Mockingbird Times

May 2008
Foster Care and Homeless Youth Speak Out Across the Nation
Visit us online at www.mockingbirdsoociety.org or call 206-323-KIDS (5437)

Volume IX, Issue 5

Foster Care Alumni of America by Leona Bill

The following is an excerpt from an interview with Misty Sustele of Foster Care Alumni of America (FCAA). FCAA brings together the community of alumni of the foster care system and their allies in order to support youth currently in foster care and enact change.

MB: How many youth are involved with FCAA?
MS: FCAA’s membership is actually made up of adults—all of our members are people 18 years and older. We have members from every generation throughout the ages. We currently have 1200 members and we are growing at a rate of about 100 each month. [We] expect to get around 200 each month by fall. We hail members from every single state in the US, and a handful of members from other countries. We have members of all different races and ethnicities, all different occupations and educational backgrounds, all different foster care experiences.

MB: What are the differences between Alumni Relations and Foster Care Alumni of America?
MS: Alumni Relations (now called Constituency Engagement) was an internal department at Casey Family Programs. The original idea of Casey’s Alumni Relations program was that the department would work with those alumni who actually lived in foster care placements through Casey Family Programs. We found right away that when groups of alumni had the chance to get together, they felt so connected to each other. I remember the first alumni convening where a 19-year old, Mookie, said, “I never knew anybody before who was an adult that lived in foster care. You make me feel hopeful. You make it possible for me to look into the future to when I’m in my 40s and know that I can be like YOU!”

As a result, the group of alumni made the recommendation that we actually form our own organization, independent of any child welfare organization, where all of the priorities and all of the activities are alumni led. Casey generously agreed to support the founding of our independent organization.

MB: When was FCAA started? Who is funding FCAA?
MS: FCAA was legally established in late 2005. Alumni and our allies (people who didn’t live in foster care but who share our mission), as well as organizations like the Mockingbird Society, have officially joined together to build the national alumni community and to use our experiences to improve foster care. Our members are actually one of our funding streams now. Not only are people paying membership dues but we’ve also received donations from our members to cover FCAA’s mission—members who can’t afford to pay. We’ve made the commitment that no one will ever be excluded from the alumni community because of inability to pay dues. Casey Family Programs continues to provide general support to FCAA. We also have a number of grants.

MB: Who are the Alumni Leaders, and how are they selected?
MS: Our Alumni Leadership Institute was kicked off last year and continues to grow. We are bringing alumni together to build skills and knowledge about how to influence policy and practice in foster care. The best way for someone who wants to get involved in our Alumni Leadership Institute to be is to follow through with their commitments, and who represents themselves and the alumni community well, they are invited to be part of more opportunities—including our Alumni Leadership Institute trainings.

MB: Are any of the very first Alumni Leaders of FCAA still involved with in FCAA?
MS: Many of the members of the national Board of Directors [and national] chapters are from that first group. Across the country, the original founders of the national alumni movement are working as social workers, foster care teachers, and adoptive parents, volunteer in their own communities, participate in our Alumni Leadership Institute and stay involved. We take seriously the idea that because we all share the same parents—the government—we are brothers and sisters to each other. This is just about ‘work’—it is also very much about family.

MB: What kind of projects is FCAA currently concentrated on and or going on currently?
MS: All of our projects are connected to one or both parts of our mission of connecting the alumni community into a giant extended-family network and transforming foster care practice and policy through the collective voice of alumni. Activities we are working on right now on the connecting side include a major re-design of our website, and our overall presence on the Internet—making places for people who share the foster care experience to talk, to know one another, to provide support and encouragement for each other—to really stand in the places where most peoples’ families stand. There are holiday dinners, summer family reunions,” recreation.

