

Mockingbird Times

FOSTER CARE AND HOMELESS YOUTH SPEAK OUT ACROSS THE NATION

December 2008

Volume IX, Issue 12

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Foster Youth Give Back BY GEORGINA RAMIREZ



With the Thanksgiving holidays around the corner, YMCA and Youth LEAD participants shared some holiday fun with the residents of the **Kawabe Memorial Center**, a local retirement home. Experiential Learning Specialist **Alex Okerman** and youth participants from the **YMCA** and **Youth LEAD/Mockingbird Network** collaborated on a Thanksgiving service project that included baking homemade pies and origami.

Everyone congregated in the 2100 Hundred Building kitchen to bake apple and pumpkin pies. A kitchen full of care and young chefs created a room full of mouth-watering aromas that would make your granny jealous. Whether peeling, slicing, mixing, or cleaning up, everyone was involved and put in their greatest effort to create something special for the Kawabe residents.

According to **Senior Digest**, "The Kawabe memorial center is a retirement housing community in Seattle that provides affordable apartments for seniors. The majority of residents are Japanese and Korean elders, 40% do not speak English, and 45% of them are over age 80."

The Kawabe Memorial Center residents shared their wisdom in the field of origami and provided an experience that truly displayed the rewards of goodwill. This activity was beneficial to everyone involved but what I found most inspiring was that this event demonstrates youth are passionate about staying connected and caring for their community.

"Kawabe Memorial Center was great because participants had the opportunity to bake pie, have fun with peers, fold origami, and hang out with elders all in one day," said Okerman who arranged the event. "Our interactions transcended age and cultural barriers that can prevent us from having such memorable experiences like we did last Monday. We look forward to continuing and strengthening our relationship with the people at Kawabe Memorial Center."

Families, communities, and society all function as systems of support that provide a sense of significance that an individual is



YMCA and Youth LEAD participants join residents of the Kawabe Memorial Center for some holiday cheer.

needed and valuable to something bigger than themselves. It is embedded in our culture that the holidays are a special time of the year that emphasizes a sense of connectedness through holiday rituals between family and friends. Some think that expensive gifts are the only way you can show someone you care about them but, in most cases, all people want is to feel cared for, significant, and special. Volunteering is the least expensive and most impactful gift anyone can give.

HOLIDAY MAGIC BY LEONA BILL



For the second year in a row, **97.3 KIRO FM** and **Treehouse** have come together to help foster kids have a wonderful Christmas. KIRO FM has been producing **Foster Child Holiday Magic** since the year 1988. They have a 27-hour radiothon to raise awareness about the difficulties that foster children face and to provide holiday gifts to foster kids across Washington State, turning the holiday season around by showing these kids people care. That's what the 97.3 KIRO FM Holiday Magic program is all about.

The radiothon raises money to pay for gifts for foster children as well as children who are in kinship care. Foster Child Holiday Magic brightened the holiday season last year for about 3,500 foster kids. Tens of thousands of holiday gifts have been delivered across Western Washington for nearly 20 years. This year there are about 3,555 kids on the list to receive a gift from the program and there are still more foster children who are waiting to be submitted into the system to also receive a gift from Holiday Magic.

KIRO has a Web site, www.holidaymagic.org, where people can purchase toys for foster children of all ages. On this site, they give you the option to either shop by the price you want or shop by categories of ages. 100 percent of the donation you provide goes to purchasing gifts.

Treehouse has only been participating in Holiday Magic for two years. Three years ago the only thing they could do was take small donations that people were bringing in or dropping off at their warehouse. The **Department of Children and Family Services** last year asked Treehouse if they could take over this project. Treehouse felt that this was a thing they could not do on their own so Treehouse and KIRO worked together to make sure foster children would get a gift.

You can apply for Holiday Magic in three easy steps. First, the foster parents or case worker have to fill out a form, one form per child. Second, they pick out which gift the child wants from the list that is provided with the registration form. Third, they return the completed form. The foster children are put on the list for receiving a gift after the forms are completed. Treehouse then puts that information on a document and purchases the toys directly from the vendors. Finally, they ship the gifts straight to the families' homes.

