

# ***primer anthology***

*sharing our stories to make a difference*



*a compilation of stories and research*

*national youth in care network*

# **Primer Anthology**

## **Sharing Our Stories To Make A Difference**

### **A Compilation of Stories and Research**

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Editor

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**CHAPTER ONE**  
*The Canadian Child Welfare System*



*One*

# **INTRODUCTION**

## **The Canadian Child Welfare System**

Physical and sexual assaults are among the most pervasive causes of harm and death to children and youth, yet the most difficult to document. Assaults by family members account for a substantial portion of all assaults against children and youth. These incidents are frequently underreported because they often take place within the privacy of their home, and involve victims who are dependent on their abusers and fear the consequences of talking to anyone about it.

There is a general consensus among academics and clinical professionals that family violence has a long-lasting detrimental impact on the lives of child victims. Common problems experienced by child victims of violence include noncompliance, hostile and aggressive behaviours, poor peer and social relationships, insecure attachments, low self-esteem, impaired moral developments, and an overall sense of anxiety and emotional insecurity. Overall, a history of family violence and/or abuse is associated with higher rates of delinquency, adult criminal activity, psychiatric illness, and teenage pregnancy .

Canada has in place a wide array of legally sanctioned protocols and programs focused on the protection and substitute care of children and adolescents who have either been abused or who, for a wide variety of other reasons, cannot be cared for by their biological families. These were based on the system originally designed for the protection of animals, the humane society.

If and when abuse or maltreatment is suspected, a child welfare agency or department of social services initiates an investigation to determine whether or not the allegation is founded and whether it falls into the jurisdiction's definition of abuse and/or maltreatment. If the allegation is founded, child welfare authorities are legally authorized to apprehend the child. The state assumes legal guardianship of young people in need and thus is considered to be acting "in loco parentis" or in place of the parent. These children and youth are then designated "in care".

The experience of being in the care system is unlike anything one would wish children to experience. Children and youth frequently have difficulty adjusting to the disintegration of their families and subsequent removal from their home. Being placed in a stranger's home with little more than

a garbage bag of belongings compounds the barriers for adjustment. While some social workers, judges or foster parents may attempt to explain to them that they have been removed from their families “for their own good”, they typically feel that they are being punished for the abuse they have suffered. After all, it is not the parents who are removed from everything that is secure and known, it is them.

Once placed in the care of the state, youth are frequently moved to new foster or group homes causing further rupturing of relationships. This transiency is a product of inadequate placement selection, inadequate worker contact and supervision and/or worker misdiagnosis of the child’s needs. Emotional and behavioural problems resulting from past histories of family violence often manifest themselves in anti-social, hostile and aggressive acting out behaviours, also leading to the breakdown of a placement. Unfortunately, this “acting out” is a natural response to their earlier separation and loss, yet displaying this response leads into a self-perpetuating and unhealthy cycle of non-attachment and disruptive behaviour. Successful experiences with attachment provide children and youth with the psychological security and confidence necessary for them to cope with stress, fear, frustration, and worry later on in life, while providing the foundations upon which future relationships are built. Unfortunately, the experience of the child in Canada once in care “tends to be characterized by considerable instability, something which is undesirable for any child, especially one who has an unhappy background and has been characterized by an unstable relationship with parents”. Youth in care living transient lifestyles over a sustained period of time tend to develop a conditioned inability and an understandable unwillingness to interact, integrate, and become emotionally connected to or attached with either peers or adult caregivers.

In the midst of these unhealthy conditions and in spite of the interference of a system originally designed to ensure the protection of animals, some youth survive and live well. They become strong enough to overcome the impacts of vicious childhoods and stop the cycles of violence. And some excel, leading organizations that support those who are in their place, who are suffering under the same unhealthy conditions and oppressive bureaucracies. Their passion drives them to commit themselves to helping others in similar situations. They have the courage to work with the perceived enemy to prevent their experiences from happening to other younger children.



## **The National Youth in Care Network**

For youth living in the Canadian child welfare system, life can be frustrating. Often feeling like they have no control over their lives, dealing with past traumatic experiences and faced with difficult challenges for their future, they feel like just another number in an already large and rapidly growing system. Many youth in care express feelings of isolation, loneliness and hopelessness as a result of being in care.

The National Youth In Care Network was started by a group of young people from across Canada in 1985 who shared a feeling of powerlessness – they felt strongly that the child welfare system had taken away from them control over their own lives. They also shared a desire to regain control and become empowered. Years later the faces have changed but the desire remains the same: National Youth In Care Network members are youth who want to become empowered and to help empower their peers in care.

The National Youth In Care Network (NYICN) exists to nourish the development of Youth In Care Networks across Canada, while helping our members find their voices and regain control over their lives through support, skill building, and healing opportunities. The NYICN also exists to voice the opinions and concerns of youth in and from care and promote the improvement of services for this group.

The NYICN mandate is to:

- Increase the awareness of the needs of youth in and from government care by researching the issues and presenting the results to youth, professionals, and the general public through publications and speaking engagements, etc.;
- Promote the improvement of child welfare services;
- Facilitate support, skill building and healing opportunities for youth in and from care;
- Support the development of local and provincial Youth in Care Networks; and
- Ensure youth at risk are given the opportunity to participate and be included in the social decision-making that affects their lives.

Since 1985 we have conducted research, produced publications, worked on policy issues, advised child welfare professionals, and supported the development of over 70 provincial and community level youth in care networks in Canada. We provide social service programming in the areas of networking, advocacy and education.

## **Primer Introduction**

Primer started out as a project that designed to teach professional caregivers, those already working and those training to be in the field, how to be more sensitive to young people growing up in care.

The project was based on a consultation with young people in care from across Canada. The youth were asked to talk about the major challenges experienced as young people in the child welfare system. They were also asked to talk about what their “ideal” social worker looks like and how they can work with young people better. And we asked youth to explore what would help them most as they prepare to leave the “system”.

The results of this consultation formed the basis of Primer, a sensitivity training program for caregiving professionals and students. Primer explores five major challenges facing youth in care today (moving, leaving care, stigmatization, voice, and emotional healing), the “ideal” worker qualities and attitudes, and how to nurture resiliency, wellbeing and empowerment. Primer provides practical recommendations to enhance the quality of life of all youth in care. For more information on the research or the themes, please refer to the original Primer research report, entitled, Primer (2003).

Primer is a “speak-out” in that it brings together experts: young people in care join with professional caregivers to talk about this distinct experience. Primer, however, differs from other “speak-outs” in some very important ways. Traditional speak-outs incorporate the whole story including why young people have come into care. Primer does not. In Primer we focus on the experience of being in care and how this experience could be better for the next group of youth in care. Primer also offers very concrete ways that professionals and caregivers in the field and those who are in school can change the way they interact with young people to make the care experience more positive. Primer includes both positive and negative experiences with social workers,

foster parents, group home staff and/or others connected to the child welfare system.

Hopefully, by presenting a balanced message about what works and what doesn't, Primer will help workers be more attentive to the needs of young people. Primer provides an opportunity to hear first hand about experiences in the child welfare system but it also provides comments, insights and common themes faced by young people all across Canada.

But Primer is also so much more than a presentation. The stories and experiences of youth in care have been captured to illustrate the incredible resilience and desire to survive, to make the system better and to educate all of those connected to the system. The value of Primer lies within the sharing of personal stories and experiences. Primer provides opportunities to reclaim their stories and positively impact on the working relationships between youth in care and their social workers. The stories and voices of youth presenters are validated through research.

Storytelling is one of the most powerful and effective communication tools we have. When youth in care reclaim their stories, we have the opportunity to not only take back control over our lives, but also change others and make a difference. And when we share our stories with caregiving professionals and other interveners, we are sharing with them a real chance to experience what we experience, and to own up to their own responsibility to improving the system.

The final goal for Primer was to produce an anthology of personal stories and a DVD compilation of video stories from youth in care across Canada to accompany the Primer presentation. Both the anthology and DVD are used in university classes, professional training programs, and foster parent trainings across Canada, for the purpose of sensitizing and educating caregiver professionals to better support youth in care. Both the anthology and DVD explore the major challenges faced by youth in the system explored through Primer (moving, leaving care, stigmatization, voice, and emotional healing) through the stories of youth themselves.

In keeping with the Primer tradition, the stories of youth in care were captured in an ethical and supportive manner. Issues such as emotional preparation and readiness, confidentiality, control over content, and

consequences, etc. were addressed with the young person and their self-identified support person to ensure that the entire process was done in a healthy, supportive and ethical way.

This anthology presents both highlights from the original Primer research report, along with the stories written by youth in care as well as one professional intervener that explore the themes originally identified. In almost all cases, the stories touch on more than one of the Primer themes, as these themes are not separate entities, but overriding components of life in care. For the most part, we have separated the stories into themes according to the most dominant focus. In some cases, we have split stories up into different themes. And in a couple instances, we have chosen to keep the story intact and outside of an individual theme area, as a holistic example of the ways these themes interact and play off each other within an individual's life.

Now is the time to start listening and acknowledging the impacts of personal relationships. Now is the time to incorporate the messages of youth in the system of what works and what doesn't work. Now is the time for collaboration.

# **The Story of Shauna Parks-Denton**

**Written By Shauna Parks-Denton**

I was born ninth out of eleven children from the same mom and dad. I have an identical twin sister who is four minutes older than me and I'm one of three girls, the other eight are brothers. I was born into a family that was faced with extreme poverty. My dad worked to help support the family as well as his addiction to alcohol, the rest was supplemented through social assistance. I remember that we were all really dirty kids living in a dirty house. Many times we would go to school wearing the same clothes we slept in. One of my brothers had a problem with wetting the bed, and he would still go to school in the same clothes. I will never forget how other children treated us - calling us names and whispering behind our backs. Everyone seemed to know the Parks family, but no one wanted to help or do anything about our situation.

My dad was very abusive and hurtful towards my brothers. They were forced to work with him doing jobs like landscaping late into the night. We were taught to obey him or else we would get it. Although I don't think I ever experienced it myself, my brothers were subject to beatings: kicking, punching, scratching, and being burned. My older sister filled me in on other stories she had from when I was a baby...my dad coming home in a drunken stupor and going to the kitchen to retrieve a knife to kill us all 'because he loved us so much'. One day when I was seven, my oldest brother and sister went to their guidance counsellor in Jr. High school and told her everything that was going on at home. Finally someone was going to do something about our situation. Child Welfare came and took the two oldest out of the home and left the other nine to deal with the wrath of our father. This was the start of a series of events that I don't remember clearly, but that led to my dad telling us that he was going on vacation and that he would be back very soon. It was nine years before we heard from him again.

One-by-one over the next few years, child welfare kept removing my siblings from the home. They tried to have an in-home support worker come and help my mom with things like cooking, cleaning, budgeting, etc, but it didn't work. We were even moved out of the house for three weeks so that cleaners could go in and deal with the filth while we stayed in a motel paid for by child welfare and people came to clean lice from our hair.

## **Moving and Transiency**

I was eleven years old when I was taken into care at my request. I knew that I needed to get out of the dysfunctional family I was living in and find something “normal”. My twin sister and I made the decision to not live together because we were sick of being treated as though we were one person. I regret that decision to this day and our relationship has suffered for it. We lost a bond that we will never be able to reinvent or recover. I lived in my first placement for a little over a month. It was the same one as my older sister, who had been living with her guidance counsellor as her foster placement for the last couple of years. I had to be moved because child welfare wouldn't approve of her having another foster child. From there I went to Avenue 15, a homeless youth shelter, and stayed there for three weeks where I had my first encounter with the law when I was caught shoplifting with another Ave resident.

After that, I was placed in a foster home where I stayed for about a week. I shared a room with my foster parents' own daughter who was five years old. She was allowed to stay up later than me and got better privileges than me. The two other foster kids and I had to eat generic food while their biological kids ate brand name foods.

I went back home for a couple of weeks, but knew I wouldn't be able to stay. Even for the small amount of time I had been away from home, I couldn't stand to be back. The smell of the house was enough to make me want to vomit. It's gross to think I grew up in such filth for the majority of my life.

After the couple of weeks at home I was placed into another foster family with one of my older brothers. The family I was placed in was great. They taught me a lot about manners, and gave me opportunities to do things that I never thought I would do, like travel across Canada and the USA, or attend horseback riding camp. I really thought I was beginning to fit into their family and feel like I was a part of it. I desperately wanted to be loved and to feel loved. After I had lived there for almost two years and was fourteen, I decided to tell them that I loved them. They told me that they didn't feel the same way about me. I was pretty fucked up about that and it didn't take me long to ask to leave that home. I wanted so desperately to be a part of a family. The rejection I faced that day was only the start of what was to come for me.

I was placed into another family, another set of rules, different expectations, a new routine. By that time I had finished Jr. High and

started up in High School. I was not the best student. I frequently got in trouble and I was a bully. Everything that came out of me, all the aggression and hate that came out of my mouth was an outside manifestation of the way I felt on the inside - anger, hurt, rejection, and loneliness. The family I was placed with introduced me to church and to God. I would go to youth group with their son, Aaron, who to this day is a very good friend. Being at church became an obsession for me. It was a way to deal with all the shit I had been through and be around people that I thought cared about me. The more I was involved, the more I couldn't think about how shitty I felt on the inside about myself and my life. The church helped me to feel love and it was an experience for me that shaped who I am as a person. It helped me to look at bigger issues, not just my own.

During this six month period of living with this family, I was beginning to trust again and I could feel hope. I really liked being a part of this family and thankful that they introduced me to church. One day, I received a call at school telling me that the director of the foster agency was going to pick me up after school, which wasn't normal. As I sat in his vehicle, he told me that the people I'd been living with didn't want to be my foster parents anymore and that they were moving and they didn't want me to come with them. I was crushed by the news and completely pissed off that they didn't have the decency to tell me themselves, instead they had to get someone else to tell me. I was driven back to the foster home and was greeted with a for-sale sign on the front lawn. Again, I felt the pain of rejection stabbing my heart, making me feel like a worthless human being. I asked my social worker to be removed from the home and five days later I was.

After that, I was placed into another foster home with a single mom and her older daughter. I lived in the basement with another foster child and was treated like a boarder. I was fifteen years old when I decided I had enough. I was not going to let circumstances control me and I was going to start controlling circumstances. I soon came to the conclusion that there must not be a family out there for me and I was destined to be lonely and unloved for all of my life. At that point I could count the days, weeks and months since I had last been hugged. I was desperate to feel loved, but I didn't think it would happen. I lived with the single foster mom for around six months and became extremely independent, doing my own thing, still staying involved at church. I asked my social worker if I could get a placement with a "Christian" family. She set up

a meeting with a family and I thought they looked great on the outside. Something about this family made me feel like there may be hope. I moved in and after a few short days I found out what these people were really like. The foster dad refused to have anything to do with the lives of his foster children and the foster mom was a complete hypocrite. She would say one thing and do another. I would hear her talk on the phone to her girlfriends telling them information about her foster kids that should have remained private. This woman helped change the way I viewed church and the people who went to church. Again, I did my own thing and tried to ignore the other five kids living in the house. These foster parents had seen some eighty kids go through their home in something like fifteen years. They had pictures of every foster child on their wall upstairs. I was determined to make sure that my picture never ended up on their wall.

There were a lot of negative things about those people I observed in the two years living there. It made me want to be away from them as much as possible and be away from the home. I got a job and began working around forty hours a week while I attended school. I would have done anything to get away from that home. They helped seal my fate of ever being a part of a “normal”, loving family. During this time, I never heard from or saw my social worker. I gave up and became cynical and sarcastic. I was fortunate to have four close friends who helped me through this time and made things bearable until my eighteenth birthday, when I was to move out of the foster home. I could taste freedom.

## **Leaving Care and Independence**

I was lucky to have babysat for a family in the neighbourhood who knew about my situation and knew I was going to be moving out of my foster home. These people were virtual strangers to me. I babysat a couple of times for their two boys, Welby and Devon. Susan, the mom, invited me over for coffee one day and asked me about my situation and then asked me to come and live with them, to be a part of their family – no strings attached. I was totally taken aback. Who in their right mind would want me, at eighteen-years-old to come and be a part of their family? These people wanted me so I accepted their offer. Living with this family significantly changed the direction of my life and taught me more life skills than any of my other foster placements. This family changed the direction of my life, and taught me the most practical things than any of the previous foster placements I had been



in. Susan and Martin were never foster parents, knew nothing about the child welfare system, but saw a need in their community and did something about it. They never formalized their support and I was able to live with them for over a year before I even started to pay a small amount for rent.

Susan and Martin saw potential and pulled it out of me. It was Susan who drove me to Mount Royal College and told me that I was going to enrol in a program and that I was going to do something with my life. Living with them helped me to decide that I wanted to do something about my experiences living in foster care to help other people.

After having extensions of care and maintenance until I turned 20, I was officially cut off from the child welfare system, emancipating me into a world I was scared to be apart of. Part of me felt angry towards the system and my social worker for not giving me enough information, or making sure I had the tools I needed for success. I remember getting an Alberta Health care bill in the mail a few months later. I was never told I had to pay this and I certainly wasn't prepared to. I wish that I had learned these skills while I was in care, so that I felt more prepared for life outside the system.

## **Voice**

Around the same time, Sherry Wheeler, a Children's Advocate, invited me to attend a meeting to talk to the Minister of Children's Services about my time in care. Sherry was great because she helped advocate for myself and other siblings throughout the years, but it was this opportunity that changed things for me in a huge way. I wrote the Minister a letter and read it to her in front of a group of twenty others including advocates and other youth-in-care. It was that moment that put the desire in me to speak out about my experience in care and to advocate for others. In many ways, Sherry is the woman I want to become – a Children's Advocate, a strong woman, a role model and mentor. She is a force to be reckoned with and I love her for teaching me about the voice within me and giving me the opportunity to be heard. She helped fuel my desire in a big way to be on the path I am right now working towards my degree in Social Work. Having this opportunity and being connected to Sherry helped me to find my voice, and this was just the beginning.

## **Emotional Healing**

In 2001, when I was 21, I became the Executive Director of the Alberta Youth in Care and Custody Network. For three years I had the opportunity to stand on my youth-in-care soap box and speak to government officials, politicians and many social workers about what it was like to live in the child welfare system and how it changed me as a person. I will never forget the opportunities I had to speak and to be listened to. These moments for me allowed a process of emotional healing to being. Sometimes, as painful as it was to speak about those experiences, I would realize the impact of what the opportunity was doing to me. I am indebted to the Network for giving me the chance to be heard and in the process, helped me to heal so much. The three years I spent at the Network was the best therapy I could have ever asked for. I am in a much healthier state because of that experience.

## **Stigmatization**

Although I never experienced any form of blatant stigmatization, I did always feel like my teachers at school treated me differently and saw me as a troublemaker because I was living in care. There was a time in Jr. High that I had tried to keep my secret of living in foster care, but somehow it came out. I lost some friends because they thought I was some kind of criminal and couldn't be trusted. I also think of my post-secondary education experience and realized that at times, I was in fact stigmatized for my experiences in care. I never wanted to exploit myself as a survivor of the system, but many times I felt I had to speak up in class because the instructor had it all wrong. I often felt over-exposed and used as a result. I knew it was valuable to share experiences with my peers, but often I felt like the token child welfare kid.

I am now 25 years old and still feel like I've got some growing up to do. I wouldn't change my shitty experiences in care for anything. Those experiences have shaped who I am and given me a greater character than most I know. I am currently five months away from completing my Bachelor of Social Work Degree at the University of Calgary. In a sense, finishing my BSW will be like closing the child welfare chapter in my life. I am always looking forward to moving on and to the future.

# **The Creator Gave Me A Voice And I Have Finally Found The Courage To Use It**

**Written By Cortney Garnett**

I grew up in Dresden, Ontario in a very dysfunctional and broken home with my mother and two brothers. We lived in constant conflict amongst ourselves and with our extended family. Although there was never any real physical abuse, the emotional abuse has deeply scarred my brothers and me.

As a “family,” we were social outcasts. My mother suffers from severe depression, compounded with nearly non-existent interpersonal skills, and a number of other deficits. Poverty was a part of normal life growing up as my mother constantly relied upon my aunts and uncles to pay for school supplies, Christmas presents and monthly bills. When we were kids, it was difficult to come home from a friend’s house while they ate their dinner because we knew there was no food in our fridge to make our own dinner.

There were many times that Children’s Services were involved with my family during that time of my life. However, there was never enough proof that my brothers and I were neglected and abused. My mother would frantically find money to fill the fridge then scare us into lying about how we lived when the social workers came to inspect the home and speak with us.

My older brother, who was only two years older than I was, raised my younger brother and I until he turned sixteen. He then left home. After he left, I assumed his vacant shoes – shoes that were ten times too big for me then, and still are too big for me.

When I was thirteen years old, my cousin picked me up after school and I immediately knew something was wrong. My mother had left that afternoon abandoning my younger brother and me. Shipped off to live with our father, who was even less of a parent to us than our mother, only added to our bad situation. He was violent and had a spontaneous temper that was not to be reckoned with.

I lived with my father for exactly one year. In that year alone, there were more tears shed in fear and more abuse than in all the rest of my years combined. My brother and I were prisoners – we could not use

the telephone, watch the television or use the computer. Although there was food in the fridge, we could not eat anything more than our meagre ration at meal times.

After we would visit with our family, my father (who also suffered from countless mental illnesses), would interrogate both of us for hours on end about who we saw, what we did and what we said, always suspicious that we were plotting against him. I can recall many nights lying in bed waiting for my father's screaming to subside, crying to the great Creator to send an angel to protect me.

I spent a full year begging Children's Services to take me away telling them what kind of a master manipulator my father was. Worker after worker, blinded by his facade of smiles and kind words, did not listen when I tried to tell them how bad it really was. It was not until one worker took a close enough look and saw that I had been sleeping on the living room floor for months with all my belongings stored in a box, that they discovered the monster – my father.

