The Conversation Continues...

The Aftermath of the 2011 Leadership Summit

The Foster Youth & Alumni Leadership Summit is literally just weeks away. This is a very powerful event for the Mockingbird Youth Network as youth came from across the state to engage in intense youth leadership development activities, where the youth voice really does create change. But before we get there, it is important to look at the progress that last year’s Summit created. Every youth voice that is heard at the Leadership Summit helps create change and reinforces that the vision of the Mockingbird Youth Network is not only alive; but that it works. Last year at this same Leadership Summit youth from across the state brought ideas to bring forth to the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care and the ideas became a catalyst for conversations that are still happening today.

Normalcy is a concept that doesn’t get heard enough when we talk about reforming the foster care system. But at the 2011 Summit it was a theme emphasized by several chapters. This conversation at the Leadership Summit would eventually lead to the creation of the Normalcy Workgroup, whose main focus is to create opportunities for youth to participate in age appropriate experiences and ensuring “normal life” experiences. The Normalcy workgroup answers directly to the Commission and works to find concrete solutions to the concerns around normalcy that youth expressed at the leadership summit. The issue of normalcy shows many forms. The Spokane Chapter talked about the response times of Social Workers who need to sign off on activities that youth outside of foster care take for granted. Proms, field trips, staying overnight with friends, all of these things a social worker needs to get approval for and a lot of times youth report social workers don’t get back to youth in a timely manner. In addition, the Tacoma Chapter expressed at the Summit. Thank you to all of our advisors for their support and guidance!

Some of the Chapters learned they had complementary and interrelated topics. The Council encouraged these Chapters to combine and expand their ideas to create a stronger and more persuasive voice for change. The Spokane Chapter talked about the response times of Social Workers who need to sign off on activities that youth outside of foster care take for granted. Proms, field trips, staying overnight with friends, all of these things a social worker needs to get approval for and a lot of times youth report social workers don’t get back to youth in a timely manner. In addition, the Tacoma Chapter

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Friends,

For many young people, June marks the end of the school year. For a growing number of foster youth, it means that the high school diploma, GED or college degree that once seemed like an impossibility, is now a reality. Too many foster youth and alumni of care are forced to do whatever it takes just to survive, making completing their education a low priority in comparison. Thanks to the work of youth, advocates, stakeholders and legislators, Washington state has guaranteed that all aging youth out of care who want to complete their secondary education or pursue their post-secondary education can remain in care until 21 through the Extended Foster Care program. By ensuring a safe roof over their heads, this program gives youth the capacity to enter into adulthood prepared not only for survival, but for success. The Mockingbird Society’s legacy goal is to ensure that ALL youth aging out of care have access to safe housing until age 21, and we will continue to work with youth, advocates and policy-makers to ensure that this goal becomes a reality.

June also holds The Mockingbird Society’s hallmark event: the Foster Youth & Alumni Leadership Summit. Every year, we bring youth from across the state together for three days of leadership development, civic engagement and system reform as we use their energy and experience to develop the next generation of child welfare reforms. This year the beautiful Islandwood Outdoor Education Center on Bainbridge Island will host the first two days of the Summit, providing a unique and pristine environment for our youth to experience. On the third day each Mockingbird Youth Network Chapter will present their proposal for child welfare reform to the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care. In past years these proposals have led to innovative and effective policies including unannounced social worker visits to improve safety, Medical to age 21 for foster youth, and many others that help move us closer to a world-class foster care system.

It is this continued success that reminds me of a favorite quote from Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Thank you for your unwavering support for children, youth & families.

Sincerely,

Jim Theofelis
jim@mockingbirdsociety.org

Fail. Fail Again. Fail Better.— Samuel Beckett

Introducing Resource Specialist Sam Rennebohm

We have such a great team here at The Mockingbird Society. We are always growing from each other as well as learning new ideas and styles from one another. A couple of weeks ago The Mockingbird Society hired a new Resource Specialist for the Seattle region.