Here are a few thank yous that were sent in to KIRO and Treehouse last year: "When I opened the box I was totally flabbergasted! I thought it was going to be some cheap old [MP3 player] but boy I was wrong! Now I almost have 200 songs! I really appreciate it A LOT!!! I really do" said a young boy. "Dear KIRO and donors, You made my Christmas so

Holidays are a Challenge for Youth in Care

BY ASHLIE LANIER



Most kids consider the winter holidays the most pleasant moments of the year. However, many youth in care have a different perspective. Many agree Thanksgiving, Christmas, and

New Year's are just average days throughout the year. Some become depressed and stressed during the holidays for many reasons, not necessarily because they don't receive gifts, and not because they don't enjoy the snow, but because of their own personal experiences during this season.

Large numbers of youth enter the foster care system during the holidays. Imagine being taken away from home and/or being brought to an unfamiliar place that you have to call home for maybe the rest of your life. Memories are forever and most cannot be forgotten. That's one of the reasons youth in the system are not too happy when the holidays come around. They are constantly being reminded of a situation they wish did not happen.

One youth in particular said that he never received gifts. He made it clear that when the holidays did come he was probably in a different home. "I have never had a homely, happy Christmas. I never received anything. Shoot, honestly, I never even had someone sing Happy Birthday to me, so why should I be excited at Christmas?"

Now don't get me wrong, a lot of youth in care have joyous holiday experiences. Several youth in care look forward to the holidays because they have an opportunity to spend time with their biological family. **Joyce Camacho-Cruz** (a Youth LEAD Representative at **The Mockingbird Society**) says "The holidays can be fun because I do get to spend time with my family, however, no family is perfect. We all have problems and when everyone gets together there tends to be issues, but once we look past them, everything is always good."

Countless numbers of youth within the kinship care system would agree that during the holidays money could be an issue. Many say that the holidays aren't about flashy presents or who got the most gifts this year, but picture being in a family where gifts do matter. After all, the holidays are considered the season of giving, right? Youth like me that have been given gifts their whole life most likely are expecting gifts every year. So what happens when you change homes? What happens when Santa doesn't visit your house anymore and you swear you were good this year? What happens when you find yourself broke during the holidays and you get gifts from family members but don't buy anything for anyone?

"I love the holidays, it's my favorite time of the year. However, it's also the most stressful time of the year," **Tiffany Hunter**, kinship care alumna expresses. Tiffany explains how much she loves the holidays because everyone seems to be in a better mood. However, when Christmas-time comes around it is hard to come up with the money to buy her family gifts.

I had an opportunity to interview **Jerry Bobo** who is new to The Mockingbird Society staff and get his opinion about the holidays.

HOLIDAY MAGIC, CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

CHALLENGE, CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



Letter From the Editor BY JIM THEOFELIS

Happy Holidays! I want to take this opportunity to wish each of you a very happy and joyful holiday season.

Without question, we are living through a very difficult time as we battle in two wars and one of the worst economic climates in recent memory. My thoughts and prayers go out to the hardworking families that are fighting to keep their housing, jobs, and health care as well as those who have a loved one who is away from home serving in uniform.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank so many of you who have supported The Mockingbird Society and our work. This past year has really been a year of remarkable growth for our organization and so many of you have been a major contributor of this growth. In particular, I want to thank the staff, Board of Directors, and volunteers who have been so instrumental in the success of The Mockingbird Society. I want to thank the foster and kinship caregivers who begin each day and end each night by giving of themselves to the children in their care. I want to thank the state and private agency social workers, case managers, and counselors who go the

extra mile each and every day, often without notice or fanfare. I also want to thank the administrative support staff who truly work behind the scenes. I know how appreciative I am for the administrative staff at The Mockingbird Society who are invaluable to literally everything we do.

As we conclude 2008 and begin to welcome 2009, I want to send a special message of gratitude and hope to the children, youth, and alumni of foster and kinship care. The Mockingbird Society will continue to ensure that your voice is elevated and heard! We will continue to create opportunities for you to share your story, your insights, and your wisdom regarding positive system reform and improvement. We will continue to be an organization dedicated to "building a world-class foster care system."

Finally, as you consider your End of Year Gift, I hope you will remember The Mockingbird Society. Season's Greetings to you and those you love.