By the time Children's Services apprehended us there was no other feeling I possessed other than fear as I dragged myself through each day like a zombie disconnected from everything including myself. It was as if I were a ghost, a ghost trapped in a shell that just would not die so the ghost could be free. They say that hope is the last thing ever lost. I believe the last thing keeping me alive then was the hope that someone would save me somehow. Had Children's Services not intervened when they did I can assure you that I would not be here today telling my story.

Upon being taken away from my father's home, I was placed in a foster home. My worker at the time said that this was the best of the best the system had to offer. I say the system needs to re-evaluate its standards.

The foster home was luxurious in that the family offered an abundance of food, clothing, personal possessions, and countless other gifts that not one of the nine foster children and youth were accustomed to. We spent summers camping in the woods and swimming in the backyard pool. Winters meant playing video games and watching the big screen TV by the fireplace. This is what social workers and the rest of the community saw.

What they did not see were the hoards of empty liquor bottles after a night of drinking and games of Truth or Dare and Spin the Bottle with the foster mother. No one was privy to the fact that the boys strip danced for the foster mother in the living room, or that we were not only encouraged to explore our sexualities but, to explore our sexualities with each other. Those who gave in to the foster mother's persistence were considered the favourites and they were invited to participate in Ouija Board and tarot card readings. Those of us who stood our grounds paid for it.

Upon arriving to that foster home, my only chore was to keep my room clean. By the time I left my chores began with laundry for a household of thirteen people. I vacuumed, scrubbed floors, set and cleared tables, washed dishes, cleaned bathrooms, made beds, packed lunches and the list goes on. Although exhausting, chores were the least of my worries. The foster mother alienated the kids who did not submit to her wishes. We were the thieves when anything went missing. We were the informers when social workers poked around. We were medicated with anti-depressants and Ritalin upon the foster mother's insistence. We were the ones sitting at home while the rest shopped or dined out. We were the ungrateful leeches and we were reminded of it everyday.

I lived in this home just shy of two years. During that time, I attended counselling to combat depression and work through the tangle of thorns my life had become. My counselling allowed me to learn how to feel again. I dealt with much of the anger and resentment I held for my parents during my hourly long sessions with my counsellor and I began to realize that the pattern of abuse had not ended at the foster home. On a cool April morning while the family was out shopping I was walking to the most secluded pay phone carrying a duffle bag with my clothing and what little personal possessions I cherished. I lived with a cousin for four months so I could finish the school year. After that, I boarded a train bound for Edmonton, Alberta. I was sixteen years old at the time.

Since then, I have lived with my aunt and uncle, in residence, in an apartment in Spruce Grove, and I now reside in Edmonton. Upon graduating from high school, I received a number of scholarships and awards for my academic achievements and my community service. I have completed a year at the University of Alberta and I attend the Social Work Program at Grant MacEwan College. Not only am I a full time student in the evenings, I am also a full time Administrative Assistant. I am also a dedicated volunteer.

Over the last four years, I have concentrated on success. For the most part, people accept me as your everyday average young adult. This is because I have kept my life history up until I turned sixteen a secret. I keep it a secret because I fear judgement and being misunderstood. I also fear that people will blame me for what has happened. I have made a point of leaving my past in the past. My experiences are not contained in the past however and they never will be because they are a part of my everyday life and a part of who I am.

I have not ever disclosed to my friends that I have lived in the child welfare system. Most of my family do not know what it was like living with my parents either. Anytime the subject surfaced, I have shut down all communications and made sure my guard was up so that I would not let a single detail about those years slip. That has changed since attending an event on youth in care.

The first two days of the event it was incredibly hard to handle the topics. We were covering family dysfunction, the child welfare system and abuse of all kinds. I was doing the typical me thing to do – avoid the subject and disassociate from everyone in attendance.

Fortunately, the evening of the second day there was a documentary being shown called “Wards of the Crown” in which the director followed four youth in care for a year of their lives and basically reported what was happening with them. The film was shot in Ontario fairly close to where I am from so the system portrayed in this particular film struck home in more ways than imaginable. There were towns that were visited in the film that I’ve been to and have known in past lives. The film pretty well told my story and it was like I was watching my life on screen played by someone else. As freakish as that sounds it has had a most significant impact on me and it took a lot of effort to not choke on tears as I sat in the theatre.

When the film was done there was a Q&A with the director, a fairly young lady who also had been in the system for a portion of her life. The adults spoke up and had their questions and then the director asked the youth their thoughts. I shared mine and then excused myself from the theatre.

That was the first time I’ve ever disclosed in public even though I really didn’t say much else then the fact that I was a part of that system.

That was enough. It was really tough and I definitely choked on some tears afterwards outside. The rest of the event went by like a breeze. Everything was easier and everything was good. I hung out with people and made an effort to talk to those I really didn't know and definitely got to know a few superbly awesome people.

The moral to the story? Well, I suppose there's not much of a moral per say except that this has changed me. I can feel it when I'm talking to my room mates, I hear the change my voice when I answer the phone, my attitude is calm when I sit at my desk at work, classes are lighter and when I'm laying in bed at night there's this warm sensation that everything is going to be okay. And I don't just think everything is going to be okay - I know everything is going to be okay and I can feel it. These past seven days I've managed to stop talking only when I go to sleep (or at least I think I haven't been talking in my sleep). I feel like I have a million and one things to say and I'm about to burst in a really good way.

In sharing bits and pieces of my story in conversations following the event, I have had many people tell me how strong I am. Strength, however, is something that all children and youth facing adversity at home or in the child welfare system need to have simply to survive. Without strength, we cannot maintain healthy relationships. Without strength, we crumble into depression. Without strength, we escape into drugs, alcohol and crime. Without strength we surrender and take another's life or we take our own. Strength is what keeps us alive and we know that if we are not strong there is no hope of living a life without those adversities that hinder us.

We do not need to hear that we are strong because we already know this. What we need to hear are the voices of the people in our communities speaking up for us when we cannot speak for ourselves. Open your hearts and your minds and your mouths. Get involved even if you think it is not your place – because it is. Family violence is not a family problem it is a community problem and it exists in every community across the nation. Children living in situations like those that I have will only be saved after the silence is broken.

I will be twenty-one years old in January and I consider myself lucky. The Creator gave me a voice and I have finally found the courage to use it.

***CHAPTER TWO***  
***Transiency***



*Two*



# **TRANSIENCY**

## **Background Information on Transiency**

Youth in care have coined the term “placement bouncing” for the phenomenon of constant moving from group home to group home or foster home to foster home. In our organizational history, we have heard a number of horror stories such as moving 11 times in one year, changing social workers 8 times in a year.

The detrimental effects of transiency can be seen in the lack of stable personal relationships and the inability to trust. Without a stable home environment it is difficult to build stability in outside aspects of the youth’s life. This lack of stability affects their ability to feel safe and secure and develop personal attachments that may ward off emotional and behavioral problems over time. The cyclical nature of perceived rejection, acceptance and rejection affects a youth’s ability to form secure attachments that would act as a protective factor. This detrimental effect is also obvious in the research related to school permanency and after care successes.

Each time a youth moves, he or she must readjust to a new foster family or group home setting. The move may also mean a readjustment to a new school or even a new school board. This can take away from the time and attention that they are able to focus on school, both academically and interpersonally. (Who Will Teach Me To Learn, p.5)

There are many reasons that can lead to placement breakdown and moves. There are systemic issues such as mismatched placements, lack of emergency beds, and abuse within the care setting. There are personal reasons that placements break down such as emotional or behavioral problems and lack of support for foster parents and young people.

Frequently children are bounced from service to service, because they have multiple needs and the agency has a limited mandate...Some children move through all these three systems (corrections, child welfare, mental health) according to different professional diagnoses of their problems. Children are frequently adrift in the service system, particularly in foster or institutional care. (To Be On Our Own, p.37)

## **Recommendations for Dealing With Transiency**

1. Consult with youth regarding their placement options and allow time to prepare to be moved from one placement to the next.
2. Preplan visits with youth and placement option.
3. Show consideration and sensitivity for youth who have to be moved.

### **Transiency Stories:**

My Story (Tanya Gill)

My Mother's Hands (Anonymous)

Everywhere I Moved, There Would Always Be A Problem  
(Anonymous)

# **My Story**

## **Written By Tanya Gill**

My story begins long before anything I can remember. I entered “the system” when I was 21 months old. I was just a baby. My mother was unable to care for my sister and I because of poverty and alcoholism. My story is rare because my experiences for the most part were good. My older sister and I went to several homes in a short period of time and then finally to the first home I remember.

The first home was the Nickel home in a small Alberta village. This is the home where all of my earliest memories were made. It was in this home where I learned to speak, learned to ride a bike and where I learned to love. It is this home where I remained until I was 6 and a half years old. These are the first caregivers I can recall, the ones who quickly became known as “Nanny” and “Papa”. During this time, my major attachment was to my beloved Papa. He was the one who taught me to ride a horse, to throw a ball and most importantly to give and receive affection. My Nanny was the one who made sure we behaved! She is also the one who lovingly fixed my hair every morning, who fed me, clothed me and loved me in her own way. My Papa and my Nanny were the two consistent caregivers for the first years of my life – something many children in care are not lucky enough to have.

When I was 6 years old, it was decided that I couldn’t go home to my real mother, and we were put up for adoption. After a few quick visits with our new family, the adoption was finalized. It seems like there wasn’t a lot of thought or care put into our placement by the government. Getting anyone to adopt both a 6 and an 8 year old was hard, and it seems like they took the first family who came along.

Being adopted was the beginning of a tumultuous time in my life. At age 6, the only thing I understood was that I had been given away. The only home I had ever known was no longer mine. I was suddenly thrust into a different family with different rules and a completely different way of life. The adoptive family knew that we were Cree but had absolutely no cultural understanding and never attempted to help us develop any sense of cultural identity or pride. In fact, it was very much the opposite. When my sister and I were young, our adoptive father, who was extremely religious, had us “exorcised” thinking that we were “cursed” from our Native relations. Now, it seems ludicrous and

completely ridiculous – but at the time, it was terrifying. Not only did I feel strange because I was adopted, I now felt completely ashamed of my Aboriginal heritage.

When I look back on the time when I was adopted, there are a few overriding emotions I recall.

The first is shame. I was ashamed of my skin, my eye color, my culture. I was ashamed of my body. I was ashamed of my background; my alcoholic mother, of the things that had happened to me and had this feeling that somehow, it was all my fault. I was ashamed that I was adopted and felt as though I had done something to make my foster parents angry and that's why I had to be given away.

Another emotion is loneliness. I missed my foster family and the love I had felt there. While my adoptive mother was loving and caring, she was also overworked, tired and stressed. When I was young, she and I had a good relationship but that faltered as I shot into adolescence. I think she was overwhelmed with my rapid transformation from a loving 9 year old into a moody, hormonal pre teen. I was 9 going on 19 and nobody was ready for that.

From my adoptive father I never felt loved, wanted or appreciated. I have no happy memories at all of my time with my father. Mostly, I was afraid of him and tried to stay away when I was younger. As I got older, I became more outspoken and rebellious - something which caused much conflict between us. It wasn't so much that he was physically abusive – the way he abused my sister and I was mental and emotional. He knew how to make us feel bad and seemed to enjoy it.

When I look back on those days, I am surprised at the complete lack of self-worth and self-esteem I had. I found solace in music and writing. One of the best things my parents did for me was to enroll me in piano lessons. It became my passion and outlet for the many emotions that were stuck in a place deep inside my soul.

Eventually the situation at home deteriorated. I went to school one day and confided to my music teacher my situation at home. She was concerned and pointed me in the direction of the school counselor. I told her what was happening at home and how unhappy I was there. There was so much fighting at home and there was no resolution in

sight. A social worker was called and I was immediately picked up and put back into the system. I was 12 years old.

My social worker was special. She was someone who I knew cared about me, and made it very clear to me right from the start. The foster home I was placed in was so different from my home. I lived in a huge house with 7 other kids, two parents and a dog. Life was very structured – but well rounded. Surprisingly, I felt like I got more positive attention there than I had at home. I was encouraged to exercise regularly, to continue with my music and to excel in school. My grades went up as well as my self esteem and I adjusted well. I continued to see my Nanny and Papa regularly and also maintained contact with my friends from church. Whenever I got the chance, I would also attend my youth group.

Eventually though, I got restless and ran away. This had nothing to do with the family I was living with. They were nice, good people and for the most part, I really enjoyed living in their home. It was something deeper. I just needed to run away and couldn't help myself. Part of it was that I missed my church group and the friends I had there. Church was often the first stop I made when I was on the run, but then when it was over I would be stuck with no place to go. So every time I ran away, I would steal something, get caught, get incarcerated for a few hours and then be picked up. It became somewhat of a routine. I enjoyed the thrill of being out on my own and had little regard for my own safety.

After quite a few episodes of running away, it was decided that I should move into another home. Very quickly, I was placed with another family. They were Ba'hai, a religion I knew nothing of. They were nice people as well and treated me like a mature adult. I was given a lot of freedom and attention. In this home, there were two other children younger than me. I was the oldest. This was something I had never experienced before and I enjoyed that. The one thing that made me sad was being so far away from my friends and youth group – but my foster parents did their best to allow me to maintain those contacts. They were very involved with their religious group and involved me as well. It was them who taught me more about my culture and who taught me to drive; something I am sure they regretted later when I stole their truck and crashed it into another one on a busy street.

This incident landed me in the youth detention center. I stayed there for

three days. Those three days changed my life forever. I saw what my life would be in a few years if I continued to run away, steal and live outside the boundaries. I learned firsthand how some of my fellow inmates had gotten to where they were and was determined not to become one of them. I left with a new resolve; to reunite with my parents and to try to be a better person.

A month later, I was back at home. My parents and I decided to give it another try. I was almost 14 years old now and much more mature. However as time passed and life went back to normal – I found that this was a life I no longer could fit into. My father had not changed. We just could not manage to get along and move forward. He continued to treat me badly and the old conflicts surfaced once more. This time though, I knew it wasn't only me. I had lived with two other families where I was treated with dignity and respect and I knew what he was doing was wrong. In living with these other families, I had also developed a better ability to stand up for myself. After less than two years, life at home was completely unbearable. Things got worse and worse and escalated into physical violence.

One day, my father took me away in the car, stopped at a bridge and kicked me out. There was nothing more to say. I got out and made my way to the youth shelter down the street. I was scared, and yet I felt like this could be the beginning of something new. It just happened to be a Sunday, so I made my way to the only place I knew I could count on, my church.

When I entered the church I just knew that everything would be okay. At the end of the service, I spoke with my youth pastor and after much discussion, a decision was made that I would go to live with him and his family. I was stunned. It was something I had wanted before. I think because with all the chaos at home, here was a person who was always there, someone I had come to trust and someone who didn't label me. I had him way up on a pedestal and really loved him.

For the brief time I was there, life was much more stable. Of course, as a 15-year old, I pushed the limits. I tested him again and again and again. It was thrilling for me. In everything he was consistent and even when I was in trouble – I felt cared for and loved. The unfortunate result is that I started to do things wrong just to get in trouble so that I could feel that love and that care coming from him. At that time, my communication skills were limited. I had this jumble of emotions that I couldn't articulate

and it was frustrating. I knew that I shouldn't be like that but had no idea where to even begin telling them what I needed because I really didn't know. It's only in retrospect that I understand what I was doing.

After a few months – everything fell apart. My youth pastor, this one person whom I trusted, loved and looked up to was fired for having an inappropriate sexual relationship with a 16 year-old girl from our youth group. I was immediately removed from the home and shipped off to live with another family from the church. It was more than devastating and was the start of a very dark time in my life.

The new family I was living with was terrible. We were constantly in conflict and I hated living with them. I was very depressed and feeling terribly alone in my grief. They decided they couldn't handle me and I was once again sent to live with another family.

For the next few months, I bounced back and forth from one family to the shelter to another family and back again. I went back to live with my biological mother for a short time. Even that didn't work out. She still was drinking and had issues of her own. Knowing that she was still unable to care for me, I allowed myself to be taken away and put back into a youth shelter.

Life at the shelter was scary. I was not a street-wise kid and I had no idea how to be with those who were. I found them intimidating and lived in fear of them. My social worker had given up on me by this time. She was sick of me going from place to place and refused to find me a place to live. I was 15 years old and on my own. I decided to leave the shelter and moved in with some people I didn't know. They were friends of a friend. For the next month I lived with this young couple. I was 15 and they were 18 and having a baby. It was awful.

I wasn't in school because my social worker wouldn't enroll me. I was living with people who didn't want me in their home and made it very clear. I was all alone, no home and trying to deal with the devastating events that had happened. In a fit of despair, I tried to take my life and swallowed a bunch of prescription pills until I passed out, unconscious. When I look back, my heart breaks to think of it. There I was, 15 years old, with no one to support me, no money, no real home and dealing with something far beyond anything I could understand.

I woke up in the hospital, tied to a bed. I was so angry that I was still alive. I had no hope and my life could not have gotten worse at that

point. I resumed living in the same situation as I had no choice. A week later, I called my Nanny and Papa. They arranged to pick me up and took me out with them to visit their daughter and her family. I was thrilled to be out of what was quickly developing into a volatile situation. Living with another teenage pregnant girl and her boyfriend was not a good place to be! I think they really started to resent the fact that I was living there and they were feeding me and paying for everything. At that time, I was too young to get a job, had no experience and therefore had no money. Neither did they.

Upon returning from my visit I was told that they didn't want me to live there anymore. They drove to me to the bus stop and dropped me off. I hopped on a bus and went back to the daughter of my former foster parents, my Nanny and Papa.

My time there was a good point in my life. I slowly started to heal and return to my former self. I started to deal with the pain from the last year and put myself back together.

Healing is never instant – it takes a lot of time and patience – but then one day you wake up and realize, “hey! I'm okay!”... And life continues despite our feelings that it should not. Day-by-day it becomes more bearable until you realize that yes, it still hurts but there is more to life than this one, terrible moment. For me, music played a big part as did time and space. I was lucky enough to have a piano available which I played regularly. I also kept a journal of my most intimate thoughts and feelings. It was really helpful for me to see what I had written previously and to know that things were slowly getting better and that I was growing.

However, I still had a lot of growing to do. Healing takes time and patience – for everyone involved. Because of the turmoil I felt inside, I was still doing dumb things. I couldn't explain why. I wanted to be good, perfect and well put-together, but I wasn't. I messed up time and time again until finally the family that I was living with said they couldn't handle me anymore and I was once again shipped off into the unknown never to see them again.

Those were dark times for me, but I knew I could handle it. That's the thing when you experience something intensely hurtful. It gives you an idea of what you can take. I would always say, “Well, if I could handle THAT, then I can handle this.” And even though it was hard, I did.



By this time, my poor social worker had pretty much given up on me. Here I was, 16 years old and still messing up and having to leave every place I was put in. She refused to find me a place to live and left me on my own. I wish she had understood what I could not then verbalize. I was lost. I was alone and I just needed someone to take me in and try to understand all that I was going through. I needed protection, I needed love and I really needed someone to tell me that things were going to get better – and to show me how to do that.

I ended up living with a friend of mine who happened to be a journalist. Oddly enough, we had met because she was covering the story about the pastor from my church. One day, I had called her up to set the facts straight and to tell her my side and for some reason, she and I developed an instant rapport. We visited each other regularly and our relationship grew into a wonderful, supportive friendship. It was something I desperately needed. To have an adult friend I could talk to and someone who could help me figure things out. The bonus of her being a journalist was that my social worker felt a little threatened. Here she had given up on me and I was now living with a journalist. One meeting with my social worker, myself and my journalist friend and she was suddenly a little more cooperative.

I found out about a program called “Independent Living” where I would be able to have financial, emotional and educational support. It seemed too good to be true. I called up the agency and there is where my life really turned around. I was immediately accepted into the program. My social worker was still angry at me and didn’t want to let me have this placement. Nothing I said could convince her that I was ready to leave the past behind and start fresh. When I relayed this to the agency, they stepped in, called my social worker and fought to have me in their program. A day or two later, I was packing up my stuff, ready to begin anew.

Since I was 16, they assumed I wasn’t ready to live on my own. They were right! I went to live with a “Support Home”. It was a wonderful family where I would have room and board. Not quite a foster family, not quite an independent apartment. It was perfect. Their role was to help me develop the skills that I would need to live independently one day. That included budgeting, shopping for groceries, cooking and cleaning. I also had a youth worker that I met with on a regular basis. I think the most helpful thing from this program was that it not only prepared me

to face life competently, it also enabled me to develop relationships, to express myself and to feel good about the things I was accomplishing. Every single person that I worked with in this program cared about me and I knew it. There were times when I wish they didn't care so much – like when I got in trouble for skipping school or doing something that I shouldn't - but deep down, I was more than glad that they did care. The thing that worked for me so well in this situation was that it wasn't me being placed in a foster family, I had chosen them and they had chosen me. We each had a choice. I had my own space and was able to be independent - just not alone. And for me, that was a great match.

I enrolled in school and was very excited. One of the positive things that came from my social worker refusing to put me in school the previous year was that I realized how much I wanted to be in school. I had really missed it. I just wanted to be normal and for the first time in a long while, I felt like I was. I made friends easily and was quickly a part of a group. My school was a performing arts school which was right up my alley. I joined groups and clubs and really started to live like a real teen. I no longer had to worry about having a place to live, food to eat or having someone who cared. I was just able to live.

Through out my time in the program I was always doing new things! We went on ski trips, camping trips and did fun activities every month. I was able to develop relationships with my peers. Teens that were in the same situation I was. For me, that was helpful. Although I was well-liked among my school mates, I always felt a bit apart from them because they couldn't relate to what my life was like. They had families, homes and that had not changed for them. So while they tried it was still difficult for them to understand me completely.

