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ADVOCATE

Advocating for America's Youth in Foster Care:

Perspectives and Recommendations
from Former Foster Youth

May is National Foster Care Month, a fitting time for adoption and child welfare advocates to reaffirm our commitment to addressing the needs of children in foster care. In advocating for the best interests of children and youth in care, it is essential that we listen to them, value their opinions and firsthand knowledge as individuals who have experienced the U.S. foster care system, and welcome their suggestions on how to improve the lives of children and young people in care.

This issue of NCFAs *Adoption Advocate* is based on interviews with former Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute Foster Youth Interns Jetaine Hart, Marisela Ortiz, Jeremy Long, Jelani Freeman, Mason McFalls, and John Paul Horn. The National Council For Adoption is deeply grateful for their generosity and candor in sharing their experiences. It is our hope that this article will help adoption and child welfare advocates better understand and work for the best interests of the many thousands of children and youth in foster care.



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ENTERING FOSTER CARE

Jetaine Hart | There was a lot of abuse and lack of resources in my biological family. We were very poor, and often we didn't have lunch to take to school or food in the house. Had someone noticed earlier, maybe my mom could have gotten help and my brother and I wouldn't have had to be removed. We were placed in foster care when I was nine, after my mother had a mental breakdown and tried to commit suicide. I remember how awkward it was to have a total stranger come to tell us that we were leaving our home and our school, and that our mother was in the hospital. At first we were placed in the same foster home, though later we were separated.

Marisela Ortiz | I entered care just before I turned 14, when my mother was deported. In Washington State, we had the option of extended care, so I aged out at 21 years old. My brother, two years younger, was also put in the foster care system with me.

Jeremy Long | I entered the foster care system at the age of 13, and was placed with a woman who had never been married or had children of her own. I was her very first foster youth, after a friend of hers who worked for the Department of Human Services recommended she get involved as a foster parent. Ever since then, she has been my mom, and we have been a family.

Jelani Freeman | I entered care in New York at the age of eight because my mother was not mentally fit to keep me. I had six different placements – two group homes and four different foster homes. I finished my last year in kinship care, because the foster mother in my previous family had passed away.

Mason McFalls | I entered the foster care system in Georgia at the age of seven. Members of my church saw what was going on at home – abuse, neglect, and malnourishment – and reported it, and so my brother and I were removed from home and placed in care together. Fortunately we were able to stay together after I convinced one of our early judges to make sure we weren't separated. Our sister had already been taken from our biological mother at the age of four, and she was eventually adopted. My brother and I were moved all over the state during our time in care; we lost count of all the placements. There were at least a dozen.

John Paul Horn | I spent 10 years in the foster care system. I was in 15 different placements, including foster homes, group homes, and residential treatment centers. I was emancipated from care after graduating from high school. My time in care was filled with ups and downs – I was abused in some homes; others I was unable to stay in because of my own issues. I also ran away from two different places and spent about six weeks homeless.

FOSTER PLACEMENTS AND INTERACTIONS WITH FOSTER PARENTS

Jetaine Hart Foster care is really difficult because you're always trying to learn what's appropriate, how to fit in somewhere, how not to get in trouble. It feels as if the rules are always changing on you. I was only in my first foster home for two weeks, and I got in trouble one night for eating a drumstick with my hands instead of using a fork and knife. At my next home, I used a fork and knife to eat a chicken leg and they laughed at me. It seems like such a small incident, and it was, but it taught me that there was no consistency from home to home, and that I was expected to know things I might not already know. Foster parents often expect kids in care to have been taught certain things, to just know how to behave in any given situation. And if you don't always know what to do, often you'll get in trouble.

I think I also had a hard time because my foster parents were expecting younger kids. But at nine years old, I asked a lot more questions, and wasn't as quiet as my brother. In our third foster home – where we were for a year and a half – there were a lot of red flags, but no one told us that we should report it if, for example, we saw our babysitters watching porn. It turned out the foster dad was a peeping tom and had propositioned one of the kids who lived there. I don't know how he got past the screening process, but he did somehow. A lot of foster parents have good intentions, but some get into it for the wrong reasons – for the income they can get for taking kids in, for example. Kids in care can always tell when the parents are just doing it for the money.

In my last foster home, I was able to be almost a normal teenager. I wasn't perfect, and I got grounded sometimes, but in their home I learned how to be in a family – I learned that I didn't have to walk away, and they wouldn't either, even if we argued. I stopped drinking and partying, and graduated from high school with a high GPA. My foster parents were proud of me. Really, it was my final foster family who finally gave me stability and a chance to be a normal teenager. I trusted them, and believed they were foster parenting for the right reasons.

Marisela Ortiz I had six different placements during my years in care. The longest placement was my second to last, where I stayed for a year and a half. I'm still in touch with my last foster mother. She went to my college graduation.

In my first placement, I didn't know what to expect. I was just going into high school. I was totally traumatized, and I *felt* rebellious, even though I never acted out. In my second home, where I lived with another girl in foster care who was also Latina, the family would not allow us to speak

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—Jetaine Hart

Spanish at all. I remember being so angry about that, the lack of respect for us and our culture. I thought it was totally unfair that I wasn't even allowed to be *myself*. It felt like they were trying to take away a part of who I was.