His name is Sam Rennebohm and he went to college at Columbia University. Before joining the Mockingbird team, Sam was recently training to be a Minister at a church in Berkeley, California. He has also taught summer classes for high school students, as an adventure chaplain. Sam’s interests and hobbies include theology and philosophy, playing pick-up basketball, swimming, and being in the mountains.

Sam has many goals in life some of them are building positive relationships with The Mockingbird Society’s staff members, chapter leaders, and community partners. He hopes to guide the Seattle chapter towards being a strong, vibrant, dynamic chapter of the Mockingbird Youth Network, and develop momentum for the Youth Leadership Summit in June. One major issue with the foster care system that Sam is passionate about is the distribution of funds/income for youth who are transitioning out of foster care. One thing Sam would like to change in the system would be to have greater accountability for social workers to be in regular contact with youth.

I asked Sam in our interview why he was interested in being a part of The Mockingbird Society. His answer was that he was inspired by the example that The Mockingbird Society sets for empowerment and cooperative work with youth and alumni of care. Sam has great experience working with youth. While Sam was in high school, he volunteered at the First Place School, an elementary school for homeless children. He also worked with homeless youth who were admitted to the hospital where he worked as a chaplain. I asked Sam what he is most looking forward to, and he responded: creating a world-class foster care system!
TRIO-SSS is Critical Resource for Underrepresented College Students

It has been proven time and again that educated people earn higher salaries than those without a degree. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, people with an Associate Degree earn $130 more per week than those with only a high school diploma. A Bachelor degree will earn about $285 per week more than an Associate degree. Education really does pay. The TRIO Student Success Services (TRIO-SSS) Program can help YOU earn that Bachelor degree.

The TRIO-SSS program is an amazing resource. It is a federally-funded program—The TRiO-SSS program is an amazing resource. It is a federally-funded program aimed at increasing under-represented populations of college graduates. There are TRIO programs at all of the Seattle Community Colleges and qualifying participants have to meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Low-income by federal standards (one person cannot make more than $16,755 gross in one year).
- First generation college students.
- Have a documented disability.

I met with Renata Cummings from TRIO at South Seattle Community College and she explained that the program helps students secure financial aid in the form of scholarships, grants, and academic loans. TRIO guides and pushes youth in the right direction to achieve their goals. College can be a challenging undertaking and the staff believes that “people come first” when offering resources and support. This program specializes in advising strategies to cultivate success and keep financial aid. South Seattle Community College has an awesome scholarship called the Luther Scholarship that is only for foster youth. This scholarship can provide for books, tuition, and fees for classes. With their help, one student got more than double what they needed in scholarships and grants. They were able to use that money for things like living expenses.

If you are like me, you may need extra pushes to put school before work. For me, sometimes all it took was one C on a test and I would begin to feel that it wasn’t worth the trouble of trying to finish the class. If I had gotten the support I needed in high school, I would be earning a diploma this year instead of a GED. I plan on using the TRIO program when I start college this fall quarter so that I can get that appropriate support. Their work has had some impressive results with 93% of TRIO-SSS participants holding a 2.0 GPA or higher in the 2009-2010 school year. TRIO can be an integral part of keeping students engaged in their education. One thing Renata told me is that universities want to hear about your hardships as well as your successes. The person who has failed a quarter but turned around because they went through a rough patch can be a compelling applicant because they have some depth to their lives and show dedication to bounce back after hard times. She also told me that they prefer not to send people running around in circles. If TRIO can’t help them, the advisors find out who can help the student and call to make sure before sending the student off to help prevent confusion and frustration.