We also have been focused on improving federal policy around the way child welfare is funded by the government. We want to make sure there is flexibility in the system so that families who can safely stay together get the support they need to do that. We want flexibility so that there is funding available to help families who can safely be reunified receive the support they need. We want flexibility so that children who can safely live with relatives are able to. We want flexibility so that more young people will find forever families when they can’t go back to their biological families. We want to make sure that all young people in and from foster care have all of the privileges that most people get from their families. Our ongoing efforts have also included a great deal of training and education for social workers, policy makers, foster parents, and the general public about how they can make foster care better.

Support Groups by Samuel Martin

Treehouse whose Executive Director is Janis Avery. The people I have direct day-to-day contact with are Amy Lange, my tutor, and Frank Nam, my Coaching To College coach. Treehouse is a multi-resource program for foster youth. I began working with Treehouse as a sixth-grader in their tutoring program. As I got older, I was able to make use of many more resources. Treehouse is one of the biggest support providers of foster youth in the King County area. Their efforts are beginning to grow statewide as well. I have had a ton of support from Treehouse, and every day I walk in I hear “Hey Sam, how are you?” It is nothing but love.

One great organization I want to mention is Community For Youth, a mentoring program for foster youth. The Executive Director is Margs Bresslour and the Rainier Beach Program Manager is Sashya Clark. Someone I consistently have daily interactions with. This program is present at three schools, all of which typically have lower test scores: Cleveland, Rainier Beach, and Chief Sealth High School. In this program, called Steps Ahead, you are matched with a mentor—a college student—making the learning environment so much more fun and personalized. You’re also paired with selected students, in a setting which is committed to follow you throughout your first year of high school. After high school, you are paired with a mentor—one that is a sophomore through senior year. You are paired with a mentor—one that is a sophomore through senior year. You are paired with a mentor—one that is a sophomore through senior year. This mentor helps you navigate your way through the college application process. This mentor provides you with advice on career paths, and helps you to find your passion. This mentor also helps you to find volunteer opportunities, and guide you to find your future.

There are two ways to exert one’s strength: one is pushing down, the other is pulling up.”

~Booker T. Washington

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May is National Foster Care month so I would like to begin by thanking all of the foster parents, as well as kinship caregivers, for your amazing work, service, and love that you give to children in your care day to day. Frequently you have the opportunity to meet and talk with foster parents, as well as the grandparents and other relatives caring for their children, and I am continually inspired by their dedication and commitment. In particular, I want to say a very special “thank you” to the families involved with the Mockingbird Family Model for all of their tireless ongoing efforts.

May is also a special month for The Mockingbird Society in that we begin the month with our new employees and team-mates. The Mockingbird Society began in 2008 with eight full time employees and as of May 1 we have thirteen full time employees! The new employees are mostly administrative professionals which will result in our program staff having the support and resources to strengthen our capacity and expand our reach.

We are very excited about the growth and expansion of both the Mockingbird Family Model and our Youth LEAD program. The Mockingbird Family Model is being replicated in Washington and other states and is being spotlighted nationally as one of five promising respite care practices. This recognition by the National Foster Parent Association in partnership with the North American Council on Adoptable Children and AdoptUsKids will be in a Respite Care Manual scheduled for publication in 2008. Additionally, Mockingbird staff will be in Louisville, Kentucky in May training staff from Maryhurst, a private child placement agency, which provides foster care and other services to their community.

Our Youth LEAD Program is also expanding and we are developing The Mockingbird Network which will be a state wide network of interconnected, community Chapters that select youth delegates to participate in and lead the State Advisory Council. The local Chapters and the State Advisory Council will be youth-driven and will focus on leadership development, civic engagement, educational achievement and child welfare system reform and improvement.

Again, I want to send a very special “thank you” to all of the foster parents and kinship caregivers who give so much every day and a very special “welcome” to all of our new team mates at The Mockingbird Society.

Jim Theofelis

Meet the Staff: Diamonique Walker

My name is Diamonique Walker and I am fifteen years old. I reside in Seattle and I attend Cleveland High School. In my spare time, I basically like to hang out with my friends and family. We go to the movies, shop, or just chill at the house. I also like to write; it’s one of my greatest passions. I have a book of poetry that I would like to get published one day.

