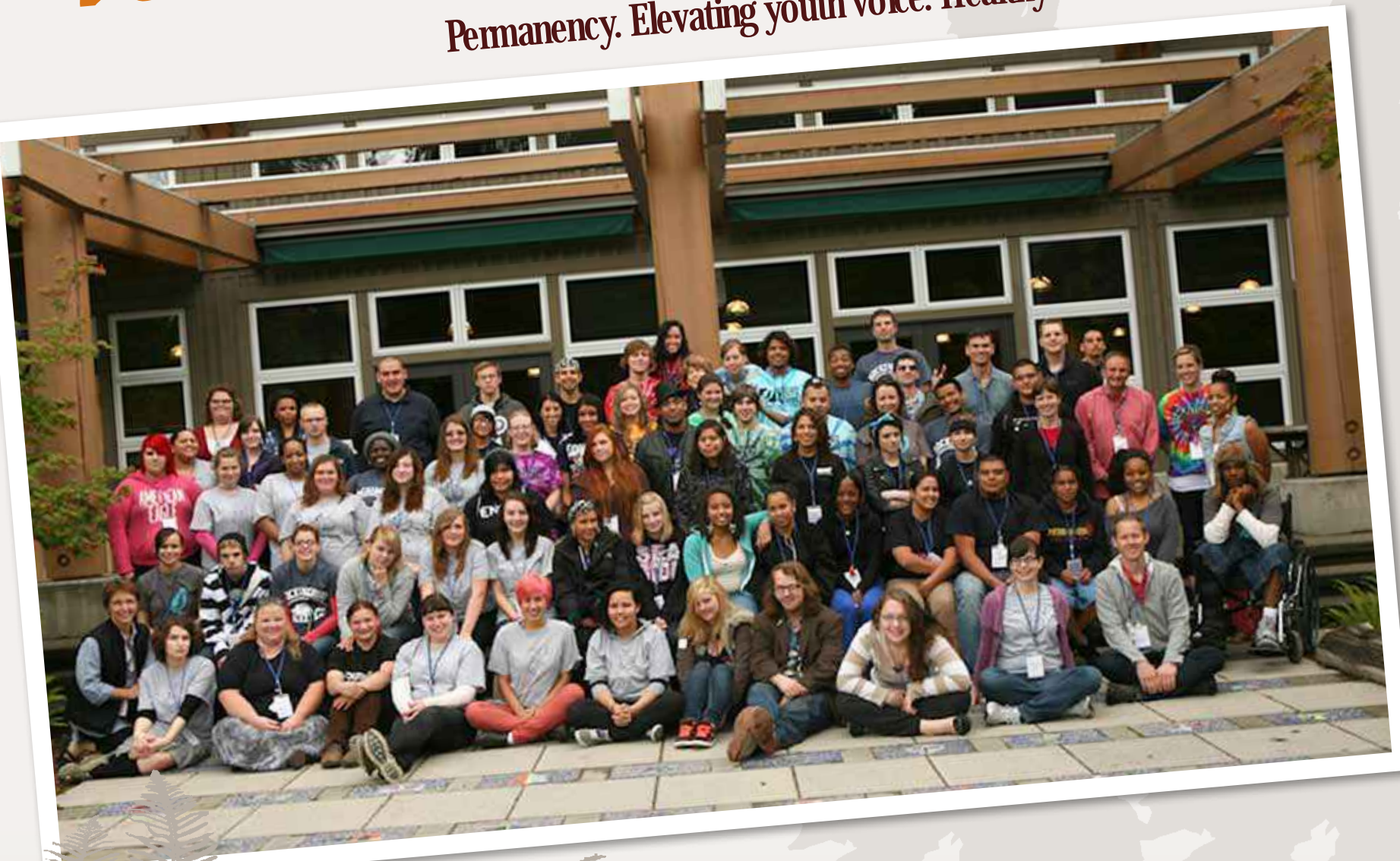


2012 Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit Report

Permanency. Elevating youth voice. Healthy transitions.



The Mockingbird Society

Building a world-class foster care system

Jim Theofelis
Executive Director
The Mockingbird Society





Dear Friends,

On June 25th through the 27th, 56 youth and alumni of care from across Washington state came together for our 7th annual Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit. This three day retreat gives these passionate young leaders the tools they need to become powerful advocates in their own lives and for the next generation of child welfare reforms.

