May is National Foster Care Month

May was first proclaimed National Foster Care Month in 1988. The National Foster Parent Association (NFPA) persuaded then Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina to designate May as the month for foster care. Every year of his presidency, George H. W. Bush issued an annual proclamation that provided a push towards state, county and city proclaimations. The main focus was to show appreciation and recognition of the tremendous contributions that foster parents have made for foster youth all across the nation. Two years later, National Foster Care Month started to focus more on the youth that were older, particularly those that were aging out of the foster care system. The Chafee Foster Care Independence Act was passed as a result of the leadership from the National Foster Care Coalition and Casey Family Programs. National Foster Care Month brings light to foster care issues and provides an opportunity for the individuals and organizations that work hard to support foster children and foster families through the year to be heard.1

1 According to Lawrence Adams, an advocate from fostercaremonth.org, all across the nation there are over 525,000 children and youth in foster care. This year alone, 20,000 of those youth will age out of the foster care system. This month, a great deal of community events are planned across the country to help attract and support seriously needed foster parents as well as providing needed support and advocacy for foster youth. Youngsters who are aging out of care are very vulnerable and the latest statistics show the price that we are already paying today because of our failure: Only 54 percent of foster youth earn a high school diploma, only 10 percent of those go on to college and only 2 percent of those obtain a Bachelors degree or higher. In addition, 51 percent of youth aging out of care will experience unemployment due to a lack of skills, 30 percent have no health insurance, 25 percent will at one time be homeless, 30 percent will require some type of public assistance, 37 percent become incarcerated, and over 40 percent will become involved with drugs or alcohol. So May is the month to cut these statistics down and change the lives of youth in and aging out of care.2

2 Fostercaremonth.org has taken a closer look at the numbers and diversity of people who were once in foster care. It has been estimated that there are 12 million foster care alumni in the United States, which represent all walks of life, from regular people to well-known celebrities.3 There are stories of those who have grown up to be thriving adults while others have struggled with the challenges of life alone. There is a difference between triumph and tragedy. Success stories come in all forms and fashions, but the best come when someone takes the time to offer comfort, support, advice, or just a milestone moment for a youngsters enduring difficulties in family situations.

As an alumnus who grew out of care, I understand fully the importance of May being National Foster Care Month. I missed out on a lot of opportunities to gain the support and comfort needed to prepare myself for life after care. Unfortunately, there is little help for youth that age out of care. Every person needs a helping hand sometimes. For more information on foster care and to see a list of all the events going on across the country visit www.fostercaremonth.org, www.fostercaremonth.org/TheCampaigns/HistoryAndOrigin/ Pages/default.aspx or www.fostercaremonth.org/home www.fostercaremonth.org/pages/default.aspx

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Sealing Juvenile Criminal Records by Christina Koshey

The things that we are capable of from the early ages to 18 years, both good and bad, are unlimited. Personally I can say that I have done some very amazing things such as graduating at 18 years old with my diploma and AA degree from community college. At the same time, I have also done some very unwis things that could have further involved me with the criminal justice system. This is not unlike all youth who have done things that they may not be proud of but who are, nonetheless, much more than any one stupid thing they may have done. Understanding how, as humans, we all make mistakes and how we learn and grow through these mistakes is key in understanding the importance of sealing juvenile records.

A juvenile record includes any record of a youth having been involved in the juvenile justice system. This could be “the official court file, the social file, and records of other juvenile justice or care agencies involved in a case.”4 These records of your involvement with the juvenile system do not disappear once you turn 18 years of age but, in some cases, you may be eligible to seal these records. Once an individual’s records are sealed they are not available for public examination, meaning that when you fill out a job or housing application, those companies would not be able to access your juvenile criminal history and you would be legally eligible to state that you do not have a criminal record, assuming you don’t have any further adult criminal record.

After your records have been sealed, they are still able to be reopened if you’re convicted of another crime (meaning you were found guilty). While this sounds contrary to getting your records sealed so that they can’t be reopened, this is the usual way the juvenile system works because of the reasons stated above. The only way to legally ensure your records are never re-opened is if the records are destroyed, but in Washington, only juvenile diversions are eligible to be destroyed. (Diversions are not convictions. For more information on diversions visit www.kingcounty.gov/courts/JuvenileCourt/diversion.aspx.)