I ended up staying with my support family for almost two years. It was hard to believe, but true. Soon after I turned eighteen I was moved out into a new apartment. By this time, I was no longer with my old social worker and had a new one.

She was wonderful! Here was someone who really, truly cared about my life. I could have been kicked out when I was eighteen and left to fend for myself – but it didn't cross her mind to allow that. I was pretty much guaranteed a place until I was 20 – as long as I maintained my end of the deal and worked to achieve the goals we set out. What a huge relief that was! I had heard horror stories of youth kicked out at 18 and the thought was terrifying. If I had left the program when I was

18 – I know that I would not have made it to where I am today. I simply didn't have the skills; most 18 year olds don't. Through out my time in the program I saw it happen again and again. For one stupid reason or another this person or that person was kicked out. They were given up on. To see where they are today reflects the fact that nobody gave them another chance. Some of my peers are in jail, in homeless shelters or struggling to get by. I believe that if someone had shown them the same care that I was shown then they would not be there, but we'll never know. Having people care was my life-saver.

My life from the time I went into the program was not all easy from then on. I still went through hard times. I still got depressed. I still felt like my life was not normal, or desirable or easy. But the thing was, there were people who cared, who gave me chances over and over again and who pushed me to be better and better. It wasn't like growing up with a "normal" family life, but it was something. And something is always better than nothing.

My youth workers from the independent living program helped me to prepare for life and for that inevitable day when I would turn 20 and be turned out into the world.

As the day of my 20th birthday approached, I grew more and more anxious. I was completely terrified. I had a very comfortable life being in care. Everything was paid for, my apartment, my University fees and every living expense. The date of my twentieth birthday, it was all going to end. I don't think it's possible to find someone who prayed so hard for their birthday not to come! As the day grew closer, I grew more and more desperate. I didn't know how to relay this awful feeling of panic to my youth worker. There were a few times when I tried but they really couldn't understand. Instead, I resorted back to my old ways. Making up stories, doing stupid things and trying to push everyone away before they pushed me away. I attempted suicide again, convinced that I would I would not make it on my own. Not only had I grown completely dependent on "the system" for all of my physical needs; I also was very dependent on them for my emotional needs. I felt like I was being abandoned, and that hurt in a way that I had never experienced before. Well, the day eventually came and although it was hard, I did make it through.

Life after care for the first few months was difficult. I ended up leaving University. To be in school during the period when I was going through

such a major life change was not a very good idea. I needed time to find out who I was outside of life in care and to figure out what to do and where to go. Because I had a few good, older adult friends, I did much better than I had thought. Having people who support you is invaluable. I really think they saved my life. Had I been left on my own with no resources, I don't think I would have made it through so well. I ended up moving in with one of my adult friends and began the process of building up a life outside of care.

That year, there was a provincial election taking place. I had just started becoming involved in a group that was fighting for the rights of youth in care. Someone had a brilliant idea to have a youth in care run as a candidate in the election. The purpose was to bring attention to the plight of youth in government care in Alberta and to push for change. I was that candidate. For months we worked on the campaign, gave interviews and participated in debates. It was a fantastic experience and gave me a hunger to do more. I realized then that I had a voice and that my voice mattered. Even though I lost by a landslide, I still came out a winner.

During that time, I started working as a youth worker. It was the perfect job for me! I understood those teens completely and knew how to work with them. I truly cared about what they were going through. Also, during that time was when I became more involved and connected with the National Youth in Care Network.

There was a conference that took place in Saskatchewan with youth in care from all over Canada. It was amazing! Everyone there had an automatic connection. We had all been through the system; we all had something in common. I was completely overwhelmed. Never in my life had I been with so many people that I could relate to and understand. I decided at this conference that I wanted to be more involved in the Network. There were so many stories of young people who had been mistreated within the system, people who had been left to fend for themselves and who had absolutely no support system.

The Network was looking for board members and I immediately knew I wanted to be a part of that. I thought it would be a good way to learn more about issues involving youth in care and to learn how to be a role model and to be a support for those who had none. It really and truly changed my life. It was so empowering to be able to take my

experiences, good and bad and use those to make a difference. The bonus was spending lots of time with my fellow board members and developing life long friendships with some of them. The staff and board are all people who care about the youth they represent and who work hard to give them a voice and a place in this world. To be a part of something so phenomenal makes me feel incredibly proud and like everything in my life was for a purpose.

The fact that I was a youth in care will be with me throughout my life.

I think of my time in care as a good time. It would be easy for me to focus on the negative and I could. There were certainly enough of them. But my experiences taught me so much about myself and about life. Through living with so many different families I learned to live with different people. I learned that all families have their quirks, their 'things' that drive you crazy – the things that are endearing. I saw that all families have their own problems regardless of how perfect they may seem. I learned to adapt to different lifestyles and to relate to different kinds of people. In my time in foster care, I lived with a large family, a small family; I lived with younger children, older children and teenagers. I lived with older people who had kids of their own and I had to learn to relate and communicate with all of them. And so, you could say that living with all of these families was a gift and you would be right. As I look back, the biggest lesson I learned was that people can truly care and love for another child who is not their own; that there are good people in the world and that I am worthy of love and care. There were certainly people who gave up on me and walked away; but those people aren't the ones that I have to thank for my success. It could have defeated me to have that happen – but it didn't. I just worked hard to do better, to be better and to make my life worth something. Maybe things didn't go so well with all of these families, but each one taught me something and I am really grateful for each and every person who brought me in to be a part of their lives if only for a brief time.

I also think that I wouldn't be where I am today if it weren't for the awesome social workers and youth workers and other professionals that were a part of my life. I knew without a doubt that they cared and that they cared possibly more than they should. There is this terrible thing called "professional distance" in the social work field which requires workers to keep their distance and not get too involved. The best workers I had were the ones who stepped over that line just a bit. The ones who did

get involved and who allowed me glimpses of who they were. Here I was a youth in care, expected to allow all of these people into my life and to have that reciprocated was a great affirmation.

To come full circle and be a youth worker, a board member and now a wife and mother has been a wonderful gift. I couldn't ask for more and I am so grateful for the life that I have been given. My hope for my life and future is that I can continue to use my experiences to help those who need it in whatever capacity I can. I understand hardship, I understand pain but most of all I understand the triumph of overcoming all of those things. And this is where the next chapters in my life will be written. Life is what you make it and I want to make mine count.

# **My Mother's Hands**

## **Written By Anonymous Youth**

The only thing I remember about my mother are her hands. She was crying as she put my baby brother in the police car as we were being taken away. I don't remember her face, the colour of her hair, or the sound of her voice.

In later discussions I've had with my birthparents, I was told that they thought I would be better off in care than at home, and I'd find a better home. Can I really believe it? For me, life in care is nothing but being lied to for your entire life.

There were 4 of us; my older sister, and my 2 younger brothers. For the next couple of years we were divided into two separate homes. It was hard because we were always together. I was always very close to my brothers, and I saw them for probably a total of about 3 times in the 2 years we lived apart.

Then we met our adoptive parents. I was so happy! Finally, a place to belong to. A real family. They told us that we were a "forever family". That meant that no matter what, we'd always be a family. No matter what. I wouldn't move anymore, and I could be with my brothers and sister. They took us in and loved us like we were their own children, and to us, we were. They would read us books, and teach us about life. They would tuck us in at night, and help us deal with our problems.

But raising four kids is tough for anyone and my adoptive mother broke down. At first it was just small things. She would yell at us a lot. There wasn't anything we could do to make her happy. Then she got pregnant and had her own child. To her, he was a miracle, and the best thing that could happen. It was after he was born that things really started to go downhill.

She started to become physically abusive. We were thrown into walls, choked, slapped. My brother even had his head slammed into the toilet seat. We were spanked until our bums were raw. The truth was always believed to be lies, so we learned to lie so we wouldn't get hurt anymore. The most important person to me growing up was my brother. We wrote stories together, and comic books. We loved Lego. We were pirates. Survivors of battle and keepers of treasure. I taught him how to ride a

bicycle. He meant so much to me. I often feel as if he was my own son. I had to look out for him, even as a child. So what happened to him hurt me more than anything else.

Little by little my adoptive family fell apart. The first to go was my brother. He was sent to a group home to deal with his issues. It was supposed to be temporary and then he would be able to come home. After a bit, he didn't want to come home anymore. He didn't feel welcome there. And then my sister got diagnosed with bi-polar disorder and was sent off to lock up. She was a good kid, got good marks, had great friends, and that all crumbled for her. There was a lot of tension at home. Who was going to be next?

I remember once on the anniversary of our adoption going to my adoptive parents and asking what we would do to celebrate. They told me there was nothing to celebrate. I couldn't understand it. My other brother and I were still there. Weren't we worth celebrating?

And it got worse. I was out for a sleepover one weekend and came back to find out that I was the only one left at the home. My only remaining brother had left the family as well. I felt so alone. I saw my brothers and sister every once in awhile, but not that often. I could feel them drifting away and there was nothing I could do about it.

I was pulled into the school counselor's office one day. I had bruises on my face. The next thing I knew I was moving into another foster home. I could have pressed charges, but I didn't. To me she was my mother, she had raised me, been there for me. It was right before Christmas as well, which hurt the most. They had a tree and everything at the foster home, but it just wasn't the same without my family there beside me.

I fell into a depression for about six months. I'm generally a strong person, but I think I just needed to go through that and reflect on my life. The only person who was there for me, or who will always be there for me is myself.

I graduated from high school, and am currently going to college. I know that I can do it. Maybe some more on how you made it through high school and into college, how you got out of the depression, where your personal strength comes from.



# **Everywhere I Moved, There Would Always Be A Problem**

**Written By Anonymous Youth**

I was only eight years old when I was first taken into care. The feeling of loneliness and anger hit me fast. I was soon to realize I was good at not showing my feelings towards all the group homes and towards my father for leaving me with people I barely knew. I was moved a lot and did not feel like anyone understood me or even wanted to. By the time I could move back with my father, there was too much damage done between him and I. We would always argue. So he would put me in respite care. Then it turned into me being in care all the time again.

That was such a tough time for me. I guess all the anger that was built up in me slowly started to come out. Everywhere I moved, there would always be a problem. I would not get along with anyone I lived with in any of the homes I lived in. Everyone seemed to be too busy to take the time to understand me. I was confused, scared, and did not understand where I was going with myself. No one ever asked me where I wanted to live or bothered to get me into sports or anything in my free time.

Before I was 10 years old, I started skipping school, hanging out with older kids and looking for attention in all the wrong places. When I finally turned 10, I moved in with a foster parent who understood me. I was her first foster child. She gave me all the love and respect I needed and wanted. But from all the places and homes I had been in, I had met a lot of kids that were into no-good stuff. I drank, came home whenever I felt, and stole, lied and treated her the way I felt I was being treated all through the years.

This went on for years. Nobody knew how to approach me and I carried on doing what I wanted to. She tried to discipline me or keep me home by buying me stuff. But I think I all I wanted was someone to talk to. I needed a shoulder to cry on. I lived with her until I was thirteen, then I moved back in with my father. I got into crime and being someone I knew I wasn't. I was so lost emotionally and mentally.

I still kept in touch with my old foster mom. She was always there for me. She was someone I could trust. But my life went on like that, doing whatever I felt like doing. There were some group homes that wouldn't even take me back.

When I was sixteen, one group home agreed to take me. I hated this place. I hated it so bad. I hated the rules, the people, and sometimes they would call me on my actions. I was not used to people doing this. The more they called me on my actions the more I would not show it, but I would think about how I was acting. Some rules I still disagree with, but they showed me that I can grow and be someone other than just another aboriginal youth statistic.

They were there to help me at my lowest times. I am still not perfect, but with the time they gave to me, it has helped me grow into more of a mature person and I hope there is another group like that because even though they were strict, it was all for my benefit.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
*Leaving Care*



*Three*

## **LEAVING CARE**

### **Background Information on Leaving Care**

Youth approaching the age of majority must prepare for emancipation from care. A normally disruptive period in the lives of all young people is made even more disruptive for youth in the process of leaving care. All formal support networks are dismantled with termination of care: the result is added instability during a period of fast-paced changes. The young person must leave the group home or institution regardless of how long he/she has called it “home”. Foster care is also terminated; the foster parents are no longer paid and the individual is very often asked, in fact expected, to leave as well. Without the financial assistance of children’s aid society or social services, most foster parents are economically unable to maintain the fostered individual past the age of majority. (p. 54, *To Be On Our Own*)

Youth who are at the age of majority without extended care and maintenance are symbolically and literally dumped out of the system. Many youth have fears and anxieties over their futures with a lack of life skills and independence training. Also lacking financial and emotional support, the road can be long and winding. In fact being able to make it through high school to be able to consider post-secondary education or training is extremely difficult. A more long- term plan of financial and emotional support is imperative. The educational needs of youth cannot be effectively separated from their personal and social needs. (p. 3, *Who Will Teach Me To Learn?*)

Young people’s ability to make mistakes and discover their own strengths and weaknesses can be hampered by strict rules and regulations that look for reasons to have young people prematurely emancipated from care. The role of social workers, foster parents and others involved in that young person’s life is to guide their development and assist them through the trials and tribulations of adolescence without the constant stress and worry about “being perfect”.

### **Recommendations for Dealing With Leaving Care**

1. Start a financial plan to assist youth with their academic careers or long-term planning for the future, including assistance with the identification of and application for financial assistance plans like scholarships.

2. Help youth connect with positive supporters in the community as soon as they enter the child welfare system who will be there as navigate our time care and prepare to leave care.
3. Be vigilant of the skills and competencies of each individual youth and support them on whatever path they choose; demand excellence from the skills they possess and ensure opportunities to develop the skills necessary for independence.

### **Leaving Care Stories:**

Family Should Not Come With An Expiration Date (Sarah MacDonald)

The Importance of Transition for Youth in Care (Jennifer Brunet)

The Journey To Independence (Kayla Boudreau)

# Family Should Not Come With An Expiration Date

Written By Sarah MacDonald

It has been a while since I have been in foster care, but I have had ample opportunity to learn from my own life and from my current work. I spent ten years of my life in foster care and group home care. I have had the opportunity to be involved in many activities related to youth in care.

The most profound and difficult part of being in care to date has been the lack of support I am experiencing now at the age of 24. All of my life I have at least had a foster parent or group home staff to speak with or look to for support. I knew that if my family failed me, that I would at least have a group home to spend Christmas at.

Now that I have aged out of the system, my holidays are just me and my cat. I try to work a lot so that I don't get sad about spending the holidays alone, but I really have no family. If I can't pay my rent, I have direct consequences from that. I don't have someone to call and bail me out. I would love a hot homemade meal every once in a while.

I find it difficult to believe that when I finished my time in foster care, I was just told to go. I stopped legally having the right to a family when I aged out of the system. And that's difficult. I have tried to supplement my needs by building networks of friend, but to date, it's just enough some days. Sometimes I just want a hug from someone that loves me for being me, but there is always something else involved in the equation ... someone wants something in return. That's tough.

It is difficult not to have any roots. It's hard to find a direction to go when you don't know where you started from. I don't really have a hometown. I try to be happy by indulging in a busy life. I try to work hard in the group homes and do as much as I can for the kids I work with so that they are happy.

If this is too much for you to offer, that is unfortunate. Family should not come with an expiration date.

I am one semester away from graduating from university with a major in Psychology and a minor in Cognitive Neuroscience. It would be nice to have a family to celebrate that with. I suppose this has made me a stronger person... however even strong people need support.

I have been blessed by the people who have worked with me over the years. They really and truly cared about me. They met my needs, they told me I messed up when I messed up and they celebrated my achievements with me. But their time was fleeting.

So who am I? I'm not a daughter, or a sister... I'm not a part of a family. I can go somewhere else for my holidays... but it's still not my family.

What is my word of advice? Give your kids some roots. Tell them that when they are 22, 23, 24 and on that they can come back for Christmas. Tell them you want to know when they graduate high school. Tell them you can be their soft place to fall, because I don't get to fall. If I can't handle my life, if I get sick there is nobody that can help me the way a family does.

# **The Importance Of Transition For Youth In Care**

**Written By Jennifer Brunet**

Attention! Attention! Everybody who is 19 must leave the system. We hope you have enjoyed your stay. Please disembark into LIFE. We are no longer responsible for any confusion or loss of property. Wow!

Is that how it is supposed to end? Didn't we start from being alone and confused and having no one, and now it starts all over again? I thought turning 19 would be so exciting and rewarding being of legal age and all, but it turns out I was more lost in life then ever before.

For youth transitioning out of care, it is like looking into a rear view mirror; everything we knew slowly goes out of focus. We walk through the door and don't get to say, "hi mom" or "hi dad", and if we have siblings they most likely have been separated from us and they are on there own too. Because we haven't had the experience to know how we should be treated, young people in care may think that they are being taken care of properly when they are not. But does that give the government the right to abandon us and take away all of our support?

From my own experience, I have learned the ins- and-outs of being in the system from when I was 6 months old until I was 19 years old. When I was 17, I found out that I was pregnant. It was going to be me and my baby girl together in the world. Don't get me wrong I had great support for two years. I went to a place called Access Eastside for young parents and attended cooking, labour and delivery classes, and the best of all parenting classes. I knew I was not going to be the mother my mom was to me and that I would be a great mother to my daughter. I also knew I would have a lot of challenges to work through, like challenging the stigma around being a young single mother. People always look down on you and say you can't do it or achieve anything.

I had a lot of things that I needed to finish before my daughter was born and before I turned the big 19. Getting prepared to be a mom was a hard process and I needed a lot of help. I had a Teen Parent Mentor Worker, a Midwife, a one-to-one worker and I also had the help of my social worker. It was me and them. And then I turned 18 and she came into this world.

Being 18 with a baby and trying to rent an apartment was hard. Landlords



are not quick to rent to teenagers, especially one with a baby. This is where my Teen Parent Worker helped. She would come and look at the places with me, support and advocate on my behalf and say that I was a good, hardworking girl. Trust me, I got rejected on a lot of places I went to see on my own, but when she was with me, I got all the call backs for the places. I would say having an adult support will help you a lot in achieving a stable and healthy place to reside in; a place that you can finally call home.

The road to independence was just starting now. I would never see my rent money because I had asked my worker just to send it directly to the landlord. That way I knew it was paid. I made a book called 'budgeting'. I would mark down all the bills I needed to pay and then pay them all. Then I would see what I had left. I would take 20% of what was left for my expenses and put the 80% into savings. Think about it, the money you save instead of spending will be an asset for you in the long term. If there was ever an emergency, I had saved money to live off of and get by. I needed this money when I left care. I also got a handbook that tells you your rights as a tenant. With information like this, you will be aware of your rights and the landlord's right.

So I had a home. What was next? Finishing school before my daughter was born. It wasn't easy at all, but I did it. I completed my grade 10 and 11 throughout my pregnancy. I also was a nanny for three children when I was not in school or studying. I needed the experience and extra money to put away. Set your priorities and think about what you want down the road. Think of where you would love to see yourself, and then do a goal sheet four times a year. Try your hardest to reach your goals.

Finally! It is getting closer. Just one more week and I will be 19. I called my worker to find out that I am no longer on independent living and that I have been transferred to the adult welfare system. I had the feeling that my feet were falling through the earth's floor, "I am all alone with my one year old beautiful daughter". This was the hardest time of my life. On independent living in British Columbia, I was getting \$ 1,200 including rent, and I was allowed to work. Now that I was on welfare, I was only getting \$ 570 including my rent, I wasn't allowed to work, I was thinking, "how this is possible?". So I applied for low-income housing and was accepted. Rent in low-income housing is very affordable, and it is a stable place to raise your child.

When I turned 19 and was no longer on independent living, I also lost my social worker. He was like a dad to me. If I did not feel like a case file when I was in care, I sure as hell did now! I lost my counselor too, and my one-to-one worker. Everyone was gone like a snap of my fingers. But this time I was not completely alone; I had my daughter who I needed to stay strong for and take care of.

My friends said they would be there, but they left after I became a parent and could not go out and have fun anymore. I watched my best friend from my childhood get so messed up on hard drugs and I looked at her and thought in my head, "that could have been me". My partner, the father of my child, who I was with for 4 years became abusive after our daughter was born and cheated on me and was doing and making drugs. I made the decision to leave him for good. Being a youth in care, we lose many people along the road (i.e. family, friends and mentors) for so many reasons, but if we can survive having to leave our parents, then listen: we can get through anything! We were put on this earth to help other children and youth coming from the same place. Don't give up. You're never alone. There are many of us out there and lots of support places to go.

Years have passed, I am still in my townhouse in low-income housing and doing great. My daughter and I are learning from each other every minute of every day, getting to know one another even more as she gets older. Being a mother is great and rewarding. While working this past summer of 2005 I got really sick. It was nothing I did to myself; it was going to happen sometime down the road the doctors said. It has been a difficult time both in my daughter's life and mine. I needed to have emergency surgery, and then found out that I had more health problems even after the operation. It was emotionally draining not being able to take care of my daughter for the past two months. Every thing I have worked hard for feels like it is falling into pieces that do not want to be molded together. I am trying my hardest to be with my daughter as much as I can because not only is this hard for me, it is 50 times harder for her not being able to cope with this all and understand it all. We are both staying strong and getting through this.

I am still keeping my head high and I am going to go back to school in next year in the fall of 2006 to become a community social services worker and give back to the youth who are out there. I am on the leadership council with an amazing organization called the Federation

of BC Youth in Care Networks. I am also a teen parent mentor for young mothers at the ypppe program at Evergreen Community Health Centre. I'm also working on the upcoming provincial elections for November 19 with the Vancouver youth outreach team. I am raising my daughter which is so much fun. The reason I have made it so far is because my motivation is to be happy with my daughter and reach my goal: which is working with youth because they are smart, intelligent human beings who have been through a lot of emotional stuff in their lives and deserve to be given a chance.

