

Mockingbird Times

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Foster Care and Homeless Youth Speak Out Across the Nation

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System Reform



“Youth Advocacy Day was a day that impacted many people, changed many minds, and influenced a whole generation of new leaders.”

— Tianna Oliver



“[HB 2592] IS AN IMPORTANT BILL IN ORDER TO IMPROVE GRADUATION RATES AND PROVIDE CONSISTENCY IN THE LIVES OF YOUTH.”

— Representative Kevin Parker (R-6th District)



“This is my third time going to Youth Advocacy Day. I can say each year only gets better. It is very cool to see everybody representing The Mockingbird Society by wearing their bright orange scarves and engaging with powerful people. Something that stood out to me was when the House of Representatives recognized the staff and youth from The Mockingbird Society after passing HB 2592. It was very powerful to see the legislators stand up and clap to show their appreciation to the youth.”

— Amanda Bevington



“The more the years go by, the more the Mockingbird Youth Network grows, and the more powerful our voices become. Advocating and standing up for what you believe in is a powerful act, and the next generation of leaders is learning that the present and future will be the better because of their leadership.” — David Buck



youth reporters

Diamonique Walker
Sr. Network Representative

David Buck
Sr. Network Representative

Amanda Bevington
Network Representative

Deonate Cruz
Network Representative

Samantha McDonald
Network Representative

Mandy Urwiler
Network Representative



"For me the highlight of the day was watching from the galleries as our priority bill, HB 2592, passed through the House of Representatives with a bipartisan 88 to 9 vote." *Letter from the Editor*



"Whenever you are in the 'storm of chaos,' it is important to take a look around you and realize that you are not alone." *Understanding story*

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about us

The Mockingbird Society is a leading advocate for foster care reform built on youth-inspired solutions, powerful coalitions and public support for every children's right to a safe home and a bright future. The *Mockingbird Times* is a key component of our youth development program, the Mockingbird Youth Network. All youth reporters are paid employees, and contributors from across the country receive up to \$25 for published works. The Times is distributed nationally to more than 20,000 through our mailing list and as an insert in Real Change, a Seattle-based community newspaper. As a nonprofit organization, we appreciate your private contributions to support our youth and family programs. Donate online, by phone or mail.

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the name

The 1962 American classic *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee is the inspiration for our name. Atticus, the widowed father of Jem and Scout, teaches them 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." We work to bring the same commitment to our most vulnerable children, youth and families. Join us!

Letter from the Editor



Youth Advocacy Day 2012 was yet another memorable experience for me and the over 240 youth from across the state who came to Olympia to help build a

world-class foster care system. It continues to prove to be a powerful testament to the importance of standing up for what you believe and doing so with respect for all who are willing to listen. There are too many important events from this day to mention here, but the images and reflections in this issue of the *Mockingbird Times* will tell a story of youth coming together and making a difference not only for themselves, but for all those that follow in their footsteps.

This year, youth spent time meeting directly with legislators and their staff in order to urge support of youth priorities, including HB 2592 – Extended Foster Care and Street Youth Programs. Special thanks to all the



Power of One
Deonate Cruz

Understanding the Misunderstood

Last month was black history month. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear black history month?

Most of you probably thought "civil rights," "struggle," or "freedom"— things like that. For someone who grew up in the foster care system, there is a connection to these concepts. The meaning of these terms is not unfamiliar to those of us who grew up in the system.

In our society, we celebrate the positive outcomes of previous struggles that groups have persevered through; struggles that were so harsh they remind us of walking through heavy winds and snow. And just like this metaphor of wind and snow, sometimes when we are facing a really big struggle, it's very hard to see the things that are going on around us at the moment.



Pay It Forward
Samantha McDonald

Changing Perceptions, Changing Systems

Imagine you are 17 years old, having grown up in foster care your whole life — you are surrounded by negative stereotypes about foster youth. Who is working to change these stereotypes and misconceptions about youth in care?

