

Foster Care as a Support to Families, Not a Substitute for Parents

Changing Identities: Accepting the Past and Advocating for a Better Future

As a foster care alumna, I never saw myself as an advocate because I wanted to move forward in my life and establish a new identity. I was convinced that I had to prove myself and demonstrate my ability to overcome my past. I dedicated myself to volunteerism and making a difference, but from age 14 to 35, I distanced myself from my foster care experience. After becoming a mother, I made peace with my biological mother and began to realize that I could help others by sharing my story. Additionally, after working 10 years in higher education, I realized how many youth in foster care strive to complete college but fall short of meeting their educational goals. I realized the importance of collaboration to impact student success, and I have spent the past 5 years focusing on programs and initiatives (Ohio Reach, Columbus State Scholar Network, The Higher Education Mentoring Initiative, HB50/Bridges, and Foster Youth and Foster Parent Training sessions) that support increased graduation rates and wraparound support for youth. Professionally and personally, I now identify as a former foster youth who graduated from high school (less than 36 percent of youth in foster care graduate), college (less than 3 percent graduate), and graduate school. Throughout my life, I experienced a series of roadblocks that made me feel like my worth was limited, when, instead, I should have realized how limitless my potential could be, if I just believed in myself. Unfortunately, my traumatic experiences trained me to expect the worst and to not trust people. My struggle centered on lacking self-worth and fearing rejection, but after many years of self-doubt, I finally learned how to love myself when I quit worrying about the worst-case scenario in every situation.



This past year, many people have asked me, “How did you do it?” The fact is that if I lived only in my feelings and insecurities, I would have never made it on my own. The miracle is that many people have impacted my life, and I remain thankful for each person and how they took the time to lift me up. Beginning with teachers, both educational and spiritual, I gained self-confidence and learned how to give a voice to my story. I still remember when my Spanish teacher told me how I emerged from being a shy and withdrawn young lady to becoming as a beautiful butterfly.

She knew my struggle and affirmed my growth. My foster parents/family influenced my life by creating stability and affirming my gifts. I remember when I wanted to quit art in ninth grade, but my foster mother convinced me to keep on keeping on. My first job supervisor in college asked me about my goals and helped me learn how to drive and assisted me with getting my driver's license (she let me driver her car during my test). My mentors helped me to plan and advance at every stage of my life through resiliency practices. I have overcome many setbacks because people affirmed my life and helped me redefine love. I know that sacrifices were made, whether it was financial support, a late-night phone call, and/or many prayers. In 2016, I finally realized the impact of my story when I spoke to foster youth in Washington, DC, at the U.S. Department of Education. I am proud of my advocacy and the difference I am making in my community. At 41, I am not a statistic—I am a survivor because I have turned my hurt into healing and learned to break the cycle of abuse.

What difference can you make? Supporters of foster youth: Try and try again to make a difference. Help youth to never give up. Learn about resiliency and the impact of trauma. Give youth the space to grow but affirm them every step of the way. Show up. Be consistent. Don't take "distancing" personally. Youth: You are not a statistic. Realize that obstacles teach you how to move forward. Do not stay stuck. Learn to ask for help. Go to counseling. Take brave steps and connect with your community. Learn how to advocate and make change to improve outcomes for other youth. Love yourself because your life matters!



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