This year's Summit themes included: permanency, elevating youth voice, and healthy transitions. This year also brought with it a number of new and exciting changes. The first two days of the Summit were held at the beautiful Islandwood School in the Woods on Bainbridge Island, providing an amazing environment for the youth to enjoy. This year's Summit also saw the unveiling of The Mockingbird Society's latest training, Transitions. This innovative curriculum, made possible by a generous grant from the Andrus Family Fund, is designed to help youth navigate the many transitions in their lives in a healthy and productive manner.

We culminated an already amazing three days with the Report-Out to the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care. After months of hard work, the youth came prepared with some of the most well-developed policy proposals I have ever seen at the Summit. I am confident that these proposals will lead to real reforms that will benefit all children, youth, and families impacted by the foster care system.

I want to take this opportunity to recognize the Co-Chairs of the Commission, Justice Bobbe Bridge and Assistant Secretary Denise Revels Robinson. Justice Bridge's steadfast leadership on the Commission ensures that youth voice impacts real and positive change in the child welfare system. Assistant Secretary Revels Robinson's commitment to giving youth in care a seat at the table embodies the impact of our annual Summit. She will be retiring at the end of this year as the head of Children's Administration after over 40 years of public service. Her unparalleled compassion for our most vulnerable children, youth, and families will truly be missed.

Finally, I want to thank our Summit sponsors for their continued support. This opportunity for youth would not be possible without them: Casey Family Programs, the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care, the Center for Children and Youth Justice, the Federal Court Improvement Program, and the Department of Social and Health Services.

Thank you to each and every one of you who support The Mockingbird Society and help improve the lives of children and youth in care, as well as for that five year old child, who doesn't yet know that she will be entering foster care..

Sincerely

Jim Theofelis
Jim@mockingbirdsociety.org

Chapter Voice

YOUTH-INSPIRED SOLUTIONS

Encouraging Family Connections

OLYMPIA CHAPTER

Youth in care have lost significant family and permanent supportive connections. While efforts are made to find relatives, these searches are conducted primarily for placement purposes, without considering the value of maintaining relationships with these extended family members.

We propose that Children's Administration incorporates relationship building into their family searches for youth in care.



Provide Safe Housing for ALL Youth Aging out of Care

YAKIMA CHAPTER

The legislature has created Extended Foster Care for youth pursuing their education. Ensuring safe housing for youth aging out of care is critical to providing the stability and support necessary to succeed as an adult. Youth who do not choose to continue their education or are not in a position to do so due to disability, money, or other hardship, are not ensured this support even though in many cases they are the most in need.

We propose that Washington state expands the Extended Foster Care program for ALL youth aging out of care.



Ensure Better Outcomes for Youth Transition Plans

SPOKANE CHAPTER

By law, youth who are going to age out of foster care must have a transition plan meeting at age 17.5. Youth transitioning out of care need their 17.5 meetings to ensure they have access to the records, documents and resources necessary to successfully transition into adulthood.

We propose that the outcomes agreed upon at the 17.5 meetings, including access to records, housing and education, be reviewed upon aging out to ensure that youth are provided the resources they need to succeed.



Chapter Voice

YOUTH-INSPIRED SOLUTIONS

continued...

Exit Funds Savings Accounts

SEATTLE CHAPTER

Youth aging out of care lack a universal savings tool to help teach them the value of saving money. Financial resources currently provided for youth aging out are strictly limited to certain demographics, only cover immediate costs for basic necessities, and cannot be used for savings.

We propose providing a state-wide matched savings account program for youth in care that is tied to financial literacy education so youth can save effectively and age out with the resources and skills necessary to succeed.



Overmedication in Foster Care

EVERETT CHAPTER

Youth in care are disproportionately prescribed mental health medications when compared to youth from intact families. There are too few opportunities for youth and those responsible for them to object to or get more information on these often powerful prescriptions. Youth, case managers, and caregivers must be better informed of the impacts of medications and have more opportunities to ensure a second opinion occurs.



Protect Sibling Visits

TACOMA CHAPTER

Youth in care should not be kept from visiting their siblings for inappropriate reasons. Too many youth in foster care are being sanctioned or punished with the removal of sibling visits.

We propose adding language to the existing statute explicitly banning the restriction of sibling visits as a form of punishment.



