



2013 Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit Report

One united voice for change



Jim Theofelis
Executive Director
The Mockingbird Society



Jennifer Strus
Co-Chair, Washington State Supreme Court
Commission on Children in Foster Care
Assistant Secretary, Children's Administration



Justice Bobbe Bridge (Ret.)
Co-Chair, Washington State Supreme Court
Commission on Children in Foster Care
CEO, Center for Children & Youth Justice

Special thank you to Casey Family Programs and Children's Administration for supporting the printing and design of this report.

Dear Friends,

On June 24th through the 26th, 56 youth and alumni of care from across Washington State came together for the 8th Annual Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit. The three day Summit is organized by The Mockingbird Society, an advocacy organization dedicated to building a world-class foster care system through reforms inspired by the experiences of foster youth. The Summit concludes with these young leaders presenting their proposals for reforms that will help tomorrow's children and youth in foster care succeed. These proposals are made to the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care, which seeks to provide all children and youth in foster care with safe, permanent families, where all of their needs are met. The Commission is a Washington State Supreme Court appointed group of decision makers that work with youth and those involved in all aspects of the foster care system to implement changes to Washington's foster care policies.

The Summit is one of the highlights of the year for The Mockingbird Society and the Commission. Through the Summit Report-Out, the Commission hears presentations from youth on concerns they have with the foster care system and improvements they would like to see made. It is an amazing opportunity to hear directly from youth and alumni about ways to improve our child welfare system. These proposals initiate a year-round effort to bring positive and necessary changes that will benefit those currently in care as well as those who have yet to enter the system.

Youth from all across Washington state proposed reforms aimed at eliminating barriers to education, housing and the normal childhood experiences that every child and youth should have. The youth proposals were incredibly well-researched, sophisticated and articulate. We, along with policymakers, advocates, and community members will work alongside youth throughout the upcoming year to address the proposed reforms.

The issues presented at the Summit embody the idea that the best way to design a foster care system that works for kids is to listen to and work with those who know it best, our youth who experienced it. The thoughtfulness of the presentations and the passion we witnessed gives us great hope for the future of these youth and Washington's foster care system.

We thank these incredible youth for their advocacy, and we thank you for your support of our youth and alumni of foster care.

Sincerely



Jim Theofelis



Jennifer Strus



Bobbe Bridge



THE SUMMIT POEM

By James Murphy

We are all connected
Within every drop and within
Every action we take, each
Leads to another action or reaction
In another time in another place

Together now
This action, this reaction
Where you're sitting, where you're standing
Right now – This is your monumental moment

This life, use your voice
Its powerful, and it is growing
These are mere stepping stones to each and everyone's abilities
They are the small echoes we make
They are the small things we say and feel

They become our foot prints
Our way of change
Our way of inspiring
Our way of loving
Our way of movement
And our way of living
Once we take another step forward
Our choices become limitless
Bound to absolutely nothing
One door closes another door opens
Use this voice, and not only will you inspire change
But your potential as person will grow
Ben Wishaw said- "My life extends far beyond the limitations of me."
So take this moment
Reflect everything that occurred today
Tomorrow will be better
Tomorrow will be great
This room will be filled with heavy throats of change
And soon after, we can all walk way evolved – A leader, an Advocate, a Lone Nut, and a Follower

CHAPTER VOICE

Youth-Inspired Solutions



Extended Foster Care for all

YAKIMA CHAPTER

The Extended Foster Care program has proven to be an effective and necessary resource for hundreds of youth who would otherwise age out of care with no support and no prospects. However, there are still youth who do not qualify. This results in leaving our most vulnerable without support while in other cases rewarding achievement with disqualification from services.

We propose expanding the Extended Foster Care program to include the two remaining categories outlined in the Fostering Connections Act: those employed 80 hours or more per month and those with medical conditions preventing them from pursuing their education or employment.



Alternatives to Psychotropic Medication

SEATTLE CHAPTER

Youth in care are subject to significant levels of psychotropic medication at a much higher rate than their peers from intact families. While Washington state has taken effective steps to address the overuse of these medications, youth do not have adequate access to effective alternatives. We want to maintain state oversight tools including the Partnership Access Line (PAL), and the automatic second opinion for polypharmacy (5 or more medications or 2 medications from the same family). We also ask that the Foster Care Assessment Program (FCAP) be expanded to allow youth being prescribed psychotropic medications access to psycho-social therapy as a supplement or alternative.

“It’s sad that these people who are most fragile are not protected by the state when they are the most likely to end up in a bad place.”

– Yakima Chapter Member

“When I was 12 years old I was prescribed psychotropic medications without proper evaluation. At age 17, I stopped taking medications and right away family, friends, and peers saw a change. I was evaluated and learned I was previously prescribed incorrectly. I am 20, medication free, and never needed it.”

