Mockingbird Times

Foster Care and Homeless Youth Speak Out Across the Nation

May has marked National Foster Care Month since 1988. The goal of the Foster Care Month campaign is to recognize those who have contributed immensely to better the system and the youth in it. Another goal is to bring light to the issues and experiences of the system’s youth. There is an estimated 32 million alumni of care and 424,000 children and youth still in out of home care. The Mockingbird’s Network of youth and alumni from care are celebrating this month a little bit differently this year. Among our six chapters The Mockingbird Network and its youth and alumni of care have chosen people that have impacted them strongly while in care. Some youth chose to honor caregivers, mentors, and other child welfare staff. In these articles you will see how it takes just one caring adult to make all the difference in the life of a child.

Grace Runyan by Tiana Oliver, Region 5

This year for National Foster care month my fellow chapter leader Janesa and I would like to thank and honor Grace Runyan, an FYHP (Independent Youth Housing Program) Case Manager for all of her generous help and contributions toward helping youth from all around the community transition into adulthood. We all thank you deeply for helping us make these hard transitions into living on our own, as well as giving us the resources to do so, and so much more. Here are a few questions we asked her about her experience and reasons for working with youth:

How long have you been at Pierce County Alliance (PCA)?

I have been working at PCA for 3½ years. I started as a case manager for the Transitional Living Program and now I am the case manager for the Independent Youth Housing Program and I supervise the Peer to Peer Mentoring program.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

I have always wanted to work with youth. After I graduated with my BA in Psychology from New Mexico State University, I moved to Alaska and I worked at a teen shelter. I moved back to NM and then worked for 5 years in Group Homes, Shelters and Transitional Living Programs. How did you transition into working with foster youth?

I have worked with youth transitioning into independence regardless if they were in foster care or just homeless for many years. Over the years, many of the clients I worked with were foster youth. When I moved to Washington I found this job working exclusively with foster youth. My entire career I have worked with foster youth in some capacity and I love it. I feel committed to helping our young adults feel safe and capable of anything. What do you enjoy most about your job?

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Tess Thomas by Nick Holcombe, Region 4

The person who has influenced my life greatly is my foster mom Tess Thomas. She has always been there for me and if I had any problem with any situation, I could count on her to help me. She was like my “mom”. When I graduated she threw me a big party and she helped me get an apartment after high school. I experienced life skills training at a very young age then she introduced me to the YMCA, and the YMCA got me involved in the Independent Living Project (ILP) at the age of 16. The YMCA helped me get into college, and helped get another apartment. My foster mom supported me while I was in her care. Tess Thomas is strong in faith, and I appreciate what she did for me as a foster parent. She helped me keep my head venturing off on my own. I was by my side during bad, good, and indifferent situations. Tess always had my back. And, no matter what happens I will always appreciate her for that.

Goldie & Patric Campbell by Kristina Thomason, Region 1

My foster parents are Goldie and Patric Campbell. The main caretaker is Goldie and she has been a foster parent for more than 20 years. I have been with them for nearly six years. They took me in when no one else wanted me, not even my birth family. They have been great to me. Of course we have our rocky points from time to time but I feel that they have always been there for me. They have been a huge part of my life, helping me through school and providing me with a strong support system. I will always be grateful to have them in my life.

Steve Queen by Chris Bauer, Region 6

What most young men hope for in life is a good father to teach them what it is to be a man. I am one of the people who asked for that mentor with an open heart and hands. In my experience, I have found that it doesn’t matter if that special person is a blood relative or a complete stranger who thought that your life was worth saving. My boss at Centralia College Steve Queen had the patience and the “keys” to opportunities that ultimately helped me so much. Maybe it was because of my good work ethic, or maybe it was my cool sunglasses, but we began to talk. We got to know each other quite well over the first few months I worked there. And with a weight off my shoulders, when I started to feel the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), instead of being fired, he asked me to sit down and discuss what caused me to disappear for days on end, rather than what pain I caused my co-workers in my absence. Since that day, I began to feel more and more comfortable with sharing pieces of myself. Whether I needed help with the responsibilities of living on my own, someone to chase away my dark feelings; how to put up sheet rock, or dealing with an unhealthy relationship, Steve was the man to go to. He is an awesome friend and a phenomenal mentor. I owe him a great deal. I have been saved from despair more times than I could remember, and he has given me a new outlook on life and I just hope everybody can find such a selfless and caring person in their own life.

Cherokee Frasier & Catholic Families & Child Services by Brandy Baxley, Region 2

This month we are celebrating Foster Care Appreciation Month by honoring Cherokee Frazier. She has helped Region 2 for the past two and a half years. Cherokee has helped so much by transporting and recruiting youth, providing food, and helping to clean up. She also has attended and helped with activities such as the Corn Maze event by bringing candy and decorations. At Skateland she helped transport and recruit youth to come and enjoy the event. When we went to the Union Gospel Mission she transported youth and volunteered with us. At the “100 Jobs for 100 Kids” event Cherokee helped guide the youth through the process of filling out applications, as well as preparing for the interview and the responsibilities of work. We really appreciate Cherokee’s enthusiasm.

