Child Welfare Practice Update from the WA Supreme Court

BY: DIAMONIQUE WALKER

On October 18th, three members of the Mockingbird Youth Network staff went to observe the Washington State Supreme Court hearing to determine youth’s constitutional right to having an attorney while going through termination of parental rights proceedings at Seattle University. Casey Trupin from Columbia Legal Services as well as Marla Zink from the Washington Appellate Project (who represented the mother of the children that didn’t have a lawyer in their termination court proceedings) both argued that youth have a due process right to counsel in these hearings. The opposing counsel, arguing for the state and representing DSHS, was Allyson Zipp. Arguments opposed to youth having this right include the fact that youth often have access to Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) or Guardians Ad Litem (GAL). Opponents often say that these roles are similar to a lawyer. Lawyers can play different roles depending on the age and abilities of the young person. For example, some lawyers are “client directed” if the child or youth is coherent and can explain their stated interest to their lawyer. Others may provide “substitute judgment” for their client, which is relied upon in cases involving young children. In these cases, the attorney is responsible for advocating for what the child needs based on her age and developmental levels. Unlike CASAs or GALs, attorneys are rigorously trained in the application of laws, and they are required to put their child-clients on equal footing, from a legal perspective, with the other parties in the courtroom. Attorneys must also keep client confidentiality which other court appointed representation does not have to do.

By not requiring legal representation in termination hearings, Washington State is in the minority of states across the country. It has received one of the bottom ten scores in a national report card on the issue of child representation in both 2007 and 2009. A possible reason for the lag is that this issue hasn’t been widely known by the community and the legislature until recently. The Mockingbird Youth Network, along with other partners and advocates, has been working to bring issues of legal representation for young people to the fore. While CASA has a very powerful and unique role in the courtroom for youth that they represent.

From my perspective, I believe providing legal representation for youth in termination proceedings could benefit youth and the system as a whole. A study in Florida on the issue of child representation showed that when younger children were provided with attorneys, they achieve permanency at a rate faster than those children without representation. If children are achieving permanency at a faster rate because they have the support of an attorney, those children are no longer in foster care, which means savings to the system. The Braam study ultimately showed that providing attorneys to youth was likely a cost-neutral solution in that state. In the event that this becomes required in Washington, funding would definitely be an issue initially. We all know that right now state government is strapped for money, so despite all of the positive aspects of youth being appointed lawyers the deficit dilemma might stand in the way. But in the long run, this could be a cost neutral way to make sure that youth in termination proceedings are on equal legal footing with other parties to the case, and ultimately reach permanency faster that they would if they weren’t entitled to their own legal counsel.

In 2007, Washington received an F grade, obtaining only 31 out of 100 possible points and ranking among the bottom few states. Available at http://www.firststar.org/documents/ FIRSTSTARReportCard07.pdf, at 10-11; 108-09. In 2009, Washington’s grade bumped to a D grade (obtaining 42 out of 100 points), but that was primarily due to a change in First Star’s grading method. Washington remained among the bottom nine states. Available at http://www.firststar.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=10McNoRqV9h%3d &tabid=74; at 22-23, 126-27.

Mockingbird and the YMCA: 10 years of partnership

BY: SEAN WALSH

Associate Executive Director, Downtown Seattle YMCA

The Y has long viewed The Mockingbird Society as the high bar for authentic youth voice and leadership, and for seeing caring adults as allies. This is embedded in their organizational culture, and it ripples outward. From my perspective as a community partner, Mockingbird’s legacy — even beyond its legislative achievements — will be its lasting influence on how the community respects the voice of youth, and how youth in turn build a stronger community.
Happy Holidays to you all!

As 2011 comes to a close, it is important to take a moment to reflect on how much we have accomplished in the face of unprecedented challenges. I am so very thankful and proud of everyone who helped us continue our mission of building a world-class foster care system, from our outstanding Board of Directors to our loyal Mockingbird Times readers.

This year’s accomplishments span our entire scope of work at Mockingbird, and they have laid the foundation for continued progress in the future. Our legislative advocacy efforts resulted in several victories during the 2011 session, including increasing safety for youth in care through unannounced visits and our state’s first step toward extending voluntary safe housing to age 21 for all youth exiting foster care.