– Seattle Chapter Member

CHAPTER VOICE

Youth-Inspired Solutions



The Prudent Parent Standard

EVERETT CHAPTER

The “Prudent Parent Standard” gives foster parents the ability to make safe, responsible decisions on behalf of their foster children. This will greatly reduce the time it often takes for youth in care to get permission for normal activities, like field trips or spending the night with friends. Typically, youth need to get permission from their social worker or even a judge before they can participate, which can take too long for many activities that require a quick response. If implemented, the Prudent Parent Standard will empower foster parents and give foster youth a chance to participate in important childhood activities.



Normalcy for Youth in Care

SPOKANE CHAPTER

Ensuring healthy and normal youth experiences for those in foster care can help reduce the impacts of the traumatic events that brought them into care. Unfortunately, youth in care face significant barriers to these experiences. These barriers can prevent youth from participating in Drivers Ed courses, participating in school activities, or traveling out of state, which is significant for those who live close to a border like we do in Spokane. We ask that the decision-making process be streamlined and that foster parents, who know their youth best, can have a greater role in making decisions.

Note: Because of the prevalence of barriers to “normalcy” for youth in care, two Mockingbird Youth Network Chapters decided to select this issue for their proposals.

“Foster parents shouldn’t have to break the law in order for me to live a normal life.”

– Christina, Spokane Chapter Member

“You can certainly expect foster parents to support you 100 percent.”

– Mike Canfield, Co-Chair,
Foster Parent Association of Washington State

CHAPTER VOICE

Youth-Inspired Solutions



High School Continuity

TACOMA CHAPTER

High school students in foster care have difficulty maintaining educational continuity due to frequent placement changes. Despite several laws and regulations calling for youth to maintain enrollment in their school of origin, the rules implementing these laws have cut many youth in care out. We want to ensure that current laws and regulations concerning educational continuity apply to all youth in foster care, and that they apply to each placement change while in care. When placement within their district of origin is not possible, youth should have access to transportation support in order to continue attending the same school.



The Permanency Pact

OLYMPIA CHAPTER

Youth aging out of care deserve a support network to provide for specific needs of young adults transitioning into adulthood. These supports include anything from a place to do laundry to a bed to sleep in over school breaks. This support will also build life-long relationships for alumni of care. We recommend the following solutions:

- Establish a “build a family workshop” before youth age out;
- Assign a facilitator to help connect youth with supportive networks;
- Establish an informal contract, or “Permanency Pact,” between the youth and adult for specific supports that will be provided;
- The facilitator will maintain contact with youth and supportive adult(s) after the youth ages out to make sure supports are maintained;
- Allow Independent Living Program providers the ability to effectively track the success of these efforts

Each time a youth changes schools, it sets them back four to six months academically.

– Tacoma Chapter Member

What a permanency pact means to me: emergency cash, a mentor, financial assistance, an emergency contact, family, someone to rely on, emergency housing, storage, friends, and healthy relationships.

– Olympia Chapter Members

SUMMIT ESSAY CONTEST

All applicants to the Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit were required to submit a reflective essay. Youth wrote about their experiences, challenges, inspirations and hopes for the future. Mockingbird Network staff read all entries and selected these two essays to receive special recognition. As the essay winner, Josephine Davis will be able to job shadow Children's Administration Assistant Secretary Jennifer Strus for a day. Additionally, both Josephine and Javonna were honored by their peers and guests at the Commission Report-Out on Wednesday June 27th.



FIRST PLACE
SUMMIT ESSAY CONTEST

HOW THE SUMMIT CHANGED MY LIFE

*By Josephine Davis,
Spokane Chapter*

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity." I will never forget the first leadership summit I was a part of because it changed my life. When I went to the summit I was introduced to the bigger picture, the greater good for the future generations of foster children. Call me ignorant at the time, but I had no idea other foster youth went through the same things I did. I was even more surprised to learn they went through worse experiences. I will never forget the time where we all shed tears for a youth who told her story in front of the legislators. They were tears expressing silent understanding and pain coming from our bruised but yet compassionate hearts. For the first time I didn't tell God, "I can't bear this life you have given me. What is there to live for when life tells me 'give up because I'm going to make your life suck.'" I didn't ask God, "Why is this happening to me." Instead I told Him, "Thank you for showing me I'm not alone and revealing to me I'm a part of the bigger picture." That moment I became proud to be a foster youth and I was inspired to be a positive change for others. I didn't want to take back any of the abuse and hardships I bore over the years because then I wouldn't have been given an opportunity to advocate for the future generations of foster children. That summit taught me many things. One of the things I learned is ashes turn to beauty. Adverse circumstances that life throws at us are bittersweet. The moment of hardship is painful, but in the end we gain virtue, strength, wisdom and most importantly, an opportunity to help those coming from the same hardship. I have realized the circumstances that life dealt me molded me into becoming an advocate, role model, and helper. Martin Luther King also said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter."