My vision of being a social worker would entail treating youth for who they are and not like where they were or as a case file. I would be a support for them while in care and get supports for them when they needed it. I would check up on them, ask them how they are feeling and managing with life. I would get them involved with organizations so they don't feel so alone in the world. I would teach them to stand on their feet strong and confident and not be afraid to forge ahead with goals and what life has to offer. When they leave care, I would help them a great deal with transitioning from being in care to being an adult. After all, it does not help you to be independent if you can't afford the things that help you to become independent.

# **The Road To Independence**

**Written by Kayla Boudreau**

For most individuals, hitting the big 19th birthday is a huge and exciting day. The birthday which makes us British Columbian's officially 'legal age'. Woo-hoo! It is a time to cut loose and enjoy some things we were never able to do as minors.

But for youth in care, we have a different perspective of this "big day." Like everyone else, we as youth in care are usually happy about reaching this day because now we are officially adults. However, we have something to worry about that other individuals who happen to live with their "biological parents" do not have to worry about... Aging out and being kicked out of 'the system' and pretty much forgotten about by our so-called "governmental parents." For some individuals, they have been able to make a happy home with foster homes and to be told 'you have to leave because we will no longer be paying your way anymore' is complete nonsense.

Now what really gets me going is that everyone knows in the last decade it is not unusual for a child to stay living with their parents until around the age of 24-26. On the other hand, individuals who are "parented" by the government still have to be out by the age of 19. This dumbfounds me and it needs to be sorted out. I know lots of individuals who were of age and given the boot and now it's a struggle day-to-day to make ends meet. Just because we as youth grew up, and in many cases are still growing up in care, we are somehow different then those other youth that always lived at home with mommy and daddy. We are no different then those other youth, yet we are expected to leave without making a scene or problem and usually have very little help if and in many cases no help whatsoever.

See for me I was placed on independent living on very short notice. I was 6 months away from turning 19 so I was learning how to cook and how to budget my money. All of a sudden I got kicked out of my foster home and then all the help I was receiving was halted to a stop. I had one month to find a place to live. I was given \$500 to help buy all my furniture and other household items. Thankfully, I had all the kitchen stuff or I would have been in trouble.

I had to go out on my own to find an apartment and deal with the fact I

had very little idea how it was going to be on my own. I also had to try to stay focused and finish grade 12. It was a very hard month, but I did it.

I have one very important tip for any individual who is or will be on independent living...

Before your time is up and you age out, make sure you do your best to get a job. I aged out and ended up on welfare and it was the hardest 1 ½ years of my life. There was never enough money to eat or have any sort of entertainment. And if you decide to have any type of fun, be prepared to miss out on a few meals along the way. There were days when I had no food in the house and was told by my worker to get used to it and ask my friends and family to feed me. I like to think of myself as very independent and to be told to beg my friends and family for food in order to survive made me feel like garbage. To go from independent living which is \$680 or so to \$510 on welfare is a ridiculous and strenuous transition.

There are several things which could make a youths transition into independent living much easier.

Make sure the youth is physically capable to care for them self. Find out what the youth needs and wants for help and what they want to do in the future. And it is extremely important to make sure the youth has identification (e.g. Social Insurance card and BCID) before they age out of care.

Another thing, youth need access to various services that will help them resolve any issues they may have because in a lot of cases, youth in care do not have any type of support system. The law states that an individual may live independently after the age of 16 and not any sooner. There are many things youth should be aware and accepting to in order for their quest to independence to be a successful one.

For starters, you need to be able to find a house and here are some of the best ways to go about your housing search:

- Ask all the people you know... someone always knows something
- Check out adds in the paper
- Look for bulletin boards around the area (grocery stores, malls and schools) Internet searches are always a good idea

Now while you are looking for a place to call home and meeting with possible landlords, here are some important tips which will help you find the most suitable residence:

- If you do not like the landlord when you first meet, more than likely you will have problems with this person, hence, you should not rent from them
- Once you have decided on a home, always get receipts so you do not get screwed for anything
- Never agree to move into a place you have not seen
- Ask questions and double check the place to make sure it is ok
- Only under certain circumstances can a landlord enter your home (emergency situations, you say it is ok, or your landlord gives you 24-30 hours notice)
- Always consider the consequences before breaking the lease

Another super important skill any individual living on independent living should possess is the ability to budget and shop. From what they spend on bills to what they spend on recreation, in the end it pays to budget. Always make sure to pay your bills before anything else, good credit pays in the end.

- When grocery shopping, never shop when hungry
- Make a list and stick to it, get what you need and try to avoid wants
- Coupons are a good thing and no-name products are not the end of the world
- Also try to save a few bucks for emergencies
- Aisle shopping is a very, very bad idea!

Now when it comes to cooking, there are many cheap and easy meals out there which anyone can prepare and here are a few:

## **Baked Chicken Parmesan**

4 boneless skinless chicken breasts or equivalent chicken tenders  
1/4 cup melted butter  
1/2 tsp garlic powder (or probably a couple of minced garlic cloves)  
1 Tbs Dijon mustard  
1 tsp Worcestershire sauce  
1/3 cup bread crumbs  
1/3 cup grated Parmesan cheese  
1/8 cup dried parsley

Mix together the butter, garlic powder, Dijon, and Worcestershire in a dish. Mix the bread crumbs, Parmesan, and parsley together in another. Dip the chicken in the butter, then in the bread crumbs, then place in a buttered or greased 9x9 or so pan. Bake at 350 for 50-60 minutes, until done through.

## **Pasta with Fresh Tomatoes, Basil, and Onions**

1/2 cup olive oil  
2 pounds tomatoes, chopped  
1 onion, diced  
2 cloves garlic, minced  
1 pound mozzarella, cubed  
basil to taste, chopped (start with 3/4 cup or so)  
salt to taste  
1 pound fettuccini, sea shell, or other pasta

Put the olive oil, tomatoes, onion, mozzarella, basil, and salt in a bowl and mix together. Let stand at room temperature an hour or so. Cook the pasta and drain, then stir into the tomato mixture. Variation: Use cheddar cheese instead of mozzarella. Add some chopped parsley and crushed red pepper. Omit the pasta, cut down on the cheese, and serve it as a tomato salad on the side!

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
*Stigma*



*Four*



# **STIGMA**

## **Background Information on Stigma**

The stigma attached to being a youth in care is an overriding concern for youth in care. They have already faced the challenge of being forced to leave their home because their home lives are disruptive and unhealthy for a multitude of reasons. Unfortunately for youth in care, the next challenge they face is trying to fit back into a society that asks them; “What did you do?” They are continually forced to the periphery of society due to further victimization, marginalization and criminalization.

A recurrent comment made by youth in care is the negative portrayal of them in their case files. The files do not necessarily portray an accurate overall picture of them. These records read like rap sheets with full documentation of negative behaviors and attitudes without the balance of their positive gains in school and other successes due to lack of time, problem-oriented processes, staff, risk assessment models of operation and being unaware of the negative impacts.

The system as it stands records mostly negative behaviors and attitudes because its resources - time, finances, and people - are limited. However, the pictures presented in each case file are often skewed negatively as a result.

In addition, youth in care are further stigmatized by their inability, due to money issues or constraints of group home life, to participate in extracurricular activities, sleepovers and other activities many teens take for granted. This further marginalizes and separates youth in care from their peers.

## **Recommendations for Dealing With Stigma**

1. Social service providers should encourage the inclusion of positive qualities and achievements of youth in care in their files.
2. Community outreach and education should take place. The community and others to be included in a youth's life should be encouraged to participate.
3. Youth should be encouraged to participate in support groups run by and for youth to decrease their senses of isolation and stigmatization.

## **Stigma Stories:**

The Evolution of Stigma (Richard Rothenburger)

Stigma (Nicole Gaudenzi)

Group Home Stigma (Andrew Mayheux)

## **The Evolution of Stigma**

### **Written By Richard Rothenburger**

There is no way of avoiding the societal need to stigmatize members of our community. Whether the stigma is positive or negative, it can live on through social standards of the time. The result is often the evolution and maturity of the stigma within and throughout a person's life.

When a positive stigma is placed on a person, the goal should be to encourage the growth of that person.

When a negative stigma is placed on a person, the goal should be to isolate the root of the stigma and make strides to educate and advocate for the rights of that person while assisting them to overcome the root of the stigma. The result will be a shift in the social standards of the time.

As a child, I felt stigmatized as being weak, both physically and emotionally. The effects of this led me down a destructive path of drinking, drugs, life on the streets, institutions and the child welfare system. I lost the will to live, but I was too weak to follow through with my desire to die.

When I was 17 years old, I was placed in young offender custody for the last time. I was sentenced to 14 months custody and 1-year probation to follow. It was while in custody that I admitted and accepted my addictions and became involved in recovery programs. I attended alcohol and drug rehabilitation and upon my release from custody lived in my 7th and last youth justice and child welfare placement. I began to work toward my high school diploma and at the age of 21 I completed grade 12.

When I made the decision to join the youth in care network in my community, my life became full of new and exciting opportunities. I

began to discover my voice as a former “system kid” and was given opportunity to speak about my experiences around Saskatchewan and Canada. I was convinced that my years of feeling inadequate were behind me.

What I eventually found out though was that the transition out of government care did not come without its price. Although I have achieved many of my goals in regards to making an impact on the policies and legislation for youth in the child welfare and youth justice systems, I have come to realize that the stigma of being a “system kid” has stuck with me through my years with the youth in care network, well beyond my life as a “system kid”. I am now preparing to age out of the network as I’m approaching 30, and I am now realizing that my accomplishments made after getting out of the system are still being overshadowed by my years in the system. Potential employers shy away from hiring me when they find out that I was once in government care.

My colleagues in various government agencies have seen the work that I have done with the youth in care network, yet they seem to only acknowledge how much I have grown and matured since I was a teenager. I don’t believe that these professionals would make the same comments to their colleagues within their departments. It is partially because of this reality that I am struggling to make the transition from youth in care networking to the “real world”, from life in and after care, to life truly beyond care.

The youth in care network has assisted me in becoming the man I am today, and I am grateful for that. But I wonder now how to best use my skills and abilities that I learned in the past 10 years to move forward into the next stage of my life.

My belief is that we live in a society that sets the social standards for the time. Our society has accomplished many things over the years, yet we are still overlooking the many social challenges young people face when they make the move from government care to youth advocacy. And once they are ready to move out of that stage in their life they are constantly reminded that they are still a part in the “system”.

My life has been dictated for 15 years by government care, and in order for me to continue to grow I need to redefine myself and my professional ambitions without the stigma of being in government care.

My recommendations are not new, however like many other social issues they need to be revisited time and again. We need to recognize that even though many youth in care survive the system because of their own resiliency, that the support of their community must continue both throughout and long after their “in care” days.

We must realize that there is much more to youth that have lived in government care. By holding onto the stigma attached to youth in/from care, our society is not able to progress and evolve.

We must work together as a community to provide opportunities for youth from care.

The evolution of stigma is only as powerful as our social standards allow it to be.

I am now 29 years old. I have survived many misfortunes and I have achieved many accomplishments. But I realize that as independent as I become, I am nothing without the support of my community. The contribution that I can make to our society depends on our ability to look past the “systems” and look toward the skills and abilities that our young people have to offer.

# Stigma

Written By Nicole Gaudenzi

Many people perceive youth in care as a detriment to society. We have done bad things, our behaviors are bad, we don't know how to love, and the world is afraid to see us for who we are. We are labeled delinquents and nobody will trust us. My high school file got red-flagged because I was in the system. I had to report to the counselors office frequently to check in with them.

When I turned 22, I was searching for answers as to why things happened in my life, so I decided to get my child welfare file. I had to apply to get a copy of my file; I also had to pay for it. Why should some one have to pay for parts of their own lives? For the weeks before my file came, my days were filled with constant anxiety waiting for it. When I finally got it, I went to catch the bus and I could not wait to open it. I tore off the brown paper that it was wrapped in. The first thing that I saw was another brown envelope. I opened it and there was a picture of me when I was 15 years old. It was the day when I first met my social worker and he took that picture for my file.

I got 200 of the 800 pages of my file, and it cost me \$50. Sitting there on the city transit bus looking at the size of my file and knowing there was 4 times that out there was overwhelming. I tried really hard to not read any of it until I got home. But whatever emotion I was feeling prevented me from going home. Instead I went to my friend's family home, who had become my family over the last couple of years.

When I got there I opened my file and the first thing that I read was how my mother told the Child Welfare Worker that she use to hit us but she does not anymore. She told them that we had a verbal altercation and that I was lying about the abuse. The worker believed my mom. I continued to read bits and pieces and read things like "Nicole's giggle alienates people". I also read things like I was "manipulative". After reading things like this, you start to wonder if you are really like the person that they have written about in your file and if if you have made up false perceptions of yourself.

I thought that if I got answers, that would be enough for me and that I would not struggle anymore. I went on a search for answers but it only created more questions.

When I hear the phrase emotional healing, I wish I had the ability to take it all away. I have become very good at telling my story on the surface, I can talk about events but not emotions. I could be feeling something, but I cannot identify the feeling. It is like I have not let myself feel things for so long, that now when I do they are so overwhelming I do not know how to identify it or deal with it.

I believe that you need to work on things on your terms, not someone else's agenda. I decided a while ago to seek counseling. I defiantly need to process something that happened to me when I lived with my mother, her death. I have a fear that I will someday turn into my mother, therefore I choose not to be in a relationship, I do not drink alcohol at all, I want children but I fear that someday something will just snap for me and I will be my mother. I know I need to work on these and that they will take time. It seems like I will start to work on an issue and it brings up more issues. Sometimes it feels like it will never end.

# **Group Home Stigma**

## **Written By Andrew Mayheux**

I feel I am a stronger person because when I lived in the group homes I had to be stronger. There was so much shit I had to go through while living there, and I had to deal with it. I wasn't into drugs, and I wasn't really suicidal. Like a lot of other kids, I just wanted some attention.

The staff at the group homes were always busy dealing with the kids who were being negative. Their lack of attention to the people who weren't acting out only made it worse, and other group home kids, as well as myself, acted out to get their attention. I felt staff focused more on enforcing the rules and they had a snotty attitude that made me not want to listen to them. I felt that the staff were uncaring and I didn't feel like I could go to them for support. I didn't feel like I could talk to them about my problems. It's hard to explain. But group home staff just had this negative attitude which made me dislike them.

There was a no "hands on" policy so group home staff didn't give hugs to the youths in care. I thought it was sad when the only "hands on" policy that the staff used was during a restraint.

Coming back to the group homes from school was always interesting because you never knew if cops were at the house door or what staff members were working when you got home. I had some of my things stolen and broken while living in group homes. The staff wouldn't do anything about others stealing and breaking your things. One time, I had a bike and I put it in the front of the house while I went to ask a staff to open the garage so I could store it there. Another one of the kids at the group home took my bike and left it in a field where somebody else took it. I told the staff and they didn't do anything about it. The kid who stole the bike didn't get into any trouble for it all.

I never wanted to be in the group home. They wouldn't let me out of there, so I went "absence without leave" a lot. I wanted to move back with my mom very much. I wanted to live with her. When I went into care in 1998, my sisters and I were told that we would only be in care for about 3 months. After a few months, we would be returned to our mom. For me, 3 months turned into 4 years in the system..

When the staff would “ground” me or punish me, they would take stuff out of my room. If we asked to have a shower in the morning, the staff would make us go last just because we asked them to go for a shower. We weren’t allowed to watch movies that were rated anything over “14A” When we would have a movie night then, we’d get some stupid children’s movies to watch, so I never bothered watching them.

When I went on home visits to see my family, I dreaded coming back to the group home. I’d always be in a bad mood before I left my family because I knew I had to return to the house. I didn’t like that they sent a form with me that my mom had to fill out on how my home visit went. I’d always rip them up and I would never give them back to the staff. It would cause arguments between my mother and I when I would rip them up. It always seemed she was trying to impress the group home by doing what they asked. It almost seemed like she never disagreed with them at all.

I would have to bring what was called a “communication” book to school for my teachers to write in about my activities during the day. I would bring it back with me after school for the staff to read. After every class my teachers would sign it and write things such as “Andrew had difficulty following through with his expectations” or that I had been restrained during the day. One of my teachers said that she didn’t care about what goes on at the group home, and that it was not relevant to write about my day so the staff could read about it, but she still did it and so did my other teachers. Some of the kids in the group home went to “behaviour schools” and they would have to get their communications books signed, but I was in a “normal” school and I would keep telling them that I wasn’t in a behavioural school, because I didn’t wanted to be treated as if I were. Every now and again I would forget to have a teacher sign the book, and then the staff would write on the book, “Would you make sure all the teachers sign it as Andrew will be ‘consequenced’ if they are not signed.”

Whenever I was on a home visit with my mother, they would give me some papers for my mother to fill out detailing the home visit. I ripped them up because I felt it was my only time and privacy away from the group home. I was not fond of giving information to the staff. They expected a lot of private information from us.



In 2004, when I was looking for an apartment, I had to attend school as well. It was very hard to do both activities at the same time. I had nowhere to live because my sisters and I always fought when we lived together. So I started school in February and I couldn't start apartment searching until towards the end of the school year. I couldn't do both at the same time and I thought it was unreasonable that the Children's Aid Society (CAS) wanted me to go to school every single day and find somewhere to live without any help from them at all.

Maybe I would have been able to look for an apartment if they had helped me through it. I had trouble paying my first and last month's rent and I had to make out some sort of special deal with CAS. Those are the types of things that really would have helped me out a lot. It would have been nice if they helped, it would have made things easier on me. But the CAS workers didn't help.

***CHAPTER FIVE***  
***Voice***



*Five*

## **CHAPTER FIVE: VOICE**

### **Background Information on Voice**

“Any time you are without freedom of choice you are incarcerated.”  
p. 28, *Through the Eyes of the Judged*)

Youth in care feel that their voices are not being heard. The notion of having a voice and being heard is crucial to the development and empowerment of young people. There are different ways for youth in care to have a voice. The most critical and important way is to be allowed to provide input in the formation of their plan of care. The plan of care dictates the actions that will be undertaken in the “best interests of the child”. According to the Canadian Looking After Children project: “This plan maps out the school, the group home/foster home placement, who the social worker is, in essence, what happens to the life trajectory of the young person. A major consideration in the design of the tool is the young person’s level of comfort with the content. Youth in care have repeatedly reported the damaging effects of child welfare record-keeping practices, which tend to focus on negative events and perceived “behavioral problems”. To help prevent this, youth in and from care must participate in the design of the record. When the record tool is actually being used, consensus must be reached by the conference participants about what can and cannot be entered into the record. This will allow the youth in care a significant voice in the discussion and resulting record-keeping. (Who Will Teach Me To Learn?)

### **Recommendations For Dealing With Voice**

1. Listen to youth, the “consumer”, and work with them in a “human approach” to planning and record keeping.
2. Encourage youth to share their opinions and provide input into their plans of care. Explain how and why decisions are made.
3. Help youth understand long-term implications of the “plan of care” as a life process and not merely a systemic process.

## **Voice Stories:**

That Voice (Anonymous)

Untitled (Nicole Gaudenzi)

My Experience (Anonymous)

# **That Voice**

## **Written By Anonymous**

“Come on I know it hurts! Just an hour and a half to go and you’re in first place. This pain is nothing! Keep pushing!”

That voice, that reassuring voice. The voice I heard for the first time when I was just about 9 years old. It was on a night that changed my life forever. It was a Friday night, like any other. Mom and Dad were holding another house party and my brothers, sister and I have once again taken refuge in the basement. The sounds and smells of that night will forever be etched in my memory.

So the party plays out until the early hours of the next day when everyone goes home and all is quiet for a moment. Then, as what was almost a routine at this point, I begin to start to hear the cries and screams of my mother as my father begins to bash her. But something is different. I could not just throw a pillow over my head and go back to sleep like I had done so many times before. I heard it, that voice. “This is wrong, someone should do something or he is going to kill her. Do something. Get up and make him stop. You can do it. Just GET UP!”

My heart was racing faster than ever before. Should I do it? Her screams get louder and I hear her sob. I have got to do something. I get up and climb the longest set of stairs I have ever climbed in my life. I open the door to what used to be a white hallway, which was now painted red with the blood of my mother. I look to my right and my father is punching my mother in the head.

Just say it! The voice says.

“Leave my Mom alone!” I scream at the top of my lungs. My father stops and looks at me. He takes off his belt and walks over to me and says, “So you a big man now boy?” The alcohol was rank in his breath.

“Leave her alone!” I replied.

Tears are now streaming down my face. He grabs me by my arm and begins to whip me with the belt. The voice comes back, You did good, you got him to stop hitting mom!

For the next 3 years he never hits me, but he continues to beat on my mother, although never when I am at home. Some days I would come home and have to clean up the bloody mess he made of my mother. Until, one day. I came home to find that the police and social workers were there to take my brothers, sister and I away.

I lose that voice for some time. I have gained a lot of weight; food seems to help the pain. I move through a few foster homes until I meet some very interesting foster parents who begin to teach me how to use that voice for power and to give me strength when times are hard. Slowly I learn how to use the voice that once gave me strength to make a change. But now I am using this power of change for myself.

I now use this skill for strength in my running. When I run it is my time, my time to heal and to free myself from pain and frustration. I listen to that voice when I am given some opportunities, whether good or bad. It has given me guidance in the dark and has relaxed my body in times of pain.

“Come on you’re there, just keep pushing. Come on!”