Even if your records are sealed, it’s important to be aware of the fact that the Washington State Patrol also keeps criminal history record on individuals that have been convicted of a crime. It is important to let your family and friends know that you have a sealed record and to make sure they don’t share this information with others. Sometimes things come up that require you to talk about your past. In these situations, make sure you are honest, but be prepared to explain your past. If you are applying for employment, you should always inform your employer in advance that you have a sealed record. This will allow you and the employer to discuss how the sealed record will affect your ability to get the job. The best way to do this is to discuss your situation with a friend or a family member who has some experience in the field you want to enter.

SLINGS AND ARROWS II

BY IAN GRANT

Slings and Arrows is a series of articles examining the challenges faced by foster youth and alumni in school. This month I interviewed Daphne Nelson, Education Program Manager for the Washington State Children’s Administration whose job is to develop policy that improves educational outcomes for foster youth in Washington State.

According to Welton, the two biggest obstacles foster youth have to overcome in order to achieve their educational goals are the stability of their placement and the continuity in their educational career. These are related: placement stability is the ability of a student to stay in the same school and work with the same teachers and administrators that they have already made connections with. Repeatedly switching schools is critical to educational success: a student loses an average of four to six months of educational progress each time he or she changes schools.

However, things aren’t necessarily as bad as they seem. It turns out that about 61% of foster youth in Washington State only move schools once while in care. That’s not ideal but it’s a good start. The biggest problem, ensuring that foster students maintain their educational continuity is the availability of foster homes in the different school district of children entering care.

The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) is currently working on a program to partner with local school districts to recruit more foster parents and make sure that the current ones are well connected with the school district. So far, of the 295 school districts in the state, the OSPI has signed agreements with about 140 of them. These agreements outline how school districts and Children’s Administration can work together to improve educational outcomes for foster youth.

Unfortunately, there’s not much an individual foster youth can do to move this process along; the school districts and Children’s Administration are large organizations with lots of inertia and improvement is going to be gradual. In the meantime, Welton believes that one of the biggest things an individual foster youth can do is connect with an adult that you know and trust. The school system, no matter which level of education you are at, can be confusing and frustrating. It’s important to have a cultural translator that can advocate for you at levels where certain people would be more likely to dismiss somebody who is not an adult.

Foster youth are just one part of what many would characterize as a broken and poorly educated education system. Even among the general population, only 75% of high school students receive a diploma. For foster youth, it’s even worse: only 54% graduate from high school. Foster youth do not have the luxury of waiting for the system to improve; many of the most important and consequential reforms will take effect after they have already left both foster care and the public educational system.

Visit us online at www.fostercaremonth.org or call 206-323-KIDS (5437)
Meet the Staff: Catherine Lanham

Mockingbird Society would like to introduce our Finance Manager, Catherine Lanham. This position is a new one for The Mockingbird Society (MBS) and we are glad to welcome Catherine Lanham as a new staff member.

MT: What attracted you to the MBS?

CL: I heard a lot of good things, I read the paper, and I am also a foster parent. I had a good friend who told me of the opening here.

MT: What do you enjoy about working for the MBS?

CL: I love working with this great group of people. I also really appreciate being part of an effort in changing the system for the better.

MT: What was your position before you joined the MBS?

CL: For the last 9 years I had been a consultant working in accounting with a non-profit agency.

MT: What is your favorite hobby?

CL: It is a toss up between writing and gardening.

Thank you for joining us in our mission to create a world class foster care system through collaboration, innovation, and advocacy!

Support The Mockingbird Society!

We invite you to join us in making a significant difference in the lives of our most vulnerable children, youth and families. In gratitude of your support, we will send you a monthly issue of the Mockingbird Times. Please join us today!

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May also marks the end of the 2009 Washington State Legislative session which concluded April 26th. With a 9 billion dollar deficit, the 2009 legislative session turned out to be as grueling and exhausting as anticipated, particularly in the areas of health care and education. However, due to the leadership and commitment of so many legislators, The Mockingbird Society (MBS) legislative agenda was nearly 100% achieved. Both the Independent Youth Housing Program and the Fostering Connections bills passed with funding in the budget. These critical programs provide safe housing for youth being discharged from foster care. Many of the young people participating in these programs testified in legislative hearings that if the program closed on June 30th as planned, they would homeless for the 4th of July.