Tess always had my back. And, no matter what happens I will always appreciate her for that.

Picture: Tess Thomas in a group setting.
Dear Friends,

May is National Foster Care Month (NFCM). Spring is a season of renewal and gives us the opportunity to honor and thank the tireless work of all caregivers and the opportunities they provide to children and youth. We are grateful to foster parents, kinship caregivers, social workers, CASAs and service providers. These amazing people truly are the unsung heroes who make a difference in the day-to-day lives of children and youth in the foster care system.

The Mockingbird Society, partnering with organizations such as the National Foster Care Association, strives to shine a bright light on children and youth in care to reorient our thinking and actions in support of children and youth. We are so grateful to everyone who is working to ensure that All Youth Have a Future.

The 2011 Washington State Legislative session has been a major challenge due to the ongoing economic struggles and declining resources. Our goal continues to be to retain as much funding and resources as possible in the 2012 budget to make the difference in the lives of vulnerable children, youth, and families. And, as we go to press, we are jumping up against the last days of the scheduled legislative session and our elected leaders are negotiating the final budget. This session I am happy to announce that the Legislature has passed Unannounced Visits (HB1697) and Governor Gregoire has signed it into law. Our other major priority, HB 1128, which extends foster care to age 21 for youth, has passed the legislature and is awaiting delivery to the Governor’s Office. In addition to these successes, we continue to fight to protect safe housing for youth transitioning out of care and street youth programs, as too many foster youth often find themselves homeless.

The legislative progress we have made for these reforms thus far is due to the combined efforts of The Mockingbird Network youth who have testified from personal experience to inform the system; as well as the Child Welfare Advocacy Coalition, ASK-V, and Children’s Home Society, and our legislative champions. Our annual Legislative Celebration will take place on Wednesday, June 29th from 9 to Noon at Seattle University Student Center. Please Save the Date. I look forward to celebrating our legislative achievements and honoring the vibrant coalition of advocates that made them happen.

Lastly I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who participated in the Jefferson Award voting process. It has been a true honor to be among such admirable public servants and I congratulate Megan Johnson for being selected as the Washington State Nominee for the National Jefferson Award.

Thank you all for your strength and commitment to building a world-class foster care system.

Jim Theofelis
jim@mockingbird.org

The Power of Public Service

By David Beck

On February 24th, we learned that Jim Theofelis, Founder and Executive Director of The Mockingbird Society, was named a 2011 Washington State Jefferson Award winner. The Jefferson award is given out to five individuals in the state who have demonstrated excellent achievements and contributions through public and community action, as well as volunteerism. We at The Mockingbird Society are so proud of Jim. Ultimately, Megan Johnson of Federal Way was selected to go on to represent us in Washington, D.C. and, that was synchronous because she is an incredible advocate for the homeless and we have so many issues in common.

The Jefferson Awards celebration caused me to think a little bit about volunteerism and community action. We at The Mockingbird Society believe that it is the right thing to do and, ten years later, we have the Mockingbird Society and that call to action to do what is right has paid off substantially.

A wise man once said “if saving the world was profitable, the world wouldn’t have many problems.” This quote is unfortunately very accurate. You certainly won’t be able to pay the bills by helping out your elderly neighbor with chores around the house. But, doing so will improve the quality of life for your neighbor and your neighborhood, and for many that is payment enough. I didn’t think volunteering was commonplace these days. But, after taking a good hard look at the volunteering community, it turns out there’s a lot more going on than I thought.

Barry Boone, a writer from Seattle and former director of eBay’s International Product Development, started a website called Earthbongo design to bring volunteers together to work on projects that they themselves create. The concept is simple: volunteers come together and create projects that other volunteers can then take part in. The projects can be simple to complex such as a project, which now has 10 participants, that tapes signs saying “Don’t use plastic please” onto microwaves or projects such as the Vancouver’s community cleanup.

The website is relatively new so it hasn’t picked up a lot of steam. But, the idea is invigorating and the participants that have joined in the bongo’s initiative have had success with their projects. Under their ludos section they have a “by the numbers” section that posts statistics of their successes. These numbers include the 2,642,400 gallons of water saved, 7,651,08 pounds of CO2 reduced and others. They have even started a project for Japan as a wake up after the wake of the earthquake and tsunami.

Since saving the world isn’t “profitable” it may be hard to come by volunteers who are willing to dedicate their time to make a difference. But volunteers provide our society with projects and services that essentially go hand-in-hand with the health of our community. For the longest time there have been challenges for those of who have the spirit of volunteerism to utilize this spirit in the most effective manner. Luckily enough there are many networking sites for volunteers like Earthbongo are starting to become the trend. The pride and the call to action that drives volunteers is one that doesn’t get enough appreciation.