When you become a part of a cause for the greater good of humanity, life is not worth living for yourself anymore, at least for me it isn't. My inspiration to become a positive change for myself is for all the future generations of foster children and all the "rejects" of society. I can honestly say they are my loved ones, my passion that I will live and die for because they are the people who I call family and friends. To help my family and friends succeed and for them to know they were made for a divine purpose, inspires me to be a positive change. A woman once said to a man who killed her only brother in a drunken driving car accident, "It is never too late to become the person you were created to be." Those words changed his life. Gandhi said to be the change you want to see in the world. I want to be the positive change not just for me, but for the world.



RUNNER UP
SUMMIT ESSAY CONTEST

UNTOLD STORIES

*By Javonna Arriaga,
Seattle Chapter*

Numbers don't always represent truth. Annually 250,000 children enter foster care in the US, of those children only half will return to their home. Around 40 percent of foster children will graduate high school, 2 percent of foster youth will attend college and even less will graduate. Against these odds, in the summer of 2013, I will have graduated both high school and college. The numbers I was born into set me up for who I was supposed to become. I chose, with my family's guidance, to deny these expectations and create a new story. As my life has unfolded so has my passion to tell untold stories to make a change in our world.

My family's story has taught me that everyone's sacrifice needs to be recognized, perhaps by telling their story. We found happiness in our poverty, but my mother was born with very few choices. She is an amazing woman, who survived the foster care system at its worst; physical abuse, teen pregnancy, and prison. Eventually, her given circumstances led her into trouble because she wasn't given the tools to be successful or the opportunity to take care of me. Despite her best efforts, I ended up in foster care. However, because of her tenacity and ambition, I didn't make the same mistakes as her. I will not be a statistic and I hope through my work I can help prevent others from perpetuating negative statistics. Throughout my college years, I have found that exploring beyond the surface always reveals complex and necessary knowledge. In theatre, specifically directing and acting, we study the best ways to tell stories and how to communicate something deeper about the human condition. Similar to the 99 percent genetic make-up that all humans have in common, there is something buried deep inside, beneath the obvious, that we can all relate to. As I studied, I uncovered a hunger for finding truth, particularly in the doubted. We discover this truth through the stories we tell and we need them to propel ourselves past adversity.

Telling these stories and working past adversity can change the lives of others and prevent the repetition of our mistakes. There are many cycles waiting to be broken for people in poverty that weren't given the inspiration and support that I was. I want to devote my life to supporting youth who grew up without tools. During my sophomore year of college, I founded the Boundless Arts Performance Collective, a local non-profit that works with foster youth in Seattle through the performance arts. As a leader, I hope my personal story will serve as an example and motivator to youth in a similar situation and help them find strength from their wounds. I want my work to help raise warriors out of ashes and leaders out of unjust statistics. I hope to teach the youth I work with that they have never been nor ever will be just another statistic. Their life is meaningful and important

SYSTEM REFORM

2013 LEADERSHIP SUMMIT A HUGE SUCCESS

By Mandy Urwiler



June 24th-26th were filled with passion. Those days held the 8th Annual Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit. During the Summit, youth and young adults from across the state came to share in their common goal: to create a world-class foster care system through advocacy and system reform.

The Summit represents the first stage in a year-round advocacy process at The Mockingbird Society. The proposals youth present are the result of months of research and many years of experience in the foster care system.

Youth participants spent a day of the Summit in preparation. The National Foster Youth Action Network (NFYAN) facilitated a leadership training focused on developing teamwork. Youth learned that everyone has leadership skills, that everyone has a part and, most importantly, that being a leader isn't just about controlling the group, it can also be about playing to the group's strengths.

After the NFYAN training, youth participated in a System Reform Workshop. During this time, they practiced the presentations for their topics in front of panels of advisors with expertise in public policy, child welfare, and communications. The presentation topics began as an undeveloped idea, and were brought to coherent reform topics by the youth, who

researched and worked until they were perfected. By the end of the workshop, the presentations sounded ready for the Commission!

The final day was the big event where youth presented their ideas to the Commission. Youth lined up with their chapters, and spoke from their hearts. They took three minutes to tell the Commission what they needed to change in the foster care system for the youth to come behind them, and to share why that was important to them. Commission Co-Chair Justice Bobbe Bridge said that this was the best Summit yet!

But this success is just the beginning. Next youth will work to turn their proposals into reality by continuing the conversation with community members and policy-makers. These conversations can then lead to their proposals becoming pieces of legislation, agency workgroups or other reforms that will impact youth in care. Then the conversation turns into action, and youth will gather again to advocate their state leaders at Youth Advocacy Day in February.