After that, I moved into a temporary placement, which was disgusting and dirty. And then I moved in with another foster parent who was young and hip, but tried to be my friend, not a parent figure. All through these placements, what affected me most was not having stability, not having a home – I never felt as if my foster home was my family, even when the people were nice. I felt very alone. My friends and teachers at school didn't understand my life, or what it meant not to have parents around. No one knew what it meant to be a foster child. I was invisible.

Jeremy Long | You always hear the horror stories about foster parents that get involved for the money and don't actually care about the youth. However, you can also go completely across the spectrum and see the families who genuinely care for the individuals that come into their lives – my mom, for example.

I would absolutely recommend becoming a foster parent to anyone who is interested just for the simple fact that they are given the opportunity to change a life for the better. I don't know if you can tell prospective foster parents what to expect, just because each youth that comes up through the system is going to be 100% different from all their peers. Foster parents need to be prepared for all the challenges, and realize that this is a commitment they need to follow through with. These youth are not articles of clothing that go out of style and get tossed in the trash. They are human beings with hearts, feelings, trials and errors, potentially negative upbringings; in short terms, caring for them is hard work.

Jelani Freeman | My first foster mother never really spoke to me, except to tell me things such as “dinner is ready.” I wasn't there for that long, only a few months. We didn't have any sort of relationship. It wasn't really disappointing or upsetting to me, it was just odd that we never spoke. There was no connection there.

In my next foster home, the parents had three kids of their own, one about my age. Often I wasn't allowed to do the same things their kids were allowed to do. I remember one day the circus was in town, and the family went, but I was left at home. At the time it didn't particularly seem terrible to me, like they were trying to be hurtful, but there was a definite sense while I was there that they saw me just as someone staying with them, like a boarder in their house – not a part of their family.

The next family was so different. Almost immediately I felt like part of the family, part of their traditions and their holidays. I stayed there for five years, and it was a great experience. There was one time, early in my

stay with them, when I had gotten a good report card, and I didn't show it to Mrs. Parker, my foster mother – but she found out about it and asked me why I hadn't told her. I said, "I don't know, I didn't know you would want to see it." She told me that she really did care, and that she was proud of me and wanted to celebrate my good grades. She took me out to dinner as a reward, and I remember at that point I was convinced that she really did care and that I was part of the family.

Mason McFalls | During my 11 years in the foster care system, I lived in more than a dozen foster and group homes all over the state. I was subject to abuse from my first foster parent, the preacher at our church, who eventually lost his faith and reverted to his former alcoholism. So my brother and I were taken away from him and moved to a group foster home for three months while waiting for another family to go through training and take us in. It was the first of several group homes we had to stay in, and it was tough there, because we were in one big home with a bunch of other foster youth, many of who just didn't seem to care anymore.

In our next foster home, the parents eventually decided not to foster anymore – they saw me and my brother as expendable, and felt their biological son wasn't getting the attention he needed – so again, we were moved. In all our foster homes until the last, it was the same situation: after a while, the foster family just didn't seem to want two extra teenaged boys in the house, and so they decided not to do it any longer.

In high school, I started taking my life into my own hands, and actually found my own foster family at church. I talked with this family about taking my brother and me in, and they did. So I got to stay with them till I graduated from high school.

REUNIFICATION

Jetaine Hart | My brother and I were returned to our mom at age twelve. That was a really, really difficult time for me. No one had really prepared me or my brother to go home. We had been away for three and a half years while my mother had been sick and on medication. I'd gotten used to caring for my brother, acting like his mother, and being as independent as possible myself, but my mother wanted to be our mom again and take on that role. Essentially I rejected it and didn't respect her authority. To me, she wasn't the mom I had grown up with, and she wasn't able to communicate with us or take care of the house the way she had at one time. So I rebelled, and made her agree to let me switch schools, and I started ditching class and drinking and doing a lot of things I shouldn't have been doing. I ended up on probation.

We had very little support after our family was reunited. To this day it baffles me that no one knew what was going on after we went back to our mom. Basically, my mother was unable to be a parent. I wanted a different home, and I told my probation officer to remove me. At the time he was the only adult in my life that really listened to me. While on probation, I couldn't be put in a foster home, so I stayed with my best friend's parents. It was really difficult to be separated from my brother; I think at times he resented me because he thought I was actually better off in foster care than with our mother.

After my probation ended, I was placed in what was going to be a temporary foster home – my sixth one – but a week turned into a month, and a month turned into a year. They kept saying “We'll keep her longer” – and I ended up staying with them until age 18.

I am still in contact with my biological mom. I told her she could call once a month or email me, but that's all I can handle – I had to set my own boundaries. It's such a difficult relationship. I do still talk regularly with my brother.

ADOPTION

Jetaine Hart | No one ever talked to me about adoption. Not once.

A year ago, close to my twenty-seventh birthday, I called my foster mom and said, “I know this sounds weird, but would you adopt me?” And she said yes! I was so happy when she said that. It seems strange to some people, like why would it matter to me at my age, but to me it makes a huge difference. I want this to be *mine* – forever – and I want to know that my family is committed to being with me, no matter what happens. I want a family that is permanent and can't ever be taken away. So the adoption is something we are going to pursue down the road. I see it as expanding my family, not substituting another set of parents for my mother.

