2009 Youth Advocacy Day

by ASHLEI LANIER

On February 13th, 2009, over 200 foster youth/alumni as well as supporters made their way to Olympia for the 2009 Youth Advocacy Day. The Mockingbird Network (a statewide network of youth advocates who are informed, trained, and empowered and determined to transform the system) and ASK-Y (Advocates for System Kids and Youth Coalition) collaborated to put on Youth Advocacy Day.

We started the day off with the presentation of the 2009 Legislative Agenda performed through a skit created by The Mockingbird Society Network staff to make it more appealing to youth. The definite Mockingbird Legislative Agenda consists of HB 1492—Independent Youth Housing Program and HB 1961—Foster Care to 21. These bills are designed to provide safe housing for youth after exiting care or give them the alternative to stay in the foster care home they are in while furthering their education.

Joint HB 1138 & SB 5609—Legal Representation provides a lawyer to youth for their dependency hearings not just in juvenile court. We also presented HB 1938—Sibling Visitation which came out of the 2008 Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit. It essentially encourages the adoptive parents of siblings of youth in care to continue visitation rights after adoption. Finally, SB 5785—Notification of Rights, also a product of the Leadership Summit, makes it mandatory for caseworkers to inform all youth in care at the age of 12 of their rights.

Throughout the day we had five influential people come give us inspirational speeches showing their support: Kari Burrell from the Governors Office; Leilei Lippold, a lobbyist Representative Roger Goodman, a sponsor of HB 1138 & SB 5609—Legal Representation; Representative Ruth Kagi, Champion for HB 1961—Foster Care to 21 and HB 1938—Sibling Visitation; and Representative Eric Pettigrew Champion for all the bills in our Legislative Agenda.

After hearing all the impactful speeches and getting fired up, we marched around the campus shouting for what we wanted and when we wanted it. My personal favorite chant was: “We don’t want no garbage bags, we want homes!” Youth that attended the march carried large black garbage bags waving signs appealing to youth. As we marched and raised our voices to let our presence be known to anyone in ear shot. I was full of amazement on that day and would not think twice about going again.

Youth Advocacy Day—An Inside Perspective

by CHRISTINA KOSKEY

Friday the 13th is associated with terror and horror in popular culture, but this February, 2009, Friday the 13th was a day of terror in Olympia, as foster youth tore through the capitol. This may seem a frightening way to represent Youth Advocacy Day, but to me it painted a picture of the passion that was brought by the 200 plus foster youth and supporters that attended Youth Advocacy Day. Olympia was brought a new energy, a new spirit that day and it was from the foster youth. We had something to say and we came with some very specific goals.

It was the several legislative representatives and other Olympia staff, taking the time to welcome the foster youth voice to Olympia that allowed a platform for us to be heard. I appreciated the representatives that let us know that we did have some friends in Olympia and that our fight was a worthy one. The representatives also made it very clear that this is a time of great financial deficit and that to get all these bills passed, it would be a fight for our rights and all the more necessary to speak loud and clearly to the board members and chair in Olympia. Fortunately, if anyone missed the message on Advocacy Day there was plenty of media coverage including KING 5, The Seattle P.I., The Tacoma Tribune, and The Olympian. At one point, I caught myself getting that exciting feeling in my stomach. I had finally realized the importance of what I was doing when I watched the crowd roaring and the cameras filming. The youth advisor Ian Grant expressed, “The march was the most visceral part of my experience. It’s one thing to sit in an office and work for change. It’s quite another to stand on the marble steps of the Capitol with 200 other people demanding it.”

During the day, Regions Two through Six all had the opportunity to work with their local representatives. Region 4 For Change had the chance to speak with Senator Adam Kline. Three youth gave short personal statements that included logical reasons why he should support the bill. This was many of the youths’ first times getting the chance to advocate for themselves and others to important people who can produce change. The youth definitely put on their game faces, especially Mockingbird Network Resource Specialist Georgina Ramirez. She provided assertive yet logical arguments and opinions in the defense of these bills.

At the end of the day came the hearings. We actually had the chance to sit in on a real hearing—In the senate, the Youth Advocate’s lawyer was hearing arguments from the Governor’s Office and a lobbyist to HB 1961—Foster Care to 21. My personal favorite was a lobbyist from an independent radio source my perspective on foster youth and the specific issues we brought to Youth Advocacy Day this year. I was caught off guard by the sudden opportunity to see that people really wanted to hear what we had to say. The hearing was emotional and uplifting, giving us hope and a better understanding of the circumstance in which our bills were in jeopardy. But the most influential part of the whole experience was the youth from all different backgrounds and current situation coming together and striving to help one another. The sense of belonging and acceptance was all around as we marched and raised our voices to let our presence be known to anyone in ear shot. I was filled with pride and hope that we will be heard!

