To Ms. Michelle Obama

Your biography written for the White House Web site states that you found your true calling in life was to serve communities and their neighbors. I share those sentiments, calling in the conviction of serving my community by informing them of the many issues within the child-welfare system and giving them resolved. The reality of being a youth in care is that you grow up often not knowing your rights. When I joined The Mockingbird Society (MBS), I had no idea that living with my cousin and friends was considered informal kinship care. I also had no clue about all the many resources available to me.

I work for MBS as a Senior Network Representative. MBS is a nonprofit organization that dedicated to improving the lives of current and future youth in the foster care system. Our mission is to “Build a world class foster care system through innovation, collaboration, and advocacy.” The Mockingbird Society consists of two programs: The Mockingbird Family Model and the Mockingbird Network. I am a part of The Mockingbird Network, Region 4, King County. Our chapter name, Region 4 for Change, was inspired from the 2008 Obama/Biden campaign.

President Obama speaks about change and how important it is for us as citizens to be inspired by hope and our supporters. The Mockingbird Network is a Washington State-wide initiative bringing together youth and alumni of foster and kinship care, with a vision to develop individual leaders, engage and strengthen communities, and reform the foster care system.

The Mockingbird Family Model Expansion (MFM) is an award-winning, innovative model of foster care delivery that offers practical and cost-effective solutions to improve the lives of our most vulnerable children and youth. MFM is a simple yet innovative concept which establishes a sense of extended family and community around the participating children, youth, and families. In each MFM Constellation, six to ten families (foster, kinship, foster-to-adopt, and/or birth families) live in close proximity to a central, licensed foster care facility called a Hub Home whose role is to provide assistance in navigating systems, peer support for children and parents, and improve their social activities, placement rates, and crisis response as needed. By taking this model and expanding it, The Mockingbird Society is going in the direction of prevention.

I asked Jim Theofelis, Executive Director of The Mockingbird Society, where the idea of expanding the MFM into prevention came from and he replied, “The prevention applications have always been part of the concept—there are a variety of ways in which The Mockingbird Network accomplishes these goals. One avenue that youth use to advocate for themselves and other foster youth is through the Mockingbird Times. Over 22,000 copies are distributed every month and is also a digital version on the MBS Web site. The Foster Youth & Alumni Leadership Summit is another way that youth from care can advocate for themselves. This opportunity gave me the ability to learn more skills on what it takes to become a better leader. It also allowed me the opportunity to get together with youth like me to discuss key issues and challenges we face every day while also helping to present those issues to important policy makers. For youth in today’s society, advocacy is the strongest way to implement change and get our voices heard.”

Advocacy Day is yet another method that youth use to stand up for themselves and others in care. This last year we marched throughout our beautiful capital in Olympia, shouting for our rights. (“We don’t want any garbage bags we want homes!”) I actually sat down in the hearings for the bills and watched youth testify. After hearing heartfelt stories and meaningful statements, the legislators were left with decisions to make. On April 21st, 2009, Governor Christine Gregoire signed HB-1492 Independent Youth Housing Program. On April 25th, 2009, she signed HB-1098 Sibling Visitation and HB-1981 FosterCare Consolidation. On May 11th, 2009 HB-S81 Notification of Rights was signed into law.

Ms. Obama, MBS is one of the most change fulfilling organizations I have ever been a part of. I understand government officials are concerned about health care and jobs but what about the youth? More specifically, what about the youth who are a part of the child welfare system, a system based on a concept that suggests that the government is our parent? Today’s youth are our next presidents, legislators, judges, lawyers, and other professional people of importance. With a broken child-welfare system, how do we expect the children to succeed? You cannot put a dollar amount on a child’s life.

No one asks or someone from your administration could come visit our headquarters and go through the culture of Foster Care training, a training created and facilitated by the government’s children and tomorrow’s leaders. I think it would be a great asset to your calling of serving communities and their neighbors.

November 2009

Mockingbird Times

Foster Care and Homeless Youth Speak Out Across the Nation

Volume X, Issue XI

A Letter to Ms. Michelle Obama

By Ashlie Lanier

Mockingbird Family Model Expansion

By Jerry Bobo

Visit us online at www.mockingbirdsociety.org or call 206-332-KIDS (5437)
I like November if for no other reason than it seems like it is the month that both prepares us for and shifts us into a season of special days. Of course, Thanksgiving is a month and a wonderful opportunity for each of us to reflect upon our many blessings for which to be thankful.