I think it's so important to have the conversation about adoption. Child welfare workers must understand what it means and how to talk to youth about it. Don't use the word “permanency”; an 11-year-old might not know what that means. A lot of kids are just told, “You're going to go home to your family someday,” so when you ask them, “Do you want to be adopted?” they don't understand it as a goal at all. You have to know how to balance those two options, and talk about what it means to be adopted and how you don't necessarily have to give up your connection with your parents. Ask a kid more than once about adoption, because the answer could very well change. Finally, if a child is adopted out of foster care, it's not as if all her problems go away – so post-adoption services are very important, to give families the best chance at success.

Marisela Ortiz | A few foster parents wanted to adopt me, and they spoke to me about it – my caseworker never talked to me about adoption, but the foster parents did. But I knew my mom, and I knew I had a family, and I wanted to remain loyal to them.

I remember one year my older sister, who was already out of the house by the time I entered care, came to visit me at Christmas, and my foster parent told her to leave. I think it's important for foster parents to recognize that children in foster care have families they still love and care about, even if those families aren't there anymore. Foster parents should try to understand the child's parents and extended family as much as possible, and help them maintain those family relationships if they can, as another means of support and accountability for the child.

Jeremy Long | My mom was very focused on ensuring that I was not identified as a “foster youth.” I was simply her son. Only once did the topic of formal adoption arise between us – I was all for it, but at that time in the state of Colorado I would have lost a tremendous amount of money for higher education had I been legally adopted, so we never went through the official process. Technically I “aged out” of the system, but I did not do so without support or connections or the love of the people in my life that I call my family. To this day, my mom is still my mom, and she will always fill that role for me.

Jelani Freeman | My mother struggled with mental health issues, and I always had a feeling that I would never be reunified with her. But my permanency goal was always reunification, until I aged out at 18. There was never any discussion about adoption. I never knew much about it at all except for what I saw on TV. My caseworker never talked about it, and so it never dawned on me that it was even a possibility, I suppose because my mother's parental rights were never terminated. I was always very concerned about her and we had regular visits. But if someone had brought up the subject of adoption, I certainly would have wanted to discuss it – I would have been open to it.

Mason McFalls | Although our parents' parental rights had been terminated during our first placement – at my brother's and my insistence – we were only approached about adoption once, near the end of my time in care. My last foster family, the one I was with for most of high school, said they were interested in adopting me. As much as I appreciated it, that would have meant I would no longer be eligible for a great deal of scholarship money – I couldn't be adopted without losing that. But we still consider one another family. I keep in touch with them, and go back to visit for the holidays.

John Paul Horn | I was told a few times that I wasn't adoptable. Then I went to court and made sure my biological mother's rights were terminated. At that point, I had just finished my freshman year of high school, and had been in care for six years. I was then told that I was "too old" to be adopted. I was used to disappointing news, and had been shuffled around so much that I just wanted to become an adult so I could leave foster care.

I was almost adopted twice, actually, but I only knew about one instance while I was in care. A friend's family from school wanted to adopt me. We spent the holidays together; they used to take me out to eat and on trips with their family. Then my friend and I had a falling-out one day, and I got a phone call from his mother telling me how "evil" I was and how it was no wonder no one wanted me. It's sad to say, but by that point in my life I was very used to rejection, so I simply said, "I'm sorry you feel that way," and hung up. The second time I was almost adopted was when my elementary school band teacher wanted to adopt me, but her husband decided not to. I didn't find this out until I was an adult.

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PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

Marisela Ortiz | There is this awful view of children in foster care – the belief that they are bad kids who created their own problems. I often felt as though people never understood who I really was or what foster care was like for me.

I think that a lot of people think all at-risk youth, or all foster youth, are exactly the same – that they need the same things – but that's just not true. You can't generalize and assume that all foster children need the same things. You can't pressure a child into being what you think she should be. All you can do is *ask* her what she wants, ask what would help her in her situation. Maybe it's writing in a journal, maybe it's joining a sports team, maybe it's pursuing another type of interest or hobby, maybe it's visiting a sibling she loves. Just ask her, and then listen to her. Every child in care is different and might want or need different things.

Jeremy Long | Our society doesn't understand what foster care really is. Unfortunately, with the stigmas and stereotypes that our foster youth currently face, the general public is ignorant as to what foster care is and why so many youth are caught in the system. When talking to the general public, many of our foster youth are identified as "problem youth" because they are in care, when in reality they are there through no fault of their own. Our youth who have already faced trauma, abuse, neglect, and abandonment shouldn't also carry the blame for being in the system.

Jelani Freeman | I sit on the board of the Barker Foundation, an adoption agency, and work with its Project Wait No Longer, which is focused on finding adoptive homes for older children in foster care. I've tried to be the face of the program in some way, to talk with prospective adoptive parents who come in for information. We're trying to expand into nontraditional spaces, apart from churches, to reach more prospective parents in the community.

Often people are scared away from foster care adoption by horror stories in the media, or by hearsay, or by their own assumptions. So many people think we are "broken" and are afraid their household will be in danger if they take us in. So when I talk to prospective adoptive parents, I try to dispel their fears while also being realistic about the challenges. There are challenges with any child, but that doesn't mean it's not worth it to be someone's parent.

Mason McFalls | I think it is so important to work to counteract the negative image of foster youth – and encourage this kind of advocacy and education on a local basis. Larger, national campaigns are great, and have their place, but I think that the grassroots community approach could make an enormous difference too. The public agencies are already so overextended, and probably don't have the money for the kind of campaigns that are needed – but there's so much room for private donors, charitable foundations, churches and faith-based groups, and private adoption agencies to work together to challenge and change these persistent and often negative views of foster youth. I think that would be one huge component of making more families aware of the needs of foster youth and more willing to get involved and help.