I truly believe the TRIO-SSS Program would be beneficial to EVERYONE who qualifies. If you are eligible, I suggest pursuing it so you can have the tools you need to succeed. If you don’t qualify, please tell everyone you know who may be interested so that this great resource can be shared. For more information visit your college or university’s Student Services department.

www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm

Save the Date

6th Annual Benefit Luncheon
Thursday, October 11, 2012
Sheraton Seattle Hotel

Registration begins at 11:30 am
Program from 12:00 to 1:15 pm
Region 3 South (Olympia) — We as humans are often challenged by life’s circumstances, and as those who have experienced the foster care system, we may face both more challenging obstacles and more stringent forms of observation than most. Some people may look upon this as a burden but I see quite the contrary. Whereas we are in more of a position to expel the resentment and destitution we hold onto from our past, we use this personal and sometimes emotional experiences as a tool to create a better foster care system. With the Foster Youth and Alumni Summit closing in fast we decided that our chapter meeting on Thursday the 17th was just such an opportunity to hone the skills of those youth in our Chapter that would be picking up the torch this June. We were also delighted to welcome youth from the Vancouver and Kelso area to share their experiences with us and give us a helping hand in finalizing the finer points of our Leadership Summit Topic. Chapter Leader Miq’ueko Johnson and I began to teach youth how they could advocate for themselves and others by using their voice to exhibit change. We taught both by example and through a series of activities and modules called the Voice Development Training. Participants got to see firsthand what to do and what not to do when sharing your story. After all, you learn the most by seeing words in action.

Projection: Using Your Voice to Advance Change  by Chris Bauer

In light of all the sharing of personal stories that would occupy the presentations at the summit, we discussed the pros and cons of sharing your experiences.

No one’s story is the same. We all have different experiences, characteristics, comfort levels, and emotional limits but that’s what makes our personal stories so impactful. We’re not just a statistic anymore. And when we can teach others how to stay calm and respectful while exercising their personal passion for change and recounting personal experiences to paint a picture for those who listen; it’s a great feeling, believe me.

At the end we were glad with not only how knowledgeable the youth that attended were but also how much of the Voice Development Training they had absorbed. Needless to say we are excited to have the support of such able members and are looking forward to tackling the issue of family connections at the summit next month.

Region 3 North (Spokane) by Will Con

In our chapter we have been valiantly tying up loose ends for our Summit trip in June. We put our helping hands in the community on the 14th of May at the Women’s Resource Partnership. In our last meeting we made a collage of drawings on fabric for a quilt.

Region 2 South (Seattle) by Merisa LeFevre

On Tuesday, May 15th I attended my first ever Mockingbird meeting. We began by introducing ourselves to the group and then played a game that focused on consensus-building skills and strategic communication. We had a very detailed and inclusive discussion about our Summit policy topic. Ultimately, we decided to represent the issue of Overmedication at Summit this year. I can’t wait to be more involved in HELPYC!

Region 1 South (Tacoma) by Brandy Bailey

On May 9th, with a room full of eager Chapter Members, we brainstormed ideas for this year’s Leadership Summit. We had a great discussion and covered a range of ideas including help with getting a drivers license and improved programs to deal with the effects of living on your own. We look forward to future Chapter meetings.

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cited the lengthy background checks required for youth to stay with friends for more than one night as a significant barrier to normalcy.

But the Normalcya Workgroup wasn’t the only thing that came out of the 2011 Leadership Summit. The Olympia Chapter gave voice to a concern about the gap in services for pregnant and parenting youth in care. According to a report from Chapin Hall at Harvard University, entitled Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Foster Youth, one-third of teenage girls in care experience pregnancy by the age of 19 and appropriate services to help them manage this new found reality in their life are scarce. In response to these concerns, The Children’s Administration created the Teen Pregnancy Workgroup.

A long-term initiative of The Mockingbird Society and the Mockingbird Youth Network has been Fostering Connections, the federal buy-in on entitlement programs for foster youth services for youth between the age of 18 and 21. We have had yet another success in with the passage of HB 2592, a bill allowing youth that are pursuing their post-secondary education to stay in foster care.

These successes are because of the voice of the Mockingbird Youth Network. They are because youth have expressed their concerns and advocated for change at the Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit in 2011. The creation of these workgroups and the passing of HB 2592 are not easily won successes for foster care reform but they are a catalyst for change that will continue well beyond for years to come.

And as we approach a new Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit in 2012, the conversations will continue, and with them so will the changes.