Our Mockingbird Youth Network continues to expand and develop capacity, and they have had a positive impact. Thanks to a grant from the Andrus Family Fund, we are developing a new training designed to help youth aging out of care succeed. Mockingbird Family Model continues to be a model of care, with numerous youth aging out of care successfully transitioning to adulthood.

As the holidays near, it is a good time to reflect on all we accomplished this year. I am so very thankful and proud of everyone who helped us achieve these milestones. We are very grateful for all of our supporters, including donations from our outstanding staff and board of directors, our Mockingbird Youth Network, our Mockingbird Family Model, our Mockingbird Times readers, and everyone who supports our mission.

Sincerely,

Jim Theofelis
Executive Director
jim@mockingbirdsociety.org

Editor’s Note: As we approach the holidays, we would like to extend our gratitude to all who support the Mockingbird Society. We are deeply appreciative of the contributions of our staff, our Mockingbird Youth Network, our Mockingbird Family Model, our Mockingbird Times readers, and everyone who supports our mission.

Mockingbird Times, December 2011

Mockingbird Hub Home Needed

Ryther, a long-term partner with The Mockingbird Society, has an opening north of Seattle for an experienced foster family to provide Hub Home support for a constellation of eight foster homes. Please visit our websites:

www.ryther.org
www.mockingbirdsociety.org

and contact Heather Perry at (206) 517-0273 ext. 11 if interested. We look forward to hearing from you.
My Life Started Over When I Went Into Foster Care

BY: SAMANTHA MCDONALD

My name is Samantha McDonald, and I am one of the new Youth Network Representatives. My life started over at the age of ten years old. I was placed in permanent foster care with a family for whom my biological family did not want me. I was extremely blessed to have this home to lay my head at night. From my experience in foster care, I feel that every child and youth in care should have a positive experience. My hope is that I can be an example, a positive advocate for those in the foster care system through my own beliefs in healthy family relationships, embracing differences, and the power of positive thinking.

In the first few years of living with my foster family, I threatened to run away because I strongly felt like I was being emotionally transformed into believing that my biological family didn’t want me. That was not case. In the transition I was split from my younger sister and my brother, and I felt alone. As time passed, my perspective changed. My foster mom came to me with grace and gave me the option of counseling or moving to another family. She let me know the negatives and positives of both decisions but expressed her sorrow in my desire to run. My choice was counseling because in my heart I knew that my foster parents were helping me and my future. Now, not only do I have them as family, but I am able to have healthy relationships with my biological family as well. Healthy family relationships are important to my work at Mockingbird because I have experienced the love of being in a family, and I believe all kids in care deserve this experience.

Difference is what makes the world what it is, whether it’s race, culture, or style. It takes a certain kind of person to embrace difference—a person who is able to learn from diversity. I believe 100 percent in the power of positive thinking because it helps me keep going in the hardest of times. As I laid awake the first years of going into foster care I comforted myself in the knowledge that things were going to turn out okay. Being positive in any situation doesn’t make someone naive, stupid or unaware; it simply helps them keep going. The power of thinking positively is important for my work as representative because I will be faced with challenging tasks.

My life is a journey, a joy, and I look forward to working as a Youth Network Rep here at Mockingbird.

Support Youth and Alumni of Foster Care this Holiday Season!

The Mockingbird Times is distributed free of charge to people with a passion for improving the lives of children, youth and families. Please support our youth reporters with a holiday gift to The Mockingbird Society. Make a gift today and help empower our next generation!

3 ways to donate!

Online: mockingbirdsociety.org
Call Us: 206.323.5437 (KIDS)
Mail: The Mockingbird Society
2100 24th Ave S., Suite 240
Seattle, WA 98144

We Welcome Your Work!

We welcome submissions of articles, poetry, artwork, and photography from our young readers who have experience in the foster care system and/or homelessness. If you want to be published in the Mockingbird Times visit www.mockingbirdsociety.org, or contact us at (206) 407-2134 or via email at mbts@mockingbirdsociety.org. If you have submitted something before that hasn’t been published, you may resubmit your submission agreement in order to publish your work. Please submit materials and completed agreement again via the email address listed above.

Note: Any incoming letters to the editor and any correspondence to youth under 18 years of age should be addressed to the Mockingbird Times and will be opened first by adult editorial staff.

