

## **The Museum of Lost Childhoods and The Museum of Foster Youth Empowerment**

Conceived by foster youth and former foster youth working in the Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project at San Francisco State University, the Museums of Lost Childhoods and of Foster Youth Empowerment are collections of artifacts of foster youth culture, many of which were actual items from former foster youth's lives, contributed to the museum in the hope of making an impact on the child welfare system. They are exhibited on clear plastic risers or in cases and placed on tables that are draped in black cloth. Each item is accompanied by a description of the item in the context of foster care and the experience of the person who contributed it.

Participants first come to the Museum of Lost Childhoods, which is introduced by the following statement, displayed on an easel at the head of the table on which the artifacts are displayed:

*Childhood years are most influential for a person's cognitive, social and emotional development. There are teachable moments in learning to ride one's first bike, in being read a story at bedtime, in celebrating a birthday with family. The Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project reminds us that these and countless other teachable moments are just that, moments – glimpses of time where the present affects the future. The Museum of Lost Childhoods, conceived by members of the Y.O.U.T.H Training Project, offers a starkly contrasting look into childhoods where developmental moments were in essence lost, and replaced with the memories laid out before you.*

The memorabilia displayed on the table include the following and many similar items:

- A box of the powdered milk provided by the foster parents who refused to purchase "real milk" because it was more expensive.
- Motel soaps and shampoos from which group home residents had to choose two items at a time for personal hygiene use.
- Multiple prescription bottles to represent the overmedication of so many foster youth.
- Liquor bottles and drug paraphernalia to represent the substance abuse so many foster children and youth resort to in order to escape from their pain.
- A baby book in which nothing had been entered except the baby's name.
- The toothbrush given to an African American youth to use as a hairbrush by group home staff when the youth's brush was lost because "Black hairbrushes were not available".
- The unsightly hospital gown that was almost transparent from age and wear that had been issued to a youth in an in-patient mental health facility for 24 hour wear.
- Dental floss to represent the lack of attention to dental hygiene for foster children and the resulting serious dental problems that so many of them develop.

Then one comes to the Museum of Foster Youth Empowerment, introduced by the following statement:

*In contrast to the Museum of Lost Childhoods, we present the Museum of Foster Youth Empowerment. Presented here are examples of the many forms of success of foster youth and the multitude of people which are a part of that process. Ultimately this museum exists as a testament to the unwavering perseverance, strength, and amazing spirits of foster youth who have become empowered in their own lives and who strive to create change for others.*

The artifacts on this table reflect the resiliency of so many foster youth and the beneficial impact on their lives of a positive youth development approach in child welfare. They include such items as:

- Examples of one youth's journaling, her method of lending voice to her feelings, experiences, and choices.
- High school diplomas and GED certificates of foster youth.
- Pictures of a former foster youth with her young daughter, an obviously healthy and happy child of approximately two years of age.
- The business cards of former foster youth now working in the human services and other professional fields.
- College diplomas and graduation pictures of former foster youth who have obtained their undergraduate and their graduate degrees.
- Community service award certificates reflective of the very significant contributions youth are making to their communities.
- Y.O.U.T.H Training Project awards presented to youth trainers.
- Y.O.U.T.H. Trainers – pictures of youth trainers in action.
- Youth advocates (former foster youth) meeting with Gov. Schwarzenegger and members of the California General Assembly to advocate for foster care reform.