But even before the “big holiday” in November we have others that also call upon us to take a moment and consider not only our blessings but of the contributions and blessings of our fellow citizens. For example, November typically brings us an election year, and this year is no exception. We are so fortunate in this country that we have the right to vote and make a direct impact upon those who are alive. I encourage each of you to exercise your right to vote.

Additionally, November is the month of one of my favorite holidays which is Veterans’ Day. I personally want to thank the men and women in uniform who are serving our country. I especially share my gratitude with those who are serving on foreign soil away from their loved ones during such a precarious time in our history. To the Veterans who have returned from this time of duty and especially to those who come home injured, I say, “Thank you for your sacrifice and your service!”

My gift to help children, youth and families in foster care is (check box):

☐ $1,000+ Protector
☐ $500 - $999 Champion
☐ $250 - $499 Supporter
☐ $50 - $249 Sponsor
☐ $25 - $49 Contributor

Payment Options:
☐ Check (payable to The Mockingbird Society)
☐ Credit card:
☒ Visa ☒ MasterCard ☐ AMEX
Account Number:
Expiration Date:
Credit card billing address

☐ Please charge my credit card: ☐ One time ☐ Monthly ☐ Quarterly
My employer will match my gift. Company Name:

Thank You!

Anonymous; Lucy Berliner; Bob Bowman, Rosauers; Casey Family Programs; Paula Clapp and Matthew G. Norton Co.; Community Youth Services Independent Living staff and volunteers Heather Guiz, Brian Hatcher, Danille Kettel, Sarah LaGrange, and Maki; Mary Meinig; Megan Notter; Danille Kettel, Sarah LaGrange, and Andrea Lane; Sally Solomon; Jim Theofelis; Diana Clark; Ros Ghan; Executive Assistant (AA)

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!

NAME
ADDRESS

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So that we may recognize you for your gift, please write how you would like to be listed:
☐ Please do not include my name on published donor lists (check box).
☐ I prefer to receive my copy of the Mockingbird Times at the email address provided above.

To Kill A Mockingbird: 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. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was the October/November special issue of the Mockingbird Times. To Kill A Mockingbird is the inspiration for our name, Mockingbird Society. We invite you to join us in making a significant difference in the lives of our most vulnerable children and teenagers who are in foster care system so that our most vulnerable children and teenagers are not only safe but loved and have the right to vote and make a direct impact upon those who are alive.

The Mockingbird Society

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When youth are in foster care, whether it was foster care or kinship care, often one of the first things they want to do is reach out to their birth parents if possible, a process called reunification. Reunifying might not be simple because the youth might have feelings such as abandonment, resentment and anger towards their parents. Even with negative feelings, reunifying can be important to provide closure on a youth’s foster care experience as well as open a door for a fresh start with birth parents.

Sometimes youth are able to reunify with birth parents before they age out of foster care which can be an even more difficult transition, especially for younger children. This can sometimes be better though. Whether youth get taken away from their parents because of abuse, neglect, domestic violence, or whatever reason, they sometimes are able to be reunified because Child Protective Services (CPS) feels that the parents have their stuff together and are capable of being adequate parents. The transition can be difficult on the youth’s part because they may have a lot of emotions about being sent back into foster care whether it is for their parents not doing the right thing or themselves not doing the right thing.

Reunifying is important when I transitioned back into my mother’s care when I was 16. Reunifying was made easier for me because I was actually spending more and more time with my mom then finally living with her again. I think having reunification be a gradual process is what made it easier on me and my mom. Not everyone has as good a reunification experience as I did though. Someone I know, who is an alumna of foster care, had a not so great reunification experience. After experiencing the stress of going out of care, she pursued relationships with both of her birth parents. “I wanted my mom’s love like no other… When I got older and closer [to realizing the] how bad, my mom’s addictions took over our relationship, she stole from me and said some things that can never be taken back,” she said. “My dad had me fooled. He was playing like nothing could tear us apart again. He tried to buy my love and I fell for it, but eventually he got back hooked on drugs and abandoned me.”

Reunification isn’t always a good thing. Youth may come to find that their parents really don’t want anything to do with them when they age out of care. Parents sometimes don’t change from their old ways that got their child put in care in the first place. Then the youth may eventually end up back in foster care. While some youth have negative experiences with their birth parents, some relationships can still be important. It can open up doors for other family bonds. “Yes, I am happy that I got to meet my parents. It is a very positive thing that came out of it was meeting my siblings who love and care for me and will always be there for me no matter what,” said the alumna mentioned above.

