Mockingbird Times
Foster Care and Homeless Youth Speak Out Across the Nation

December 2008

Foster Youth Give Back by Georgina Ramirez

With the Thanksgiving holidays around the corner, YMCA and Youth LEAD participants shared some holiday fun with the residents of the Kawabe Memorial Center, a local retirement home. Experiential Learning Specialist Alex Okerman and youth participants from the YMCA and Youth LEAD/Mockingbird Network collaborated on a Thanksgiving service project that included baking homemade pies and origami.

Everyone congregated in the 2100 Hundred Building kitchen to bake apple and pumpkin pies. A kitchen full of care and young chefs created a room full of mouth-watering aromas that would make your granny jealous. Whether peeling, slicing, mixing, or cleaning something everyone was involved and put in their greatest effort to create something special for the Kawabe residents.

According to Senior Director Okerman, “The Kawabe memorial center is a retirement housing community in Seattle that provides affordable apartments for seniors. The majority of residents are Japanese and Korean elders, 40% do not speak English, and 45% of them are over age 80.”

The Kawabe Memorial Center residents shared their wisdom in the field of origami and provided an experience that truly displayed the rewards of goodwill. This activity was beneficial to everyone involved but what I found most inspiring was that this event demonstrates youth are passionate about staying connected and caring for their community.

For the second year in a row, 97.3 KIRO FM and Treehouse have come together to help foster kids have a wonderful Christmas. KIRO FM has been producing Foster Child Holiday Magic since the year 1988. They have a 27-hour radiothon to raise awareness about the difficulties that foster children face and to provide holiday gifts to foster kids across Washington State. This holiday season around by showing these kids people care.

That’s what the 97.3 KIRO FM Holiday Magic program is all about. The radiothon raises money to pay for gifts for foster children as well as children who are in kinship care. Foster Child Holiday Magic brightened the holiday season last year for about 3,500 foster kids. Tens of thousands of holiday gifts have been delivered across Western Washington for nearly 20 years. This year there are about 3,500 kids on the list to receive a gift from the program and there are still more foster children who are waiting to be submitted into the system to also receive a gift from Holiday Magic.

KIRO has a Web site, www.holidaymagic.org, where people can purchase toys for foster children of all ages. On this site, you give the option to either bid on the price you want or shop by categories of ages. 100 percent of the donation you provide goes to purchasing gifts.

KIRO and YMCA and Youth LEAD participants join residents of the Kawabe Memorial Center for some holiday cheer.

Holidays are a Challenge for Youth in Care by Ashlie Lanier

Most kids consider the winter holidays the most pleasant moments of the year. However, many youth in care have a different perspective. Many agree Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s are just average days throughout the year. Some become depressed and stressed during the holidays for many reasons, not necessarily because they don’t receive gifts, and not because they don’t enjoy the snow, but because of their own personal experiences during this season.

Large numbers of youth enter the foster care system during the holidays. Imagine being taken away from home and/or being brought to an unfamiliar place that you have to call home for maybe the rest of your life. Memories are forever and most cannot be forgotten. That’s one of the reasons youth in the system are not too happy when the holidays come around. What’s more frightening is being reminded of a situation they wish did not happen.

One youth in particular said that he never received gifts. He made it clear that when the holidays did come he was probably in a different home. “I have never had a homely, happy Christmas. I never received anything. Being honest, I feel like someone is trying to make me feel bad by doing something just for Christmas.”

Now don’t get me wrong, a lot of youth in care have joyous holiday experiences. Several youth in care look forward to the holidays because they have an opportunity to spend time with their biological family. Joyce Camacho-Cruz (a Youth LEAD Representative at The Mockingbird Society) says “The holidays can be fun because I do get to spend time with my family, however, no family is perfect. We all have problems and when everyone gets together there tends to be issues, but once we look past them, everything is always good.”

Countless numbers of youth within the kinship care system would agree that during the holidays money could be an issue. Many say that the holidays aren’t about flashy presents or who got the most gifts this year, but because picture being in a family where gifts do matter. After all, the holidays are considered the season of giving, right? Youth like me that have been given up their whole life most likely are expecting gifts every year. So what happens when you change homes? What happens when Santa doesn’t visit your house anymore and you swear you were good this year? What happens when you find yourself broke during the holidays and you get gifts from family members but don’t buy anything for anyone?

