Changing Labels: From Transitioning Youth to Transforming Families

On graduation night, I had my things packed in the driveway of my supervised living home. After a summer of being on probation, working a retail job, and going to night school to catch up on math credits, I couldn't wait another day. I was already 18 and I was ready to be free from the label “ward of the State.” Little did I know that I was already given a new label of “transition-age youth.” Where I come from, transitioning youth are young people between the ages 16 and 24 in the child welfare system. Many of these youth age out of the foster care system without family support. These youth are often straddling multiple service systems with little to no guidance from adults and often lacking the life lessons that parents typically provide. I, like many other transitioning youth, experienced living in a new home and attending a new school every year of high school. On top of not having stable living conditions and having to make multiple attempts to conform to new families and structures, I had over a half dozen caseworkers. The instability was hard, but I knew I had to do something to prevent other kids from becoming a statistic.

Today, I work as the community liaison for 3:11 Youth Housing. 3:11 Youth Housing is a nonprofit that provides safe and affordable housing to youth who have aged out of foster care or experienced homelessness in Kent County, Michigan. 3:11 is an organization that is trauma informed, compassionate, and has created a safe place for youth to flourish by providing low-barrier, safe, and affordable housing. I use my lived experiences as a former transitioning youth to help develop and implement policies and procedures to engage youth in financial education, employment, and, most importantly, peer support and community engagement. My work has been recognized by The Young Nonprofit Professionals Network of Grand Rapids. I am nominated for Advocate of The Year! I’m proud to say that I am not only breaking the cycle of poverty and domestic violence in my own family, but I am also serving as an advocate for the families in my community that have been redlined, systematically oppressed, and forgotten.

For more information on 3:11 Youth Housing, please visit https://www.3-11.org/.