FOSTER CARE SAVED MY LIFE ESSAY CONTEST WINNER

By Kimberly Hines • EVERETT CHAPTER

We presented the topic of mental abuse to the Commission. Under Washington State law (RCW) I grew up thinking that I was nothing. I had no motivation to do well upon entering care. I met numerous people who helped me gain this motivation. My best friend, Brittany Oswald, and my aunt/legal guardian, Cheryl Frazier, helped me to get back on the right track. Before I entered care, I only went to school because my friends did and even then I barely attended once a week. I didn't think that getting good grades was a priority. It wasn't until I was placed into care that I started to see how important they are. Brittany and Cheryl helped me see that I could do things that I never would have dreamed that I could. They gave me motivation that my parents never did. I went from having a very low GPA to maintaining a 3.6 through freshman and sophomore years. I would have never been able to do this without their help. Brittany even helped me study, and I got into the Running Start program. These are things that I would have never even attempted to do before I was placed into care.

It was only about three years ago that my siblings and I were placed into the foster care system. In that amount of time, I feel like have come a long way from where I used to be. I had the most negative outlook in the world about everything and I was steering myself down the wrong path. I was spending time with gangs, drinking and using several types of drugs. My life consisted of having fun and then going home and being beaten and put down. My life was an ongoing rollercoaster that never went back up. I never told anyone about being abused because I didn't want their sympathy; I didn't want to involve anyone. In care, I realized that abuse isn't a part of regular life and that it wasn't me who should be ashamed. I also realized that I shouldn't hate the State for taking me and my siblings out of our parents' custody, but that I should thank them.

When I first entered care I promised myself that I was going to turn around and do better than I had been. In 8th grade I had a teacher, Mr. Freeman, who taught me that nobody was better than anybody else. He talked about how a certain percentage of students don't make it to college and how he didn't want any of us to be a part of that percent. This motivated me as a student and a person. He was like the father that I never had, but always wanted. In that same year, I participated in a group called Affected Others. It was a group for students who lived in homes with abusive parents. I had been holding a lot of anger and frustration inside of me, and this group gave me the opportunity to let it all out.

I want my siblings to have a better childhood than I did, the motivation and support that every child needs. Although I wanted to change for me, the real reason I wanted to change was for my younger siblings. They look up to me and I'm their role model. I regret that I was so busy being preoccupied with myself and that I left them alone at home with our father. This is part of the reason why I really would like to attend Summit 2012. This conference gives me the opportunity to directly improve our foster care system for future generations. I look back on my childhood and I am ashamed of myself and regret many things. But, what I progressively learned as a foster youth is that you can't change the past but you can change the future. If I never went into foster care, I can't, and don't even want to imagine where I'd be today.

Summit Essay Contest

All applicants to the Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit were required to submit a reflective essay. Youth wrote about their experiences, challenges, inspirations and hopes for the future. Mockingbird Network staff read all entries and selected these two essays to receive special recognition. As the essay winner, Kimberly Hines will shadow Representative Ross Hunter for a day and observe advocacy in action. Additionally, both Kimberly and Chris were honored by their peers and guests at the Commission Report-Out on Wednesday June 27th.



Kimberly Hines
and Representative
Ross Hunter.

COMPELLED BY A BRIGHT FUTURE ESSAY CONTEST RUNNER UP

By *Chris Bauer* • OLYMPIA CHAPTER

Each of us is motivated by something. Whether it be by friends, family or some deep set personal ambition; we all have a self-pronounced personal trainer of sorts to help us reach our goals in life. I am no different and even though there is some embarrassment that comes with what motivates me to succeed, I must explain after throwing it out there in the first place.

I wouldn't say that I have the worst hand in life by far, but my life was no walk in the park nonetheless. Without taking pity, as this is not what I am asking for; I am asking for an understanding that many people are motivated by the hope of a better life. With that, believe me when I tell you, it is a dang good motivator.

So, what is it that motivates me? I'm tired of making poor choices for myself. I got tired of making excuses for why I've gotten myself into trouble. Believe me, I've been through all the standard operating procedures and after hearing myself repeat the same redundant justifications, over and over again, I got to thinking if it was my thinking that was the problem.