Mockingbird Times, December 2011

Who I Am

BY MANDY UHRLER

My name is Mandy and I am seventeen years old. I am a new Youth Network Representative and I am excited to be here and have the job I have been trying for since May of this year!!!

I was in foster care for fifteen months, starting when my son was four days old. I was scared when I entered foster care at fifteen, mainly because of a combination of having two older brothers taken away and put into foster care when I was two (I haven’t seen them since), and the horror stories I heard about foster care from peers. I was very lucky to be placed in a foster home where I felt like part of a real, working family.

Early this year, my foster father asked me to go to an Independent Living Services (ILS) meeting where I met Graham Farrington, Resource Specialist for the Olympia Mockingbird Youth Network Chapter. Graham told me about The Mockingbird Society, and got me hooked on advocacy. Within a month, I stepped up to help my friend with fulfilling his duties as Chapter Leader by filling in for him when needed.

As a parent in foster care, I realized that teen parents aren’t always treated like we are capable of being proper parents at a young age. We aren’t always given the respect that every parent deserves. I wanted to help change that as a Youth Network participant.

While in foster care, I knew I was a strong leader with a powerful voice filled with passion, I worked to make my opinions heard through the MBF chapter in Olympia. As a parent in foster care, I realized that teen parents aren’t always treated the same way we are capable of being proper parents at a young age. We aren’t always given the respect that every parent deserves. I wanted to help change that as a Youth Network participant. For more details on my experiences as a teen parent in Foster care, feel free to refer to my article in the October 2011 edition of the Mockingbird Times.

In addition to being an advocate, I am a musician at heart. I was born into music, and learned that music is the one friend that will never die and never leave me. You can get rid of every instrument in the world and cut out my vocal chords, but you can never take the music that is intertwined with my soul.

I also am a parent and I love to spend time with my son, Nicky, and my absolutely amazing fiancé. Nicky just turned two and he is WAY too smart for his own good. He is the light in my life, my world, my very being. My fiancé has been a tremendous help in dealing with the stress of the “terrible two” and working on my own transition to adulthood.

Personally, I have many ambitious longer term goals, which include continuing my education and earning an engineering degree with a specialty in medical engineering.

I can’t wait to see what is in store for me as one of the newest Network Representatives. I am truly proud to be a member of the Mockingbird team. Thank you to all who believed that I could make it.

Meet Mockingbird’s two newest Youth Network Representatives, Mandy and Samantha!
Mockingbird Times, December 2011

Creative Corner

If Only Someone Had Told Me
by Courteney Canova

But, there was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears here witness that a man has the courage to suffer.

-Viktor E. Frankl

Someone once told me that emotional pain only lasts for 12 minutes, everything after that is self-inflicted. Well I wish they would have told me that years ago.

Nobody told me life would be easy, but I wish they would have warned me of how hard it would be. I wish someone would’ve told me that almost every day I would wake up to something that would change my life once again...something that usually wasn’t for the better.

I wish someone would have told me that my mom would be a drug addict and go to prison, and that I would have to raise my little sister at the age of 12. If someone would have told me that my dad would have a stroke when I was 15, I would have been more prepared; I would make sure I told him just how much he meant to me.

I wonder if anybody thought of stopping to help me when I was homeless and living on the streets. I wonder if I could’ve stayed in high school if I had a stable home. I wonder if my sister will grow up knowing that I did everything I could to protect her. I hope she doesn’t think I abandoned her.

I wonder if I will ever learn how to trust or truly love. But mostly I wonder if life would have been different had I known what was coming next.

Looking at me now you would have never guessed that at one point I wanted to be six feet under; you would have no idea that I had a dark fire burning inside me fueled by a mixture of loneliness, anger, fear and hopelessness. You would not have guessed that I had attended over 13 different schools, and you wouldn’t think I had lost hope in ever finding a place to call home. Now, you see a girl that keeps her head high and hides her pain behind her smile—what you wouldn’t see is the girl who had everything she’s ever known or loved ripped away from her; a girl who literally had to do what she could to survive, and who now is paying the consequences for it.

You don’t know me; for a period of time I didn’t know myself. Nobody has held my hand through life, and in some ways, that is what makes me who I am today: a strong, beautiful, young college student who has the world at her fingertips.