COURTS

Jeremy Long | My experience in court was nontraditional. Court times ended up being in the middle of the school day, and my mom didn't feel it was necessary to pull me from school to attend a court hearing just to hear "yes he will stay with his foster parent, his biological parents aren't coming to the table, and he is doing really well in school and his extracurricular activities." Since nothing in my case changed, no court decisions impacted the way my life was going to be lived or who I was going to live with. My guardian ad litem was incredibly supportive in making sure the courts understood that I was in the best placement already and would remain there.

The courts are probably the most influential entities when it comes to a youth's case. They ultimately get to make the decision on the future of that child. My interactions and discussions with fellow foster youth on this topic have revealed that they were usually afraid of the judge. Everyone is in suits

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and some youth feel an inability to speak up about what they want their lives to entail. So judges, case managers, guardians ad litem, foster parents, and every other individual involved with a youth's case need to understand that he has a voice that should be heard and taken into consideration. This is the one place where actions are made and decisions are finalized, and if there is no youth input, the results may be unsatisfactory.

One idea that I have seen with the local juvenile districts is a benchmark hearing, when everyone involved with the youth's case comes together in a more laidback manner, instead of standing in the courtroom and displaying their professionalism. It's a more casual hearing, and so the conversation flows more freely and openly. This gives the youth the chance to feel like an equal, instead of just a case, which can be essential in helping him to express what he wants for his life.

John Paul Horn | I only remember going to court a few times. My two siblings and I would be excited because we knew we would get to see our mom. Then we would be disappointed because she would miss the court date, so we just quit going.

I had a pretty bad lawyer up until my junior year of high school. After that my lawyer was a woman named Kerrin, who was an amazingly talented lawyer and really helped me understand what was happening. I still call her when I need some information on child welfare proceedings.

The trauma a child goes through needs to be acknowledged at the court process level. Adults get so desensitized to the way the system works that they seem to expect children to always be compliant or know what they are supposed to do in court. In proceedings directly involving the children, the courts need to be more flexible in format. Lawyers and referees, magistrates, and judges need to be educated on how to engage children and youth so that they can minimize the trauma being experienced by the kids in care. They also need to explain what they are saying to the youth in court in a way that can be understood.

CASEWORKERS

Jetaine Hart | I had really bad caseworkers, for the most part. They didn't visit me often or talk to me much, and they never once asked me what I knew or thought about adoption or permanency. I wish someone had asked me. I'm upset that no one ever did. I still don't know why my mom's parental rights were never terminated, as I kept telling everyone that she wasn't able to be my parent and I never wanted to go back to her.

Marisela Ortiz | Throughout my years in foster care, I had four different caseworkers, but most of them weren't very supportive. I really disliked the first one, and never felt close to any of them – but my second-

to-last caseworker did better than most. She was very nice, and she would actually listen to me. We had good conversations. But at the same time, she mainly asked the same standardized questions, and checked them off her list. I liked her, but we were not building a relationship.

Mason McFalls I was very fortunate to have an incredible caseworker on my side, and very good judges too. I saw how much my caseworker cared and how hard she worked for my brother and me. But at the same time, it's so hard to work within the system; there are budget constraints and so many restrictions.

People that work with youth in foster care so often burn out because it is so stressful, and I understand that – I know how much work goes into it, and how discouraging it can be. I think it's important for them to have the chance to meet and work with former foster youth who have become success stories – it might help them recharge and feel validated in their work. Most of the time – and I've seen this with both child welfare workers and foster parents – if someone doesn't get validation or feel that they are truly making a difference, they will get discouraged and decide to do something else.

MENTORS/OTHER CONNECTIONS

Jeremy Long While in foster care, I was introduced to countless individuals that impacted my life, the first person obviously being my mom – who took a chance and invited a teenager into her home to become part of her family. She taught me many life skills such as cooking, cleaning, and banking, as well as fun skills such as bike riding, tennis, and how to interact with peers. My mom saw my need for therapy and quickly found an outlet for me to relieve my anger and hatred for my biological parents and begin fresh. I could go on and on about what she did for me. She was the most influential person in my life and is still, to this day, the one and only mother I will ever know and love.

Another family that was highly impactful on my life was my mom's best friends. They were a family consisting of a mother, father, daughter, and son – the son is my best friend of almost 11 years. He was on the junior cycling team with me and continues to be my "partner in crime" (in a good way, of course!). The reason I say this relationship was important was because it allowed me the opportunity to see how a family unit really operated. Growing up in a broken home with divorced, abusive, and neglectful parents didn't exactly leave me with a positive view of family. This family showed me everything that a good family should be. They were very supportive of each other, their kids, and anyone else they associated with. They were the ones I would stay with when my mom had to go out of town; they were at my high school graduation, my college graduation, and

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every bike race I ever competed in. I consider my best friend's mom to be my second mom and his dad to be my first dad, since my biological dad was never there. They are a family that have and will continue to be right by my side.