I have never actually been in regular foster care but I have been on the verge. I have been in the system though. I’m currently in long term care and it’s a really awkward situation. I live with my seventeen-year-old sister, who is emancipated, and her 1 year old daugther (my niece). My sister has been in foster care for a long time. She was never a part of: I got to help make the foster care system a better place for children.

I have gone through, I still push forward. Even though I have heard no matter what their background is. I have my voice heard and share my talents and I have my voice heard and share my talents with people. People got to see what an amazing person I am and that, despite all I have gone through, I still push forward with my life. What I have learned while working here is that I have a voice that is important and anyone at anytime can be heard no matter what their background is. I have done a lot and learned a lot and have met amazing youth and people who support MBS to the fullest. Thank you all.

Thank you Jim for giving me a chance to help set up meetings which I can do better because I will be in a new place to be more successful. I feel that it is important in the lives of youth. It is important in the lives of youth. It is certainly something that I want to be a part of.

We go to the movies, shop, or just chill at the house.

One thing I would want to change about the foster care system is all the moving. I hate moving myself. All my life I have barely stayed in one house or apartment for more than a year. Moving can be hard. Having to find new friends and start over again frequently is unhealthy. Stability is important in the lives of youth. It is even harder for them, I would assume, because not only are they being bounced around but they possibly also have live with strangers that they don’t know. I can’t imagine doing that so I would definitely want to change that. Stability is very necessary to me.

I want to be a part of The Mockingbird Society’s Youth LEAD Program because, firstly, like I mentioned before, I love it. I frequent it. I was formerly a part of the Mockingbird Society. I love it. It is one of my greatest passions and I have never actually been published and I would like to be. When I found out that I could be helping change the community at the same time, I wanted to do it even more. I actually have a friend who is in foster care and, to me, helping a friend and many more at the same time is definitely something I want to be a part of.

Thank You!

Natalie, Alex and Kelly Almeleh; Albert Almeleh; Phoebe and Jeff Anderson; Anonymous; Linda and Bob Benson; Michael Campbell; Orville Cohen; Char Collier; Karen Cowgill; Bruce Cross and Perkins Coe LLP; Sandy Eyrelove; KMGC Consultants; Spencer; Jodie and Patricia Gray; Laurie and Steve Rosen-Ritt; Celeste Till and Jim Fair; John and Janet Walker; Mark and Barbara Whidest; The Whiners

Thank you to all of the foster parents and kinship caregivers who give so much every day and a very special “welcome” to all of our new team mates at The Mockingbird Society.

Jim Theofelis

Become a Member of The Mockingbird Society

We welcome you to join us in making a difference in the lives of our nation’s most vulnerable children, youth, and families. As a supporter, you’ll receive a monthly edition of the Mockingbird Times. Thank you for your contribution.

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Mockingbird Times, May 2008
My mom has been on drugs ever since I’ve been in this world. It’s done a lot of damage to both her and my family. It controls her and makes her do things that a mother should never do to her child. My brothers and I love her a lot, I mean, if it weren’t for her, we wouldn’t be here. Her drug use has just got her isolated and doing stupid stuff and we really don’t want anything to do with that. Like I said, she is our mother but I love her with all our hearts but there has got to be a point were we have to step back and that’s what we are all doing. It hurts us deeply but honestly, I feel like it’s the best move because I am the youngest and I have never really had a relationship with her. Deep down inside I feel that mother daughter relationship all of us want what is best for our mother but I feel if she keeps heading down this path of drugs, my brothers and sisters and I are not going to have a mother for much longer. It’s sad but it’s the truth and the truth hurts a lot.