John-Paul Chaisson-Cardenas, Executive Director of Foster Promise, saw himself as someone who could lead the work of changing perceptions about foster care. John-Paul became involved with the child welfare system in 1997 when he was in graduate school at the University of Iowa. He recalled, "My interest was sparked by my research into the causes of systemic disproportionality between kids who are

legislators and staff who took the time to meet with and listen to our youth. Also, for the second year in a row, the Governor's Office honored us by proclaiming February 10th, 2012 Youth Advocacy Day. Andi Smith from the Governor's Executive Policy Office and Secretary of DSHS Robin Arnold-Williams joined us on the Capitol Steps to present the Proclamation.

For me the highlight of the day was watching from the galleries as our priority bill, HB 2592, passed the House of Representatives with a bi-partisan 88 to 9 vote. As if this was not enough, House members took the time following the vote to formally recognize our youth and The Mockingbird Society with a standing ovation. Seeing our youth experience their impact in real time was a truly special moment.

Finally, I want to recognize and thank our program speakers, including Representatives Carlyle, Hunter, Billig and Pederson, Assistant Secretary Denise Revels Robinson, Mockingbird Family

Model foster parents Yossi & Gitit Banai and alumna of care Donnie Sellers, who jumped at the opportunity to speak after attending last year's Youth Advocacy Day. All gave passionate and moving speeches emphasizing the importance of youth voice from all perspectives; from policy-makers, to caregivers to the youth themselves.

Youth Advocacy Day continues to get better and better every year. While there is much work left to be done, it comforts me to see that whenever we bring youth voice to the table, there are more decisionmakers listening and taking meaningful action.

Thank you for your unwavering support for our children, youth and families.

Sincerely,

Jim Theofelis
jim@mockingbirdsociety.org

The struggles of youth in the child welfare system and the struggles of those who fought for equality and civil rights are prime examples of groups that faced, and continue to overcome overwhelming challenges. When I think about the reason why many organizations do the work that The Mockingbird Society does, I can't help but realize it's because, like minorities in early America, we — youth in care — are plagued by a lack of equality when compared to those who come from intact homes.

At the same time, while there are obviously clear barriers that keep us from being "normal," we also have a variety of awesome services and programs provided to us in an attempt to make up for our lack of equality. This situation is very similar to opportunities that America's minority groups have been provided due to the historical struggles that they have faced.

But when it comes down to it, I would give up access to these services in the blink of an eye in exchange for the chance to be able to laugh as an adolescent, for the chance to have "parents," and for the chance to experience stability and love.

When you are done reading this article I hope you are thinking something similar to what I was thinking when I wrote it, which is not that "youth in care have really bad lives." No, my message is much simpler than that. I am trying to convey that whenever you are in the "storm of chaos," it is important to take a look around you and realize that you are not alone. There are many others who go through struggles on different levels. And the struggle of every single individual, and every group, in our society sooner or later becomes our shared problem because it is groups of individuals that collectively make up a nation.



white and kids of color. This interest led me to focus on three interlinked areas where the disproportionality is glaring: the schools, the juvenile justice systems and child welfare." These were the seeds of inspiration that eventually grew into Foster Promise.

The mission of Foster Promise, founded in 2008, is "Strengthening children, youth and families by changing the public's perception, understanding, and investment in foster care." The members of Foster Promise believe

that children in foster care deserve the opportunity to reach their potential. They believe that children in foster care are there by no fault of their own, and that they deserve safety, permanency, and well-being.

The organization works to increase public awareness, understanding and support for youth in foster care. They do this by working to increase the immediate availability of permanent, appropriate homes for children in foster care, increasing cultural relevance and racial equity within the child welfare system, and increasing support for kinship and foster families. In short, they work to

Changing, see page 4



"Homelessness can make people feel hopeless — but on the Friday after YAD, our chapter felt full of hope." *Dreamers story*



"Throughout the filming, I was thinking that I wished that I had a lawyer who explained things to me and told me what was going on while I was going through dependency court." *Attorneys story*



Special Contribution
Chris Bauer

Dreamers Inspiring Hope

We were all part of something monumental. Watching the House of Representatives pass HB 2592-Extended Foster Care with a final vote count of 88 to 9 was remarkable; receiving personal recognition from the representatives from the floor of the House was an experience I'll never forget.