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 make music for us to enjoy. They don’t do one thing but sing their hearts out for us.”

What if we created an organization, a community, indeed a world, in which our most vulnerable youth are protected and valued with the same commitment that Atticus had for mockingbirds. Join The Mockingbird Society today and help us give young people a safe place to nest and sing.

Letter From the Editor by Jim Theofelis

Submit Letters

All incoming Letters to the Editor should be addressed to the Mockingbird Times and will be opened by editorial staff. All incoming correspondence to youth under 18 years of age will be opened first by Young People and will be opened by editorial staff. All incoming correspondence to youth under 18 years of age is tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law. Please consult your tax advisor regarding your specific tax situation.

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The Mockingbird Society is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation developing innovative models for improving the outcomes of foster care, while also 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 newspaper written and produced by youth who have experience in foster care and/or homelessness. All youth employees of The Mockingbird Society are paid between $8.50 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 has a monthly circulation of over 25,000 copies being distributed across Washington State and the USA, through a private distribution list and as an insert in Real Change, Seattle-based community newspaper. Youth Social Justice 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.
Foster Parent: Why did you decide to become a foster parent?
I didn’t believe other foster parents when they told me how the state handled other foster parents. I thought they went into the state system and all of a sudden they (foster youth) were “cured”. When searching for foster kids, I actually went around to several group homes to decide what kind of child foster kids, I actually went around to several group homes to decide what kind of child.

What do you like about being a foster parent?
The outcome is the most gratifying part about being a foster parent; if you stay with them the benefit of the doubt because most anyone crazy.

When you are asked to take in a foster child what are your thoughts/main concerns?
When looking for a foster child, I actually look for all of the things that they have; if they don’t have a lot of issue then they really aren’t worth helping as much as those who have a lot of issues. In my eyes it’s more of an accomplishment to make a difference in the lives of those with more struggles than those with very few.

When you see an “at risk youth” what are you thinking?
Don’t judge them; read the reports and give them the benefit of the doubt because most anyone crazy.

Most youth, whether in care or lack thereof; services that a youth is eligible to help them pay for programs will aide someone that knows.

4-Year Old Child: Are you happy in this foster home?
Yes.

What do you like about living in this foster home the most?
Because I love grandma and I love sleeping with my toy dinosaur.

What do you like to do the most in this foster home?
Play with my cat. His name is Lu Cat.

What do you like about Grandma (foster parent) the most?
I love it when she bakes cakes and she is really nice.

Getting Off to the Right Start

by Diamonique Walker

Aging out—or “transitioning” out of foster care—is something that is always happening, but the experience is different for everyone. Reasons for this can vary based on a social worker’s involvement, or lack thereof. Sometimes a youth that is eligible for help can be turned away because finding a place to live, employment, post-secondary education and living independently is really tough.

Most youth, whether in care or not, go through a transitional phase that may include going on their own, or getting out of foster care and moving out on their own. The main difference is the fact that aging-out for foster youth isn’t a “whenever you’re ready” deal. At age eighteen the state is no longer responsible for them so they must pack their belongings and leave their placement unless they are enrolled in Foster Care or 21 or have yet to graduate from high school.

By law all states are required to assist youth in developing a transition plan for exiting care start- ing ninety days before their eighteenth birthday. In Washington State it is called the “17.5 meet- ing”. In my opinion, if these meetings started at the age of sixteen, it could benefit the youth more if more time was dedicated to planning for this critical transition. Six months isn’t enough time to prepare a youth to be out in the world on their own. Independent living services and transition- al houses have waiting lists ranging from a few months to a couple of years. That wait could be devastating to youth that actually have no place to live when aging-out.

Foster youth have access to numerous resources to help them pay for different types of post-secondary education choices. College Success Foundation and Foster Care to 21 are just two programs that can help youth with going on to college and remaining stable while doing so. Going to college or remaining a ward of the state isn’t for everyone. So no means do youth have to participate in any programs. But if fewer youth participate in the programs, they won’t be available when someone really needs them. It’s really important for youth to be able to have access to funds and resources that they need to survive. For more information on services for youth transitioning out of care your local YMCA can be a good place to begin.

Any foster youth who live there often.

Our chickens have access to the creation of the Sharehouse, a non-pro- fit organization called the Sharehouse comes in.

In 1989, a needs survey discovered that there was a desperate need for household items for families and individuals that have been homeless or who are at-risk. This led to the creation of the Sharehouse, a non-profit organization whose tagline is “turning housing into homes.” Through my own experience with the Sharehouse I found this to be true. At Sharehouse I was able to get a bed, furniture, and kitchenware that turned my empty apartment into a place I could call home.