My mom and I have had our problems but I think I was lucky in the way of ever losing my family again. I wish she felt the same as what I feel. Sometimes, I really think she cannot feel anything. Before she went away for years, I had never experienced every bad thing that has happened in my life. I blamed her for the abuse I went through in my younger childhood years. I blamed her for everything that has ever happened to me through the care system. I blamed her for all my behavior issues. Whatever went bad was always her fault. Now I realize she really can’t help the things she has done for me now and the fact that it’s got her all crazy and it’s her addiction that has me sick. It makes me sick because I want and have always wanted a mother – not because I want one but because I need one. I feel that it is the best thing for me. I want to go to my graduation and things like that. Sometimes we don’t get what we want in life and that’s how it is.

**SUPPORT, continued from page 1**

means a great deal to me because, not only have I had one mentor, but I have had a community of mentors backing me all four years of high school. In this program we learn to acknowledge people and I am going to give special acknowledgements to a few mentors who stuck it out with me all four years: Richard Hodgkin, Meline Roberson, Dan Pronovost, and Barbara Nelson.

Next is Mathematics Engineering Science Achievement (MESA). This program has opportunities for students in elementary, middle, and high school. The Center Director of the Seattle MESA is Anna Maria de la Fuente. Parents, I urge you to look into possible opportunities for your kids in MESA now if they are interested. I had two mentors near you. I have been in the program since I was a sophomore. In the MESA classes we did all sorts of fun, unique things that get our minds thinking and actually doing engineering like making airplanes out of balsa wood and making a mousetrap car. It was hard for me because I had a tough time with math and science. In the MESA program it opened my eyes to a whole other world that I didn’t have experience with before. They also allowed me the opportunity to go to two National Science Foundation (NSF) National Conferences. I also had the opportunity these past two years to participate in the first ever Mockingbird Summit, an event that features mentors and seniors from many different areas. The Mockingbird Society is a great organization and I am planning on going to this event as soon as I graduate. I am planning on sending my sister and I to a psychiatric facility to see if we had any “mental problems” in hopes of increasing her payment. It was such a great opportunity to meet my sister and I picked up and have the entire neighborhood know. It turns out, though, that moment was a blessing in disguise. Once I reached the facility, I had the opportunity to inform the staff about how my guardian was treating me and my siblings. It was the first step that initiated our脱离 foster care project.

If I could change one thing about the foster care system it would be that siblings should be kept together. I think that sibling connections provide children with a sense of strength and hope. I was fortunate enough to remain with both my brother and sister for the majority of the time I was in the system. Many days they were the only thing that kept me motivated to become a prominent member of society. They kept me focused on being a good role model and I honestly believe that if I did not have them as inspiration, I would have given up on myself.

To become a member of the Mockingbird’s Youth LEAD Program be a foster care alumni I can use my experience to assist others that are going through the foster care system. I have seen the system’s failures and been through the experience that breaks the souls of so many youth today. I want to let others know that they are not alone and so I want to become a voice to those in foster care to help them change the system’s failures and been through the experience that breaks the souls of so many youth today. I want to let others know that they are not alone and so I want to become a voice to those in foster care.

**An Interview with Contract Employee Kara Sanders**

The following is an interview with The Mockingbird Society’s new Fosters Youth Coordinator, Kara Sanders.

**KS:** The promotion of the Summit to the homeless, oversaw our military programs, assisted with our outreach programs, and managed our church programs.

**MT:** How do you feel the Summit will change in the future? The Mockingbird Society is an organization that provides educational and social services to children and families in need. It is a place where I have gone through countless changes in the system and have worked hard to become a statistic or a victim of circumstance. However, in order for this goal to become easier to obtain for many youth, changes in the system must occur. This is the reason why I want to be apart of the program, to hopefully create solutions that work to the youth’s advantage.

Mockingbird Network by allowing individuals to realize there is support available in the community. We are able to help foster youth and siblings to want to start up chapters in their area. During the Summit, the Resource Coordinators for each region will have opportunities to develop relationships with youth in their area and it will strengthen relationships between foster youth, alumni and allies. Each of these relationships will strengthen the future of the Network which will give more opportunities for the voice of the youth to be heard.