Additionally, two other bills passed including one that encourages adoptive parents to ensure visitation if any siblings of their adoptive child remain in foster care and a bill that increases the notification to youth 12 and older of their rights and benefits while in foster care. Finally, I am so pleased that during such a tumultuous budget year the legislature continued funding the Mockingbird Family Model Constellations that are sponsored by the state. I also want to say that the one bill that did not make it through the process was the Adequate Legal Representation for youth in Dependency Court. The MBS remains steadfast in our commitment to this issue and expect to continue this effort going forward. Finally, I want to give a hearty “thank you” to the youth and alumni who participated in this year’s session, the over 200 who attended Youth Advocacy Day and again to the legislative leadership in both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Jim Theofelis
jim@mockingbirdsoociety.org

SEALING RECORDS, CONT FROM PAGE 1

Sealing records is a very involved process that is not easily completed by an individual without legal training and can often become complicated and frustrating. So, if a young adult wants to get a job or housing but doesn’t want the mistakes made while a youth coming back to haunt him or her then he/she should consider sealing juvenile records? Street Youth Legal Advocates of Washington (SYLAW) is one of a few legal resources available to youth. They provide a free legal service (minimal fees for a consultation) to help seal a certain juvenile records. The bill was HB 154 and Governor Gregoire signed it into law on April 25, 2009. This young adult felt it important to do this because, “I just wanted to do my part in preventing others from having to go through the same things...I just want to help people...I feel like I’m currently working, has his General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and is taking steps towards being an activist by utilizing his voice and his story.

“...I was kind of an impulsive kid who made reckless decisions, but there were a few people along the way who helped me, like the probation officers and the treatment facilities. They helped me in a way that was out of my family’s control. Every kid who goes through this system is helped to have people in the juvenile system.”

For more information on SYLAW and their free clinic please visit www.sylaw.org.

Mockingbird Times May 2009

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 wisedow father of Jim 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. They don’t do one thing but sing their hearts out...”

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 give young people a safe place to nest and sing.

ABOUT US: The Mockingbird Society is a 501c(3) nonprofit corporation dedicated to helping children and youth who have experienced foster care, while advocating with decision makers for system reform. All contributions are tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law. Please consult your tax advisor regarding your specific tax situation. The Mockingbird Times is a monthly newsletter published and produced by youth who have experienced foster care. All youth employees of The Mockingbird Society are paid between $9.50 and $12 an hour. Additionally, youth from across the country submit articles, art work, and poetry and are compensated $25 per published piece. The Mockingbird Times is distributed 25,000 copies being distributed across Washington State and the USA, through a private distribution list and as an insert in Real Change, a Seattle-based community newspaper. Youth involvement is the key to the philosophy, values, and success of The Mockingbird Society and, as such, youth are involved in all aspects of organizational development and decision-making. Donations to The Mockingbird Society may be tax-deductible and are greatly appreciated. No part of the Mockingbird Times may be reproduced without the written permission of The Mockingbird Society. All contents copyright ©2009, The Mockingbird Society.
While growing up, you are surrounded by family and friends. They help define your identity as well as help you discover who you will become. They are always there and dependable when you need help making life altering decisions. In a “normal” family setting, there are members of your family and community support to help you through your times of need. In the foster care system, that isn’t always true but Family Team Decision-making Meetings (FTDM) might be one of the first steps.

FTDMs occur whenever a placement decision is needed. Ideally, the purpose of these meetings is to make sure the youth maintains his or her current placement. When this is not the case, the participants in the meeting are required to come up with a solution and a well thought out plan. If the group is not able to make an agreement, the social worker as well as his or her supervisor has the authority to create the plan for the youth.

Meet the Staff: Lauren Steed

Lauren Steed has joined The Mockingbird Society (MBS) as a Resource Specialist for Region 1. Lauren is a part of The Mockingbird Network that is growing strong. We would like to welcome Lauren to the MBS.

MT: What attracted you to the MBS?
LS: I am most attracted to the idea that the MBS is rather than later you through the voices and strength of young adults and youth who want to make positive changes and improve the foster care system. One way to build a well-developed foster care system is to start with our most valuable assets and anything needed in order to continue to support the growth and development of the youth. Creating family

Table: Meet the Staff: Samantha Valle

The MBS would like to welcome Samantha Valle to our continuously growing Mockingbird Network. Samantha is our Region 5 Resource Specialist. Welcome to The Mockingbird Society (MBS) and thanks for joining us in always doing our best in changing the system and working with so many youth.