The Sharehouse essentially is a warehouse where donations are received and then are distributed to households in need. According to Michal Nortness, the Sharehouse program director, the organization changes the lives of about 1500 to 2000 people per year. “We distribute about 30000 items a year. This has a dual benefit by keeping those items out of landfills and changing the lives of those in need which helps all of us,” she said I want my children to succeed; to be able to grow up and be able to provide for them- selves when they reach adulthood.

Thank You!


What would you like to achieve as a foster parent?
I would like to try to help make the state fol- low through with sibling connections; it’s a chemistry. Even if they were separated at a young age they know that they still have someone helping a child state recognizing that foster parents have a lot of firsthand experience working with the youth, so they should consider the foster parent’s recom- mendations more; that being said even a lot of the professionals like psyches have their hands tied with what they can and can’t do.

In conclusion, I believe The Mockingbird Society fights for system reforms. There are also some success stories in the system. Some things are great just the way they are.

GOLDIE, continued from page 1

time to time, but all families do. They have helped me to grow by supporting me and by being examples of good human beings. They have encouraged me to get through high school and to go on further to college. They encouraged me to become involved in church and led me to God. I have gained an amazing system. Thanks to Goldie and Patric I have learned that people don’t have to be “bloody” to be your family. So, I like to say I got lucky.

The youth who live there often access the Sharehouse, allowing them to turn their empty apartments into homes that they can be happy with. The Sharehouse helped me, but the Sharehouse also needs help.

The Sharehouse is at capacity in regards to what they can do. Sharehouse only has about half the amount of donations and fi- nancial contributions needed to serve people in need of help. They accept physical do-

More often than not, youth who moved into the Home of Hope Apartments did so with next to no clothing, no bed- enware, without furniture, and found themselves with a house, but not a “home”. The youth who live there often access the Sharehouse, allow- ing them to turn their empty apartments into homes that they can be happy with. The Sharehouse helped me, but the Sharehouse also needs help.

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We Welcome Your Work!

We welcome submissions of articles, poetry, artwork, and photography from our audience. Readers who have experience in the foster care system and/or with homelessness. If you want to be published in the Mockingbird Times, visit domesticviolence.org and select Mockingbird Times under The Mockingbird Network or contact us at 206-322-5437 or via email at info@mockingbirdviolence.org. Note: If you have submitted something before that hasn’t been published, we need your submission agreement in order to print it. Please submit again via the web location listed above. Because of space constraints, shorter poems have a higher chance of being published.

Success is not to be measured by the position one has reached in life, rather by the obstacles overcome while trying to succeed.

~Booker T. Washington

Domestic Violence by Amanda Bevington

I am writing this article on domestic violence (DV) because I am tired of seeing young women abused by their partners. It is not okay for your significant other to put their hands on you in anger, and it is not okay to make excuses for the abuser. They know what they’re doing and it’s called being manipulated. As women we need to be strong for each other. What if I do the same? Will you feel what I felt? Will you drown in pain? But I won’t leave you, let you cry or turn you away, I hope next time I come to you, you can do the same.

An estimated 1.3 million women are victims of physical assault by an intimate partner each year.

1. Intimidation
2. Emotional abuse
3. Isolation
4. Minimizing, denying, and blaming
5. Using children
6. Economic abuse
7. Male privilege
8. Coercion and threats

If you are interested you can check out the power and control wheel and read the eight steps of abuse definitions at www.shakeshakeshake.org.

I have a really close friend who has suffered from domestic violence for years. At the beginning of her relationship she thought everything was going well. After a few months her boyfriend started to be really possessive. He controlled everything she did. She became pregnant and he lied to her about how much he loved her and how he would be there for her and the baby. She trusted him with all her heart, but when she was about six months pregnant he became really abusive. I told her you need to wake up and understand this will only get worse unless you get help. I told her you need to wake up and understand this will only get worse unless you get help. If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence please get out or get help ASAP. There are many helpful resources available to victims. Remember that you are not alone, it is not your fault, and you can get help. Please take advantage of the help that is out there. Please do not put your life at risk because of an abusive man. Remember don’t ever settle for less when you could have the best. If interested in help here is the 24 hour domestic violence hotline number: 1-888-888-7702. Remember please get out and get the help you need.

SHAREHOUSE, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

A 42% of murdered women are killed by their intimate partners.

1. Intimidation
2. Economic abuse
3. Isolation
4. Minimizing, denying, and blaming
5. Using children
6. Male privilege
7. Coercion and threats
8. Economic abuse

We can be reached at 206-767-5280 or by visiting www.thesharehouse.org. Remember that before you consider taking that old couch of yours to the dump, you should first consider how you could change the lives of those in need by giving it to an organization that literally turns housing into homes.

www.thesharehouse.org

1 An interview with Michal Normoss, the program director