A System Without Child Rights by Christina Koshney

When I think of the child welfare and foster care systems, I think of an old broken record that’s been skipping for far too long. Both from my personal experiences of the foster care system and from hearing stories from current and previous foster youth, I hear the same stories only with different scenes and characters. The same issues that have been brought up and noticed in the past are the same issues that we are currently fighting for today.

A lot of these issues were brought to Youth Advocacy Day on February 13, 2009 that issues since at least 1990 when the Juvenile court act—Dependency and Termination of Parent-Child Relationship went into effect (this is the main piece of legislation in Washington that discusses the rights of the parties in the dependency court system). These long time issues include a lack of a voice in the system which can be equated to lack of legal representation, and a lack of stable and safe housing. In the state of Washington the lack of clearly defining the rights of the child including a right to legal representation and to be housed as soon as possible can lead to a child being homeless.

Without a permanent and stable family, youth often has no one to turn to during their struggles. That experience made us grow and become closer friends. That experience made us grow and become closer friends. That experience made us grow and become closer friends.

Kinship Care Keeps Family Bonds by Ashlie Lanier

Family can be defined as any group of persons closely related by blood; such as parents, children, uncles, aunts, and cousins; as well as a group of people who are generally not blood relations but who share common attitudes, interests, or goals and, frequently, live together. This is the goal of kinship care: to keep families together.

Kinship care was designed to be an alternative to foster care. If caseworkers take the initiative to place children with their families, they can keep family bonds intact. The connection to family, relatives, and friends is important aspects in a growing child’s life. With kinship care, a child would have the opportunity to live with people he or she already knows, trusts, and have established loyal relationships with.

The bonds that youth have with family and friends are vital aspects in the outcome of the youth’s life. Sibling connection starts at a young age and children can remember people from very early in their lives. So, if you are taken out of your home around that age and separated from your siblings, people that you have already grown to love and trust, then it will have an effect on your life.

One kinship care alumnus youth that I spoke with was taken out of his home at the age of eight years old, separated from his two sisters and five brothers, and placed in a foster home. He stayed in that foster home for approximately six months. He refers to those months as the most depressing time of his life. One day he received a random visit from his case worker who told him to gather all his stuff because he was going to his grandmother’s house. When he got there, his siblings were there waiting for him. Five years later, he, along with his siblings, moved back in with his mother into their own apartment. Now 21 years old, he remembers this day as if it were yesterday. He states, “I could never imagine being without my brothers and sisters. That experience made us grow and become closer at that young of an age...” When growing up, without a mother or father, you have a lot of unanswered questions. Who were my parents? Why didn’t they want me? What type of people are they? These are questions that only your family can answer. I read a heart felt story of an alumnus of kinship care who had these exact same questions growing up. She expressed how her biological family was able to explain to her why she wasn’t with her parents and answer all the questions she had. In foster care, youth often have these same questions but they usually remain unanswered. She also

Permanency in Foster Care by Diamonique Walker

Permanency in foster care is when a youth is put in a placement that he or she is expected to stay in for the remainder of his or her childhood years.

Having a permanency plan, whether or not the youth will return home before the age of 18, is important to the goal of permanency. Having child welfare professionals give the support needed for this to occur, which doesn’t always happen, is another step needed. For the permanency to be truly effective, it is also very important for the birth parent(s), relatives, or adoptive parent(s) or guardian(s) to participate in the process.

Not achieving permanency in foster care is a risk for many youth. Being moved around to different placements can be traumatizing. Never having been in an absolute permanent placement by the time a youth ages out of care at age 18 also has negative effects. Each youth placed in care should have a permanency plan that his or her family helped develop which says where the youth should be permanently, whether it be back with their parents, a relative, an adoptive family, a guardian, or another permanent option.

The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM) helps with permanency in foster care. It creates a safe place for visits with birth parents, relatives, and adoptive parents to support transitions to permanent placement. Places such as the Hub Home or the current placement of the child are typical places for these visits. The support from the Constellation community even after the youth goes home, whether reunification, adoption, or something else. During the steps of permanency planning, the parent or relative can get extra support and guidance from the Hub Home parent if needed. Even after the youth is permanently placed, he or she and the parent or guardian are welcome to participate in Constellation events and get community support if they need it for a period of time.

Sue Lewis, an MFM Hub Home parent, supported one child’s permanency. In this particular situation, a four-month-old baby was placed in Sue’s care after being in the hospital since birth at only 24 gestational weeks. The mother of this child was there every step of the way, knowing what was going on through the whole process with her child. Sue and the mother and even the mother’s family spent time getting to know Sue and the child to prepare the baby to live with the mother once the circumstances were right. The mother visited her baby every day (except when she was ill for fear of getting the baby sick) which shows that she was really committed to the plan of her child coming home to her. With all her hard work for drug treatment and learning to parent her child, she got to bring the baby home a couple of months early. The child has now been living with the birth mother for eight months and is expected to be with her permanently.