So how did we get here? Are we celebrating our most successful Youth Advocacy Day (YAD) yet as a result of the hard work of The Mockingbird Society's youth and staff? Definitely. Could it be we got here through collective compassion and generosity? Of course. And don't forget about the countless community members, young and old, foster and homeless youth, who, through their own ambition, helped bring us closer to the dream of what we all believe the foster care system should be.

At YAD this year I saw more people devoted to our cause than ever. Whether it was through an empowering speech, or our annual march around the Capitol, we inspired others to speak up to improve their futures. The YAD program ended at about 1:30 for most participants on Friday, February 10th, 2012, but for me and my chapter, the day was just beginning.

At the conclusion of the event, the Good Samaritan juju was still flowing. I left with the rest of the Olympia Chapter carrying good intentions and boxes filled with sandwiches, fruit and delicious crackers leftover from our celebratory lunch. Did I forget to mention croissants? We decided to



On Youth Advocacy Day, a sea of Mockingbird youth observed from the gallery as the House passed HB 2592 with an 88 to 9 floor vote.

"pay it forward" and deliver our gifts of food to participants at the South Sound Family Support Center's Family Shelter Program (SSFSC), and we were greeted with open arms by the SSFSC staff.

Shortly after we arrived at the shelter, which is located just north of the capitol campus, the conversation between Mockingbird youth and shelter staff moved from obligatory introductions to a discussion about each parties' professional missions. I began to think again about how hard the challenge of homelessness is for families. At YAD earlier in the day, there was a lot of talk about how many youth are put into foster care just because their families' financial situations make it difficult for caregivers to support their kin. I wondered how we could help to prevent this kind of separation.

Homelessness can make people feel hopeless — but on the Friday after YAD, our chapter felt full of hope. So, during our visit, we decided that it would be a great idea to work

more frequently with SSFSC to lessen the hardships of families experiencing homelessness and keep them remaining hopeful about the future.

We don't know exactly what our partnership will look like, but we know we want to create special evenings for shelter residents, when they will have more opportunities to share good food and hopeful conversation in a warm, safe environment.

There we were, as residents finished their meal and our day of advocacy and service finally came to a close. On the horizon stood many possibilities for volunteer projects and outreach opportunities, as well

"Are we celebrating our most successful Youth Advocacy Day yet as a result of the hard work of The Mockingbird Society's youth and staff? Definitely." — Chris Bauer

as the awaiting feelings of satisfaction that come with helping families stay together. Jim Theofelis often says, the work of The Mockingbird Society "is for the 5 year old who doesn't know she will be entering foster care." What if our chapter can prevent that child from entering the system by helping families in Olympia cope with life's hardships?

This is my dream and I believe dreams can inspire hope and come true.



Pay It Forward
Diamonique Walker

Attorneys Learn from the Experts

As Youth Network Representatives, my colleagues and I are able to take part in systematic change on many levels. We do this in very visible ways, like during our ever-impactful Youth Advocacy Day. But less visible projects can be just as powerful. For example, this January we worked on an amazing project to help lawyers across the nation support youth going through dependency as best they can.

We teamed up with a program called the Quality Improvement Center (QIC) that works with lawyers to make sure that youth in care have effective legal representation. The QIC is a five-year, \$5 million project to gather, develop and communicate knowledge on child representation, promote consensus on the role of the child's legal representative, and provide one of the first empirically-based analyses of how legal representation

for the child might best be delivered.¹

Deonate Cruz and I were selected to play the roles of Marco/Margo for a video to help train lawyers on how to improve their skills in engaging and representing young clients more effectively. Our character was a teenager who has just entered the foster care system and feels confused about what is going to happen next. In our scenario, we were introduced to a lawyer who was there to guide us through the process of dependency court hearings. She asked questions about how we felt and what we actually wanted, and she even tried to get to know us a little bit in a short amount of time.

Deonate described his perspective of the experience stating: "It was an enlightening experience. It was very different in the sense that it was less of an acting role and more of being in a role that I was very familiar with.



Deonate Cruz and Diamonique Walker teamed up with QIC to improve legal representation for youth in care.

I liked that we got to improvise. Because of that it felt realistic and I was able to relate to it on a personal level. I also like that it opened up your mind a little bit. As a youth who aged out of foster care you never forget

Attorneys, see page 4

MOCKINGBIRD BOARD RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGN UNDERWAY!