It's true that misery loves company. It's one thing for me to live my life as a drifter. It's not hard to be the ignorant lone rock among the winds of change but as I went along I began to see my choices affect others around me, and often the results were not even close to satisfactory. I wasn't happy with the results to say the least. So here comes the start of a new life. It's time to get healthy and feed my mind right. I have been told that I can be anything I want to be in life as long as I have faith in myself, and from that moment on, that's what I have done.

I didn't have the life I wanted but I knew the steps I needed to take to get where I wanted to be. I finally knew what I wanted and that alone was enough to propel me into the real world. The want for more, a slight greed you can say, motivated me to get my G.E.D, attend post-secondary education, and engage with and inspire those around me. I vow to do just that and I feel that I can also motivate people to be what they want to be.

Life is a journey and as with all journeys there are hazards and detours along the way but I have my road map and the motivation to see it through. That, to me, is all someone needs to transform a journey into an enjoyable adventure.

Chris Bauer
accepts his
award from
Jim Theofelis.



PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT ADVOCACY

By Amanda Bevington

This was my third Leadership Summit at The Mockingbird Society. This year was great; it was a meaningful experience for youth participants as well as the advisors who assisted the youth in developing their systems reform presentations. It amazes me when I see youth from across the state come to this annual event to put a face on issues they care about. It shows me that youth are extremely passionate about creating change in the foster care system now, and for the future.

The Summit is a time where youth do not have to feel alone. Many of the youth that attend the Leadership Summit have had shared experiences and Mockingbird gives them the opportunity to advocate for themselves and for others in the system. This is truly unique; most organizations do not give that opportunity directly to youth.

The second day at the Leadership Summit was a time for youth to organize in their regional groups and practice presenting their region's topic. This year there were six tables with advisors. Each group had three minutes to present to the advisors at the table, then 12 minutes for feedback from the advisors, and 15 minutes to regroup and prepare to move to the next table with other advisors. This gave youth the total of 30 minutes before they had to move to the next table. Youth took their time to absorb feedback and practice answering questions. This process helped participants hone their presentation skills in a motivational and supportive environment.

The focus for the System Reform Workshop was to have youth understand the feeling of presenting in front of a live panel before the final Report-Out on the last day of the Leadership Summit. In addition, The Mockingbird Society invites different advisors from many different backgrounds to the Youth Summit. The advisors get the opportunity to see the youth present their topics, and to be able to bring that information back to their respective work groups. This year advisors included legislative aides, non-profit leaders, and advocates from other organizations. Mockingbird Society Public Policy and Communications Coordinator Jon Brumbach noted this event is important "not only for youth to practice their topic but to also educate advocates and influencers to move these priorities forward to the future."

Youth participants at the Leadership Summit said that this year the workshop was great. They said this year did not feel rushed and they appreciated that they were given a total of 30 minutes for presenting, receiving feedback, and regrouping back into their chapter to debrief. Many youth said it was helpful to hear from the advisors and to role play like it was the real thing. The System Reform Workshop not only allowed youth to practice standing up for what they believe in and using their voices effectively, but the way it has changed over the years is a great example of how Mockingbird listens to youth as it refines workshops and trainings so that participants grow into the best advocates they can be.



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Center for Children and Youth Justice

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MAKING IT FROM POINT A TO POINT B

By Deonate Cruz

This year The Mockingbird Society received an amazing grant from the Andrus Family Fund (AFF). This grant was given to us on the terms that we develop the content and material for Mockingbird's newest training: Transitions.

If you are anything like me, the first thing you might think of when you hear the word "transition" is a physical movement from point A to point B. But in the AFF model, created by author William Bridges, transitions means something very specific and different. Thanks to our very own Georgina Ramirez, Mockingbird's Youth Development Specialist, we learned that there is much more to any transition than most people think.

The training was held over a period of two days and was a total of 8 hours long. We first learned the difference between change and transition. One of my new personal favorite metaphors came out of this part. Georgina used the image of an iceberg to distinguish between change and transition. She stated, "When you go through transitions, it's very much like an iceberg in the same way that everything you see (change) is only 10% of the big picture. Everything else below the surface (transition) is the other 90%." I took this to mean that the things that are apparent are the 10% and the things that are not always clear to people like emotions and your thoughts are the 90%. Being able to distinguish between change and transition was the first step in learning the framework. After getting that distinction down, we got into the heart of the training — learning the three phases of transition: Endings, the Neutral Zone, and New Beginnings.

The Transitions training has been facilitated three more times since its unveiling, helping a total of 133 youth move forward from point A to point B.