Advocacy Day, continued on page 3
Hi my name is Ashley Vassar, I am 16-years-old and I am from Seattle. My mother is also from Seattle and my father is from Alabama. However, I was raised by my parents. Instead, I was raised by former relatives and a few foster parents. I have an enormous amount of experience in kinship care, foster care, and living in a group home. My mother passed away when I was 12-years-old. Ever since then, I have been very determined to graduate from high school. I want to go to college and come out with a degree. I want to achieve many great things in life. I was in kinship care for the first 15 years of my life. In the last two years I have been in two foster homes. Now I am in a group home called Burien where I have been there for the past eight months.

I am currently attending Highline High School and Puget Sound Skills Center in the culinary arts class program.

In my spare time I love to write poetry. I mostly like to write about my problems or a memory of some sort. I have a passion for drawing portraits of my friends and family. I am ambidextrous. My favorite thing to do is dance and to sing my favorite songs. Some of my favorite singers are Keisha Cole, Mary J. Blige, and Mary Mary.

In the past, I have won many accolades and awards such as being a participant on the youth panel at the 2004 Kinship Care Gathering at African American Academy. The gathering highlighted issues around foster care and kinship care systems and family members who serve as long term caregivers for other members of their family. That experience was great and I really learned a lot from it including how to advocate for myself as a young individual and what my rights are as a child in the foster care and kinship care systems.

On April 2, 2009, I won Youth of the Year at Atlantic Street Center in recognition of my hard work and accomplishments towards meeting and achieving my goals and enhancing my personal growth. It took me a while to accomplish my goals but when I finally achieved them I was very proud of myself. Some issues in today’s society with foster care and homeless youth is the lack of visitation with relatives. Most teenagers and young adults in care find it very difficult to have to leave their younger siblings. If I could change one thing about the foster care system it would be to keep siblings together instead of separating them into different foster homes.

I wanted to be a part of the Mockingbird Network so I can tell my side of the story and let my voice be heard.
Trietal and Tribal State Court

By Leona Bill

When Native American children are taken from their home they cannot find a home in the State Indian Child Welfare. The State must inform the Tribe why they want to enter on to tribal land request permission to step foot on Tribal Land. The state will be escorted on to Tribal Land. When Native American children are taken in foster care, the family deals with either state court or tribal court. A judge, tribal court has the chief of the tribe, tribal councils, and elders in the Court room. All these people decide what happens in all cases that are in tribal court. When in out of home care, Native Americans are protected by federal legislation. The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) is a law designed to protect American Indian/ Alaskan Native children who were being removed from their Tribal Communities and Tribal Families at an alarming rate. The ICWA requires that an Indian child is to be placed with an Indian relative or within their tribe or else with another tribal nation. The place of a child is a priority of placement of non-Native foster home. This law protects the right of Indian children to maintain connection to their culture and ensures that the rights of a tribal Indian and the tribe to be self-govern their welfare of its children is protected and enforced. This law applies to the children and families whether or not they are enrolled in a Tribe. The Native children’s cases are handled by either the tribal nation and or by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). If the child lives in an area that is non-Native then the ICWA doesn’t apply. If the child is Native then it is up to the tribe to take a stand. It is up to the tribe to make sure that the children receive the care that they deserve.

To me, cultural relevancy in foster care is everyone being able to engage with and have choices of their same or different backgrounds in a way that makes the youth feel supported and safe. When there is no one around the youth that shares their cultural background to have an open-minded child welfare professional that is willing to experience a youth’s culture, when it is different from their own, and how a youth can get a better understanding, can make that much of a difference in a young person’s life.

For a youth to be in a home that is culturally insensitive to them, “…has the potential to be damaging to the youth,” says Mockingbird Family Model’s (MFM) Hub Home parent, Degalle Cooper. They may question who they are and who they identify with. But, by being culturally relevant, we are supporting the healthy development of youth in care. Having a “one size fits all” way of thinking and not regarding cultural differences between the youth and caregiver group can severely influence youth to be closed-minded as well. “As caregivers, our own cultural incompetence can have a direct effect on youth and may lead to confusion and uncertainty of who they are as individuals,” said Ms. Cooper.