Jim Theofelis

jim@mockingbirdsociety.org

My Journey to YouthBuild BY ARIANA

My journey in self-discovery has not been easy. I started out as a shy kid. I felt lost within the depths of a heart that had been locked in a cage imposed by an abusive father and a weakened mother. I struggled to find myself amid the constant teasing of misunderstanding peers. I was unable to recognize the potential of who I could become. Life became increasingly difficult as the stability I called my home crashed under me when my father walked out the door. Hopelessness set in when my mother was diagnosed with kidney disease. They said she only had two years to live. Depression became an inventive friend. I went from being in shock to suicidal.

I blew off school when I was placed with my first foster mother. She was a caring but unintelligent lady who was unable to appreciate what was happening to me. From there, I was on a foster care roller coaster, removed and replaced, removed and replaced, each time feeling more unimportant and uncared for as each foster parent realized they were unable to help me. I landed at a therapeutic group home called **Virginia Miller**. That piece of heaven (and sometimes Hades) made it possible for me to get my mind back on track. I was able to reunite with my mother. She had improved her health with spiritual wholeness and lifestyle changes. With my home finally whole, I was finally able to focus on my passion: education.

With little schooling, I was behind in my education. I tried **Sartori** for awhile but it wasn't a good fit. I reanalyzed my dreams. A friend told me about a cool place for learning and job training called **YouthSource**. Their staff put their hearts into helping students. They have passion for what they do and are fervent themselves about learning. Now I'm involved in the **King County YouthBuild Program**. I am learning hands on training in the fields of construction and green building. I am also able to use my artistic expression in these crafts. YouthBuild supports my educational dreams as I work with their diverse (and fun) staff. I'm balancing construction with the art of creating. Construction jobs

offer a high salary and benefits as an apprentice. That means I will get paid to learn. While learning I will earn an average of \$15.00 plus overtime. That will help pay for my dream of art school. I have finally found a purpose for my life. Although constant uncertainty is life, one thing is for sure: Obstacles are only overcome by a force made up of the hopes and ambitions of those who are willing to set their life in motion. When I was hopelessly drowning in depression, that perspective was all I had. A change of heart gave me my will, sprouting a faith of the finest cedar wood, planted in fertile ground so that I could bloom where opportunity would come knocking. It did and I call it YouthBuild.



Ariana has found a future for herself with YouthBuild.

CHALLENGE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

He states, "I have very many different opinions of the holidays. Me living with family members most of my life, my opinions have changed over the course of my life. When I was younger I couldn't wait for the holiday season to come around. It was fun, all the family got together and enjoyed the love that everyone was giving. The older I got, the more my opinions started to change. I am 21 years old now

and the past three holiday seasons have been terrible, so much arguing and blaming getting thrown from family member to family member. I don't really care for the holidays nowadays. It is just a normal day with a whole bunch of extras."

The holidays can be an emotional roller coaster for most youth in care. I just wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!



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 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 nest and sing.

THANK YOU!

Anonymous; Angie Cross; Steve and Barbara Didis; Steve and Judi Finney; Theodora Geokezas; The Glaser Foundation; M. Harris; William Hodge; John and Susan Holt; Annie Huguley; Linda Katz; Shannon Komen; Olivia Locker; Christine Martin; Anne and Steve Phelps; Maya Rowland; Majken Ryherd; Kimberly Serwold; Don Stark; Josephine Stokes; Joel and Lorene Vanetta; Natalie Wood

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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 _____
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For appropriate recognition, please write in the space above how you would like to be listed.

Please do not include my name on published donor lists (check box).

My gift to help children, youth and families in the foster care system through collaboration, innovation and advocacy is (check box):

- \$1,000 +Protector
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- \$50 - \$249Supporter
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Please mail this completed form and your check to The Mockingbird Society, 2100 24th Avenue S, Suite 240, Seattle, WA 98144. For more information, call (206) 323-KIDS (5437) or visit www.mockingbirdsociety.org.

ABOUT US: *The Mockingbird Society* is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation developing innovative models for improving the outcomes of foster care, while advocating with decision makers for system reform. All contributions are tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law. Please consult your tax advisor regarding your specific tax situation. *The Mockingbird Times* is a monthly 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 \$9.50 and \$12 an hour. Additionally, youth from across the country submit articles, art work, and poetry and are compensated up to \$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*, a Seattle-based community newspaper. Youth involvement is the key to the philosophy, values, and success of *The Mockingbird Society* and, as such, youth are involved in all aspects of organizational development and decision-making. Donations to *The Mockingbird Society* may be tax-deductible and are greatly appreciated. No part of the *Mockingbird Times* may be reproduced without the written permission of *The Mockingbird Society*. All contents copyright ©2008, *The Mockingbird Society*.