This advocacy cycle helps make sure that foster youth have a seat at the table and that our foster care system is constantly being improved by youth-inspired solutions.

ATTENDING COMMISSION MEMBERS

Justice BOBBE BRIDGE
*Center for Children and
Youth Justice, Co-Chair*

Assistant Secretary
JENNIFER STRUS
Children's Administration

MIKE CANFIELD
*Foster Parents Association
of Washington, Co-Chair*

JOANNE MOORE
Director of the Office of Public Defense

Judge
KITTY-ANN VAN DOORNINCK
*President of the Superior
Court Judges' Association*

JEANNIE KEE
Foster Youth Alumni Representative

GREG WILLIAMSON
Director of Student Support

CARRIE WAYNO
*Attorney General of the
State of Washington*

JIM BAMBERGER
*Director, Office of
Civil Legal Aid*

CHORISIA FOLKMAN
*Chair of the NW
Intertribal Council (NWTIC)*

TONIA MORRISON
Parent Advocate Representative

ALYSON McLEAN
*UW/Evans School Intern
supporting the CCFC*

SYSTEM REFORM WORKSHOP POLICY ADVISORS

KIMBERLY MILLS
*Communications Director
Seattle City Attorney's Office*

DAN HAGEN
*Legislative Aide
Office of Representative Roberts*

KEN EMMIL
*Office of the Superintendent
of Public Instruction*

JOSEPH PEHA
*Legislative Aide
Office of Representative Carlyle*

LAURIE LIPPOLD
Partners for Our Children

MARILYN PEDERSEN
*Legislative Aide
Office of Representative Hunter*

LAMONT GREEN
*Pierce County Unaccompanied
Youth Task Force*

PEGGY LEWIS
*Independent Living
Program Manager DSHS*

CASEY TRUPIN
Columbia Legal Services

KATARA JORDAN
Columbia Legal Services

CHRIS BAUER
The Mockingbird Society

TONYA HIGHTOWER
*National Foster Youth
Action Network*

MITCH FINDLEY
*National Foster Youth
Action Network*

The Mockingbird Youth Network's Advocacy Cycle



**PRAISE FOR THE 2013 FOSTER
YOUTH AND LEADERSHIP SUMMIT**

“ I mainly want to thank youth who are currently in foster and care and who are alumni of foster care. It’s through [their] hard work and sharing what it’s like really on the ground that will enable us to improve the foster care system. ”

– Justice Mary Fairhurst,
Washington State Supreme Court



“ Truly you should be proud of yourselves... Obviously a lot of thought went into each of the proposals and you answered questions beautifully and were very thoughtful about that so I really want to commend you on your leadership. ”

– Judge Kitty-Ann van Doorninck,
Commission Member and Chair of the
Superior Court Judges’ Association

“ I applaud you. There are so many things we can do when we all work together and when you guys come here and present like you did this year it feels like we are working together. ”

– Mike Canfield, Co-Chair,
Foster Parent Association of Washington State

“ I’m so incredibly proud of each and every one of you. The selflessness of improving the foster care system for our brothers and sisters who come into care is unbelievable. I think one day we will be able to see a world class foster care system. ”

– Jeannie Kee,
Commission Member and Alumna of Foster Care



LEGACY OF THE SUMMIT

Over the past 8 years, youth proposals presented at the Summit have resulted in over a dozen major reforms, including:

- The Extended Foster Care Program
- Healthcare to 21
- The Independent Youth Housing Program
- Unannounced social worker visits
- Notification of the rights of foster youth
- Protecting sibling visits

Youth Impact

Fifty-Six youth and alumni of foster care from across the state of Washington attended the 2013 Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit. Of those in attendance, 51 surveys were completed—a response rate of over 85%.

- 92% of youth surveyed reported having a stronger sense of connection to the foster youth community.
- 88% of youth reported feeling more comfortable sharing their story to help transform the foster care system.
- 94% of youth surveyed reported feeling more confident seeking support from community leaders when advocating for an issue.
- 86% of youth surveyed reported feeling as though they acted as a leader.
- 88% of youth surveyed reported as though their participation made a difference.





The Mockingbird Society

Building a world-class foster care system

**SINCERE THANKS TO OUR GENEROUS
FOSTER YOUTH AND ALUMNI
LEADERSHIP SUMMIT SPONSORS**



Washington State
Department of Social
& Health Services

CA Children's Administration



center for
CHILDREN & YOUTH
JUSTICE *Better systems. Better lives.®*



WASHINGTON
COURTS

Our Mission

The Mockingbird Society

The Mockingbird Society is dedicated to advocating for systems reform based on the personal experiences of children, youth and families impacted by the foster care system.

The Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care

Our mission is to provide all children in foster care with safe, permanent families in which their physical, emotional, intellectual, and social needs are met.

mockingbirdsociety.org