“I love the holidays, it’s my favorite time of the year. However, it’s also the most stressful time of the year. Only people in the kinship care alumni expresses. Tiffany explains how much she loves the holidays because everyone seems to be in a better mood. However, when Christmas-time comes around it is hard to come up with the money to buy her family gifts.

I had an opportunity to interview Jerry Bobo who is a Mockingbird Society staff and get his opinion about the holidays.

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CHALLENGE, CONTINUED on page 2
My Journey to YouthBuild by ARIANA

My journey in self-discovery has not been easy. I started out as a shy kid. I felt lost within the depths of a heart that had been bodied in a cage impaled by an abusive father and a weakened mother. I struggled to find myself amid the constant teasing of misunderstanding peers. I was unable to recognize the potential of who I could become. Life became increasingly difficult as the stall I called my home crashed under me when my father walked out the door. Hopelessness set in when my mother was diagnosed with kidney disease. They said she only had two years to live. Depression became an invasive force, eating me alive and being in shock to suicidal.

I blew off school whenever I could, my first foster mother. She was a caring but unintelligent lady who was unable to appreciate what was happening to me. From there, I was on a Foster Care roller coaster, removed and replaced, and replaced and removed, each time feeling more unimportant and uncared for as each foster parent realized they were unable to help me. I landed at a therapeutic group home called Virginia Miller. That piece of heaven (and sometimes Hades) made it possible for me to get myself back on track. A change came. I was able to reunite with my mother. She had improved her health with spiritual wholeness and lifestyle changes. With my home finally whole, I was finally able to focus on my passion: education.

I am 21 years old now and the past three holiday seasons have been terrible, so much arguing and blaming flowing down from family member to family member. I don’t really care for the holidays nowadays. It is just a normal day with a whole bunch of extras.

The holidays can be an emotional roller coaster for most youth in care. I just wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Happy Holidays! I want to take this opportunity to wish each of you a very happy and joyful holiday season. Without question, we are living through a very difficult time as we battle in two wars and one of the worst economic climates in recent memory. My thoughts and prayers go out to the hardworking families that are fighting to keep their housing, jobs, and health care as well as those who have a loved one who is away from home serving in uniform.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank so many of you who have supported The Mockingbird Society and our work. This past year has really been a year of remarkable growth for our organization and so many of you have been a main contributor of this growth. In particular, I want to thank the staff, Board of Directors, and volunteers who have been so instrumental in the success of The Mockingbird Society. I want to thank the foster and kinship caregivers who begin each day and end each night by giving of themselves to the children in their care. I want to thank the state and private agency social workers, case managers, and counselors who go the extra mile each day and every day, often without notice or fanfare. I also want to thank the administrative support staff who truly work behind the scenes. I know how appreciative I am for the administrative staff at The Mockingbird Society who are invaluable to literally everything we do.

As we conclude 2008 and begin to welcome 2009, I want to send a special message of gratitude and hope to the children, youth, and alumini of foster and kinship care. The Mockingbird Society will continue to ensure that your voice is elevated and heard! We will continue to create opportunities for you to share your story, your insights, and your wisdom regarding positive system reform and improvement. We will continue to be an organization dedicated to “building a world-class foster care system.”

Finally, as you consider your End of Year Gift, I hope you will remember The Mockingbird Society. Season’s Greetings to you and those you love.

About the Author

Ariana has found a future for herself with YouthBuild. With little schooling, I was behind in my education. I tried Sartori for awhile but it wasn’t a good fit. I reanalyzed my credit and was accepted into a cool place for learning and job training called YouthSource. Their staff put their hearts into helping students. They have passion for what they do and are fervent themselves about learning. Now I’m involved in the King County YouthBuild Program. I am learning hands on training in the fields of construction and green building. I am also able to use my artistic expression in these crafts. YouthBuild supports my educational dreams as I work with their diverse (and fun) staff. I’m living a construction with the art of creating. Construction jobs offer a high salary and benefits as an apprentice. That means I will get paid to learn. While learning I will earn an average of $15.00 per hour. That will help pay for my dream of college. I have finally found a purpose for my life.