Seattle Youth Network participants were delighted to share pies and origami with seniors at the Kawabe Center on November 15th.

Everett chapter leader Valerie Skelton connects with Representative Kirk Pearson during a recent chapter meeting at YouthNet in Mt. Vernon.

Regional Chapter Updates

Region 1 North (Spokane) Chapter Update
by Kristina Thomason

What’s going down in Spokane? Well glad you asked, let me tell you in. This month I was excited to present the Life Advocacy training, along with Courteney Canova, at our chapter meeting at Volunteers of America on Tuesday, November 15th. With Thanksgiving approaching, we decided that our community outreach project this month would be doing our annual holiday kickoff on Wednesday, November 16th. We partnered up with Crosswalk to provide sack lunches to the homeless who come through the downtown plaza. We were really excited to spend time together and give back! We were happy to see our usual faces, as well as new ones, at both our chapter meeting and at the community service project!

Region 1 South (Yakima) Chapter Update
by Brandy Bailey

On October 29th ACT FIRST had our 3rd annual Harvest Party! We had 13 youth in attendance, plus many of their family members. We had our staff members come and join in our fun. Tiffany (one of our participants) won our big raffle for the MP3 Player. It was a great time. On November 11th our planning team gathered together to prepare for facilitating the Culture of Foster Care Training. Then myself, Brenda, Luis, Stevie, and Jacob facilitated the training on Wednesday November 16th at Casey Family Programs in Yakima for about 55 CASA volunteers from Region 1 South. It was very empowering to conduct the training for the group, and our team was happy to help the CASAs learn from our experiences in care.

Region 2 South (Seattle) Chapter Update
by Max Ream

On Thursday November 10th my fellow chapter members Christina Kushnry, Lakeshia Schirner, and Miriam Mboya, and our Resource Specialist Jerry Bobo, facilitated the Culture of Foster Care Training to about 15 state social workers at the Children’s Administration office in West Seattle. They were very pleased and excited to receive a training about foster youth given by foster youth. November marks the start of the holiday season, and in our region, to start off the holiday festivities, we go and visit with the senior residents at the Kawabe Memorial House.

The day before our November 15th visit, a group of chapter members baked pies, which we then delivered to the seniors during our visit. This was the 4th year that we have spent time with them during the holidays. We enjoy this visit every year because the Kawabe residents are so kind hearted, and they love telling stories about their lives, and telling us young people how we should not take our youthful years for granted. It is a good feeling knowing that volunteering in “OUR” community at the Kawabe Memorial House changes someone in life in a good way.

Region 2 North (Everett) Chapter Update
by Valerie Skelton

HEYMAC held our latest chapter meeting on 10/27/2011. It had a great turn out; chapter participants attended with enthusiasm and were prepared for the event. Youthnet board members and staff enjoyed meeting the chapter participants, and our legislative guest Representative Kirk Pearson gave very positive feedback on the event. Garrett, Valerie, Janell, Montique, and Marta and Marta were the featured leaders for the night. After giving an overview of the Youth Network and our advocacy topic, sibling connections, to our adult visitors, we had a guest speaker. Amie Watkins, an alumna of care and participant in the original Braam lawsuit, spoke about Braam’s history, how she became involved, and the advocacy work she still does today. To conclude the meeting, Georgia read some letters from a fellow chapter participant who recently joined the military. We all took time to write him back to support him in his efforts; the chapter was really excited to hear from him.

Region 3 North (Tacoma) Chapter Update
by Tatiana Oliver

For November’s chapter meeting we hosted a community service event, and said a sad goodbye to our Resource Specialist Samantha Valle, who, after years of advocating for the rights of foster youth right along with us, is now transitioning to a new job. After the announcement of her resignation, we got together to work and sign up for case management. We are thinking of creating something similar for Mason, Thurston, and Lewis counties, starting with Olympia, and working our way out. Our last Chapter meeting was on September 15th, and the next meeting is still to be determined since we are still interviewing candidates for our Resource Specialist position.

I, Mandy Urwiler, left my position as Chapter Leader to take a new position as a Network Representative at Mockingbird headquarters on November 7th. We plan to take new applications for Chapter Leader at the next chapter meeting.

REGIONAL CHAPTER UPDATES