChildrensRights**

www.childrensrights.org