**KS:** In the next week or so, you can download an application from www.mockingbirdsociety.org or you can email me at leadershipsummit@mockingbirdsociety.org.

**Come Work for The Mockingbird Society!**

The Mockingbird Society is hiring for the following positions:

- Events Planning Assistant
- Youth Lead Coordinator
- Resource Specialist
- Foster care alumni and people of color encouraged to apply. See www.mockingbirdsociety.org/jobs for details.

**Meet the Staff: Georgia Ramirez**

My name is Georgia Ramirez. I am 23 years old and I am from Los Angeles, California. Since I am so far away from home, in my spare time I enjoy talking to my best friend on the phone about my life or what I am wearing this month, just as I am doing right now. I absolutely love to cook and eat great food; I am always trying to improve my culinary skills. Every day, I reserve some time to observe the world in motion as a way to constantly stay aware of my surroundings. During that time, I love to challenge myself by finding out how the people I am observing connect to each other and society. Ultimately, it’s a moment of reflection that helps provide me with a balanced thought and an individualized perspective on human nature. It keeps me humble and grateful for everything I have. I love my job and I enjoy being put in the foster care system. I wish she did not worry about a loved one when they go through wrong. Sometimes you just have to step back. It’s hard but it’s the best thing to do.

**A Mother’s Addictions by Anonymous**

Addiction can really mess up the whole family even if you are not the one on drugs. You can have a lot of stress from day to day. I am constantly worrying about my mom and what will happen to her next. It messes with my daily life, my friendships, and other things that are important to me. Sometimes I wish I did not have to worry about her, just like she doesn’t worry about her kids, but it comes naturally for me. For her, though, I am honestly not sure if she cares.

Addiction runs in my family and, knowing that, I will never do drugs that my parents have done. I know you can never really say “never” because people say they never will but then they do. So I try my hardest to stay away from all that. I don’t want to end up like my mom. I want to be an example to someone. I’m not going to try to sound like because of my family’s addiction issues I never did a drug. I have and I do know that’s not the road I want to go down. Its hard enough seeing my mom and friends going through it. I don’t want my friends to turn to when things get rough is drugs.

Some day I would like to be blessed with a child. Just going through what I have been through in the past, I believe parents I am going to make sure my child doesn’t have to deal with any of the things I have had to deal with. When I am financially able to, I am going to bring a child into this world. Until then, I am going to continue to do right or at least try.

For young people who constantly worry about your parents: Parents are going to do what they want. If they have not changed their lifestyle for as long as you have known them, then it’s too late. I think changing are very slim. I know it’s a lot of stress to worry about a loved one when they go through wrong. Sometimes you just have to step back. It’s hard but it’s the best thing to do.

**The Wire**, Sex in the City, and The Simpsons. Finally, I love music, especially the music of R&B artists like Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, The Isley Brothers, Lupe Fiasco, and Amy Winehouse. I love these artists because their music has a special touch which makes me smile. I heart my family and makes me heart.

An issue that’s important to me is child maltreatment/abuse and the rights of foster youth. I love to partake in “normal” things as well, like watching television. The shows I view most frequently are The Wire, Sex in the City, and The Simpsons. Finally, I love music, especially the music of R&B artists like Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, The Isley Brothers, Lupe Fiasco, and Amy Winehouse. I love these artists because their music has a special touch which makes me smile. I heart my family and makes Georgia Ramirez
It was just two years ago when I met the man who would scar my life forever. I was only 15 and in search of someone to be loved by, I guess you can say. When I met this “Mr. Pimp” I was automatically attracted to him and the way he carried himself. It was something about his swagger that just got me. Not long after we started talking he started treating me like I was his. He was really sweet to me (aren’t they always?) So, after he “gamed me down,” I became his whore. It was that easy.