Holiday Time Again BY RHONDA SMITH

The holiday season has arrived: family, fun, laughter, and the feeling of acceptance. For a lot of people that's how the holiday season is but for a lot of youth who have been in care we experience basically the opposite.

Family-oriented holidays get to me the most; they have ever since that cold dark depressing day on December 23, 1999 when I was placed in the foster care system. I had nobody and I felt like a nobody. In a house with strangers for Christmas is a young kid's worst nightmare or at least one of them. I used to fear the holidays because I didn't want to feel the sadness and I didn't want to feel left out, which has always happened in foster care.

I always used to dream of when I would find my biological family and things would get 100 times better, but honestly, the first Christmas with my biological family was very disappointing. It was nothing like I used to dream of when I was a kid. It's just crazy and I'm reminded of that saying "Grass is always greener on the other side of the fence." People think the grass is going to be greener on the other side, until they get to the other side, and the grass is far from green.

This holiday season started off a little rocky but I figure it is time to let go of the past. I have great supporting friends that have been through what I have been through and people who understand what

it is like to not feel a part of a family around the holidays.

I am going to go to dinner with some close friends and then I am going to visit my family. I figure with all the violence that has been happening in the neighborhoods we all live in, I should treat every day like it is my last. Deep down inside, I have been holding resentment against my family for something that happened over 20 years ago. Yeah, it hurts but there's no need to carry it on because really it is hurting me more than it is hurting my family. I know I cannot change the past but I can try my hardest to make the future worthwhile.



I know that holidays can be tough. I guess it takes time to forgive and let go because it took me about nine years to do so. Do not wait that long because it will really mess

you up in the long run. It is safe to say that I am on my way to happiness. For me, getting to happiness is to forgive others and forgive myself. Forgiving myself is what I am working on right now. Personally, that is the hardest, but I am working on it, and I feel like I have come a long way.

To young people who feel like their situation is similar to mine: Things will get better. I did not believe that when I heard it the first 100 times but it eventually proved true. A quote someone told me that helps during hard times is, "The harder you fall, the higher you bounce." Whenever things get rough, just remember that saying; it will help. Happy Holidays to all.

HOLIDAY MAGIC, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

great by giving me a bike. I've been wanting one so bad this past year and now I have one and I'm so thankful," said a little girl. "Thank you for the camera. It was my all time favorite Christmas gift," another young girl said.

A big THANKS to the donors, KIRO, and Treehouse who help foster kids have a great Christmas. I am touched by how foster children are getting blessed with those gifts that will bring smiles during the holiday season. I know that if I were still in care I would be very grateful as well. I can't wait until Christmas Day comes because I know that all the children who will receive a gift will be extremely happy. Thanks everyone. Also, thank you **Jessica R.** from Treehouse for answering my questions.



Radiothon calls being taken at 97.3 Kiro FM.

For the Radiothon, tune in to 97.3 KIRO FM December 4th and 5th. You can listen and call 1-877-547-6454 to sponsor a gift for a foster child. If you would like to register to get your foster child a gift, please call 253-372-6010 (Washington State Region 4 only).



December's a Rough Time to Go Into Care

BY JOYCE CAMACHO-CRUZ

Each year youth that are taken away from their parents and placed into foster care are overwhelmed by feelings of displacement. Not knowing where they're going and being placed with complete strangers contributes to these feelings. The holidays can be a highly distraught time for youth in care.

Many people have been taken out of their biological parent's home and placed into foster care during the month of December. I know a handful of people who have been placed during this time and I know there are many more. My sister **Lelani** and I entered the foster care system in December. In an interview over the phone, I asked my sister some questions. "What was hard about entering the foster system during the holiday season?" She answered, "Trying to find a basic understanding of why it has to be this way and how come I can't stay at home with my mother." "Was it hard adjusting to a new environment?" I asked.