In some cases when youth reunify with parents before aging out, their parents may have missed CPS to believe that they are capable parents although they haven’t refrained from their old ways that got their child put in care. Then the youth may eventually end up back in foster care.

Some youth have negative experiences with their birth parents before they age out. While some youth have negative experiences with their birth parents, some relationships can still be important. It can open up doors for other family bonds. “Yes, I am happy that I got to meet my parents. It is a very positive thing that came out of it was meeting my siblings who love and care for me and will always be there for me no matter what,” said the alumna mentioned above.

Being in the System by David Buck

The child-welfare system as a whole is problematic for youth, but what I hope to be able to give you is a better understanding of just how the system affects children. I will be focusing on one of several issues on how the system makes things difficult. Psychological problems manifest themselves everywhere: in social situations, on the job, in families, etc. I am going to be focusing today strictly on the social issues around the child-welfare system.

Whatever problems led youth into the system, the consequences are usually the same. Being removed from their families is hard on youth, as is being separated from their neighborhood, their schools, their friends, and other family and this sense of loss is very traumatizing for those so young. Take these emotions into a new environment where children need social relationships such as friends, family, and mentors you got yourself a big heap of problems.

According to Casey Family Programs, more than 500,000 children are in foster care in the United States. Most of these children have been the victims of repeated abuse and neglect and have not been able to develop a safe environment during the early years of life. A 2003 issue of the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry says that neglect can distort the attachment aspect of a child’s development. They go on to state that “children who have experienced chronic abuse and neglect during their first few years may live in a persistent state of hyper-arousal or dissociation, anticipating a threat from every direction.” According to the Child Welfare League of America, some 2,500 kids were removed from homes due to abuse and neglect in Washington, DC.

Psychologists with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services who studied the affects of the child-welfare system on children have pointed out that many of these youth have almost completely avoided attachment in their lives. It’s very common for a youth in foster care to feel like the only person he or she can trust is him- or herself.

When I was in care that was the way that it was with me: I refused to make friends because I always felt like they would try to get into my stuff and abruptly down the road. A twenty year old alumna of the system, Zematra Bacon, says, “I stayed very private about myself with the friends I did have and didn’t talk about issues I was having.”

Research shows this continues into the youth’s adult lives; it makes it very hard for youth to feel like they can trust anybody even into adulthood. “It was hard for me after leaving the system to get the ability to be open with people again,” Zematra says. Loving relationships developed at this time can be tough on both the alumna and the people the alumna cares about. This often results of the cycle of abuse continuing, a very real problem that needs to be addressed.

According to the American Psychiatric Association which studied the effects of the issues in the system, the best treatment option for those in these situations is large support groups for these youth: effective, integrative support where: those in the system won’t just one on one counseling. They are not taken out of context, however, are common for youth leaving care, once all those supporters they had while in the system are removed, to have those old feelings returned or reinforced.

Sharing Our Stories by Ian Grant

Everything has a price. For foster youth, telling our story is the price we pay for getting people to listen to us, to help us. It is ironic that the part of us that we would most like to forget, the part of us that most of the world wishes they could erase, is the one that we are constantly called upon to share in order to better our lives and the lives of those who come after us. I spoke to an alumna of care, whom I will call Jack, about this contradiction, and how it affected his life. He left his home at age 11, after running away several times until he was 15 years old. He spent the remainder of his time in care placed with a foster family, before aging out at 18.

Jack struggled with the expectations of the people that were assigned to his case, his family, and mentors he got himself a big heap of problems. He was always trying to dig deeper. I felt like they were probing me, like I was a science experiment… and when you’re 11, you… don’t know how to cope with that sort of thing. I learned to talk to my first psychiatrist what I thought he wanted to hear.”

Jack is doing well now. Although the meetings with service providers were sometimes uncomfortable, he feels that “in the end, it was worth it. It got the pressure off my chest… [and] helped me with my behavioral issues.” He said that service providers “need to trust their kids… social workers are there to build relationships that help kids, and if you’re digging and probing, you aren’t able to do that.”

After I talked with Jack, I spoke to Henry Author Jenkins, Jr., a case manager with the YMCA Independent Living Program. He has worked as a case manager for the last five years, and regularly interviews youth in care and alumni of care in order to provide them services. “I don’t want to bring people’s history into things initially — the questions he asks at the first meeting are along the lines of “What do you want from this program?” and “What are some of your goals?” He knows that most people aren’t going to tell me their whole life story the first time they meet me.