# Untitled

Written By Nicole Gaudenzi

I have some memories from my early years. They consist of living at my grandparent's house, my mother's house, and being left alone a lot at home with my younger brother. My childhood is still like an untold secret. I am ashamed of my mother and yet I feel guilty for her death.

July 20, 1996 started off like any other summer day in my life. I woke up and made sure that my 12-year old brother had breakfast. My brother and I went out to Calaway Park, an amusement park located out side off Calgary. I remember this specifically, as this was not a usual activity for my brother and I. We spent our day having fun and doing things that other kids our age do.

When it was time to leave the Park we went out and looked for my mother's car. Inside there was a man that I had never seen before driving her car. She was in the passenger's seat. My brother and I got in the car. When we arrived back in Calgary, we dropped the man off at a pub and my mother got behind the wheel. By this time I had realized that my mother was intoxicated. We drove back to our home; she came inside for a brief moment before leaving again. For the first time in my life, I did not even care that she was getting in the car drunk and I made no attempt at stopping her. I just let her go.

Shortly later I got a call to go babysitting and I took it. After all it was better to baby-sit than to sit around the house with her smelly-assed boyfriend.

When I arrived home that night there was an unmarked police car with the lights' flashing. I went inside and there was a police officer sitting in the front chair, he had the florescent vest on, the kind that construction workers wear. I took one look at my mother's boyfriend and asked what the fuck is going on in here. The police officer looked at me and told me not to use that kind of language and to sit down, he needed to talk to me. So I sat down and the first question that he asked me was "Was your mother intoxicated when she left the house this evening?". I answered, "No". I am not sure why I did that. Maybe it was to still protect her in some way.

I had to sign a statement. Then he went on to explain that there had been a car accident, that my mother was taken to the hospital and had undergone surgery. I automatically figured that she was fine and was in recovery. I had already started to think how Chase, my little brother, and I would get up there to see her the next day. The officer then asked me if I understood what I was just told. I repeated to him that my mother was in a car accident and that she had surgery. He then said, "No. Sorry your mother has passed away."

I do not remember if I said or did anything at that moment. I think that I had prepared myself all my life to hear those words, but actually hearing them sent me into a state of shock. The police officer asked me for the address of my grandparent's house. I did not know their address as they lived just outside the city so I gave him directions. I went downstairs to my room, but the sound of the furnace began to scare me, so I returned to the living room to try to think of how I would tell my younger brother that our mother had passed away.

When Chase awoke the next morning I told him that our mother was in a car accident and that she did not make it. I do not think that he understood, so I repeated there was a car accident last night and mom died in it. I can still see the complete look of shock on my brother's face. I asked him if he had any questions and he said no and went back to watching Sunday morning cartoons.

I decided that I was going to go to church with the lady across the street as usual. I got in the car and she took one look at me and asked me what was wrong. I told her without any emotion at all that my mother died in a car crash the night before. I could see the tears in her eyes as I sat there and waited for her to start to driving.

The next few days are somewhat of a blur. I know that I stayed with two different people from the church and with my mother's boyfriend who had only lived with us for about a week and a half. My mother's funeral was the following Sunday. All I remember is that my brother did not cry and that there were flowers there from my half-sister that I had not seen or heard from since I was four years old.

My Grandmother moved into the house with my brother and I. I asked her where Chase and I were going to live. She did not answer. All she said was that she was going to court to apply for temporary custody of



us. Little did I know that she had phoned Social Services Response Team and reported that she was no longer able to care for us.

In mid-August my friend's family took Chase and I to Calaway Park to celebrate my birthday, which was on July 22, two days after my mother died. When I arrived home that afternoon there was yet again another strange man sitting in the front chair. He wanted to take my picture and I asked him what for. He replied, "For your child welfare file." I did not understand, as I believed that I was going to live with my grandparent's just like I did when my mother was in jail. He told us that we would be moving to a foster home in the next two weeks. I told the people at the church that I was attending and they contacted Child Welfare and one of the families offered to take us. For the first time in my life I felt like there was a chance for me to be in a family. Little did I understand the changes that were about to happen.

We moved in on August 27 and had a court hearing on August 29. This is when I heard for the first time the true cause of my mother's car accident. My mother was not only intoxicated but she was also high on cocaine. We went to court to hear that we now had a permanent guardian order, which means that we could not be returned to our family of origin.

I was enrolled in a different high school than the one I was supposed to go to. I was expected to stop parenting my brother, and I was sent to my room when I did. How do people expect you to stop caring for your sibling when that is what you had done all of your life. I needed to protect my brother and make sure that he was getting what he needed.

My days were filled with going to school and coming home. I was so used to cooking dinner and cleaning up afterward and making sure things were right around the house that I did not know what to do with myself.

One afternoon at school I was called out of my class to go talk with my social worker. She had come to the school to tell me that my brother was being removed from the foster home that we were living in. She asked if I wanted to go too and I said no. I asked why he was being taken away, and she explained to me that the foster father had physically abused my brother. I asked her how he was abused and she stated that he was pulled to the bathroom. I could not believe what she had

just told me after what we had lived through with our mother. She was telling me that physical abuse was being pulled to the bathroom.

I did not get to say goodbye to my brother. He was gone by the time I got home from school.

I spent the next nine months in this foster home. I finally decided that I wanted a new placement because this family wanted to home-school me and for me not to continue with activities such as dance, choir and volunteering at the Boys and Girls Club.

I spent the next three weeks at my grandmother's house while they looked for a new placement for me. They found a new foster home for me, with pets and a down quilt, both of which they were well aware I was allergic to. In spite of that I moved in and immediately went to volunteer for the Boys and Girls Club residential camp, Camp Adventure for the whole summer. When September came, I went back to school and continued to do my activities such as choir and volunteering at the Boys and Girls Club.

I spent some time with the new foster family but I felt like I just did not fit there. It was a big joke around the house that I was "Nicky the retard". This joke went as far as them purchasing a handicap sticker and placing it on my bedroom door when I was away with Boys and Girls Club for the weekend.

I decided that I did not want to live there and requested a move. The foster mother made a point that I was only running away from my problems and conflict. My social worker would not move me.

I wanted to live independently and I was told things like "Until you deal with your loss issues, you will never be able to live successfully on your own." My foster mother decided that she was going to prepare me for living on my own, so I was given \$30 a week to purchase groceries, and a box that had a bowl, plate, cup and a set of cutlery in it. I was only to cook dinner once the "family" had eaten and was out of the kitchen.

This foster family made me feel like I could do nothing for myself, or that I would not be able to live on my own. I was constantly told things like, "You spend too much time at home and do not have enough friends", or that I needed to look at options for my future as I would have to try really hard to get into college because my marks were not good enough.

After a long meeting with the Placement Assessment Review Committee, it was decided that I could look into independent living programs. As well the director of the foster care agency that I was with said that I would need to seek counseling. When I told them that I was already seeing a counsellor at the Boys and Girls Club, they did not believe me, so I gave them her business card. Later that evening I got a call from the director who told me that if I wanted to "play adult games" that he could play them too and would put me six feet under. I reported this to my social worker. When I got my child welfare file years later, it said that I made false allegations against the director of the foster care agency. I went away on my own and got an interview with the Boys and Girls Club Transitional Housing Programs. They accepted me right away, as I showed commitment to school, my part time job and all the extra curricular activities that I was involved in. I phoned my social worker and told her that I was accepted and that I needed her to sign the paper work the next morning. I showed up to the meeting, and to my surprise, my foster mother and the director of the agency were at the meeting. She said that I need not go through the right channels and again said that I was just running from my problems. The process was stopped in its tracks and I was expected to return to the foster home where no one wanted me or cared about me.

I went home that evening and swallowed a package of Graval and the rest of the pain killers I had been given for my wisdom tooth surgery hoping that everything would go away, and that I would never have to sit there and listen to my foster mother tell lies about me again. All I did was puke for two days.

I went to see the lady that I was talking with at the Boys and Girls Club and told her what had happened at the meeting at Transitional Housing. She was very concerned and did not feel that I was safe at my foster home. She contacted the Children's Advocates office on my behalf, which I had never heard of before. The bed at Transitional Housing was held for me and I moved into it about two days later. As I did not have the support of my foster family, numerous things were left behind. I had a youth worker go and try to retrieve my stuff, but the foster mother said that if I wanted my stuff I would have to come get it myself. She knew that I would not come to get it, as I hated her and never wanted to see her again.

From here things slowly started to improve. The youth workers at the

Transitional Housing took the time to get to know me. They helped me build on the strengths that I had and improve on the things that I needed to. Even though these were positive things, I still felt very overwhelmed with life and once again I became suicidal. I spent 8 weeks at Transitional Housing and then was given an independent living placement in the community. I finished high school and moved on to college.

The relationships I developed at the Boys and Girls Club were very important to my growth. When I was younger, I attended after school programs. Later I moved on to leadership and counselor-in-training programs. These programs helped me realize that I loved working with kids. Staff at the Boys and Girls Club supported me when I decided that I wanted to attend the Child And Youth Care Counselor Program. One of them took me to the college to help me apply, and when I was accepted, they helped me fill out scholarship and bursary applications so that I could receive funding to go to college. Boys and Girls Club has supported me with \$10,000 worth of scholarships. To this day, I still remain in contact with many people from the Boys and Girls Club especially the former director of Camp Adventure.

My after care experience was probably the most positive part of my child welfare experience. I was granted an extension until my 20 birthday. Child Welfare paid for a year and a half of tuition for me to attend Mount Royal College. I was fortunate enough to rent the house I grew up in from my grandmother so I still had reasonable rent and was not living in a dive. Being able to live in this house is also special at moments. I had a part time job working for the Boys And Girls Club. I also continued to receive support from people at the Club. I worked for them for 4 years. I then became an outreach worker at the Alberta Youth in Care and Custody Network. Today I am the Executive Director for the Alberta Youth in Care and Custody Network. When I look what I have written, it seems like I have completed a lot for someone my age, but I cannot take credit for it. I give credit to the people who stood by my side and believed in me.

Today I am one course away from my diploma in Child and Youth Care Counselor Program. I have a full-time permanent job. I just bought a car. And from the outside I appear to be no different than my peers, until I open my mouth and I start to talk about issues in the Child Welfare System.

# **My Experience**

## **Written By Anonymous**

Growing up wasn't that horrible, but at the same time, there were a lot of issues that my mother just left or even created. I don't really want to get into too much detail, but she definitely did some damage. I guess I will admit that she does ok with younger kids, but when they start to develop their own mind and their own sense of self...that's another story.

I began my in-care experience when I was about 12. It started with in-home support. Then I went to a stabilization program. Shortly after that I was living with the lady I baby-sat for, but that didn't work, so I ended up staying in a couple of shelters, then a group home, a foster home, another group home, another foster home, then finally on my own. Oh, and of course lets not forget about those wonderful respite homes in between.

My most difficult in-care experiences were living in the foster homes. I found it very difficult to have to live as part of a family that I knew I would never truly be part of (especially when they remind you of that). I did the best when I lived in group homes. I liked the structure. And I liked the non-family "family" because I didn't have to try to belong somewhere I didn't belong. I know that living in a group home isn't all that great either, but honestly, sometimes I would rather live in a group home than even on my own. I didn't have to worry about lack of self-discipline to get homework done, or sometimes even chores..., or bills, or shopping, or whatever else. Someone was always there to ensure it got done.

I've had many experiences where the child welfare system was not easily providing needs or sticking to their word. I learned that pretty much if you ever want the child welfare system to do anything for you, you've really got to stay right on top of them about it. I was in a community band for quite a while, and even though they had made a deal so the fees could get paid, they were never fully paid; my school band fees were eventually paid, but I had to fight for them. I've dislocated my knee a few times and getting physiotherapy approved wasn't easy, even though I could barely walk or bend my knee for a while. And they only approved it until I looked "good enough". The doctor said that orthotics would help a lot (and they have).... It took two different social workers and three different doctors to make the suggestion, and yet they still

wouldn't pay for them. I had to write a letter to another agency that pays for stuff when you cannot afford it yourself. And my dentist has asked for braces every year, but I never got them. I had a social worker once who wanted me to move into a placement I didn't want; they ended up calling the Children's Advocates to get it done for me and I didn't even know until it was too late. There was even one time when I was in a placement and I needed something done that required a social worker's approval, but there wasn't even a social worker assigned to my case for about a month. That made life very difficult.

I think it's pathetic how many kids in care are medicated and to the degree that they are. They medicated me (with Paxil) because they figured it would help me "deal" with my placement better. I actually find it kind of funny thinking about it , I wasn't doing it on purpose, when I was medicated my behavior was worse. And what about all the diagnoses for "excuses". The way I see it, for the child welfare system in most cases, medication is the way to go because its cheaper and easier it's to medicate the problem than it is to get it dealt with. As far as I'm concerned, they treat medication like it's another care-giver.

I'm 20 now. I live on my own now, free from the child welfare system. I have moved a few times, but I'm still going to school with the help of the a bursary, and I have held down a part-time job for quite a while now. To this very day I do not have a very good relationship with my parents, but I would not be where I am today if not for the mentors I have in my life. They are always there (especially when they're needed the most and I have been unable to find anyone else who is willing to help me).

Children and youth in care will always struggle. But the key is not trying to do it on your own. People will always judge you based on your circumstances - I have had a few friends whose parents wouldn't let me be friends with their kid's only because I lived in a group home. But there also are people out there who are ready and willing and want to help you - you just have to find them.

***CHAPTER SIX***  
***Emotional Healing***



*Six*

## **EMOTIONAL HEALING**

### **Background Information on Emotional Healing**

Youth have indicated that while they were taken from their homes and placed in pseudo families they were not given appropriate access to healing resources. The issues that they have to deal with such as serious physical, emotional and sexual abuse are not eradicated because they are removed from the home. Youth in foster care and group home settings suffer punitive sanctions and/or medical restraint due to behaviors that spring from feelings such as anger, grief, fear, frustration, loneliness, and low self-esteem. They are punished for acting up without an investigation as to why these behaviors are occurring. Youth are searching for services and resources to address emotional needs and these should be ready and available as soon as the youth asks for them, not waitlisted or pushed to the bottom of the pile.

Youth in care are a unique population of youth and depending on their situation and individual resiliency factors they will all need some type of guidance and help either from a trusted adult or professional. However, youth should not be pushed into therapy or be forced to share before they are ready. This is a population of young people who have trust issues with adults and have suffered from the loss of personal attachments. In the words of Paul Steinhauer: “These children have learned to keep adults at a distance through avoiding them emotionally, as if allowing themselves to care would ultimately lead to punishment, rejection and abandonment.” There should be an over-riding goal of providing for the young person’s wellbeing. Social service providers need to work with young people to regain their trust and help them to understand that there are adults who wish to support them and guide them on their road to recovery in their own time. Social service providers need to maintain strong contact with the “child in their care” and help guide them to the appropriate resources when the time is right.

### **Recommendations for Dealing With Emotional Healing**

1. Compile a list of all community resources a youth can connect with when they are ready to do so.
2. Compile a list of helping professionals a youth can contact when the time is right.



3. Provide consistent contact and encourage the development of personal attachments to repair damaged trust.
4. Don't give up on a youth who may reject help at this moment, everyone else has given up on them and they have become conditioned to reject help as a defense mechanism for constant betrayals of trust.

### **Emotional Healing Stories:**

Coping With A Mineshaft: The Unwieldy Ascent  
(Nathaniel Christopher)

Hug (Anonymous)

Dark and Cold (Jessica Auger)

The Perfect Moment (Jen Currier)

Lend Me Your Ears and Listen To My Heart (Yolanda Lambe Tapper)

# **Coping With A Mine Shaft: The Unwieldy Ascent**

**Written By Nathaniel Christopher**

Nathaniel wakes up just before dawn so he has an opportunity to gaze at Eric who is curled up in a fetal position next to Nathaniel, cradling his tormented thoughts and memories at a time when he should be free of them. Eric's demons are the only barrier between Nathaniel and his chasm of pain. Eric is alone and vulnerable under the sheets that barely conceal his stocky frame. The light from the street barely highlights his face. He tosses and turns in a fit of unintelligible muttering. Nathaniel gently takes hold of his hand, "Everything's going to be okay" he whispers into his ear. Eventually his muttering quiets down to a soft coo, his pulse slows down and he becomes one with the bed once again. As the sun the sun peaks through the window Nathaniel slowly gets dressed and prepares for the day, returning to the bedroom one more time to catch a glimpse of Eric and kiss him goodbye.

Every time Nathaniel looks at Eric he is enamored by a sweet, pure beauty that radiates his being. He could stand all day staring like a stalker, but knows that beauty and perceptions of beauty are ever-changing. Fully clothed and ready to go to work, Nathaniel stoops over the bed and kisses his friend, lover and soul mate on the forehead as he gently strokes his hair. He slips a note on the bedside table and sneaks off to work..

Nathaniel is the editor of a small university newspaper. He goes into work every day to a fine, independent position that lends him autonomy and control. His office is located in a beautiful Queen Anne mansion five doors down from the house he shares with Eric. His office is large, open and bright with a bay window overlooking a lovely park. It is a good job in which he feels competent and extremely capable. With the assistance of staff he produces a high quality publication on a biweekly basis. As editor, he determines the content and tone of each issue and produces articles of his own.

As soon as he gets into the office he becomes completely absorbed by the newspaper and goes into what he refers to as "editor mode". The phone calls roll in and emails pop up. Every piece of correspondence demands Nathaniel's immediate and undivided attention. He's barely at his halfway point of paperwork when he takes note of the calendar and the impending deadline for a feature article which is a lot closer than he

thought. “Oh shit” he exclaims “I have to get started on this thing”. As he loads up Word he leafs through another pile of papers and unearths an ancient banana which reminds him about all the proper meals he has skipped in favour of junk food. He looks at the clock and notes that he has yet another hour before lunch. He tries to get back to the task at hand but forgets which one it is. His train of thoughts are interrupted by a knock at the door which is promptly followed by a procession of would-be journalists who have assembled for a short story meeting. He sees the meeting through with his co-editor and notes that it is past noon and three messages are on the machine. He dutifully returns the calls, sends some faxes, checks his email and makes a few postings on the ABBA website. He is gently awakened from his precarious routine by a soft, sweet voice that says “Hey Nathaniel.” He doesn’t need to turn around to know that his motivation and love has entered the office. He’s wearing his favourite black jean jacket and a ratty pair of Nathaniel’s old shoes. Eric’s old shoes were not a good fit.

For a few blissful moments Nathaniel’s work and ambition are on hold and all his dreams are revolving around the man in front of him.

“I brought some drawings to show you” beams Eric, “I just want to get a second opinion on them”, In the preceding four hours, Eric has put the finishing touches on a drawing that he’s been working on for the last week. He probably hasn’t had more than a coffee and toke for breakfast. Nathaniel wants what ever it is that fuels his motivation to persist. Eric’s drawing is done with such care and precision, every line and detail rendered with laser precision by his adept hand.

Nathaniel has observed him do this and several other drawings and noted the exacting, sometimes pained expression on his face whilst doing it. It’s almost as though drawing is a transcendent experience for him that shuttles him to some other fantastical plane. “If I could exist in spirit form and do nothing else but draw then I’d be happy” he says. His drawing is his outlet. Nathaniel admires the finished product and offers the artist some token suggestions on improvements, although he is woefully unqualified to do so. Nathaniel hasn’t picked up the pen for years.

“I have twenty minutes before I have to go to work” says Eric “I’ll be working until nine, how about you”

"I'll be lucky to get out of her before ten." Responds Nathaniel whose mountain of work brought on by careless procrastination has finally caught up with him.

Nathaniel invites Eric for lunch where they talk about their respective issues and concerns.

Reinvigorated, Nathaniel returns to work, where for the next ten hours he pumps out some articles. He returns home to find a message on the machine from Eric who will be working an extra hour. Nathaniel uses the time to tidy up the bedroom and hook up the DVD player.

At half past eleven Nathaniel hears the familiar "swish" sound of the door which means Eric has arrived. "Honey, I'm home" Eric cries out. They spend the last few hours of their day together before falling into a pill and pot induced sleep together.

They are in love and were each other's first partners.

Eric identifies himself as someone from a privileged middle class upbringing. He is a scholar and gentleman in every sense of the word. He speaks two languages, is well traveled, earned excellent marks throughout his educational career and has perfect credit. He currently works as a support worker in a home for developmentally delayed adults. He's a devoted son, brother and grandson, phoning his family in Alberta every night. He moved from Alberta a year ago and his family misses him terribly, imploring him to come to a place where he irrevocably belongs.

Eric recently told his family that he was in love with a man named Nathaniel. They are extremely distraught, angry and disgusted by this revelation. Eric falls out of contact with them for a while.

Although Eric has his differences with his parents he loves and cares for them very much. He wants them to be a part of his life but can not go back and retract what he had said but he does attempt to minimize the damage by avoiding discussion on the trigger point that is his boyfriend. In future conversations with his parents he keeps mention of Nathaniel and his existence in his life to a bare minimum. It's a lot less stressful this way.

Eric loves and values Nathaniel and that shred of sanity brought on by a harmonious family life. Eric struggles to balance the two. Eric's family knows that he is with Nathaniel but do not know that they are living together and Eric lays down one simple rule for Nathaniel (who has moved into Eric's house) and that is to not answer the phone after six. "I don't want my parents to get suspicious" says Eric "It would be better if you were to just let the answering machine pick up before answering or let me pick up."

Nathaniel resents this denial, he feels as though he is being erased from Eric's life the way he was from his own family.

Nathaniel identifies himself as someone from the foster care system or welfare class. He grew up in Nanaimo, Vancouver Island with his mother, sister and brother. His father grew up in the foster care and correctional systems in the United States. Shortly before Nathaniel's birth his father was deported from Canada to the United States where he would spend the rest of his life in prison.