The MFM supports cultural relevancy in foster care by training Hub Home parents to be culturally sensitive professionals. A culturally sensitive person is gaining the knowledge and skills to develop effective relationships with diverse individuals and work against barriers to fairness and equity within groups and organizations (Hackett, W. & Hanson Smart, D., 2006). Bridges to Engagement: Tools to Support Culturally Relevant Care. Success is a person learning to be empowering—actively furthering youth’s self-confidence; valuing differences—providing settings where cultural norms are practiced, acknowledged, shared and experienced among others; and transformative—helping youth and families develop effective skills using anti-racism and anti-bias practices. Dr. Coop not only serves the youth in her constellation but insures that the youth’s surroundings are culturally relevant as well. In her home for drug care youth and adults of different ages, races, cultures, and sexual orientations. Everyone is different so no one feels left out. Ms. Cooper also mentioned initiating age-appropriate discussions with the youth asking the youth to contribute stories, ideas, questions they have about culture. Ms. Cooper also made a reference to the importance of signage being evident in foster homes. This could be posters and pictures portraying different cultures, customs, and beliefs.

Keeping cultural relevancy in foster care is important because many youth don’t have connections to their families. Winter children of color in foster care nationally is about fifty nine percent. Many of these youth of color are often put in places where the primary caregiver is a different race and culture. With cultural relevancy in foster care, youth and families are able to explore, understand, and respect their cultures and customs.

As an alumna of foster care, I have had experience in dealing with both systems. My case moved back and forth between the tribal court and state court. This had a major affect in my life as I was not always sure who had jurisdiction over my case. I was constantly calling both Tribal and State to try and find out who I needed to speak with about my needs or speak with them to receive permission to go on trips. I was constantly running into problems, such as not being able to go to camp, rock climbing, rowing and sailing. Since my case was passed between the two systems it took a long time to get a hold of the right person in charge of my case. The last time I was in foster care, tribal court was handling my case, and I was disappointed with the decision because my reservation’s tribal court did not want my mother to get us back. Although we experienced many different challenges, my mother still did as they ordered and received custody over us again. When the tribal court was supposed to work for and help my family it felt like we were receiving a death sentence. We did not have any money, it took a very long time for her to find an attorney. The attorney she finally found was very helpful with our case and helped get us back.

If tribal court is not providing help for parents with their case they can turn to the Northwest Justice Project (NJP) for legal help. The NJP is an attorney that will take your case for free. Parents that can afford an attorney and are in tribal court can ask court clerks for a list to admitted in practice. Parents can also try to hire a private attorney who does dependency law. To receive either legal advice or find an attorney visit the website www.washingtonhelp.org/WA/index.cfm. Thank you to Jancen Comenote and Chori Folkman for taking time to answer questions I had about the tribal system.
Indulge
RASHUNDA JOHNSON
He is special with a hint of vanilla: purposely the gentleman without doubts but what is it that makes me wait: I love the fact that he’s similar yet a cliche tic model of a human being. That’s not the usual or is it? My mind races as if I was sprinting; not continuing other races but still a hold on this one... the 2. I am interested: I own an interest for him: His name is special and sincere.
His name is a name that’s speaks to me whenever I need words: His name is my belonging: Passion of communication erupts when there’re thoughts: Passion of warmth soothes me when he’s near. The words of a humble gentleman never intimidate but fiercely accommodate me with his intentions of acknowledging me: Love is sudden: Commitment is already here, yet unsure because of waiting.
Waiting for time: waiting for us: waiting.... The days go by and I miss his words, so not his style: A sprinter like I: We, the brains of the relationship: His eyes make me melt: His voice a patient rattle: His face, round: His body, muscular: His ambition is more than street life: His presence is my friend, my man... Indulge.

All One
ASHLEY VAUGHAN
In my mind the cord got cut
But the world keeps spinning
All the shows that they show
and all the games that they play are fun and satisfying
but no one’s winning
my life is a toy that never shuts down
my reality is like a boy that never plays around sometimes the truth hurts.
but you just have to open your mouth and let it burst
it may cause a little pain, you may gain a little fame
but in the end nothing will be the same
’cause my life is your life our life we live together from my broth to my sista to my cousin to my motha to my pop to my peoples we are all one within each other

Community Events
Region 2
Mar 19th, Central Lutheran Church & March 26th KDNA Radio: Community Education Forum, Supporting Successful Futures for Youth in Foster and Kinship Care: 10 AM - 3 PM

Region 3
March 26*, Everett Community College: 3rd Annual Region 3 Educational Summit
March 13*, Mt.Vernon Younnet: Life Advocacy training, 4-6 PM.