That was now my label and my job. This choice changed my life forever. I had to make $1000 a day. I was so fooled. How to really get inside these tricks head, I had never been, but how I got hit, I started to feel all the pain this guy put me through. My misery is up, sorrow is down, and worth observation.

My Experience In The “Game”

BY ALAIZA M.

It was just two years ago when I met the man who would scar my life forever. I was only 15 and in search of someone to be loved by, I guess you can say. When I met this “Mr. Pimp” I was automatically attracted to him and the way he carried himself. It was something about his swagger that just got me. Not long after we started talking he started treating me like I was his. He was really sweet to me (aren’t they always?) So, after he “gamed me down,” I became his whore. It was that easy.

That was now my label and my job. This choice changed my life forever. I was to work for this guy every night and was expected to come in with nothing less than $500. Well, that’s what my quota started out with. Then, when, I started doing it for long enough to know how to really get inside these tricks head, I had to make $1000 a day. I was so fooled. I thought it was okay at first. I mean, I was with this guy who I loved and I thought he loved me too. That’s what he said. We had all this stuff: new clothes, shoes, jewelry, whatever we wanted. When reality finally hit, I started to feel all the pain this brought. I was stuck, I was scared.

Within a year, I’d already experienced being robbed, nearly raped, being in jail, and, worst of all, being abused physically, mentally, and emotionally by this guy I thought I loved. With all these deadly situations in my corner, I still couldn’t just stop. I asked myself the same question: Why? Was it love or fear? I was getting tired of all the lies and pain this guy put me through.

In March 2007, I went to jail. I got another prostitution charge to add to the many I had already had before. While locked up that time, I made the decision to leave him. When I got out I told him I was done. He didn’t take it too lightly but, eventually, he got tired of me running from him so, after a year, it was the end of me and him.

Prostitution didn’t stop there, though. I started to do it for myself. It didn’t take long for another “Mr. Pimp” to come along. For some reason, I thought that this time would be different because we seemed to have a clear understanding. It was the same story but with a different ending. It lasted about half a year this time. We both eventually got locked up. I had the choice of either getting sent to prison for a year or going to a six to nine month inpatient treatment center in Bellingham, WA. I chose to go to the treatment center. I was there for six months and I must say that by going there and learning about myself and the causes and effects of my issues helped me a lot. Today I have hope and refuse to go back to that lifestyle ever again. There is help out there so if you think you are truly ready to change, let someone help because change is possible.

Some People Ask Me Why?

Some people ask me why and still, to this day, I can’t give an exact reason. I know why I think I got involved in “The Game” but my reasons don’t make much sense. I grew up with a hard childhood. One of my favorite people, my dad, left me at the age of nine. My dad use to tell me a lot of things I did have a family that loved me. We be that but, although I did not have a father I did have a family that loved me. We didn’t have a lot growing up. I could say it’s because we were poor. The truth is that I don’t know exactly why I got involved in such a horrible activity. All I can say is: I did it, I lived it, and now I’m done.

The Game Owes Me!

Getting out of The Game is so hard, no doubt. I must say I’m one of the lucky ones. I got out of The Game pretty quickly, while a lot of my girlfriends are still out there. What people don’t understand is this is not a game, it’s not for fun; it’s “The Game”: a way of living. It’s something like a nightmare that you can’t wake up from. They say there’s no way to escape The Game. I just recently got out and a lot of my fears and worries are about going back. Its easy to slip back into believing that and I know the hardest part is getting out. These pimps make you believe the only thing you’ll ever be good at is selling your body, but we’re worth so much more. The only way to get out of The Game is to be true to your self, stop believing what that pimp tells you (you know its not true) and get some help. My sister always use to tell me, “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t force it to drink.” Choose or lose!

The Mockingbird Society: The Story Behind the Name

The 1962 American classic To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee is the inspiration for our name, The Mockingbird Society. Atticus, the widowed father of Jem and Scout, joins Miss Maudie in teaching his kids that it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird because “...Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but sing 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 rest and sing.