Ultimately, I need to know what drives them — why they want to achieve the goals that they set for themselves.” Like Jack, a lot of foster youth have learned to tell service providers what they want to hear, and Jenkins says he often finds himself in situations where youth “tell me what I want to hear, what they’re being asked.”

Jenkins tries to be fair, saying “If a participant tells me their story, or if a person doesn’t tell me their story, I have to treat them each the same way.” However, he says that knowing more about a participant’s background can help him in his work: “I try to remember the stories that each participant tells me, because that’s the connection I have with them… I like to take the stories to… make a parallel to whatever goal that they want to achieve.” He admits, however, that it’s not always easy to remain objective: “When I hear the stories and I try not to do this, but I do — I hurt for them. And it’s hard, because I would like to be professional, but I’m still human; when I see a participant who has gone through serious trauma because of something an adult did to them, it affects me. It makes me think about my kids… I carry it around with me. It’s real.”

I asked Jenkins what he would say to other case managers, and he said “When a young person tells you their story, listen intently. Don’t just listen for the traumatic part of it, don’t listen for how you can jump in and save the day, but just listen, and be there… And then you can take all that you’ve heard, and you can use it to best help the participant in whatever they are doing.”

Jack and Mr. Jenkins are on opposite sides of the social services equation. But they can each see that being respectful and compassionate with the stories that youth share is absolutely central to building effective relationships with those youth, and that paving and providing tend to undermine those relationships. Some service providers occasionally need to be reminded of this fact. Trust is the single most important factor when building a relationship and the only way to build trust is to show respect for each other. I hope that hearing these two stories helps you to do that. Good luck, and keep fighting.

Godly Sorrow

Anonymous

For what delight I feel when early morning dew
touches my fingertips.
In the air there's a feeling of
tranquility, peacefulness.
My Heavenly mother; I’ve been gone too long.
I’ve helped in the destruction caused
and the hand which is killing you.
For I have polluted you and abused you,
destroyed you.
And now I’ll help to revive you,
nurture you, feed you. As you have me
during voice development training.

How treacherous man can be
to you, my Lord.
Do not punish them for sins
they know not of; but love
them as you love me.
Help me open their eyes and
their hearts.
O' Lord, my Father, start through me.
Start through me.
And when I serve my time and meet
you face to face, you will see;
Love through me. AMEN

Listen

R.J. Howard

Sound the trumpet for a sacred feast
Sing! Beat the tambourine
Play the sweet lyre and the harp
But people please listen to me
Just asking you this please
Play music have a good time
God made me and you shine
With desires so sweet...
With a fresh new beat
Help the sick, fill them with pride
Wash the sins the people bring in
One huge tide
Listen to the heart
With the beat only
It knows when to start.

Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, and if you involve me I understand!

~ Anonymous

Creative Corner

How we can help

Get Published ~ Get Paid!

We are looking for articles, poetry, artwork, and photography from our young readers who have experience in the foster care system and/or with homelessness. If you want to be published in the Mockingbird Times, contact us at 206-323-5437 or via email at kara@mockingbirdtimes.org.

The Mockingbird Network

Your Needs, Your Voice

Region 5: Chapter in Pierce County by DeMarea Kirk

This month we had a group training on how to speak not only to professionals, but also to communicate with people on an everyday basis. We also learned how to not over share our lives when speaking in front of people. During Voice Development training we talked about credibility and its importance. We have been lucky and recruited new participants to our chapter. We all have been very active in educating our peers about what is currently going on in foster care and what we can fix. Also, we are hoping to help with a food bank for Thanksgiving so families can have food on their table. All in all I’m proud of all the regions and the impact they are making for change.

Region 6: Chapter in Thurston County by Sam Evans

This has been a very exciting month for us. Our chapter moved from Vancouver to Olympia. We have a new resource specialist, new chapter leaders and are starting new chapter meetings. This month, Graham and I held our first training together on Life Advocacy 101. This personally was very scary for me being the first big thing to facilitate on my own and there were a lot more people there than I thought there would be. I also sat in on the Center for Children & Youth Justice Summit Meeting and gave my input to the members of the panel on how the foster care system should be reformed. Graham and I are currently planning the kick off for our chapter meetings. We look forward to seeing this chapter flourish in Olympia, right next door to the Capitol.