"Yes. Adapting to a new environment was hard, let alone moving into a home during Christmas with complete strangers," she replied.

My co-worker **Rhonda Smith** has experienced a similar situation. She entered care on December 22nd and expressed similar feelings. Speaking from personal experience, I entered the system when I was nine years old on December 10th, 2000 with my four siblings and we were moved into different homes. It was difficult being separated, especially during the holidays when I needed my sisters and brother the most. It always has been an emotional roller coaster for me during the holidays because of these memories of discomfort.

Spending holidays with strangers made me not want to get close to anyone. I separated myself from my family, not because I didn't love them but because it hurt. I felt like I was the one to blame and was in the wrong. I felt resentment and hurt and took responsibility for things that couldn't have been my fault. I couldn't come to the simple conclusion that foster care is what

it is and I have to make the best of it and adapt to my environment.

I felt like I was an authority figure trapped in a young child's body who's supposed to be carefree but I took it upon myself to make a decision. I knew going back home with my mother who neglected us and hurt us with harsh words wasn't it. (She's still caring, understanding, and a beautiful person inside and out regardless of the mistakes she's made. She's a hard worker and down to earth and working on mending this relationship. She's a strong loving mom in my eyes. I see her as the best mom I could ever ask for. I forgive her for whatever happened. I love her: she's

my heart and soul.) At times I would have felt displaced no matter where I went.

Even though it is one of the toughest times of the year for me, I have learned to adapt to my surroundings whether it would be with my family or with my foster family. Holding on to every last memory of the past during Christmas-time really was a drag



each year and it is now time for a new start to create new memories. "It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement there is life, and in change there is power." - Alan Cohen.

Many organizations reach out to foster/kinship care youth and families during the holidays. One such organization is Treehouse which accepts donations and gifts for foster children. For more information visit www.treehouseforkids.org. Treehouse joined **97.3 Kiro FM Holiday Magic** to make it easier to provide gifts for foster kids during the holidays. Please see the Holiday Magic article on the front page for more information. Another program for foster youth is called **Toys for Tots** which is for youth who are ages 5-10. For further information visit www.toysfortots.org. Family Services is hosting the **Baby Boutique Open House** for homeless families. Visit www.family-services.org and click on "events" for more information.

Meet the Staff: Rap by Jerry Bobo



My name is Jerry Bobo and I was recently added to The Mockingbird Society (MBS) family. I am 21 years old, maturing every day, but there are still obstacles in life that I consider to be the test that I must pass with excellence to be the man I can be.

But let me tell you a little about me as I continue to take you on a journey through my home, King County. My head lies down in a town by name of Kent where my heart was sent and stored by those who love me plenty.

The 2008 school year at the Art Institute was put on hold financially until 2009, but working daily will not stop me artistically; this is a passion of mine. Friends enjoy passing my work around from one to another giving the best input, for the next time that I rhyme to get that shine, hopefully sign on that dotted line.

Shopping before the show, getting

ready to go all the way, showing off what goes on in my mind. Appearance is everything so I look my best from the haircut to the shoes on my left and right foot. Five years and counting since foster care has been a part of who I am and will be.

Have been looking outside of the picture frame, since I have been a part of **Casey Family Programs** retreats, Treehouse, and young men who I can keep in contact with who have integrity. Change is underway in more than one way, society is made up of you youth who want to change. Change to some might be strange, but one can't do it alone for us all.

HELP HELP HELP! The system is under construction; let's make sure it does not fall, turning all problems from youth into one answer that they can maintain. The LEAD program is not only helping others, but giving me the experience that I need to keep working on me as a young adult so when my manhood arrives I will be able to lead.

The Mockingbird Society's Youth LEAD Program Presents

LIFE ADVOCACY 101

Learn how to be your OWN best advocate in all areas of your life. Participate in activities that will give you the skills you need to "make things happen" for your personal success!

Receive your own personal Life Advocacy 101 TOOL!

Contact us to today to schedule your FREE Life Advocacy 101 Training for your group or organization! Open to all youth and young adults ages 14 to 23.

Contact Kara at kara@mockingbirdsociety.org for more information.