Nathaniel's mother had very little energy for or interest in parenting by the time Nathaniel was born. Hers was a tumultuous life that came to an abrupt end when Nathaniel's father left the picture. She was but a ghost of her former self. She abused, neglected and endangered her children without visible shame or remorse.

Nathaniel was identified as a bright child by teachers and doctors at a very early age. However, his mother did little to nourish his mind and spirit. She took no interest in his education. When he began to develop symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder and Behavioral problems, his mother and her family scorned, shunned and ridiculed him. Throughout his life Nathaniel's grandmother drew comparisons between him and his father and cited behavioral concerns as a reason to treat him as something less than family. By the age of six, his fragile sense of self worth was shattered. He no longer gave a shit about life or others' perception of his behaviour. The physical abuse and neglect agitated Nathaniel to the point where he could no longer be controlled. The teachers at his school could not handle him. He ran around the halls, spoke out of turn, swore, fought, stole, lied and disrespected adults.

**1987...**

Nathaniel is in grade one. Halfway through the year he showed up to his grade one class as usual, but when he went to the cloakroom he was greeted by his teacher and school principal who informed him he was in the wrong classroom. Nathaniel thought they were crazy, of course this was his class, and he'd been going to it for months now. He dismissed what they said as if it were a bad dream. As he carefully placed his tin lunch bucket and thermos of powdered milk into his cubby hole he declared "This is my cubby hole and my classroom" and just then noticed the masking tape with his name written on it was missing. The principal promptly removed Nathaniel's lunch pail and thermos from his cubbyhole and prevented him from entering the classroom. He all but dragged Nathaniel to the kindergarten classroom, the same one in which he spent the previous year. He stood out like a sore thumb as he was obviously bigger and older than the other students and was frequently singled out in class trips.

He was not the only grade one student who was sent back to kindergarten. At one point another girl from Nathaniel's grade one class was acting up and sent to kindergarten as punishment. She did not want to be there and cried the whole time. She was given crayons and construction paper on which she drew a picture for the teacher as a form of an apology. She was promptly forgiven and sent back to her proper classroom. Later that day Nathaniel drew an even bigger and better picture but received little more than a few kind words from the kindergarten teacher. He was to spend the remainder of his year in kindergarten.

Nobody, not his mother nor grandmother, came to the school to speak on his behalf. He went home to the constant stream of ridicule and scorn from his mother who berated him for failing grade one. At a very young age failure was instilled into Nathaniel as an inseparable component of his identity. His mother is equally amused and frazzled over the situation and his grandmother wastes no time in pointing out his bad behaviour.

Nathaniel failed grade one and nobody made him believe he was any better.

## **1989...**

By grade three, Nathaniel was completely out of control by everyone's account. He was swearing at and attacking teachers, and throwing schoolwork and other objects across the classroom. He terrorized the class and school with his constant outbursts. The sad, immature brat had grown into a venerable hellion who lacked self control. His mother's abuse, which he had grown accustomed to, was now compounded by that of his mother's new live-in drug addict boyfriend. He did drugs in front of Nathaniel and his siblings, beat them up, left his used needles on the floor. When Nathaniel informed his grandmother about the abuse she admonished him for telling such "horrible lies" about her daughter. His grandmother constantly berated him for his bad behaviour.

Nobody told Nathaniel they loved him. He just needed to be told he was a person again. He wanted to be loved so badly and felt the only he could get attention was by acting out with negative attention-getting devices.

## **1990...**

By 1990 there was a profound cultural shift in the educational system in British Columbia, or at least Nanaimo. There was an influx of new teachers who sat down and listened to Nathaniel and saw a side of him that wasn't all that bad. He loved to draw, write, and read. He was constantly reading about famous artists and would write and perform plays based on their lives. These teachers were the ones who never blamed Nathaniel but asked him what was wrong. One teacher, Mrs. Clements, notices bruises on Nathaniel's body and he just tells her that he had bumped his head but she knew better.

Nathaniel is placed into a special behavioural class for children with behavioral problems where he receives intensive individualized attention from the teachers who recognize his strengths and accomplishments. In the same year he spends a month at a mental health facility for children in Victoria in what turns out to be the happiest month of his childhood. He cries on the way home.

## **1991...**

Despite progress at school Nathaniel's home life deteriorates. The abuse accelerates and although he is being treated with love and respect at school, his grandmother yells at him for not being in "normal school". She has a large house with several spare bedrooms and enough money to go on regular trips abroad. She leads a comfortable life and prides herself on being a family woman who loves her children and grandchildren. However, when the shit hit the fan and Nathaniel could no longer live at home, there was no family member willing to take him in and he was placed into foster care.

His first foster mother was a kind, earthy woman who shared Nathaniel's interest in art and literature, often sharing her own insights with him. During his time there, he had but one fight with her and afterwards she hugged him and pointed out the rainbow in the sky and said "After a rainstorm there is always a beautiful rainbow." He is eventually placed into a long-term home with a young couple who are unable to have children of their own. They put him on medication, buy him new clothes, and tell him they love him. Nathaniel almost forgets his past. He likes this fantasy world where he almost passes as a familiated middle class child.

## **1992...**

Nathaniel comes home from school to find his possessions have been unceremoniously packed into garbage bags. "You're moving to a new home" declared his foster mother who was dealing with her own baggage. Eight months prior, her marriage had fallen apart when she found out her husband, Nathaniel's old foster father, had been seeing someone else. The foster mother moved across town and brought Nathaniel with her. The next year brought her great misfortune and Nathaniel's escalating behaviour became too much for her to handle. He was sent by cab, garbage bags in tow, to a new foster home that blamed him for screwing things up.

## **1997...**

Nathaniel is in an alternative secondary school for dropouts, drug addicts and misfits. He is profoundly depressed, suicidal. The quality of education was terrible, and the teachers vest very little hope or



encouragement in their students who are viewed as write-offs. Almost all of the students had trouble with drugs and/or the law. But Nathaniel, who has never touched drugs, alcohol or been involved with the law, is kicked out of the school for swearing one too many times. His life is a disaster. It's bleak and pointless. He finds his escape through new age spirituality which connects him with a crowd of calm, loving people who are almost all at least twice his age. He dreams of a bright future where he is educated, well-traveled and in a healthy relationship with someone who loves him. He still craves attention and love, but begins to explore a new outlet – journalism. He helps establish a local youth newspaper that he would be involved with for the next two years.

## **2004...**

Nathaniel has been living, studying and working in far away Ontario. He's almost finished his degree in Canadian Studies. He's an extremely involved and respected community leader who's on the student union and editor of the student newspaper. His voice is a potent one that is heard far and wide. His writing, speeches and activism have affected change for the wider community and society. He is well-traveled, well-dressed and selectively well-spoken, although it is apparent to anyone who meets him that he is troubled. He has fought long and hard for his rewards, but has done so independently of a family who excluded him from nearly every family gathering such as Christmas for the previous ten years. They still cite his behaviour and immaturity as an excuse.

At the height of his power and success, Nathaniel falls in love with a man named Eric who is almost as needy and vulnerable as him. Nathaniel sees an ending to his life in Ontario, but only the future in Eric's hazy eyes. Eric and Ontario are irreconcilable. Despite his tumultuous past back home, Nathaniel longs for British Columbia. He no longer harbours any hope of acceptance or love from his family – he realizes that it is unhealthy to long for something that he will never have so he channels that need for love into homesickness for the land he and his family comes from. British Columbia is something that he is an irrevocable part of, something that will never reject or dispose of him. On the day they consummate their love, Nathaniel places his head on Eric's chest, his heartbeat turns into the sound of waves which carry him from the frozen east across the Strait of Georgia to that land, that horrible and wonderful land he fears he will never see again. Eric slowly morphs into Nathaniel's idea of home and after a time he can no longer tell the difference between the Island and Eric. They are now one.

**June 3, 2005...**

There's an air of jubilation in Nathaniel's house and surroundings as it is his graduation day. In the morning he dons his regal graduation outfit and proceeds up to campus on the city bus as though he were some long lost prince en route to Camelot. There is an aura of inner peace about him and everyone he passes casts a respectful glance in his direction. In two hours time he will shake hands with Dr. Roberta Bondar, Chancellor of Trent University and join the ranks of the educated. At long last he has achieved a goal and honour that could never be taken away or disposed of.

Nathaniel arrives on campus and joins his two hundred or so fellow graduates who are mostly from working or middle class backgrounds. A decade before they would have been on the other side of the tracks as Nathaniel, but today their differences in background are concealed under the same green gown and they will all receive the same piece of paper. Before he crosses the academic podium to receive his credentials Nathaniel is careful to whisper the correct pronunciation of his name into the announcer's ear. In a stern, eloquent British accent Nathaniel is presented to the community who greet his accomplishment with scattered cheers, but Nathaniel hears the real applause coming from afar, from friends and family back home in British Columbia and Britain. It is the proudest day of his life for he has accomplished the seemingly impossible. The boy who failed grade one and survived a life of torment had risen up out of the ashes of abuse and neglect to achieve an honour jealously guarded by the middle classes.

Two thousand people are in the crowd but Eric's is the only face Nathaniel can see. Eric has taken the day off work to witness the glorious event.

Nathaniel returns home with a degree to find his mailbox full of cards, cheques and even a huge Oxford Dictionary from the person who inspired him to go to university in the first place. Throughout the day the tribute keeps pouring in and Nathaniel imagines that even The Queen on her birthday might blush with envy.

He carefully removes the degree from its white folder. It's a nice cream colour with his name and the words "Bachelor of Arts" on the same page. It's starting to sink in that he now has an education! When he first came to Trent he never thought he would someday graduate so he purchased the matting for his degree as a motivational tool. Whenever he felt as though he was about to give up he would pull out the matting

and say “There is going to be a degree inside this someday.” In his own private graduation ceremony, which symbolized his transition from university, Nathaniel placed the degree on an academic podium which he had in his bedroom and then placed the mat on top of it. The sun reflected his truth, ambition and fortitude.

If Nathaniel could have had one thing for his graduation it would have been to have his brother and sister there to witness the event. His sister lives in Europe and his brother is back home in British Columbia so they cannot make it to the ceremony. The presence and support of family at such events lends it legitimacy and dignity.

Nathaniel looks to Eric not only as his friend, lover and soul mate but someone who for a split second views me as someone valuable, worthwhile and ultimately indispensable.

Prior to the graduation ceremony Eric seemed puzzled as to why it was so important to Nathaniel “It’s just another day” he said, “They just herd you around like cattle”. Eric had graduated from university two years before with a bachelor of education. He worked very hard throughout his education and achieved excellent marks. “I only went to my ceremony because of my parents and grandfather” explains Eric who places the legitimacy of the ceremony in the presence of family. At his own ceremony he had members of his family both in the audience and on the podium. His grandfather was a professor emeritus at his university and was there to greet him at the podium. Eric hails from a family and class that expects one to attain a post-secondary education. In his class, a degree is an expected rite of passage, not a great accomplishment. Moreover, the graduation ceremony is not so much a celebration of education and enlightenment, but an affirmation of middle class values and ideals.

In 2000 Nathaniel graduated from secondary school and almost his entire family was in attendance including his grandmother, mother, sister and brother. It was the only time in the last sixteen years that they were all in the same room together. It was awkward. His siblings were there because they were, and are, an irrevocable part of his life. His grandmother was invited because he wanted that honour that comes from having family witness such an event. All of the teachers who had loved and supported Nathaniel over the years were at the event. These were the same people who pulled him through the floorboards of hell

to a point where he could crawl on his knees and clasp but a crumb of self-esteem. For a time they helped quell the screaming torrent of self-loathing. They had committed to making Nathaniel's life better and had succeeded. He would probably never see them again, and the horrible reality was that he would likely see the people who ruined his life again and again. His mother and grandmother were in the audience like murderers at a funeral. They were dressed in their nicest clothes and beamed with cold pride, outwardly oblivious to the fact Nathaniel had achieved this honour in spite of them, not because of them.

In his last year of university Nathaniel receives quiet, consistent support from his partner, Eric. He feeds him when he has no food, encourages him when he has no job, comforts him when he has no spirit, listens to him when he has no shame and puts up with him in ways that nobody else ever had. He shows Nathaniel the kind of love and support he had always needed.

On the night of his graduation Nathaniel responds to the mountains of email that have piled up in his inbox. His friends are jubilant; most of them have seen him through very rough periods of his life when any hope of going to university rested in their faith alone. As Nathaniel types away Eric phones his family, the phone is pulled into the kitchen so that his parents will not overhear the clatter of Nathaniel typing – it might arouse their suspicion that Eric is living with him.

“Hey mom, how are you?” says Eric, “Oh, nothing much happened today, how about your day?” A tear wells in Nathaniel's eye as he looks up at his new degree, a devalued piece of paper which he stashes away into a mountain of poor report cards and behavioral reports.

## **September 2005**

Nathaniel boards the Queen of Oak Bay. He stands and stares ahead at the pixels of light against the darkness that gradually materialize into his hometown. Nanaimo is the root of it all, although much of his past in this place was something he would love to be free from he cannot resist the draw back to this odd place he calls home. As he steps out of the ferry terminal and navigates Nanaimo's narrow windy streets he discards the internal trappings of an acquired life. Much like many of his relationships his life at university was a pale imitation of some middle class dream that he could never hold. The Island in its quaint, subtle way would always hold and cradle Nathaniel where everyone had dropped

him. The incline of Brechin Street seem to embrace his every step up. He remembers exactly where all the sidewalks end and what slopes to avoid jumping down. It's a familiar terrain that melds with Nathaniel's determined stride. The Island has a special hold on Nathaniel. He believes it holds some kind of collective memory of all those from there, always holding a special place for Islanders. No matter how long they are absent they will always come home. You can't walk off the Island, you can only sneak away by boat or plane.

For nearly a century Nanaimo's chief industry was coal mining. Thousands of men, including my ancestors, earned their living by going beneath the earth every day and extracting coal in extremely dangerous conditions. Far beneath the heart of Nanaimo lie abandoned tunnels and shafts, arteries gone cold. The old shafts and air vents are still there but are now capped up and largely forgotten. Nanaimo has new industries and coal mining is a distant memory, but an irrevocable foundation on which the city uneasily rests.

Nathaniel's foundation is equally uncomfortable. Years of abuse and neglect were mine shafts and tunnels that pierce his very core. Those precious resources that were extracted from him are gone. They were taken away to prop up the lies and denial of people who still walk this earth. At first glance Nathaniel is an average looking twenty-something man. Tall, slight of build and full of character but the needy glimmer in his brown eyes betray a hole inside his spirit that can no longer be ignored. Although the holes have been patched up they still exist to destabilize his life and relationships.

# Hug

Written By Anonymous

I remember the first time I let someone hug me since I came into foster care. Every day he would ask for a hug, and every day I would give him a look that said, quite sarcastically, "Right".

Eventually though, he started to wear me down, bit by bit. Slowly but surely I let him get closer and closer from helping me out of the car to messing up my hair. I got less and less uptight, and eventually I even felt like I wanted to get closer to people. It just sort of happened one day. There was nothing special about it, nothing to separate it from any other day. Somehow I get the feeling I'll never forget it.

I was walking up to my room after supper and at the same time he was coming down. All of a sudden it just sort of became okay.

For about the millionth time he asked me with a single word, "hug?". And for the first time in my life I didn't think about what might happen or what the consequences would be. I nodded and as fast as it began it was over, a quick embrace and we kept going our separate ways.

Sometimes I think that people just have to learn how to let people in, to take a risk on someone that you wouldn't have normally.

Some people have trouble learning how, but if you find the right person I think they can help you, even teach you. I guess I was just a lucky, lucky girl. Lucky enough to find that person, and smart enough to finally let them in ...

And I couldn't imagine my life any other way.

# Dark and Cold

Written By Jessica Auger

Before I went into care, life was pretty good from the time I was born until I turned three years old or so. I was living with my mom and things were good. She got married when I was three years old and the man she married became the only father I had ever known. He was a good daddy to me. My mother and father had another two children, my two sisters, and at that time in my life, things were great. After the first couple years my mom and dad started having problems though. My mother soon became very depressed and even suicidal.

Because my mother wasn't stable enough to look after myself or my sisters, the very first time I went into care it was at my mother's own request. While sitting in the "child friendly" room of the Ministry building my mother sat there and explained to me that we were leaving her and would not be able to see her for awhile.

"Watch the girls Jess, make sure they'll be okay, be my strong girl".

I was only a child, and I didn't know why our mother would be leaving us . . . "Mommy, what did I do? Am I bad? Why are you leaving me?"

When we left the Ministry building, we were soon sitting in the back of a car with hardly anything in our suitcases. My sisters were asleep and we were being driven out in the middle of nowhere. I was just staring out the window at all the trees just trying to understand what had just happened to us. I really didn't know why our mom was leaving us, and I didn't know if it was because I had done something bad. It was very traumatizing.

Once in the system, my sisters and I experienced a lot of transiency. We would be placed in care, and then put back into our home with our mother once again to live in a very dysfunctional household where domestic violence and emotional abuse just kept happening over and over again. The emotional abuse I was suffering through all of this was just literally unimaginable, even to me. I still loved my mother even after everything that I was put through and what my sisters were put through. I was a child and gullible, sometimes I feel like I still am today. I used to believe everything she would tell me about how our lives would get better with every new boyfriend she would have and every new place we would move into. Every nice guy she would meet and get attached

to would leave, and every shitty boyfriend she would get involved with, I would yell at when they were getting into fights while trying to protect my mother and my sisters.

“What are you doing to my mom . . . don’t talk to her like that!” I would yell. Soon after, I would scream at the man, “Get out of the house, you’re making my sisters cry!”

Then I would start crying for the man to leave us alone. I would run to my room after I made sure my sisters were okay.

I knew my sisters and I would never function properly while living and growing up in this type of home – I loved my mother very much, but she didn’t realize that what she was doing was hurting us a lot. My mother was an alcoholic and most times there was something very wrong in the house, whether it was with a man she was involved with, or a result of her alcoholism. There were many things she did that she thought we didn’t know about, and these things had quite an impact on my sisters and myself. I was always older in my mind than most people really realized I was and living with my mother meant that I had to be the parent in the household. I was forced to grow up fast and had to understand the problems of an adult, through the eyes of an adult. I was the one who had to make sure my sisters were okay, and I was the one who had to try and protect my mother.

I think I’ve been older than my mom since I was a teenager. I was parenting my younger sisters while I was a child myself. I was protecting them from the effects of alcoholism and the men that treated my mom poorly. I love my mom, and have had contact with her since I was first placed in care. My love for her has never changed. However, a child should never be stuck with the role of parent and stuck with the responsibilities that parent(s) should be taking care of while you are a child. Because I was so used to being the protector of my family, I grew up with this need to look after people. From a very young age I could sit and listen to people and help them sort through their problems. I have always been the type of person that people just came and talked to, but until now, I’ve never talked about my experiences as a child.

At this point in my life, I’m always in pain because I haven’t really dealt with the problems that stem from my upbringing. I grew up not really being able to talk about the things that happened to me when I



was younger. It is very hard to sit here and write about the things that happened to me and to talk about my mother, but I know this is part of something I need to do to heal. It is a relief to finally be putting down in words what I felt as a child, and how those experiences affected me. I didn't or couldn't talk much as a child because whenever I talked about my experiences and what was going on in my life, something bad would happen. For example, whenever I talked to a teacher at school or a First Nation's worker, my sisters and I would be taken away from our mother and placed into care. The social workers thought that they were doing the right thing, and I now realize that being placed outside of our home was for our own good.

As I got older people realized things were indeed not going great and I was eventually separated from my sisters. From the age of eleven to thirteen years old, I went to live with my "Aunt" and I was fortunate in that I was growing up in a more stable type of household. My Aunt's home offered a better environment to grow up in, but there were some things that she thought were best for me that I feel hurt me in the end, although I know that was not her intention. She knew I grew up in a house where violence, alcohol and emotional abuse were things that I experienced repeatedly. She did not want me to go through anymore of that and because we lived in a small town, my aunt taught me to stay away from most of the people in my family. Most of my family members lead very negative lifestyles and she did not want me to be a part of it. She thought she was doing a good thing for me, and I too felt she was doing a good thing – but staying away from my family was also a negative experience for me because family ties are important.

I have always been in contact with my mother from the beginning. I love my mother. I still love my mother. As I got older and with the help of my Aunt, I learned about some of the problems I had with my mother and why our personalities always seemed to clash. I honestly felt like only family members should be allowed to love me and I believed in the many broken promises I lived with all my life – believing in those empty promises helped me through very hard times. One of the reasons I wouldn't let anyone get close enough to me to help me was because I felt hopeless – anytime I tried to talk to someone, they weren't interested or they didn't have enough time for me or they would take us away from our mother and place us in care where we were moved around a lot and returned to our mother repeatedly. So every time I went to a new placement in the system, I distanced myself from the people around me

and I never allowed anyone to get too close to me. After all, if you get attached to someone in the system, it's only a matter of time before you are moved, and any relationships you have made with foster parents or other caregivers usually end as well.

It is really hard to explain how much it hurts when you look to all the wrong places to get help. One of the main reasons I have never fully talked about the things that happened to me in the past was because I truly believed that if everyone thought that I was okay, that I was alright, then I believed I was okay too. I wasn't okay though, I really needed to talk about my life history, what had happened to me and my sisters, my relationship with my mother and other problems I had as a young woman living in the system. Because I was never a "troubling" kid, the social workers believed that I wasn't "troubled". This was very, very damaging to me because I had needs that were not met, nor would they be met, as long as I remained, for lack of better words, "a good kid" that did not cause trouble. I'm always placed at the end of my social workers list because if you're not a problem for the social workers, or other caregivers, then you are not at the top of the priority list.