Although constant uncertainty is life, one thing is for sure: Obstacles are only overcome by a force made up of the hopes and ambitions of those who are willing to set their life in motion. When I was hopelessly drowning in depression, that person whose spectacles were all I bapped on was a friend. I went from two years to live. I was on the brink of heart disease. They gave me my will, sprouting a faith of the finest cedar wood, planted in fertile ground. I give God my will, sprouting a faith of the finest cedar wood, planted in fertile ground. I give God my all. The holidays can be an emotional roller coaster for most youth in care. I just wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

About YOU!

AnonymouS; Angel Cross; Steve and Barbara Didis; Steve and Judi Finney; Theodora Geokezas; The Glaser Foundation; M. Harris; William Hodge; John and Susan Holt; Annie Huggins; Lisa Hunt; Sherman Ramirez; Oliver and Christine Martin; Anne and Steve Phelps; Mya Rowland; Majken Ryberd; Kimberly Servold; Don Stark; Josephine Stokes; Joel and Lorene Venata; Natalie Wood

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CHALLENGE continued from page 1

He states, “I have very many different opinions of the holidays. Me living with family members most of my life, my opinions have changed over the course of my life. When I was younger I couldn’t wait for the holiday season to come around. It was fun, all the family got together and enjoyed the love that everyone was giving. The older I got, the more my opinions started to change. I am 21 years old now and the past three holiday seasons have been terrible, so much arguing and blaming flowing down from family member to family member. I don’t really care for the holidays nowadays. It is just a normal day with a whole bunch of extras.

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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 and the 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 nest and sing.

Theodora Geokezas; The Glaser Foundation; M. Harris; William Hodge; John and Susan Holt; Annie Huggins; Lisa Hunt; Sherman Ramirez; Oliver and Christine Martin; Anne and Steve Phelps; Mya Rowland; Majken Ryberd; Kimberly Servold; Don Stark; Josephine Stokes; Joel and Lorene Venata; Natalie Wood
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great by giving me a bike. I’ve been want- ing one so bad this past year and now I have one and I’m thankful,” said a little girl. “Thank you for the camera. It was my all time favorite Christmas gift,” another young girl said.

A big THANKS to the donors, KIRO, and Treehouse who help foster kids have a great Christmas. I am touched by how foster children are getting blessed with those gifts that will bring smiles during the holiday season. I know that if I were still in care I would be very grateful as well. I can’t wait until Christmas Day comes because I know that all the children who will receive a gift will be extremely happy. Thanks everyone. Also, thank you Jessica R. from Treehouse for answering my questions.

For the Radiothon, tune in to 97.3 KIRO FM December 4th and 5th. You can listen and call 1-877-547-6454 to sponsor a gift for a foster child. If you would like to reg- ister to get your foster child a gift, please call 253-372-6010 (Washington State Re- gion 4 only).

HOLIDAY MAGIC, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Meet the Staff: Rap by Jerry Bobo

My name is Jerry Bobo and I was recently added to The Mockingbird Society (MBS) family. I am 21 years old, maturing every day, but there are still obstacles in life that I consider to be the test that I must pass with excellence to be the man I can be.

But let me tell you a little about me as I continue to take you on a journey through my high school experience in King County. My head lies down in a town by name of Kent where my heart was sent and stayed by those who love me plenty.

The 2008 school year at the Art Insti- tute was put on hold financially until 2009, but working daily will not stop me artisti- cally; this is a passion of mine. Friends en- joy the way I work around from one to another giving the best input, for the next time that I rhyme to get that shine, hope- fully sign on that dotted line.

Shopping before the show, getting ready to go all the way, showing off what goes on in my mind. Appearance is every- thing so I look my best from the haircut to the shoes on my left and right foot. Five years and counting since foster care has been a part of who I am and will be.