REPORT-OUT REFLECTS MONTHS OF HARD WORK

By Mandy Urwiler

On the afternoon of June 27th 2012, the spacious community room at the 2100 Building in Seattle was filled with youth from across the state. They had spent the previous two days at a retreat center called Islandwood on Bainbridge Island, preparing day and night to perfect their reports to the Commission about their concerns within the child welfare system.

The Commission was very supportive — before the report-out started, Justice Bridge even told us all, “I know that this is going to be perfect.” All the members seemed interested in the concerns youth brought forth. Both Commission members and youth used their personal stories to put a human face on issues in the foster care system. They not only shared their stories, but showed the Commission that we don’t just tell them what to fix, but give them ideas on how to fix it. One of the Commission members, Ryan Cummings, replied to the sibling visits proposal by saying that the topic is one of personal interest to him and he will make sure to bring it up in the Normalcy Workgroup.

The room fell silent as youth began to line up to present to the Commission. All eyes were on these participants. The youth discussed their concerns with the child welfare system. These included: sibling visits being used as leverage for behavior modification, trying to find more family for youth in care to build relationships with, 17.5 transition planning meetings not happening properly, getting vital documents for youth aging out, overmedication of youth in care, further implementation of Fostering Connections, and creating an exit funds savings account program for youth.

The youth presented with lots of research to back them up. It was clear that they worked very hard to prepare for their presentations. It was inspiring to see powerful decision makers willing to take the time out of their busy schedules to listen to youth voice. Representative Ross Hunter published a response to the Report-Out on his blog saying, “These young people make incredibly powerful presentations that get right at the heart of how to make our foster care system actually work for the kids instead of the adults. It’s frustrating because the solutions seem like they should already have been done, and some themes repeat year after year. Every year we take some of the ideas they present on and try to get them implemented. Some of the ideas struck me as immediately implementable and almost criminal that they haven’t happened yet.”

The broad support amongst Commission members, legislators and community members alike provides hope for a bright future for many of this year’s Summit proposals.



ATTENDING COMMISSIONERS

Justice BOBBE BRIDGE
Center for Children and Youth Justice, Co-Chair

Assistant Secretary
DENISE REVELS ROBINSON
Children's Administration, Co-Chair

MIKE CANFIELD
Foster Parent Representative

RYAN CUMMINGS
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Alumni of Care Representative

Representative MARY HELEN ROBERTS
Washington State House of Representatives

Judge KITTY-ANN VAN DOORNINCK
and CARRIE WAYNO
Office of the Attorney General

Praise for the 2012 Annual Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit



“These young people make incredibly powerful presentations that get right at the heart of how to make our foster care system actually work for the kids instead of the adults. It’s frustrating because the solutions seem like they should already have been done, and some themes repeat year after year. Every year we take some of the ideas they present on and try to get them implemented.”

– Representative Ross Hunter (D-48)

Praise for the 2012 Annual Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit



The impact of the Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit grows every year. Through their experiences and expertise, youth show policymakers, advocates, community members and everyone in between how we can improve the child welfare system so that all children and youth who experience the system gain the tools to reach their potential.

– Justice Bobbe Bridge, Co-Chair, Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care; Center for Children and Youth Justice President and CEO

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Praise for the 2012 Annual Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit



Participating in the Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit is one of the highlights of the year for me as the Assistant Secretary. I value the opportunity to hear directly from the youth about ways to improve how they are served by the child welfare system. The 2012 Summit was no exception. The issues presented were substantive and touched my heart. In partnership with Children's Administration staff, I look forward to our continued work with youth to respond to their concerns.

– Denise Revels Robinson, Co-Chair, Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care; Assistant Secretary, Children's Administration

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Youth Leaders Give Summit A Grades

2012 SUMMIT SURVEY RESULTS

Fifty-Six youth and alumni of foster care from across the state of Washington attended the 2012 Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit. Of those in attendance, 48 surveys were completed – a response rate of over 85%.

- 98% of youth surveyed reported having a stronger sense of connection to the foster youth community.
- 92% of youth reported feeling more comfortable sharing their story to help transform the foster care system.
- 96% of youth surveyed reported feeling more confident seeking support from community leaders when advocating for an issue.
- 94% of youth surveyed felt their participation made a difference.



Sincere thanks to our generous
Alumni Leadership Summit sponsors





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