MT: What was your position before you joined the MBS?
LS: Before I joined the MBS, I had a few different positions. One, I was a Program Developer for Project Safe Place, a non-profit organization devoted to helping young victims of violence. When I was a case manager in Crosswalk, an emergency shelter and a school drop-out prevention program dedicated to breaking the cycle of youth homelessness. Before this, I taught public speaking courses at Eastern Washington University while obtaining my Master’s Degree.

MT: What was your favorite hobby?
LS: My favorite hobby would have to be going to Priest Lake in Idaho. Here, I am able to take part in swimming, kayaking, bull riding, rock climbing, cross-country skiing, going on jeep rides, reading, making bonfires, kayaking, and just enjoying nature at its best.

SLINGS AND ARROWS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Graduating from high school is possible. As hard as it can be sometimes, anyone who is willing to work hard at it and make the most of his or her experiences can achieve their educational goals. It’s hard to focus on your education when you’re dealing with difficult issues at home, but it is your future. Find an adult you can trust and get their help.

1. www.k12.wa.us/cisl/improvingoutcomes/index.htm
3. www.k12.wa.us/DataAdmin/jub/docs/GradDropout/05-06/05-06GradDropoutStatistics.pdf
The Truth About Me

ROSE VALENCIA

The truth about me is I can sing like a bird flying through the rainbow.
The truth about me is that sometimes I get out of control, and I can listen to music or write in my journal to make all my bad feelings go away.
The truth about me is that I feel sad sometimes, because something bad has happened and I want to wash it away like a river rushing through the rocks.
It's bumpy, but it gets better and better as I go.
The truth about me is that I am as gentle as a bunny, but I'm also as strong as a mountain.
Nobody can knock me completely down.
The truth about me is that I am open as a door that lets good people into my heart.

These Are the Days of a Foster Child

SONADY CHEA

Staying awake all day, sleeping all night, waiting for our mothers to hold us tight.

Thinking of the days we spent together, always laughing with one another, always watching each other's backs, making sure nobody attacks.

Little children coming in and out, always wondering without a doubt.
Someone watching our every move, thinking of what we'll try to do.

Going to church every Sunday, asking the Lord to take care of our families.

Crying in our minds and in our hearts, looking at the day we got ripped apart.

Sitting by the window wondering why, laying on our beds looking up at the sky.

Thinking of our brothers and sisters safe at home, crying our hearts out for being so alone.

Doing the same things over and over, thinking of the days we got closer and closer.

Waking up the next day in an empty room, shouting, "Finally, I get to go home!"

Happier than ever, yelling real loud, these are the days of a foster child.

Creative Corner

APOLOGY

We would like to apologize for the obvious plagiarity of the poem Please Listen in last month’s Mockingbird Times. The actual author is unknown so we are unable to properly credit.

Youth Writings Reach Larger Audience

Some of the Mockingbird Times’ (MT) writings will be published in Seattle University’s Journal for Social Justice (JSJ) volume 7, issue 2, which will be an issue devoted to the unique legal issues facing kids who are homeless. The following writings (the issue of the MT in which they were originally published follow the title) will be included in the article: "Anastasia Klatt, Lonely Girl, June 07; Anony-
mous, Understanding, June 08; Anonymous, When My Frustration Takes Over, November 08; Rhonda Smith, Reconnecting With Family After Foster Care, March 08; Ashley Abbott, The Shadows Of My Study Past, August 08; Bridgiane Green, Don’t You Wonder?, October 08; Kassandra, Pictures to My Mom, September 05; Rhonda Smith, Reconnecting With My Dad, April 08; Whitney Allen, Untitled, January 08. If any of these are your writings, please contact Karena Sanders at karealmockingbirdnetwork.org to receive a gift card.

Community Events

Region 1
May 14: Spokane Public Schools Forum, 7-8 PM, Glover Middle School
May 19-20: Pizza, Pop, & Power Tools, showcases career options to 8th grade girls, 9:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Apprenticeship and Journey-

Region 2
May 14: Family Night, 6:30-8 PM, Southeast Community Center.