Permanency is important because it provides a source of stability for the youth. Without a permanent and stable family, youth may not have a constant support in their life. A permanent family can provide support and encouragement, including finishing school, going to college, or getting a job; versus being in foster care and not ever knowing what stability really is.
First and foremost I want to send a hearty “shout out” to the youth and alumni of foster care in Washington State who have worked so hard during this legislative session. It has been remarkable to watch young people from all corners of the state come to Olympia and advocate on critical proposed legislation. Examples of this critical legislation are HB 166 Fostering Connections to Success and HB 1492 The Independent Youth Housing Program. Both of these provide critical housing for youth being discharged from Washington’s foster care system. As many of you know, the statistics paint a very grim picture of what life is like for the 18 year-old that is discharged from foster care directly to the streets. The research on these youth face include homelessness, early parenting, increased chemical addiction and/or mental health problems and, of course, reliance on public assistance. Imagine being a child that was removed from your birth family and separated from your family, school, and community; endured being placed in multiple different foster homes and who knows what else during adolescence and yet still managed to earn a high school diploma or GED. As a youth employee of the Mockingbird Society, I reflect on the “against all odds” accomplishment, you find out that you have become immediately ineligible for foster care; you just lost your housing, your health and your future. This is research to confirm what Grandma has known all along; those young people who receive safe housing and support are more likely to enter college, secure gainful employment, delay early parenting and rely less on public assistance. In fact, a recent cost-benefit analysis demonstrated that for every one dollar invested in housing for youth exiting foster care, there is a $2.40 return. During a hearing before the Senate Human Services and Education Committee, one young woman reported having had 52 different foster homes and identified the Independent Youth Housing Program as something she had not experienced. Nearly all of the young people who testified as residents of these two housing programs reported having secured multiple placements while in foster care. They are currently engaged in employment and/or higher education and, if these programs close June 30th, they will be homeless for the 4th of July.

The legislature is in the final stage of this year’s session which is scheduled to conclude on April 26th. They are now focusing on their main piece of work: the 2009-2011 state budget. I urge you to contact your legislators and encourage them to support HB 166 Fostering Connections to Success and HB 1492 The Independent Youth Housing Program. If you need assistance to find your legislator, visit www.leg.wa.gov or call 1-800-562-6000. I will close this month’s commentary the same way I began: thanking the youth, alumni, and allies who have worked so hard this session and who are leaders and advocates in the effort to build a world-class foster care system. Thank you!

Jim Theofelis

The Mockingbird Society: The Story Behind the Name

The 1962 American Classic To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee is the inspiration for our name, The Mockingbird Society. Atticus, the widowed father of Jem and Scout, joins Miss Maudie in teaching his kids that it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird because “...mockingbirds don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don’t do one thing but sing their hearts out for us.”

What if we created an organization, a community, indeed a world, in which our most vulnerable children and youth were protected and valued with the same commitment that Atticus had for mockingbirds? Join The Mockingbird Society today and help us give young people a safe place to be and sing.
Disproportionality and Child Welfare by Jerry Boro

Child welfare is in bad standing for children of color in the foster care system. The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) provides a great deal of services to those needing a stable living environment while in care. CWLA states that this system will grow up safely with a loving family which will lead to the people of the nation stepping up and realizing this vision. It is important to reflect the strength of family for care of families both above and below the poverty level.

In African American children live below the poverty level compared to 6% of white children. In addition, single parent families occur at a higher rate in African American families than white families which is an issue as well since single parent families are more likely to be one wage-earner.5 Families living in poverty often don't have access to services to support a family, prevent neglect, and help with the stresses of parenting to make sure the children are not rehomed by the system. A child welfare system which often leads to homelessness. This is a problem for all youth in care, but a bigger problem for youth of color.

The welfare system is supposed to be able to help every child and family with services that prevent these types of problems. It will hopefully only get better from here since progress has already been made and is more under way, but it will take the help of the community, alumni of care, and people who care, to assist in the system's push to spend more time with my family and friends, listen to music, spend time outside, and dance.

My experience of the foster care system includes a smaller portion of my life, starting in 1989. At 17 years old, I began to school, which was a big step to spend more time with my family and friends. I began to understand the stress that need of every child is met is only fair and then all youth would be served appropriately. It is the job of the community, the child welfare system, and government branches to protect and provide help regardless of color, cultural, or racial identity. It is important to reflect the strength of family for care of families both above and below the poverty level.