Jelani Freeman | I met Jackie Booker through a community center program when I was in 11th grade, and she made all the difference in the world to me. She worked at Xerox, and the company wanted to be more involved in the community, so they started a mentoring program with internships. I never knew my father and never had a strong male influence in my life, and so when I first heard about this program, I hoped that I would be matched with a man who would be my mentor and play basketball with me, that sort of thing. I wasn't sure about being matched with a woman, but Jackie was the best person I could have met. She was my mentor in 11th grade, and in 12th grade I got an internship at Xerox. Jackie helped me go on college tours, paid for me to take the SAT, and supported me throughout the application process. I just spent part of my Christmas holidays with her.

Mentors are very important. Young people in foster care benefit so much from being introduced to professionals and others who care about them and can expose them to different things and help them make their own plans. I am a lawyer now, but when I was younger I never thought about becoming a lawyer because I didn't know any – that kind of a possibility never even entered my mind. When you start to expose young people to different sorts of careers and opportunities, the possibilities can be endless. And it's not just about professions, it's about learning about different people, who have different backgrounds than your own. It can also be satisfying for mentors to help out young people in foster care, and make them more aware of kids in care so they might consider foster parenting themselves.

A lot of kids in foster care have had very limited exposure to the larger world. Just being exposed to new and different things can open them up to all sorts of new experiences. Get to know them and their interests, and build on their natural curiosity so they can be encouraged to learn as much as possible.

John Paul Horn | My seventh grade teacher (for English, reading, and history) as well as the school librarian were two amazing women in my life who mentored, comforted, advocated for, celebrated and mourned with, and loved me for longer than anyone else in my life. I owe a great debt to the rest of the world to pass on the kindness they showed me. They showed me what real compassion looks like, and their support is the reason I am where I am today.

EDUCATION

Jetaine Hart | I am now a social worker and educational mentor, and I work with kids in foster care – predominantly African American women in Oakland. It's challenging, but I know I can help them because I have been there. I advocate for the educational rights of my kids – making sure their assessments get made, making sure foster care placements don't mean that their school credits get left behind. I try to motivate them to go to class, and think about career plans, and engage them in the community so they can learn about different jobs.

Jeremy Long | Because I was with my mom, the same foster parent, from the beginning of my time in care, my experience was very different than that of youth with many placements. I spent all four years of my high school career in my local school. I played varsity tennis my senior year, and was involved with a local junior cycling team that my foster mom coached. During this time I made many lifelong friendships. My mom was always a huge supporter of my education; I'll never forget the day she drove me to my dorm at the University of Northern Colorado and helped me set up my room. I graduated four years later with a degree in communications and a minor in economics.

Jelani Freeman | Educational advocacy is so important. There's such a low graduation rate and college matriculation rate for foster youth, so I have tried to speak out about how there needs to be action taken, and at an earlier point, to help youth in care make educational goals and meet them. There needs to be more support for kids who age out of the system, and more financial aid if necessary to help them get their education. You have to start talking about college while foster kids are in middle school, and starting high school, and do a better job monitoring the educational progress of kids in care. They move around and switch schools and are under so much stress, and it's common for grades to suffer and requirements to be forgotten. I was lucky and didn't have to switch schools too often, but a lot of kids do. They need someone who will really focus on their educational progress and help them succeed.

Mason McFalls | I graduated with honors from my high school, and at age 18, I aged out of care. I signed myself into the Independent Living Program in Georgia, which helped pay my tuition at the University of Georgia in Athens as long as I met certain requirements. Though I received monetary support all through college, at age 21 I lost my healthcare benefits, which is one issue that needs to be addressed for youth who age out of care in Georgia.

John Paul Horn | I attended 13 different high schools, if I include summer school between eighth and ninth grade. I received very little

guidance on how to go to college. When I was a high school sophomore, I found a book that listed all of the four-year universities in North America, and I learned about schools I wanted to attend. The book explained how to send away for prospective student materials, which I did, and I had a catalog from the University of North Dakota that I took with me from placement to placement. The book also explained various college entrance exams, and I made sure I knew which tests I needed and how I could take them.

My senior year of high school, I was very close to not graduating. My transcripts were a mess from all the transfers and different credits. That year I attended all of the college workshops my school offered, and researched how to fill out the applications. I asked admissions representatives a barrage of questions. I made sure my group home at the time knew that I was placing college as a priority. In the end, I graduated with 0.5 credits above what I needed to complete high school, and my final GPA was a 3.27. I chose to attend California State University at Bakersfield in part so I could stay close to my biological brother and sister (they were still in care).

Though it took me six years and 11 major switches, I completed my B.A. in 2010. I thought about becoming a lawyer, but eventually I decided to enter the social work program at CSU Bakersfield, and commuted 90 miles two days a week to attend classes, while also working full time. I soon realized that I wanted more than just a Master's in social work, and decided to transfer to a better-known university to help me meet my goals. Because my focus has always been on youth in transition, I was already familiar with some of the work that came out of the University of Iowa's National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice. I applied to Iowa as a graduate transfer student and was accepted, and I now have an assistantship with the National Resource Center for In-Home Services, and have started my practicum with the National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Jetaine Hart | My advice for people who want to help and work with kids in foster care is to be as real and as honest as possible. Don't be so disconnected and "professional" that you don't think about what their experiences are. Try to empathize. Give them the opportunity to feel listened to, and involved, and in control of some part of their lives.

Also, family finding is key. Take the time to really look at people in the community, find out who the kids are already connected to, and see if you can find people they already know who could take them in. I had extended family, cousins, a couple of hours away who might have taken me in, but no one asked and they didn't know what was going on with me and my brother. Do your due diligence to seek out and find kin, if they

exist, and find out if they are willing and able to take in children from their own family.