Being left behind and left at the bottom of my social worker's list because I didn't cause trouble while living in the system fuelled my depression, especially when I went on independent living. When things are tough for me, I don't have a family to help me get through those hard times and I have very little support from my social workers. It is very difficult to deal with – not having much support from my family or the system, but somehow I still managed to get up to go to school and keep good grades. By not checking in on me, or asking me if I needed anything made me feel unimportant and unrecognized and my abilities to get through those rough times only seemed to prove to the social workers that I didn't need help.

I remember sitting in that Ministry office and overhearing the conversation between the workers talking about me, but not including me in their meeting:

"She's smart, she'll make it", I hear one of the social workers say. Another social worker replies, "She won't fail. She doesn't need help. She's the least of our worries on the list".

I sat there listening to them talking about me. Social workers think that

because you're smart and because you're doing well in school, that you are so called 'normal'. You can still be angry, mad, depressed and suicidal even if you do well in school. The things that I went through as a child had very serious effects on me and still affect me today. Those experiences helped shape how I think and feel about myself today. Inside my head I'd be screaming, "WHY CAN'T ANYONE SEE THROUGH IT? HOW CAN YOU NOT KNOW THAT I'M NOT OKAY?" But no one sat down and asked me what was going through my mind. They continued to think that good grades and staying out of trouble were an indication of being "okay".

I would hear people say "Oh she's doing so well, she has no problems", when in fact I did. The workers would say things like "She's going to be one of the success stories." I just continued to ask myself "Why can't people just hear what's inside my head?" It would be so much easier for me to tell them what was wrong with me, but like I said earlier, every time I opened my mouth, something bad would happen. No one, especially children and young people who live in the system, should have to deal with the feeling of being an outcast and the feelings of being ignored and unrecognized, whether it is because you are a so called "good" youth or a token "bad" kid. We are all unique individuals and we have had good and bad experiences that should be recognized by the social workers that come into our lives regardless of our behaviors. If we want to talk about our life histories, we should be able to do so with workers who recognize that some of us in the system have issues that we have not dealt with.

I finally broke out of my depression just this past summer. I got really sick and actually went to the hospital and almost died due to an infection. I never phoned anyone until a few days later because I didn't want to worry anyone. The moment that I phoned people and realized that they actually cared and that I really wasn't alone was the turning point in my life and since then my outlook on life has changed for the better. I hope this story, although it has many holes, gives you a look at the challenges we face as "systems" youths, family relationships and what it is like to be an invisible girl who was almost lost in the system just because she wasn't labelled a "bad kid".

# **The Perfect Moment**

**Written by Jen Currier**

(Editor's Note: The following submission was written about one moment experienced during a Healing and Storytelling Retreat held by the National Youth in Care Network, where youth in care came together to "reclaim their stories" and share them through this Primer Anthology to make a difference in the lives of other youth in care. It speaks not only to the healing process of individual youth in care, but also to the power of sharing our stories with other youth in care to move the healing journey forward.)

The words tumble out into the quiet: sounds dancing through the room, brushing across a tear-stained cheek to nestle deep within the heart. The tale spills out, a lyrical voice giving life to the story of a life, the cadence rises and falls cascading in a tumultuous waterfall here, now it slows fading into the whisper of a thought, and a pause. The sun fills the room with its golden light warming the air ever so gently. Those across from me are silhouetted in a halo of radiance and I can't help but think that it is their true selves shining through. Behind, the giant peaks stand high amongst the clouds on the other side of the clear sheet of glass, cradling and protecting the secrets being shared. The air is heavy and fragile, so much pain and love has poured out into this circle of survivors, slowly swirling and mixing together until they cannot be separated, that is seems as if everyone has been coated in a fine layer of truth and honesty.

Inches away a good friend lounges, waiting for the next picture to be so eloquently painted. Earlier, when it was our turn to set loose our memories, we conspired like sisters, switched our stories and in the exchange found the bravery to open up; my fragile confidence in the power of my words gaining strength in her lilting voice, her tears coming at just the right moment so that I could see she understood the rawness of the emotions I had uncovered, and underneath that lay an even more important message – she cared. When it had been my turn to give her gift to the room, I unexpectedly received one myself, for a second I had seen her home and family through her own eyes and still kept that little piece of her former self within me now, rolling it around to experience it to the fullest and matching it up with the caring, wounded soul seated next to me.

The bright flash of a forming tear drop catching the light captivates

my attention and I remember how he has shown for the first time ever the memories that haunt him; stalking him and sneaking up to pounce when least expected. He has such a long road still to walk, but here in this room he has taken the first steps past surviving and into healing, claiming a little bit of the power his history has held over him. We are all here together replacing the hurt with hope and love, creating an instant in time that will always be, that can be travelled back to, that can live in the dreams of our hearts for as long as we need.

A voice carries through the room, a hint of laughter belies the hidden joke, faces light up with merriment and we all journey onward into the rest of our lives. The moment has passed.

# **Lend Me Your Ears And Listen To My Heart . . .**

**Written By Yolanda Lambe Tapper**

A life that has no meaning  
Is revealed through the tears  
Shed as blood, one by one,  
Painfully throughout the years.  
Lannie, 1991

An excerpt from my life history:

I remember writing the above stanza – never again touching what was supposed to be a complete poem. I was thirteen years old then and in so much mental anguish, turmoil and pain that I just wanted to give up on life – it had given up on me, or so it seemed. Having left my father and brother behind in our little community for the second or third time, my mother, baby sister (3 yrs) and I were living in a rented house on welfare in a nearby town. After fighting with my mother, I'd smash a hole in the bedroom closet wall and then lock myself in the bathroom (the only private place available) of that house. I'd pray that I would die, that my dead grandmother (she died when I was five) would come and take me.

It was so painful just to “be” – just to exist. I wanted to be anywhere but where I was at that time of my life. I told my mother I wanted to die, that I was suicidal. I think it was the first time in my life that my mother showed me the unconditional love kids expect from their parents. She knew I was serious and brought me to the doctor who then referred me to a child and youth psychiatrist. A day after telling my mother I was suicidal, we were on our way to see the specialist located four hours away. He prescribed me anti-depressants, a very common drug given to kids with “problems” – Imipramine©. I saw him maybe three or four times but I continued to take the medication nightly for about three years.

I was fourteen when we left the rental house and moved home once more. It wasn't long before the same stuff was happening all over again – drinking, brawling and emotional strife. So we were up and leaving again. I was fifteen years old when mom left my father and brother again. She stayed away from home with my younger sister for about two months, and then decided she would take my sister and me and go

home again. This time I refused to go with her. I knew in my heart that if I went home, I wouldn't make it. I knew that if I heard the words that I had "something wrong with me", or was laughed at one more time when I shared my dreams with my parents, really bad things would happen in that house. I was tired of having all my dreams trampled on, and my spirit could no longer handle it. With my mother returning home, and my refusal to return with her, my only option was to enter "the system", or as I then knew it to be – "foster care". My mother and I went to see our social worker the morning of the day she returned home with my sister to our dad. She signed the papers and proceeded to voluntarily place me in care. The official reason I entered care as indicated on my file is the fact that I witnessed domestic violence.

I don't remember what day it was, or the date, or much of anything about the day I was just signed over to the system. I remember feeling so vulnerable, alone and straight up just fucking abandoned. I was scared – an emotion I knew very well but despised. I was very nervous and on edge – there was so much risk involved with getting placed inside. Who were these people that I would be living with, and what were they all about? What if they didn't like me – what then? Would I be sent to a group home? I had been told all of my life that if I thought home was bad, going into foster care would be much worse because kids in there get raped, beaten on and no one cares about them. A portion of the scare tactics used to silence kids by parents who knew they were under the systems workers' gaze was true. It was only a portion however. The harsh reality of the system reflects what "no one's" kid really means – whilst in the system you probably won't find no one individual to love you like you need to be loved and no one individual there to help you along. I feel so pathetic now, knowing I sought love but didn't find it – I should have known that I would never find it amongst the red tape, the files, the subjective opinions of all those involved in my care.

For young people from the system who may pick up this book – my life history is most likely familiar in one way or another to yours. My family was ripped apart by the bottle (alcoholism), violence and the presence of untreated mental illness. I come from a family that parted ways many, many times, only to reconcile one last time and fall apart altogether in 1995. Mom and dad were unable to step outside of their own headspace to actually see how they were hurting us, or how they were affecting us by drinking, arguing and fighting. Sometimes parents just don't know, they've never known anything different so it's normal for them. When

we are growing up in that environment, it becomes second nature for us to act out in an attempt to get attention from anywhere so that we can make home a safe, loving space. It doesn't always mean we are, or in my case, was, bad children with behavioural problems – sometimes it's something very simple – we're all in need of love and kindness.

### **Living in the system and surviving:**

Before I was “signed” over to the system, I never stopped to think about the consequences for me, the family (siblings especially), and those little things we take for granted until lost. I really missed the feeling of being loved and wanted, even with the dysfunction that came with it. I really missed my dog. I missed my brother and sister so much that crying for them was an every day occurrence. When you enter the system it doesn't take a very long time for you to really “get it” – you're no one's kid, and who really cares whether or not you miss your dog, or the view from your kitchen window and your siblings? I was luckier than most however – my social worker was brand new and out to do everything she could do for me, and I only experienced two placements. I had counselling every week, and came to learn what was “normal” and what was not. But I was still empty inside, and I had no idea how I would fill that void within me. For awhile it was my schooling – I poured everything into my school work. That made care a little easier, but I was still breaking apart inside.

When I entered the system, no one gave me a rights booklet, nor was the legislation ever explained to me. What I did know was that the government was now my so-called parent, and as my parent, it had to provide me with an appropriate living environment, mental, physical and dental supports and educational resources. I knew these things so I took advantage of them and for me it was a non-issue. I know I was considered “high maintenance” and a kid who expected too much from the system. If I wanted to see my sister or my brother, and I knew there was some sort of allowance that would assist me in doing that – I wanted the money so I could go visit them. When my high school graduation came and I found out that there was money allotted for that – I asked for that. When I needed braces and three root canals – I made sure that I would have that done. I asked for what I thought I was entitled to as a young person living in the system that had taken me under its “care”.

Even though it seemed like I always got what I wanted (I never got what I really wanted – I never found unconditional love in the system)



I always felt like a beggar when I asked for things that were outside of the monthly cheque sent to the foster home. The way the system works made me feel as if I should be grateful to the system, and not to expect so much. It's particularly disturbing when a worker tells you that you should be grateful, that the government didn't have to extend your services when you reached the "age of emancipation". It's disturbing and insulting, and I'll be very honest about this, because if kids never had to leave home, a lot of systems workers wouldn't have a job. That's a fact that hasn't been incorporated into the systems domain – the reason why it hasn't probably has something to do with not listening to the kids, and not allowing them a space where they can vent these types of remarks without fear of repercussion.

Once in the system, I knew that if I opened my mouth about some things to my social worker, my ass would be on the street quicker than I could fill my garbage bags. The fear of repercussion with a social worker investigating a complaint is not confined to the family of origin – it is an inherent part of the system that we shut up, put up, not fuck up, and we are constantly reminded that if we crossed the yellow line, we can be moved like pawns in a chess game. My first foster home was quite the fucked up home to live in. The parents there allowed their five-year-old to harass and beat on the little foster kid who was severely mentally impaired. I wasn't allowed to drink fruit juice or eat certain things if it was close to grocery day and there was very little in the fridge. There were times when I went to school without lunch or lunch money – I had to ask my boyfriend (at the time) for money to eat at school. They allotted out ten dollars a week for me to spend on my self and my hygiene necessities. They shoved their religion down my throat, and figured I was disrespectful because I had my own religion and refused theirs. I never told my social worker any of this until the day after I had been removed from the home.

Even before I came into the system officially, I always felt threatened and silenced by the system. When a social worker phoned and made an appointment to come and speak to us about a complaint he or she received, I knew my mother would question where the complaint came from – eyeing me as the rat. I also knew that she would be especially angry after the social worker left. It's next to impossible to tell a social worker the truth when he or she has phoned, made an appointment to come do a home visit with you and your parent(s) and sits down with the family to ask about the complaint.

I've always asked myself what the fuck that was all about – as if I would ever say my mother blackened my eye in front of her. I'd be setting myself up for another punch to the head wouldn't I? I would just roll my eyes and answer the questions so that I was protecting my mother's ass, and my own. Calling to make an appointment when you've received a complaint regarding neglect and violence is a ridiculous notion for it's only a matter of bringing back the empties, not taking some pills for a day and cleaning your house up. Things look okay when you come, and everything goes back to normal once you leave. The fact that the young person may actually get hurt because a social worker investigated a complaint should be a consideration before one even acts upon the complaint.

We won't tell you the truth with our parent(s) there – even if we wanted to, we still have this innate (and irrational) feeling that you must protect the perpetrator – after all, they are your parents, no matter what they have done, or not done, for you. A great number of systems youths don't want to leave their parents, they just want something to change so that home isn't a bad place. It may seem absurd to some that youngsters can still love their parents even after they've been maltreated. Your mother is your mother no matter what, and your father is your father no matter what. It's not written anywhere that you must love them, but for me at least, I never stopped loving them. The love doesn't die when you enter the system, and sometimes living in the system makes you realize just how much you love them.

I had lived with my first foster family for about eleven months when I got the boot. One night I was wearing my bathrobe and I was carrying a cup of hot tea into the dining room. The loop on my robe got caught on the spindle sticking up from the chair where my foster mother happened to be sitting. I spilled boiling hot tea down her back by accident, and she thought it was malicious – that I did it on purpose. I'll never forget the fear, tension and the question of "what the fuck do I do now?" running through my head. Who in their right mind would intentionally scald someone? Apparently I would and I wasn't in my right mind. Due to one accident, I left a home that should never have been operating in the first place with the labels of being of questionable character, difficult to deal with, unable to follow the rules (I was five minutes late on one particular weekend) and possibly malicious.

After getting kicked from the first foster home, I had two options – group home, or find another person who was willing to take me in. My

boyfriend's mother was approved to be a foster parent so that I could live there. It was a good placement, but my foster mother wasn't an emotionally available mother figurehead. I wanted to love and I wanted to be loved, but in the system that's so hard to do. I loved my foster mother with all my heart, and I felt as though she loved me somewhat – even if she did tell me “I'll do my thing and you'll do yours”. I stayed with her for about three years, and in the end, when I went off to become independent in the city and go to school, once again I was labelled as manipulative and a “user” because I broke up with her son, who was extremely hurt by the break up. I understood why she had to take her son's side in the situation, but I didn't understand why I was being accused of using, manipulating and even being narcissistic. I wondered why I was considered a user when it was my foster mother who hired a housekeeper after I left. I was always taking care of her house and other shit but in the end I got the shaft because I went off to see if I could make it as an independent young woman. When I needed a support person the most, when I left the foster home, I had nothing or no one to turn to and this caused more troubles for me than I had imagined it would.

That dirty word “independence”:

For the first four months of being independent I was so confused and lonely that I didn't know where to turn – I was broke, not attending classes, I was smoking drugs constantly and living a life that was, in retrospect, inappropriate and dangerous. My friends helped me out when I had no food, and I can recall looking for dimes in the couch so I could take the bus to school. By the end of the summer, I weighed about 100 lbs, my hair was like straw from all the drugs, I was flunking all three of my courses, and I hated what I was becoming. I called my old social worker and asked for some counselling. Within a few days I got the go ahead from her, and I picked up the phone and called one of the counselling services. I went there a few days later for my first appointment and was told that it was a long hill down, but I was halfway there.

I needed someone to tell me that I was messing up real bad and I needed to get my act together. I can only call my counsellor an angel. Mary helped me turn my life around by helping me in terms of harm reduction and going to school, while also helping me accept reality for what it is. My reality is the only reality I can change. I cannot change

anyone else. I can only accept people for who they are and how they affect my life. As much as I wanted to change my mom and my dad back then, I had to come to terms with the fact that I cannot. Mary helped me see that it is my decision as to whether I will strive in the world, or fail in the long term. I heard “get that degree” from her so many times that my head still spins. I did get the degree, an honours degree in Sociology & Criminology, and as I sit writing, I am currently finalizing my thesis on “voice” and “exclusion” within the system

Mary and I clicked and I knew she was good for me – she showed compassion and empathy. She treated me like a young woman with some issues not a manipulative, malicious and threatening systems kid. We would do “normal” things together – we’d take our sessions on the road, she’d drop me off at school and she really cared. I needed that more than anything else then. Just someone to show an interest in me – why the hell would I care about flunking out of school when no one cared? Why would I stop harming myself with drugs and other activities when no one cared? Mary cared and I respected her opinion so much that I actually listened – well most times anyways. I didn’t always keep true and tight to some of the verbal contracts we agreed upon with respect to drinking and drugging. She didn’t scold me, threaten me or make me feel like shit because I screwed up – she saw it as an opportunity for me to see for myself the repercussions of screwing up.

Mary and workers like her really reinforced the fact that I was not a piece of shit that no one cared about and didn’t want. They were the ones who helped me keep my head above water when I was sinking and pulled me out of the water when I was drowning. The “best” workers, in my humble opinion, were those who allowed me to be myself, without fear of repercussion or reprimand and allowed me to screw up every now and again so that I might learn from my mistakes. Room for error should be allowed for systems youths – parents just don’t give up/abandon their kids when they miss curfew a couple of times so why should the state do it? It’s so simple that its common sense, but the words seem to fall upon deaf ears. Systems youths have been torn from all they’ve ever known and utilizing punitive measures against them only serve to reinforce every bit of negativity that they’ve swallowed their entire lives. They shouldn’t have to worry about being kicked out on their own because they threw a fit, or had a tantrum – consider what they’ve just been through coming into the system, and what happened to them prior to entering it.

Furthermore, systems youths shouldn't have to worry about getting kicked because they screwed up just in ways that any other non-systems youth would.

### **Hints and How-to's:**

For some of us who have had a lot of support while in the system, we exit not unscathed by the effects of the system but aware of our own potential as healthy and loving individuals. I took advantage of the services available to me while I was in the system, and through using those services I was able to see that I am not a bad person, nor am I responsible for what happened to me as a child. I also learned that life is about the unknown and the inability to control anyone except myself. I learned that the system lacks in many ways, and you have to really step up to the plate and fight for your rights in there. If I had to pick three things my mother taught me as I grew up they would be "never back down", "always get back up" and "never come back for a second kick" (thanks Mom). By never backing down from challenges whilst in the system, we are more able to fight for ourselves once we leave the system. For young people leaving the system, the ability to trust, love and depend on people is very difficult. Everyone needs a person to help them along in life – we can never do it alone. Rarely you will find that person in the system like I did, and it's something about the system that must change. Children and youth should be wanted, cherished and loved regardless of where they come from or who they are.

I learned to love by loving myself. I know now that I am worth something, have an interesting character totally shaped by my life history and I have forgiven so that I may understand why and live happily. The pain does ease you know, but it must be recognized and dealt with appropriately if systems youths are to reach that place where they can trust and love someone without the constant fear that they will lose that person because they have negative perceptions about themselves due to a life history that was never addressed. It's very hard to love yourself when you've had your negativities affirmed and reaffirmed – but it's possible and we can all do it.

The system youths themselves are the true experts on the system and how it operates to help and hinder. Workers sometimes forget that – maybe it's their schooling, coupled with the constructs of youth in care as being dangerous and somehow inherently bad. Systems youths are experts because they live in the systems domain twenty-four hours

seven days a week. If you want to know something about a particular young person, or the system itself – I would suggest speaking with the young person in the system before reaching for their file, a textbook or the policy manual. Be kind and considerate, even if the young person appears to be disrespectful and defiant – anger is only hurt disguised.

As you walk out into the world armed with your BSW, there are situations you will encounter that school never taught you about, nor how to deal with it. Every day you will be dealing and betting with cards of life – the lives of children and youths who cannot or will not return to their families of origin. It's a very difficult job but over one hundred thousand children and youths living across the systems domain (child welfare/protection placements, youth justice and psychiatric incarceration) depend on you to help them make it through life until they leave and/or cast from the system. It's obvious that you can only prepare a child for independence so much with fiscal, human resources and policy restraints, and perhaps its time that all of us (as in social workers, youth in care networks, policy-makers etc.,) acknowledge the unrealistic expectations we place on these youths and attempt to make it better for them.

I really think we could make that happen. Just imagine if every working person gave five cents from every paycheck toward a youth in care fund that was matched by the government – such funding would allow systems youths more time for gaining an education, work skills, social skills and ultimately, how to live on their own. Imagine if we allowed love into group homes, foster homes and the likes? Imagine if we were to break the stereotypes down, and allowed the voices of the young people to be heard? Imagine if youths had an advocate from the day they entered the system until the day they left – their futures would be so much brighter.

If I were to give some “advice” to workers across the systems domain it would include never giving up on a kid, always speak with them, not to them, engage them in their own decision making and always give them the benefit of the doubt. I never intentionally scolded my first foster mother, but I was never given the benefit of the doubt because I was a foster kid, and common knowledge dictates that foster kids are malicious and dangerous. It is not fair to systems youths for people to just assume something or make decisions for them. They are the only experts in this pastiche of programs and services that can enable workers to do their job knowing that they've done their very best to assist this child in need.

And now on to better and brighter things:

This gift of love is forever,  
And forever is now fathomable,  
For time has no meaning  
in matters of the heart

Verse from Flavia,  
Lannie's wedding invitation.

When I was in the system I never dreamed that I would marry, and I was renowned for "hating children". After all, I didn't have any relationships that were authentically healthy, I never had what one would consider a "childhood" and even though I had learned to love, the underlying insecurity I felt about my life had never completely dissipated. I put all my trust and faith into my best friend and took the plunge on December 23, 2000, when my boyfriend proposed to me. We were married on August 23, 2002 and we had a beautiful wedding with our family and friends back home in Newfoundland. Having been married now nearly four years, and being there for each other over the past nine years, I really know what love is – it is unconditional, it is mutual and it is okay if you rely on another and put yourself in their hands when you can't take it anymore.