Have been looking outside of the picture frame, since I have been a part of Casey Family Programs retreats, Treehouse, and young men who I can keep in contact with who have integrity. Change is underway and there is always someone that needs to be made up of you youth who want to change. Change to some might be strange, but one can’t do it alone for us all.

HELP HELP HELP! The system is un- der construction; let’s make sure it does not fall, turning all problems from youth into one answer that they can maintain. I know I am helping others, but giving me the experience that I need to keep working on me as a young adult so when my manhood arrives I will be able to lead.
Christmas in Foster Care by Jerry Bobo

Christmas is a time of year to come together with your family and enjoy another family's company. Gifts and food are just extra after that. Whether it's your own family or someone else's family, Christmas is a family day. Not everyone has that perfect Christmas morning; some reasons being that siblings are not able to be with one another, there's no food on the table, or the gifts under the tree are not for them, or they simply have no real family to spend it with.

Some foster care and kinship care alumni have shared the most bitter-sweet feelings about the Christmas holiday were willing to share their stories. These are stories that many youth throughout the world can connect with in one way or another. Youth generally enter the foster care or kinship care system when their family is going through problems while they are young. At a young age, children really don’t understand what’s going on, but they do notice the difference between their family and new people.

At the age of two, Feltima Ferguson was placed in an all-girls home as her first foster home and then moved in with her aunt in her mid-teens. Her first thought was, “Does she really want me in her home other than because I am family?” Another alumni of care who prefers to remain anonymous, did not mind where she was placed because she knew that she would return to her mother. “I was blessed because all of the families that I lived with were great and I had a sister and I were able to stay together from a young age.”

With all of what goes on during the Christmas holiday and through being in the foster care and kinship care programs, there are many different surroundings to adjust to in many ways. Different ways of living, eating, drinking, and being around others are things that make us who we are and mold our traditions. The surroundings did not bother Feltima at all. “I knew that I was going to be placed back into foster care, so no weight was lifted off my shoulders.” Anonymous felt differently about her surroundings. Her adjustments were easy and she did not take long. “It was just an eye-opener to see that I would not be back with my mother,” she said.

Once things are starting to turn around and adjustments are made, is the time to open gifts and enjoy one another’s company on Christmas Day. The first Christmas with a new family can be a hard pill to swallow for some. Anonymous said, “My first Christmas was actually not fun. I was just missing my mother and it was hard to have my sister that could not go and give her a hug or be with her on that day.” For others it can be a little more breathtaking. “It was a good Christmas. I spent it with my grandma and got to meet one of my sisters out of six,” Feltima said.

The first Christmas with the new family is over and a relationship has been established between them and the youth. Some expectations are met and some expectations fail, but what doesn’t kill us only makes us stronger. Anonymous said, “My expectations were met but in a different way. But I learned later on that things will change. So it got easier as I grew older.” To Feltima, it was something she thought it was going to be. “That’s only because I was placed back in foster care at 16.” When living with another family you don’t get to visit with or speak with your own family very often. Once placed back in foster care that was Feltima’s “I [only] got to visit with my older brother and sister between they lived with my grandmother.” Anonymous had the same type of problem. “My sister and I did not have family contact till I was 12, which did not make sense. I did not think we would ever have a biological family again,” she said.

A family tree contains many families within one big family, whether biological or foster family said. “I consider myself as part of one big family. It feels good to know that I have an abundant amount of support and that every one of my families does not know. That same Casey study showed that 11.9 percent of foster alumni are sweating profusely, blushing, trembling, or have difficulty speaking. This can develop in care from being moved into unfamiliar places with people that the youth does not know. That same study showed that 11.9 percent of foster alumni have been diagnosed with Social Phobia upon exiting care.

Foster youth’s mental health is at risk. Many of them may have gone through some things in the process of going into, being in, and coming out of foster care. This can impact their mental health. The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM) has been working on some solutions to help youth stabilize so the disorder is if they are sweating profusely, blushing, trembling, or have difficulty speaking. This can develop in care from being moved into unfamiliar places with people that the youth does not know. That same study showed that 11.9 percent of foster alumni have been diagnosed with Social Phobia upon exiting care.

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