It's really important to think about matching foster parents and kids – you can't put just any kid with any foster parent; you have to get to know the child and parents well enough to understand when and how they might fit together. Don't just place kids anywhere that is available, find the appropriate home so kids don't go AWOL or end up with a new placement every six months. You have to tell foster parents, "This kid is not a boarder in your home. You are agreeing to be a parent, to do all the things parents do."

Foster parents also need to be taught how to talk to youth about what is going on at school, at home, and helping them deal with conflicts – a lot of times, kids in foster care have never learned conflict resolution. They don't always know that you can have a fight, and come back, and say you're sorry, and find a solution. These are basic but difficult conversations to have, and foster parents need to know how to teach their kids to resolve conflict in a healthy way. It often ends up being their job to pass on these skills.

Marisela Ortiz If you want to help kids in foster care, or become a foster parent, you need to throw away every thought or misconception you have about the children in care as soon as you start. You cannot go into it clinging to your own ideas about kids in foster care and what foster parenting is. A foster child is just like any other child – she needs love, she needs care, she needs patience and understanding, she needs a home and not just a house to live in. You do have to be aware of the special circumstances facing foster kids, but you should try to treat them the way you would treat other children. If you become a foster parent, you will be the difference between a child just staying in a home and having a home, a place to feel safe and cared for.

I wish more people knew the truth about kids in foster care, and were aware of what's going on in their own communities. I think it's so important to create more and better public awareness campaigns so people learn about children in foster care in their own communities, so they know this problem exists and more good homes are needed. People shouldn't just always look beyond America's borders to find children to help. There are children in their own communities who need them. We should be talking about this more, and encouraging everyone we know to talk about it.

I also think it's so important to focus on prevention, targeting the issues that cause children to enter foster care in the first place. Rather than just putting more and more money into the system – to keep and maintain kids in care – we need to create policies that effectively funnel money to

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—Marisela Ortiz

prevention and other programs that *work* and help families, so that fewer children enter care in the first place.

Jeremy Long Agencies have a very important role in ensuring that the foster parents they recruit are qualified, educated, and prepared to take on such a large commitment, but it's very hard when we already have a shortage of qualified homes and a high number of youth in need of placements. I feel that agencies should really encourage peer-to-peer interactions with parents who are already foster parents, so they can hear firsthand what the experience is like. Most of them will say that it is one of the best ventures they took on, which will get the other parents excited and create a localized support network to reach out to when they are dealing with a difficult youth or a challenging situation. It is crucial that they be encouraged to create these support networks and peer groups when going through foster parent training so they have someone they can call when times are just becoming too tough for them to handle alone.

Another important topic that I think is finally gaining national attention is the ability for youth in the foster care system to experience normalcy or a real life. My foster mom felt it was very necessary for me to experience life fully – even with pushback from our case managers, she took me on exciting trips around the country that really helped me understand that there was life outside of foster care. Currently, in most states, foster youth aren't allowed to participate in many extracurricular activities, or spend the night at a friend's house, or go on a school trip, due to the minimal possibility that someone they come in contact with might pose a danger. Fortunately, my home state of Colorado recently passed legislation changing this law and allowing foster youth to participate in certain activities without requiring everyone they may come in contact with to be fingerprinted and go through background checks. Other states should enact similar policies. Youth in foster care have the right to partake in activities they are interested in, and they deserve to be permitted to do so. They should have the opportunity to be treated like any other young person.

Once the term “foster care” or “foster youth” is mentioned, many people shy away from that individual as if they have some disease that can't be cured. All these youth want is to be treated like any other human being, and not be labeled or penalized due to a situation that they in most cases have no control over.

Jelani Freeman I think that agencies need to do a better job reaching out to a broader base of potential foster and adoptive parents. I have a lot of friends now who could be great foster parents, but if it comes up, they say that they know nothing about foster care or foster parenting. That's a problem, because there are great people who could be involved and matched with kids in care. Agencies could consider reaching out to local businesses

or law firms in addition to churches and community centers, holding Q&A sessions at venues where they might be able to recruit professionals that may not have previously thought about it or know a lot about foster care.

It's definitely a problem that so many current foster parents feel like they're underwater. The support needs to be there – not just to recruit them, but also to keep them. In training, they need to be told that foster kids are more than their case files: a lot of parents just look at the brief history, the things that happened *to* a child, and see those things as who the child *is*. But it's not.

The issue of sibling connections is another thing a lot of kids struggle with, and there are ways states can help make it easier for siblings to see one another and keep in touch. I had a younger brother who started out in care with me, and then got placed somewhere else. Even with my older siblings, who were already out of the house by the time I was put in care, there wasn't much of a connection – and while I have a relationship with my older sister now, it's much different than it would have been if I had stayed in constant contact with her. There's movement in a lot of states to make sure that siblings, if not living together, can remain connected to one another, and that's very important for their sense of stability and their future relationships. When you leave care, that's often who your family is, who you look for and try to reconnect with.

Mason McFalls | Burnout is so high among foster parents, and it's especially tough when you're not prepared for it. There is so much legislation regarding foster youth and what you can and can't do – and that makes it harder for foster parents as well as for kids. I had to get special approval to go out with my friends, or stay over at someone's house. I couldn't get my driver's license till I turned 18. I think that making it a bit easier to overcome some of these restrictions would improve matters for many youth in foster care, as well as their foster parents.