Meet the Staff: Christina Koshney

My name is Christina Koshney. I am 19 years old and reside in Seattle. I am currently a senior at Seattle University, where I am majoring in Political Science. I recently graduated from Seattle Central High School. While attending school, I have volunteered at various social programs for children. I plan on applying to law school so I can play a bigger role in advocacy, particularly youth advocacy. Whenever I have a little free time, I like to spend time with my family and friends, listen to music, spend time outside, and dance.

Sings and Arrows by Ian Grant

Sings and Arrows is a series of articles examining the challenges faced by foster youth and alumni in school written by Newburn whom I interviewed this month. Ms. Newburn is the Education Coordinator for the YMCA Independent Living Program. It’s no secret that foster youth have a hard time in school than most other students. In fact, the problem is much greater than the general population).

Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer The sings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them? —William Shakespeare

Every year there are different fund-raising activities for foster care held by numerous organizations do business and non-profit organizations do fund-raising, but two years ago, a high school’s ath-...
Creative Corner

Love
Stephanie Cooper

Love is a fantasy in a perfect world, only because it's not easy to find, something so close to our hearts, it has to cause emotional distress break downs, warm tears touch us with unwanted sorrows, I will never know how for some it's at first sight, It's unreal, Just doesn't seem right, maybe even in a way unnatural, I wish I could just find my perfect one.

Please Listen
Kerstel Cummings

When you ask me to listen and you start giving me advice, You have not done what I asked. When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way, You are trampling on my feelings. When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problem, you have failed me, strange as it may seem. Listen! All I ask is that you listen. Don’t talk or do – just hear me.

Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit: One Voice United for Change

June 27th and 28th 2009 in Seattle

Current and former foster youth ages 14 to 24 and their supporters will gather to discuss issues of concern to youth in care. For more information or to fill out an application visit at www.mockingbirdsociety.org.

Region 2: A.C.T. F.I.R.S.T. Chapter in Yakima County by Taylor Judd

Region 2 finally came up with a name: A.C.T. F.I.R.S.T. which stands for “Around Community Two Fostering Individual Rights Safely Together”. In this month’s meeting we discussed the different outlets we wanted the Yakima City Council to be aware of. Some of our ideas were: The Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit, letting the community know that we are available to do volunteer work, and to break the stereotypes of foster youth. We also discussed community service projects we would like to do.

We decided to volunteer to serve lunch at the Union Gospel Mission in Yakima but we were turned down because they had booked too many volunteers. At first, we were discouraged but we talked about it and asked the supervisor if there was anything else we could do. After much thought, he told us we could return to clean up. This shows that with determination and a positive attitude you can accomplish your goals. We believe that two of the keys to success in advocacy are determination and a positive attitude. After lunch at Costco, we came back and cleaned up after the lunch crowd. We would like to thank the Union Gospel Mission of Yakima for allowing us to help serve the community. A special thanks to Cherokee (Ally) who supported us in our advocacy.

Region 3: Hey Mac Chapter in Skagit County by Josephine Toohey

Region 3 has a wonderful group of people who are great at getting involved in decisions and sharing their stories, which has made a tremendous difference within the atmosphere of our group. We are open and welcome new people with open arms. Our region’s first involvement in the community was at a retirement home in Mount Vernon where we played Pictionary. It was a small group but a lot of fun. We believe that they really appreciated the company and we left feeling good about ourselves because we left them with a smile. I sat by a 92 year-old woman who, every single time I drew something on the board, always got it right. It was as if she could read my mind. We also had our first video game party, which included Rockband and Guitar Hero! I strongly believe that Region 3 and all of The Mockingbird Society made a huge difference in persuading legislators to understand and vote for the issues that we as foster kids face on a daily basis. I am really excited to see what next month brings!

News From The Mockingbird Network

Region 2: A.C.T. F.I.R.S.T. Chapter in Yakima County by Taylor Judd

The chapter meeting started off with a great and interactive icebreaker which helped the previous and new participants in the chapter become more engaged with one another, by converting to figure out which pop icon or political figure they were. During the chapter meeting we elected the chapter leaders for both the year-long and quarterly positions which were filled by Jerry Bobo and Yolanda Kilgore. As the year-long chapter leader I feel very excited to be able to lead the meeting and speak up for us. I believe being a chapter leader will help me grow as a leader and as a person in the community. Jerry, as the quarterly chapter leader, is very excited for the possibilities and change that Region Four is making and says he is thankful for the opportunity to work alongside such a great leader. While going through the meeting agenda, we debrriefed about this year’s Youth Advocacy Day and discussed the legislative agenda. We also discussed this year’s upcoming Leadership Summit and watched the video from last year which helped our four new members see what goes on and how wonderful and valuable the experience can be. As the meeting progressed, we started creating a chapter outline for our chapter meetings. Monday April 13th will be our next chapter meeting at Casey Family Programs.

The Mockingbird Times, April 2009