I Am Here

EMMA CUMMINGS

I am here,
Can you hear me calling?
Notice me,
The one many pretend not to see,
Please listen, I beg of you,
Please help, Before it's too late,
I have asked you to look,
I have cried, Get some help,
No one cared, They looked away,
I ask one more thing, Before I go...
Remember me,
I could have been your daughter,
I could have been your niece,
Remember,
Help those in need,
Remember,
Don't let another go like me,
Remember,
Me...because I was here.

Confusing State

T. S. BERRY

People ask me what state I was born
in
Well to explain it to you let me begin
I have been in this state all my life
No matter how much pain and strife
In this state nothing is as it seems
What they say they don't mean
Everything is inside out
People are always in an unrelenting
doubt
Faith and hope are far away
Trust is something no one can say
You've been to this state I now see
Where everything is not as it should
be
In this state, everyone starts to hate
Welcome to my confusing state

Creative Corner

It Is Morning

THOMAS DARDEN

It shines on my window sill
Warm as a reminder that it is time to
Love the bird
Whose turn it is to call for the newest
morning.
It's morning again
It seems like it is the same time morning
began yesterday
I wondered this morning,
How the bird
alternates the turn
for the calling of
the new morning

It is morning



Life For Me

RIKKI EVANS

Life for me is constant moving,
Please leave a message after the beep
Judge ruling in favor of the state,
Life for me is the pain and anger,
Mommy's dead, daddy has a needle in his arm.
Life for me is you deserve this
He says lay on your back.
Life for me is you have to go
Pack your things in that bag.
Life for me is what do you want to do with
your life
You're going to be just like your mom.
Life for me will be like theirs.
I refuse to cope with a needle.
Life for me will be like how I want it.
It will be successful and bright.
My life, my decisions and the outcome are my
choice,
I will live how I want to live.

"Your destiny is coming. Are you ready?"

~ Unknown



Christmas in Foster Care BY JERRY BOBO

Christmas is a time of year to come together with your family and enjoy one another's company. Gifts and food are just extra after that. Whether it's your own family or someone else's family, Christmas is a family day. Not everyone has that perfect Christmas morning; some reasons being that siblings are not able to be with one another, there's no food on the table, or the gifts under the tree are not for them, or they simply have no real family to spend it with.

Some foster care and kinship care alumni who have bittersweet feelings about the Christmas holiday were willing to share their stories. These are stories that many youth throughout the world can connect with in one way or another. Youth generally enter the foster care or kinship care system when their family is going through problems while they are young. At a young age, children really don't understand what's going on, but they do notice the difference between their family and new people.

At the age of two, **Feltima Ferguson** was placed in an all-girls home as her first foster home and then moved in with her aunt in her mid-teens. Her first thought was, "Does she really want me in her home other than because I am family?" Another alumni of care who prefers to remain anonymous, did not mind where she was placed because she knew that she would return to her mother. "I was blessed because all of the families that I lived with were great, plus my sister and I were able to stay together from a young age."

With all of what goes on during the Christmas holiday and through being in the foster care and kinship care programs, there are many different surroundings to adjust to in many ways. Different ways of living, scents, cooking, and atmosphere are things that make us who we are and mold our traditions. The surroundings did not bother Feltima at all. "I knew that I was going to be placed back into foster care, so no weight was lifted off my shoulders." Anonymous felt differently about her surroundings. Her adjustments were easy and didn't take long. "It was just an eye-opener to see that I would not be back with my mother," she said.

Once things are starting to turn around and adjustments have been made, its time to open gifts and enjoy one another's company on Christmas Day. The first Christmas with a new family can be a hard pill to swallow for some. Anonymous said,

"My first Christmas was actually not fun. I was just missing my mother and it was hard that me and my sister could not just go and give her a hug or be with her on that day." For others it can be a little more breathtaking. "It was a good Christmas. I spent it with my grandma and got to meet one of my sisters out of six," Feltima said.

The first Christmas with the new family is over and a relationship has been established between them and the youth. Some expectations are met and some expectations fail, but what doesn't kill us only makes us stronger. Anonymous said, "My expectations were met but in a different way. But I learned later on that things will change. So it got easier as I grew older." To Feltima, it was nothing she thought it was going to be. "That's only because I was placed back in foster care at 16." When living with another family you don't get to visit with or speak with your own families very often. Once placed back in foster care that was Feltima's issue. "I [only] got to see and speak with my older brother and sister since they lived with my grandma." Anonymous had the same type of problem. "My sister and I did not have family contact till I was 12, which did not make sense. I did not think we would ever see our biological family again," she said.