Region 6
May 16: Downtown Spring Clean-
up, 7:30 AM - 1 PM, Esther Short Park. More info: stephaniediez@ umqubank.com.

News From The Mockingbird Network

Region 1: Chapter in Spokane County by Lauren Steed
Hurray for Region 1! We are finally on board and eager to start participating more with The Mockingbird Society (MBS). Already, I have had two meetings in Region 2 with Tammy Soderberg, the Resource Specialist hosted at Casey Family Programs.
The first meeting was a chapter meeting where I lost every game we played. The sec-
ond meeting was a Know Your Rights training where I learned key components on how to become a facilitator. Tammy and the Region 2 chapter have helped in making me feel extremely comfortable.

Region 2: A.C.T.O.R.S.T. Chapter in Yakima County by Saundra Hunt and Tammy Soderberg
On April 18th, we led the Know Your Rights training and, of course, had a blast. We all learned lots about our rights and responsibilities in a fun and energetic way.

Saundra was responsible for teaching the other youth about safety and well-being, the court proceedings, and a fun definition activity. She was able to Molecularly break down the ice breaker, which was the inner/out circle question activity. On April 20th, we were invited by Kinship Involvement Experience (KIX), a support group for youth in kinship care, to join them in learning how to become more successful advocates for our physical and mental health with doctors. The session included a discussion of barriers to honest conversation, asking effective ques-
tions, and keeping our documentation organized. Over all, it was a great session.
The youth said that they learned how to be more vo-
cal concerning their health care needs and the doctors said that they learned more about the issues facing youth in care.

Region 3: Hey Mac Chapter in Skagit County by Mark Milano
At our last meeting, we talked about job skills and how to present yourself at a job in-
terview. For example, dress well, have a well-typed resume, and have a portfolio. We discussed teamwork in the activity we did, which was to have two teams build a ramp that a golf ball could go down using sraws, paper, a little bit of tape, and pipe cleaners.

Then both teams had to connect them without testing it out until the end. We went roller skating as a chapter activity to help get other youth involved in the chapter. We also volunteered at the Mountain Glen Retirement Community.

Region 4: For Change Chapter in King County by Yolanda Kilgore
This month’s chapter meeting was housed at a new location, Casey Family Programs. We enjoyed nachos while discussing the results of the Seattle Public Schools’ Penny Harvest, an event where a group of organiza-
tions came together and spoke about pressing issues af-
flecting youth. We are happy to say that we were chosen as one of the top three organizations that they wanted to support. We also voted on civic engagements and -
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flecting youth. We are happy to say that we were chosen as one of the top three organizations that they wanted to support. We also voted on civic engagements and activities and, of course, had a blast. We all learned lots about our rights and responsibilities in a fun and energetic way.

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cal concerning their health care needs and the doctors said that they learned more about the issues facing youth in care.

Region 5: Chapter in Pierce County by Samantha Valle
Region 5 is in a transitional period. We just got a new Resource Specialist, Saman-
tha Valle. For the last month, Samantha has been networking with all those in-
volved at Pierce County Alliance to get more youth involved with The Mock-
kingbird Network and the Foster Youth Leadership Summit. Samantha has been working with CenterForce to engage in community events such as picking up trash in Lakewood and working with Pierce County Alliance to have the youth come up with a community service project they would be invested in. We also just had our first Life Advocacy training. The attendees were lively and actively participating, including many new faces. We are excited to see who will be at-
tending the Summit this year from Region 5, and what changes they will bring.

Region 6: SPEAK UP! Chapter in Clark County by Amanda Spady
This past month SPEAK UP! had a movie night to recruit new members. The movie night was a great success and we gained two new members. SPEAK UP! pre-
sented the Know Your Rights training for the Independent Living Skills Program at the YWCA. It was a lot of fun; the youth and volunteers all enjoyed themselves and learned a lot. Together with other local organizations, we are also going to be helping develop and open a winter homeless shelter for youth ages 16-24. To do this, we are brainstorming fundraising ideas, helping to create a survey that will address youth needs, and one of our leaders will be sitting on the Continuum of Care Committee for the project. This is an exciting opportunity and the group as a whole has voiced their enthusiasm.

One who makes no mistakes makes nothing at all.”
~ unknown

Mockingbird Times, May 2009