A message from our Board President, Jana Heyd

Are you a community-minded individual with experience serving on nonprofit boards? Do you have a passion for creating a better future for children, youth and families? If so, The Mockingbird Society has the perfect opportunity for you.

With a committed staff and strong programs in place, The Mockingbird Society's Board of Directors has established a priority to grow its membership and strengthen its capacity to lead the organization strategically over the next decade. The board is seeking to recruit between four and six new members who possess vision, experience, and passion. Recruitment will take place through May, 2012, with new members joining the full board for a half-day retreat in June.

To learn more, consider attending one of two Information Sessions being held on April 10th and 24th. For details, please contact Brian Lawrence, Director of Development, at brian@mockingbirdsociety.org.

Thank you for your support.

Jana L. Heyd

Jana Heyd
President, Board of Directors

thank you

Janet Adams, Suzanne Akerman, Virginia Anderson, Anonymous, Anonymous, Rose Berg, Brandon Brown, Larry Crim & Judi Mitchell, Jordan Crump, Lisa Devlin, Forest Foundation, Darren Gray, Makeba & Aaron Greene, Jillian Gross, Lura Harrison, Jo Ann Herbet, Eric Hinrichs, Sarah Johnson, Gabriel Johnson, Lenny Kashner, Kirkland Costco, Jackie Liao, Carol Lucas, James Maki, Meconi's Italian Subs, Microsoft Matching Gifts Program, Valerie Moore, Milissa Morgan, Cecelia Porto, Marsha Reagan, Stephen Roberts, Dae Shogren, Richard Tait, Samuel Throm, Alicia Tonasket, Beth Vance, Steven Wayne, Guy Weismantel, Dustin Welch, Wells Fargo Community Support Campaign, Beth Whitezel, Paul Wirsing

We Welcome Your Work

We welcome submissions of articles, poetry, artwork, and photography from our young readers who have experience in the foster care system and/or homelessness. If you want to be, or have been, published in the *Mockingbird Times* visit www.mockingbirdsociety.org, call us at (206) 407-2134 or email us at mbt@mockingbirdsociety.org.

Note: Incoming letters to the editor and correspondence to youth under 18 years should be addressed to the *Mockingbird Times* and will be opened first by adult editorial staff.

Changing, from page 2

build a community that embraces all children in foster care as their responsibility and provides the support they need.

Their public policy and advocacy team works in partnership with policy leaders, nonprofit organizations such as The Mockingbird Society, government agencies, and local communities to develop and advocate for solutions to challenges of the foster care systems on the local, state and federal levels. They remind policy leaders that children have unlimited promise and deserve support to fulfill their potential.

It is John-Paul's belief that most of the "isms" in this world are founded on social constructs or mental images that allows those who have privilege to dismiss those who don't. Many people either believe that children in the child welfare system are "irreparably damaged" or that children are in foster care because they are delinquents, as 45% of Americans believe.¹ These misconceptions hurt foster youth by characterizing them as different or less than other kids.

John-Paul believes that we as communities can make sure foster youth get the love, patience and support they need, just like other children. He thinks we need to put aside the horror stories on the news and start celebrating the foster kids in our community who are doing good.

John-Paul's passion and commitment to his work was developed through his personal experiences as a person of color, an immigrant, and "troubled kid." He learned about the power of community in the face of great adversity and injustice. As a result of his experiences, he is now devoted to helping people who are deprived because of circumstances out of their control.

Perhaps someday, a 17 year old in foster care will grow up to become an Executive Director because an organization like Foster Promise assisted them in reaching their full potential.

¹2007, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption



Chapter Voice

Cocoon House Joins Everett Chapter at YAD *by Anthony Holmes*

Region 2 North (Everett) We in the Everett chapter are pleased to be joining hands with Cocoon House this year. Cocoon House fosters personal growth and healthy relationships to strengthen and empower at-risk and homeless youth and their families in Snohomish County.

