

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

### Empowering Youth to be Agents of Change in Their Own Lives

I spent 17 years in foster care. If my memory serves me correctly, I lived in about 12 different homes and in one shelter. And I attended about 10 different schools in Western Pennsylvania, across two different counties. All my life, my mother suffered from severe mental illness; my father was absent. I say all of this to emphasize that many youth pay attention to their placements, their schools, and their lives. Their input and their engagement in both court hearings and the full permanency planning process can and does lead to improved



stabilization, as well as expedited reunification and permanency because it enables them as stakeholders in their own lives. Foster care and non-traditional family structures often make people impacted by foster care feel disempowered and detached from their own lives. But, when we intentionally trust youth to provide us information about their wants and their needs, we give them back the agency they so desperately seek. I remember being a small child, no more than 5 or 6, and I was given the chance to speak at a court hearing that was held in downtown Pittsburgh in a gloomy, dungeon-like courthouse. Although I was (and still very much am) a shy introvert, I clearly spoke up and out to the judge that I would like to be back with my mother. I felt seen, I was heard, and I felt empowered to be a working part of my own permanency plan.

It would be incredibly negligent of me to not mention the importance of strong connections during my 17 years in foster care. There were key people throughout my entire childhood and adolescents, including lawyers, social workers, advocates, independent living workers, and even judges who grew to know me and who were in support of me being empowered to advocate for myself, my wants, and my needs. I am still in contact with many of these individuals today. Social media has been a powerful medium for connecting and maintaining those relationships that shaped me into the person I am today. Their connectedness to me and their investment into my growth and success will be with me forever. I look forward to empowering other youth in foster care to be agents of great, powerful, and positive change within their own lives and the lives of those around them!



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