Region 4
March 17*, Seattle Center: St. Patrick’s Day Parade, 12:30 PM
March 28*, McCaw Hall: Taking Root, the story of Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Mauari (Part of Seattle International Film Festival) 12 PM to 2 PM

Region 6
March 13-22* at Washougal High School: CYS Theater presents The Music Man.
March 23*, Hilton Vancouver/Women of Achievement Celebration— 25 Years, 200 Women; For more info call Heather, (360) 906-9136.

News From
The Mockingbird Network
Your Needs, Your Voice

Region 2 Chapter in Yakima County

VOICE DEVELOPMENT TRAINING by SANDRA HUNT, CHAPTER YOUTH LEADER: On Saturday, February 21, 2009, we had a Voice Development Training here at the Yakima Casey Family Programs Field Office. I had the opportunity of being a co-leader alongside Nathan and Amber from the Tri-Cities. It was all rather fun, and everyone who attended seemed like they enjoyed it too. Laughs were shared, smiles were exchanged, and candy was eaten. To end the meeting, we raffled off a $25 gift certificate to Target. The lucky winner was Yadira Mendoza. On March 7th we are voting for a name, figuring out our service project, and figuring out when we are going to the Yakima City Council.

VOLUNTEER ACTIVITY by DAVID SMITH: On Saturday, February 14, 2009, Region Two went to a local convalescent center for the elderly in Yakima, Crescent Convalescent Center, to pass out valentine grab bags to the residents of the center. The bags consisted of candy and a little “happy valentine” card, this gesture not only made the residents feel valued but we as youth learned some life advice from some of the residents. Margaret, who just turned 94 on Valentine’s Day, advised us to “always find ways to improve yourself.” Helen who was up and walking on her own at 95 advised us to “never give up and listen to your mother,” she was rather inspiring. Harry who was 86 advised us to “never lose your sense of humor.” Harry even proved he didn’t lose his, he told us a joke as we all got to hear it in his room. The residents really enjoyed our visit, some let us get to know a little bit about themselves, we let them know about us and we were fiercely accommodated by the residents. Margaret, who just turned 94 on Valentine’s Day, advised us to “always find ways to improve yourself.”

Region 3 Chapter in Skagit County by SASSI ELLSWORTH

On February 13th, all around Olympia, the buzz of hundreds of people from all around the state rings through the air. Excitation for this big day can be felt everywhere. What is this special occasion? Youth Advocacy Day. Advocacy Day was our chance, as foster youth, to meet with our state legislators and give them a face to associate with the upcoming bills about to go through the house. Among the bills being voted on are House Bill 1961 (Foster Care to 21), House Bill 1183 (Legal Representation for Youth in Care), and Senate Bill 5758 (Notification of Rights for Youth in Care). Foster youth congregated here at the Capitol, marching and meeting with their local representatives. Coming from a participant’s standpoint, I feel that this day was one of the most beneficial days of my life. Seeing how much these politicians care is quite moving and I can guarantee that they care more than we give them credit for. When it all comes down to it, regardless of the outcome of our bills, participating in this incredible day has changed my outlook on these representatives who once seemed so distant and strange.

Region 4 For Change Chapter in King County by YOLANDA KILGORE

Words cannot describe the emotions running through my body as I lead the march down the street in the Washington capitol as I chanted “What do we want? When do we want it?” We made it to the capitol building and, as I rallied the other youth, alumni and supporters, I felt totally of the lucky alumni of care who is able to make an impact in the right way. How much these politicians care is quite moving and I can guarantee that they care more than we give them credit for. When it all comes down to it, regardless of the outcome of our bills, participating in this incredible day has changed my outlook on these representatives who once seemed so distant and strange.

Region 6: Speak Up Chapter in Clark County

Young from Vancouver’s SPEAK UP! chapter joined over 200 foster youth, alumni, and allies in Olympia on February 13th for Youth Advocacy Day. They had the opportunity to talk to eight of our local legislators in one-on-one meetings about issues facing foster youth today and the importance of continuing current programs like Foster Care to 21 and the Independent Youth Housing Program. Our two SPEAK UP! leaders even testified in a committee hearing in front of a panel of legislators and a room full of supporters about issues that are important and impact them. Congratulations to the youth who participated. Thank you for taking the time to SPEAK UP!!

“"My backbone is the strongest part of my body, why? Because it allows me to stand strong and pulls me back up when I’m down.” ~ Jerry Bobo