We have a lot to look forward to in 2012 and Youth Advocacy Day was just the start of a great alliance. There were seven participants from Cocoon House, including staff members Elysa, Amelia and Julio. They joined our twenty chapter members as we stormed the Capitol to witness the passage of HB 2592. This was a grand day for all of us to see our hard work in action after meeting with Rep. Mary Helen Roberts of the 21st District (Sponsor of HB 2592) and the legislative staff members of Representative Kirk Pearson



of the 39th District and Senator Steve Hobbs of the 44th District.

Watching the passage of HB 2592 from the gallery was amazing, especially because Rep. Roberts represents many of our Chapter members in the Lynnwood community. If it becomes law, HB 2592 will see to it that we have basic support, like safe housing, as we transition out of care and pursue post-

secondary education, through expanding the Extended Foster Care program.

Another stirring moment for us was listening to Rep. Reuven Carlyle, Assistant Majority Whip from the 36th District, give a very enlightening speech. He said that we must seek to find the spark within our own soul to move forward, to be passionate and courageous in our approach to systems reform. We all have the ability to make change in the world, and as members of Mockingbird, we can take those first steps in standing for what we believe in: A democracy in which we all have a say!

Thank you to Cocoon House for joining us. Their representation is valuable as we work collectively to end youth homelessness in Washington State and continually improve the foster care system.

Region 1 South (Yakima) *by Brandy Baxley*



The Mockingbird Network had the opportunity to watch the bill for extended foster care, HB 2592, pass the House of Representatives. This was a very emotional day. I am not afraid to admit I teared up a lot. I met other foster youth who have become my new friends and I learned about new agencies that help support foster youth.

Region 3 North (Tacoma) *by Tianna Oliver*



During YAD the Tacoma chapter visited Representative Jeanne Darnielle, and spoke to her legislative aid. We learned that the Representative often sticks up for foster youth. The aid told us that recently another lawmaker insinuated that foster youth without safe housing should live in their cars to get a taste of the "real world." But Representative Darnielle informed him publicly how inaccurate and unethical his views were, and she received a standing ovation from other lawmakers present.

Chapter Snapshots



Region 1 North (Spokane) *by Kristina Thomasson*



Region 1 North Spokane is looking forward to the Chiefs hockey game this month. A few of us attended Advocacy Day on the 10th and it had a huge impact on us all. Representative Parker voted NO in his committee for HB 2592 and after we talked with him changed his vote to a YES on the floor! It was powerful to see that our passion was noticed and that our voices made a change!

Region 2 South (Seattle) *by Max Ream*



My personal experience with Advocacy Day is always full of hope and faith. I've seen many great things happen at Advocacy Day, but seeing a house bill get voted on, while we were up there advocating for it, was an experience that I won't forget. Of the 4 years that I have attended this event, this was a first. To see HB 2592 - Extended Foster Care pass the House, and fully understand what Advocacy Day is really about, was just as great as the march around the Capitol campus.

Region 3 South (Olympia) *by Chris Bauer*



Talking to Senator Jim Hargrove's Legislative aid during Advocacy in Action at YAD was one of my favorite moments. I felt empowered to speak about the issues that mattered to me, like IYHP, and I could tell I made a difference. The aid was definitely impressed with my ability to thoughtfully answer all the questions he asked.

Attorneys, from page 3

what it was like...with this project, I was kind of able to remember some specific details of my past and ultimately why I wanted to work at The Mockingbird Society."

My experience was quite similar to Deonate's. I found that I didn't really have to act or pretend, but that this "real play" was just like my own experiences and I was

telling my story all over again. Throughout the filming, I was thinking that I wished that I had a lawyer who explained things to me and told me what was going on while I was going through dependency court. I feel that if youth were more included and engaged by the child welfare courts and attorneys there would be even better outcomes.

So far, the curriculum that QIC

developed has been used in Atlanta, Georgia. "...We have just finished doing the training for the first time (including showing people the video we created). The training went very well, and people loved the video. It was very helpful," said Tim Jasko-Fisher, a UW law professor who assisted in the development of the trainings.

This project is just another example of how the Mockingbird

Youth Network can not only help empower other youth in care, but also educate those responsible for representing youth and their interests. Both efforts result in powerful change and progress towards a world-class foster care system.

¹More information about QIC: www.improvechildrep.org