A family tree contains many families within one big family, whether biological or not. Anonymous said, "I consider myself as part of one big family. It feels good to know that I have an abundant amount of support and that every one of my families and biological family loves me. It feels good to have that network." The Christmas holidays can be good and bad from time to time. Feltima understands that as an alumna from kinship care. "The holidays got worse because I didn't get to see my family that often. But once out of the kinship care my family and I went back to the basics."

Not all Christmas stories have an unhappy ending. Youth in foster care and kinship care are a perfect demonstration of that. They go through so many other things during life that can prevent happiness. The help of caring people providing food, shelter, and family helps lower the amount of negativity during the holidays.



MENTAL HEALTH RISKS AFTER LEAVING CARE

BY DIAMONIQUE WALKER

The Foster Care Alumni Association of America's Web site is littered with anonymous quotes from alumni of care. "Once I left care I became homeless and, without money to afford medication, I was left to my own devices: self-medicating with drugs," says one alumnus. Another alumna claims the system caused her to become chemically dependent. "I sought out ways to feel numb once the system was gone, once my medical was cut off: drugs and alcohol." Based on these quotes and statistics provided by organizations that track youth in care, it appears that youth exiting care and their mental health are at risk.

While in care, medical expenses and prescriptions are taken care of. However, when exiting care, unless you are signed up for Medicaid to 21 in Washington State, you will no longer get that benefit. This can lead to substance abuse because there are youth who were dependant on medicine would get the

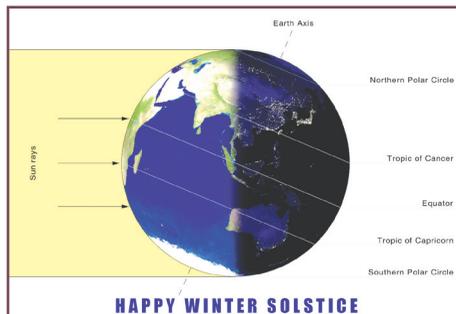
"next best thing" or end up self-medicating with drugs and alcohol.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is one of the most common mental illnesses of youth exiting care. PTSD is a disorder that occurs after an experience that threatened or harmed the person. It can be caused by a traumatic event such as being abused (sexually, physically, mentally), being in unstable living conditions, witnessing violence, and even being in an

automobile accident. After such things occur, anything that reminds the person of the event can trigger a severe reaction and cause the youth to be very frightened. A study released in 2005 on foster care alumni mental illness by the **Casey Foster Care Alumni Studies** showed that almost five times as many alumni have PTSD as the rest of the general population.

Modified Social Phobia or Social Anxiety is also one of the top mental health issues found in alumni of care. It is the fear of being around people in all or only certain places. People with this disorder feel like they're being watched or judged and humiliated by their own actions. Signs that someone may have this disorder is if they are sweating profusely, blushing, trembling, or have difficulty speaking. This can develop in care from being moved into unfamiliar places with people that the youth does not know. That same Casey study showed that 11.9 percent of foster alumni have been diagnosed with Social Phobia upon exiting care.

Foster youth's mental health is at risk. Many of them may have gone through some things in the process of going into, during, and transitioning out of care that can impact their mental health. The **Mockingbird Family Model (MFM)** has been working on some solutions to help youth stabilize so they can reduce the risk of mental illnesses. One area in the MFM model is the Hub Home. This is a place where the youth can go to hang out if they need a break from their foster home or someone to talk to. The Hub Home parent also works with the foster parents to reduce the number of times youth would have to transition from home to home. This helps prevent the likeliness of developing a mental health illness.



The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute

is now accepting applications for the

2009 Foster Youth Internship Program

May 23 - July 18, 2009

The Congressional Foster Youth Internship Program provides talented college students, who have spent their formative years in foster care, an opportunity to intern in Congressional offices for the summer. These young adults, who have beaten the odds and thrived in spite of difficult circumstances, bring their unique perspectives and resilient spirits to serve in the offices of the U.S. Congress. For more information, eligibility requirements, or an application, contact (202) 544-8500 or chelsea@ccainstitute.org.