The fact is, people can never fully know what it's like to be foster parents until they are in that situation. But I think it would help a great deal if prospective foster parents had the opportunity, during their training, to visit with and possibly shadow other foster families. Then they could really see what it's like and be better prepared for it. You might end up with fewer people going through training and completing it, but then the ones who get through will be the best and most prepared foster parents, and they're the ones you want.

In terms of advocacy for foster youth, I do think that many of the right steps have been identified, and some are being taken – but people still need motivation. In the past, maybe voices of former and even current foster youth weren't heard as much as they should be. We ought to be

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engaged, to help raise public awareness about kids in foster care, because we know how it works and have the inside perspective. We can be brought in to share ideas and opinions and promote success stories and join in awareness campaigns. Most of us are very willing to do whatever we can to help other kids in foster care.

There are so many things people don't understand about foster kids. There should be more education and outreach, more ad campaigns, billboards, newspaper ads, announcements at schools and churches, to get the message out that children in foster care are just normal kids who need love and families. The campaigns should highlight more foster kid success stories – this is another area in which current and former foster youth could be engaged – to help get the word out, and tell the truth about kids in foster care. I think you'd see a definite increase in the number of foster parent applicants.

Another thing I think should happen is the creation of a centralized foster care resources website. There are so many different resources available for foster youth and foster families, but the problem is that people don't always hear about these things. Whether it's scholarships, counseling connections, support groups, community partners, mentoring programs, foster youth-to-foster youth connections, people to assist foster youth with identifying and meeting educational goals and applying to college – all these things are important resources, and there should be one place, one website, where any foster child or foster family in the country can go to find out about them.

John Paul Horn | I would like to see all states in the U.S. fully implement the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. I also think that more money should be given to the states in order to provide for better mental health services for youth in foster care. When the rates for PTSD are higher among foster children than in returning war veterans, we really need to take a look at who is treating our youth and the quality of care they are receiving. I would very much like to see the reconvening of the White House Conference on Children and Youth as well. Children and youth are the most disenfranchised populations and their voices are often dismissed because people don't think their point of view is relevant. But youth often know what they want and need. I think engaging the youth in a meaningful way and using them as resources instead of treating them as objects would be the one important message for any professional who works with young people.

CONCLUSION

A Renewed Call to Advocacy: Telling the Truth About Youth in Foster Care

National Council For Adoption

As adoption and child welfare advocates consider the reforms needed to overcome obstacles to permanency faced by children and youth in foster care, it is essential to keep their perspectives at the forefront of the discussion. The problems within the system loom largest for them, for whom so many aspects of day-to-day life are shaped and defined by it. NCFA again wishes to express our gratitude and admiration for Jetaine Hart, Marisela Ortiz, Jeremy Long, Jelani Freeman, Mason McFalls, and John Paul Horn, who so thoughtfully and compellingly recalled their personal experiences in foster care and voiced their expert recommendations for this article. NCFA shares their belief that the foster care system, which so often fails children and families, can and must be made better for the sake of the thousands of youth in care.

Of the estimated 408,425 children in the U.S. foster care system, over 107,000 are waiting to be adopted.¹ Their need represents a responsibility that our country must work harder to fulfill. In a 2010 survey commissioned by the National Council For Adoption to study Americans' attitudes about adoption, 40% of respondents expressed an interest in adopting.² Another study conducted by the Dave Thomas Foundation in 2007 found that, of the 30% of those surveyed that had or were currently considering adoption, 71% had considered adoption from foster care. There are a sufficient number of families willing to become foster and adoptive parents, yet many states struggle to reach, recruit, support, and retain them.

The same Dave Thomas Foundation survey also revealed that 45% of respondents believed children in foster care were placed there due to juvenile delinquency.³ As several of the former foster youth interviewed for this article pointed out, this and other negative but sadly persistent myths about children and youth in care makes it difficult for many people to understand the challenges and hardships faced by children in foster care, and also discourages many individuals from becoming foster parents.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, "The AFCARS Report 18." Available online at: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report18.htm

² National Council For Adoption (June 2010). A Harris Interactive QuickQuery measuring U.S. Opinion on Statements about Adoption.

³ Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (November 2007). National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey conducted by Harris Interactive, 5. Full report available online at: www.davethomasfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Harris_DTFA-Report_FINAL_for_web_3_26_08.pdf

Alongside other vital foster care reform efforts and policies, more numerous and effective foster care awareness campaigns are needed. The public must be better educated about children in foster care in order to increase awareness of their availability for adoption and to correct false, harmful misconceptions about children and youth in care. Erroneous views of foster parents, who are also, at times, unfairly stereotyped and misunderstood, should also be countered in order to encourage as many interested and qualified individuals as possible to become involved in the lives of children in foster care.

Targeted, accurate, and positive language, as well as the highlighting of foster care “success stories” through the involvement of current and former foster youth, could help to reframe the discussion, increase public awareness about foster care, lessen the stigma of those caught in the system, and ensure that fostering and foster care adoption is seen and publicly lauded as part of our country’s strong culture of adoption. This important area of advocacy – the creation of well-funded, effective public awareness campaigns at the federal, state, and local levels to increase awareness about children in foster care – might be one area in which to encourage partnerships with private charitable foundations, nonprofit organizations, faith-based groups, and individual donors and philanthropists. Given the states’ already overextended budgets, additional sources of funding can and should be harnessed in order to meet the needs of children in foster care, encourage community involvement, and educate more people about the lives of youth in care.

Adoption must be discussed accurately and frequently with children in foster care that are eligible to be adopted. Many of the former foster youth in this article reported that their discussions with caseworkers and foster families about adoption were limited or nonexistent. Adoption can be a difficult concept for a child in the foster care system, who might have had reunification as a case goal, to understand and appreciate as a positive option. For those 107,000 children in the system whose parents’ rights have been terminated, adoption should be the goal to encourage and work towards, as it represents their best chance at securing a safe, loving, and permanent family of their own.

Adoption must be explained to these children who are eligible for it, so that they understand it not as a complete severing of ties with their biological family, but as an opportunity to leave the foster care system for a safe and permanent family. In these discussions, former foster youth that have been adopted might be able to assist caseworkers, court officials, and foster parents in explaining to the child or youth what it means to be adopted.

It is important to increase and improve communication between children in foster care and their caseworkers. Child welfare caseworkers are prone

The public must be better educated about children in foster care in order to increase awareness of their availability for adoption and to correct false, harmful misconceptions about children and youth in care.

to heavy caseloads and high turnover, and their training does not always provide them with the specifics and firsthand knowledge they need to be the most effective caseworkers for children in foster care.

It might be possible in some areas to explore and encourage collaboration between public agencies and university social work programs to help increase knowledge of child welfare best practices among future caseworkers. Like foster parents, caseworkers also need to feel encouraged and validated if they are to be effective in their work with children in foster care.

Child welfare workers must also practice due diligence with every single child to explore possible kin or other community connections that could provide support, stability, or permanency to that child. After permanency is achieved, support systems and resources must be in place to give families the best possible chance to succeed and thrive.

While much has been done to improve outcomes and promote permanency for children in foster care, clearly we can and must do better. It is unacceptable that over 107,000 children in this country continue to wait for families of their own. Each year, thousands of young people age out of foster care without ever finding the love and permanency they deserve. America's children in foster care need our commitment and collaboration to help each and every one of them experience the love and security of a forever family.

About the Foster Youth Interns

Jetaine Hart received her Bachelor's degree in social work from La Sierra University. After participating in CCAI's Foster Youth Internship Program in 2009, she spent two years working in the office of Senator Mary L. Landrieu, focusing on communications as well as policy issues related to foster care and adoption. Ms. Hart currently works as an Educational Mentor for the Alameda County Office of Education, where she advocates for the educational rights and needs of youth in out-of-home placements. Through collaboration and individualized support services, she works to reduce the myriad challenges that affect the educational success of foster youth.

Marisela Ortiz was a 2011 CCAI Foster Youth Intern. She graduated from Washington State University with a degree in criminal justice, and plans to begin graduate studies soon. After she earns her MSW, Ms. Ortiz hopes to work with at-risk youth.

Jeremy Long participated in the 2010 CCAI Foster Youth Internship Program after graduating that same year from the University of Northern Colorado. He is currently the Youth Engagement Coordinator for Youth Success at Mile High United Way in Denver. He will soon serve as resident assistant to the 2012 CCAI Foster Youth Interns in Washington, DC.

Jelani Freeman interned for then Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton during the summer of 2003 as part of CCAI's Foster Youth Internship Program. Mr. Freeman earned a B.A. from the University at Buffalo, an M.A. from American University, and a J.D. from Howard University School of Law. He currently serves as an Appellate Attorney for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Mason McFalls entered the foster care system in Georgia at the age of seven, and remained in the system until he was emancipated at the age of 18. He graduated with honors from the University of Georgia and now lives in Atlanta, where he works with a wealth management team at Morgan Stanley. Mr. McFalls also serves on the application committee of the NSORO Foundation, is a Justice for Children committee member with the Georgia Supreme Court (currently serving a two-year term), and sits on the board of the 1873 Society Club as well as Gift for a Child.

John Paul Horn was a 2009 Foster Youth Intern with CCAI and is now a second-year MSW student at the University of Iowa. His research interests include youth in transition, positive youth development, education, and the need for compassion. In his spare time, he sings karaoke and experiments with creative ways to cook quinoa.

About the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute's Foster Youth Internship Program

CCAI's highly esteemed Foster Youth Internship Program provides Congressional internship opportunities for young adults who spent time in the foster care system. The program began in 2003 as an effort to raise awareness among federal policymakers about the needs and unique perspectives of youth in foster care. As part of the program, CCAI organizes retreats, advocacy trainings, and various networking opportunities with experts in the child welfare field. Throughout the summer, the Foster Youth Interns spend time researching policy issues affecting foster children across the country, culminating in the creation of an annual policy report that is presented at a Congressional briefing and released to child welfare advocates across the country.

As a result of CCAI's Foster Youth Internship Program, federal policymakers receive firsthand information about the experiences of youth in foster care, and use this knowledge to inspire legislative change and foster care reform. Interns participating in the program benefit both personally and professionally, gaining experience and skills that will bolster their careers for years to come and providing the foundation for them to become lifelong advocates for the improvement of the foster care system. For more information about the Foster Youth Internship Program, please visit CCAI's website at www.ccaainstitute.org.



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