My husband and I live a good life. We bought a house a few months after we were married and our home now consists of our two nine-year-old cats, a dog and a huge pond filled with all sorts of fish. Our friends are family – always welcomed and deeply loved. I have a great life and an awesome job – despite my life history, despite the fact that I am bipolar and tend to go off in my own world at times, and despite the fact that people looked (and perhaps still do, but who cares?) down on me because I was a foster kid. Yes, sometimes when my mother calls I cannot deal with her and so I do not answer the phone. Yet, if you were to hurt her, it doesn't matter to me what happened in my life history between her and I, I will defend her. Yes, it took a few years for my father and I to work things out between us but he walked me down the aisle. I have great in-laws who love me for who I am, and what my husband and I share. My brother, sister and I are as they say, "thicker than thieves" and at one point in my life I thought that we would never be a family again (thanks Dad). Even in the face of the adversity we went through while separated, our love for one another has made our relationship so strong that this familial bond will never be broken again. My husband and I look forward to adding more beautiful people to our family.



***CHAPTER SEVEN***  
***The Powerful Role of Interveners***



*Seven*



# **THE POWERFUL ROLE OF INTERVENERS**

## **Background Information on How Interveners Can Help**

We asked youth in state care what specific changes their social service provider could make in order for them to alleviate the stresses of growing up in the care system. Youth were realistic in their comments, recognizing the work that is being done and acknowledging the difficulties of working within a bureaucratic system. However, comments that may seem to be common sense to certain social service providers are not to others, and this inconsistency necessitates that youth in care are consulted at all times to ensure that their needs are being met. These youth are currently the neglected consumers, the invisible children, in the crossfire of top-down bureaucracies and multilevel-intergovernmental policies. These are the systemic changes recommended by youth in state care for how interveners and workers can help them.

### **Recommendations for Interveners**

#### **1. LISTEN TO YOUTH**

“Ask us what really could have made our experience better and don’t be afraid to change.”

“Listen to us and don’t use our age against us, we are people with real ideas and opinions.”

“Be easily accessible. Show the openness and willingness to communicate with us, these traits are important to help everyone understand big issues.”

#### **2. SUPPORT YOUTH EMOTIONALLY**

“Social workers could help more by not giving up on us. They don’t help after 21, they aren’t in our life anymore; we need someone there for us, not just until a certain age, but until you feel the child is ready to go on their own.”

“They have to be there for us, they can’t be one of these there some days and not there others, going on vacation and not letting us know. They really have to keep communication open with us.”

“Let us know our options for counseling, resources and help.”

### **3. WATCH CASELOADS**

“Don’t take on too many caseloads...hire more social workers...do whatever it takes.”

“Listen, do home studies, have focus groups, take us seriously, make complaint forms available, have more one-on-one time with workers.”

“Social workers could take some time to get to know each of us and not just rely on the files to tell the story.”

### **4. ADVOCATE FOR YOUTH**

“They could try harder, instead of just asking and having their supervisor say no, they could try a lot harder than they actually do. Let us feel like people, not referring to us as subjects, and making it more of a personal note, rather than making us feel like we are just another caseload.”

“Just really get on the Minister’s back about all the budget cuts. They should cut the correct funds from the programs that aren’t working. It’s time to step up and work as a community, not just as individuals.”

“Make sure a youth is happy and likes where they are living. Public opinion can affect us greatly. Social workers can go on TV and tell the public that youth in care are just kids who don’t live at home, they are not criminals. There should be more Social Workers, and they should try to understand where a youth is in their life so they can help more.”

“Advocate for better quality of care to empower their “children” to do the same.”

## **Important Information To Remember When Working With Young People**

### **#1 Resiliency**

Young people are incredibly resilient; we can bounce back from almost anything with the right type of support. The most important thing to remember is not to give up on us, don’t write us off now because we might be giving you flack, name a teenager who doesn’t give their primary caregiver flack.

It's important in this context to focus on what we are good at, what we do well and most importantly what we like to do. The things that you think are our weaknesses will work themselves out with help as long as what's positive in our life is being acknowledged. It is like a self-fulfilling prophecy, if you don't believe in us and encourage us, how are we going to believe in ourselves?

It is important to remember to measure our successes against ourselves, don't compare us to other people. What is a success for you may not be for somebody else. What is a success for me is different from a success for you. You cannot compare apples and oranges, and you can't compare people. Everybody is unique.

There are many different types of successes as well. Being able to secure a job and keep an apartment is a success for some people. Being able to pursue post-secondary education is a success for some people. Being able to travel the world and gain life experience is a success for some people. Getting up in the morning and making it through the day is a success for some people. Keeping a job for two months instead of a month is a success for some people.

The type of success does not matter; measuring them against our capabilities and strengths is of the utmost importance.

## **#2 Empowerment and Engagement**

The key to empowering young people in care is to listen to us. It is important to include our opinions and experiences into the decisions that affect our lives. It is equally important to allow us to make mistakes. Try to guide us in the right direction, support us if we make a mistake and allow us to try again. The ultimate tool in empowering young people is to work with us and not for us in our best interests. If people are working in our best interests without our input, how is it really in our best interest?

“Despite the best of intentions of any adult, empowerment cannot be bequeathed: it can only be nurtured, encouraged and promoted.” (Raychaba, 1992)

Empowerment incorporates the principles of resiliency and overall well-being by allowing us to be in control of the decisions that affect our

lives. This in turn helps us to grow independent of state systems and be more prepared for when we are truly on our own.

We are individuals, and we have our own experiences and to truly empower us means to understand and listen to our experience and treat us as individuals. We learn differently, we experience life differently and we internalize events differently in ways. By working with us and not for us, solutions that make sense for our lives will be possible.

Through the membership consultation the National Youth In Care Network devised a series of Actions that could be practiced as a “person” oriented approach to working in social services. The Actions are also realistic to the policies and procedures in individual ministries and agencies.

### **ACTION ONE**

#### **- Listen**

Social services providers need to heed the basic tenet of youth empowerment, which is to allow youth to be participants in the decisions that affect their lives, “doing with” instead of “doing for”.

### **ACTION TWO**

#### **- Form a Relationship**

Create a relationship with the young person. The power of personal relationships is a strong protective factor. Go for coffee, shopping or to a movie. Get to know the youth. They are a person who may be scared, lonely, hurt and justifiably angry, take the time to understand where they are coming from.

### **ACTION THREE**

#### **- Involve the Community**

Meaningful community partnerships between social service departments and the wider community would enable youth growing up in care to become involved in extracurricular activities such as sports, art and music. Community partnerships could help engage youth who otherwise could not afford it on the budget of the government. This would also help to establish a support network outside of an agency that would provide for youth what the government cannot.

## **ACTION FOUR**

### **- Give Positive Feedback**

According to the Looking After Children Project (Kufeldt et al.) it is important to include other information such as interests, hobbies, achievements, supports into a case file and not just behavioral problems or crisis. It is important to make a concerted effort to include positive feedback in as many forms as possible. Provide space for positive observations.

## **ACTION FIVE**

### **- Tell them their Rights and Responsibilities**

Make sure youth know and understand their rights and responsibilities as a youth in care. Make sure you fight for their rights. A balance has to be struck between protocol and policies and what is truly in the best interests of youth in care.

### **Successful Helping Stories:**

Eight Years, One Moment (Jen Currier)

Untitled (Anonymous)

I'm A Conscientious Objector (Greg Littleford)

# **Eight Years, One Moment**

**Written By Jen Currier**

Eight years. A million things can happen in eight long years. Babies grow up, values change, and wars are won and lost. Someone can even learn to say, “I love you.” And I did. It wasn’t easy, spontaneous or even earth-shattering, but as I stood in that hallway facing my foster dad – the only one I had ever really known – I spoke those three words that finally conveyed everything that had grown in my heart. All of the emotions, the gratitude, the sense of belonging, the love was right there, and I had finally been able to claim and deliver them. It was time for me to share where my journey had taken me in those years since I became a child in the system, and that one sentence was the best way for me to express it. I don’t believe my feelings towards my foster family were unknown, just unarticulated. I had long ago discovered the gifts that they had given me and was well aware of how their presence and actions affected my personal growth and healing. The only thing that had been holding me back from expressing myself was the vestige of my old life and fear.

Seven years. I had contact for the first time with my biological father. It was my chance to have the fairytale that so many dream of become a reality. A knight on a prancing steed had finally come to rescue me from all of the pain and hurt that was left inside me. Needless to say it was a trying time, nonetheless my foster family was there. When I was stressed and not eating, they were vigilant about my health, and the tears in their eyes readily showed the concern they felt for my bewildered, and wounded soul. They watched as I struggled to define the events that happened during my life and how that influenced the relationship with those around me, including myself. They fought to let me know I was cared for when my emotions seemed to overwhelm me, and they supported me even as this new addition threatened to take me away from them. They had a strength of heart that still baffles and awes me. When my siblings (both blood and not) questioned my confusion, a common refrain from my foster mom was, “If you love something let it go.” They trusted that my heart would lead me home, and it eventually did. Through their patience, I was able to see the real meaning of family and come to believe that I was honestly a part of theirs.

Six years. I emancipated from care. One of my biggest fears has always been that I would end up unemployed and homeless. All of a sudden I

was on my own and praying that I wouldn't fall. Once again, my foster family was helping me overcome the internal obstacles I kept placing in front of myself, and to deal with the issues that stemmed from my life experiences. I don't believe that the merest shadow of a doubt ever crossed their mind, even for a fraction of a second, when it came to my success. They believed in me implicitly, and their unwavering faith acted as a firm foundation for my belief in myself. They also helped me in another, perhaps not so acknowledged way. Through their faith in my abilities, they developed expectations for me and my future. I don't mean that they expected me to achieve this or that, but only that they knew where my best would get me, and if I didn't get there I would have to face their disappointment along with my own. I would end up letting down those whom I respected the most if I didn't give it my all. Instead of procrastinating and getting stuck, because I didn't know how to start, I had to just jump in. I knew that come the weekend when I stopped by to visit I was going to get asked how I was doing in school, what was happening at work, and just generally what I was up to, and if I had a slacker answer for them I was going to get that look accompanied by "Jenniferrrrr." In short they gave me a standard to live up to.

Five years. I was adjusting to living independently and was learning many new skills. I needed the practical stuff covered before I could resume working on everything else. When my best friend and I were cooking a chicken for the first time I was able to call home to find out where to begin, and what it should look like at the end. If I needed something for my apartment, someone there always knew where to get it, and usually on sale. I never left that house without a dish of leftovers. And someone often went out of their way to ensure that I wasn't missing any of the necessary ingredients for life.

Four years. I transitioned to independent living. I left my younger brother behind as I moved out due to the constraint on the system. I felt like my world was ending. My last day at my foster home saw everyone helping me pack and a contingent followed me to my new place to help set up. When I was alone that night I grieved for everything that I thought I had lost. Consistency and continuing connections had never been a part of my life before, and to me, moving meant a forever good-bye. I wanted desperately to go back and visit, I missed my brother dearly and the transition from a busy house of eight to a basement with me and a roommate who was never there had caused a hopeless state of loneliness. Even with an ache deep inside to return, I didn't know how

and I wasn't sure that I could. Eventually I grabbed a book and a pad of paper that had inadvertently made it into my boxes as an excuse to drop by, just in case I needed one. When I got to the house I was so sad I couldn't go in, so I left the items on the doorstep and continued on down the street. After a couple of houses I realized I truly needed to see my baby brother. So I headed back, despite the weird looks from the neighbours. I grabbed the books and knocked, unsure of the reception I would get. The door was soon opened wide and the smile and enthusiastic greeting let me know that I was still welcome. To my relief not a word was said about my teary eyes. I continued to return each weekend and slowly began to realize that I was always going to belong there, that no matter where I went, it would always be my home. Until then, I had managed to keep my distance. Even though I had fully participated in household activities, and come to deeply respect and care for my foster family, I remained emotionally reserved. It was their commitment and acceptance of me when it was no longer required of them that gave me the assurance that they really cared about me and wanted me around. Sometimes still I forget that I have become important in the eyes of some of those around me, but my foster family is always there to remind me that to them, I am special, and without their commitment to me, I doubt that I would have ever come to the point where I believed I mattered, let alone to where I only need the occasional refresher.

Three years. Things were fairly settled. My emotions were stable, and life had fallen into a predictable routine. I was in the third year of pursuing my passion by playing hockey, and unbeknownst to me, my foster family had yet another lesson to teach me about myself, another tool to give me in order to help me come to terms with life. It was simple but profound, I was worthy of respect, and someone cared enough to help me ask for it. The effort it took was minimal, just a few minutes of my foster dad's time to talk with a coach with whom I didn't agree, but it sent me a huge message. I was worth the effort, and I shouldn't give up when it came to something involving me. I don't think that I will soon forget that day.

Two years. I didn't want to admit why I had been taken away from my mom, and I had a lot of things locked up inside. My psyche was incredibly delicate at the time and I struggled to make reality fit into a world that I would be able to deal with, without having it destroy me. This was obviously an important time in the healing process. I needed



to be able to work through things at a pace I could handle, and I needed to be able to put everything aside when it got too big. Thankfully, I had people around me who understood this. I never got questioned about why I was where I was, and I was never forced to confront information that I wasn't ready to handle. My foster parents just bit their tongue at my admonishments that there weren't any reason for me to be in care and they assured me that they would take care of my brother. During conversations about anything Child Welfare when I would have a rare display of emotion they didn't comment on it, perhaps sensing that to do so would have made the feelings worse and dam up the small outlet that I had for the containable portion of my trauma.

One year. My family had been split up and I had an intense rage built within me. Looking back I realize it probably stemmed from a combination of being hurt and losing control. At the time I only knew that I was surrounded by "stupid" people who didn't understand how things were supposed to be done. Little things would cause me great distress and I vividly remember getting upset with my foster mom because she didn't use the right kind of laundry detergent. Somehow she managed to put up with me, and knowing when to pick her battles, she bought a different brand. That's not to say that everything was tolerated, as there were things demanded of me, namely, I was to treat people with respect, even if I was angry. I think it must have taken a tremendous amount of patience to deal with me during that time period, and I personally couldn't imagine doing it, however, I was lucky enough to have people around me that knew I wasn't choosing to be ornery and troublesome, only that I was protecting myself from things I couldn't understand and that I wasn't ready to face things inside yet, but someday I would be.

One moment. A million things can happen in a single moment. Loves are given and taken, families are torn apart, and lost souls are found. Someone's life can be torn down around them. Mine was. With three simple words, "You're being apprehended," my world came crashing down and I was put on a path that would be long and difficult. But with the right help at the right time from those who truly cared, I would find myself a stronger person, someone I could previously only dream of being. Someone who could finally say, "I love you," not just out of habit, but because I truly meant it.

# Untitled

Written By Anonymous

I was thirteen when I started running away from my mother and everything that was going on there. At that time, there were six of us living with my mom and her boyfriend. Before I started running I lived on a reserve with my eleven brothers and sisters, my mother and her boyfriend. My mom and her boyfriend drank a lot and my mother would take off to the casino playing the slots, leaving me to look after my younger sisters. I had to miss a lot of school because of this, and we always had to do everything in the house like cleaning and cooking. All of my brothers and sisters, myself included, had to stay upstairs away from my mother and her boyfriend. There were times when I wasn't even allowed out of the house, and when mother was mad about something, she would take it out on my sisters by hitting them.

It definitely got worse when we left the reserve and moved into the city. The fighting between my mom and her boyfriend got worse, and they continued to fight in front of me and my brothers and sisters. We saw a lot of violence in our household. My mother would always take her boyfriend's side when they fought though. Even when he told her to kick my sixteen-year-old sister out of the house, she took his side. I got sick and tired of seeing the abuse all the time, so I started to hang out with my friends and stay away from my house more often. My mother started to get angrier and angrier with me because I wasn't coming home. It was just too much to deal with – I couldn't go home. So I started running and hit the streets.

When I was only twelve years old, I met a girl who knew a lot about the streets and running away. She taught me a lot of stuff about those types of things. One day she brought me to a woman's house. The woman told me that she would look after me. Not long after that, old men started coming into the house and she made me have sex with them. They would give her money afterwards. I stayed there with the woman for about a year until my sisters came and helped me get away from her.

After I got away from the woman who was selling me to these old men for sex, my sister told me she had a friend who would let me stay with him for a while. The guy told me he was only twenty-eight years old, and

said I could stay with him. He was a social worker and I was thirteen years old. I was living there for about two weeks when he told me to come sleep with him in his bed. He wanted me to have sex with him because he was letting me stay there. I couldn't go home, so I let it go one for about three months. Then the police asked me to come down to the station. The police had promised me that I wouldn't get locked up if I went down to the station and I trusted them. After all, I was thirteen and I hadn't done anything wrong. So I went to the station and the police told me that the man I had been staying with was thirty-eight years old, not twenty-eight years old, and he was a social worker for Child and Family Services (CFS). But the police lied to me in the end. I entered the system through a locked group home. That was my very first placement – a one-day emergency placement in a locked group home until CFS could find me another home.

After I left the locked group home I was put in a short-term placement and I lived there for about a month or so. My social worker there found me another placement that dealt with girls who have been or are involved in the sex trade. It was a different experience, going to this placement, which was more like a house and healing centre. I wasn't just thrown in there – my social worker took me there first and allowed me to see the house first. I was then given the option of living there if I wanted to live there. I knew I would fit in at this house. I even knew two other girls that lived there that shared similar experiences as me. There was a connection between me, the girls I knew already, and I somehow knew that I would get what I needed if I stayed in that house. I made up my mind that day to live there and I got to move in on the next day. I met all the other girls staying there. One girl was the younger sister of the woman who pimped me out to all of the old men.

I like being in this home. I've been there now for nineteen months. We do fun stuff like skiing, go-carts, camping, go to youth conferences and youth retreats. Staff help find us healthy learning opportunities. It's very clear to the girls living in our home that the staff cares about us. They teach us the dangers and what could happen to us on the street. They never judge us and never give up on us. We don't get kicked out if we do something "bad". Instead, the staff helps us learn about the consequences of our behaviors, and that helps us more than taking away our privileges, or our stereos, or just kicking us out back onto the streets.

I would never want to live in some of the group homes that some of my friends live in. The staff there doesn't show they care about the young people living in their homes. They just tell them what to do and don't show or teach them anything like they do in my home. And it seems like the staff always call the cops for little things. I have a friend who lived in sixty-seven homes and she is only fourteen years old. She ran away from most of these homes because she wasn't respected and the group homes were too strict and didn't understand how moving so many times can affect a person. She's on the streets now and addicted to crack. Everyone in my home is trying to help her the best we can.

It's very hard to tell people about my life and my personal business. I don't want to be looked at as a bad kid and I don't want people looking at my family as a bad family or a poor family. I don't want them to judge me or think my family is fucked up and that I am too. I don't like to be judged so sometimes I lie and tell people that one of the female staff members at my home is my mother and the girls are my sisters. My real mom is trying to do better, but it will never be the way it should be. We don't have a mother daughter relationship. I see the girls and staff at my home as family. This is kind of true because the staff do seem like mothers rather than staff and all us girls love each other, even though we sometimes fight but that's what sisters do, right?

I really wish people wouldn't judge kids in care. The stigma of being in care really hurts. The young person doesn't have to be the person who has done something wrong. It isn't always something that we did that brought us into the system. When people judge me for being in care, it makes me feel sad and unimportant and it doesn't give me hope for a good future, but I know I am a good person and I will accomplish my dreams. I remember once me and the girls made a big dreamcatcher for the site manager of our home and when we gave it to her I told her to please show everyone that comes to our home so that they know that we are not always bad.

But it's not always easy living in group homes, no matter how nice and supportive the staff are, or how many good programs they have, or how many fun things we all do together. It is hard living with so many other people. There can be a lot of drama going on at times and it can be very hard on everyone else who are not involved with the drama. It can be stressful when other kids are freaking out. It's not like living at home – I always have to keep my shit locked in my room or it gets stolen.

As much as I love living in my home, I do have to leave soon. In January, I will have to leave my home to live “independently”. It is hard and scary to live on your own. It will be lonely. There are things that I will need to succeed in life after leaving my home and moving into independent living. I will need help with buying furniture and other stuff for my place. I want to live in a nice area, not in a bad neighbourhood in some run down apartment infested with bugs. It’s also very important that I live close to my current home so they can be close to me if something happens and I need them.

I really hope that my current social worker will still be there for me and check in on me and help me with important things like budgeting and paying bills. My home helped me get a summer job that taught me a lot of responsibility so I’m really good in these areas but I still need help. I don’t think Child and Family Services should automatically put an age limit on when a kid has to leave the system. Most youths are not prepared or responsible enough and they are not settled or comfortable being on their own yet. As we age out of the system and go onto independent living, we need places that are specifically for young adults to live in where they don’t have to be on their own without supports and services. I have many friends who turned eighteen who were not ready to go out on their own but had no choice because of their age. One of my friends is now homeless and stays with friends who take advantage of her because she wasn’t ready to leave the system and didn’t have anything or anyone to assist her when she left.

My current worker is aboriginal and from my reserve. She is always telling me I am going a good job and doesn’t give me shit when I fall back. Instead she encourages me to do better. She always includes me in everything and asks me what do I want, or need. This is very important to youth living in the system. Social workers should be nice. They should give you praise and tell you that you are doing well when making good choices. They should listen when we talk, truly care about us, and not just do their job and make money. Workers should always make sure us kids are taken care of in our homes, make sure we have clothes and stuff to do like going to gym. They should spend more time with us than once a month and they should get to know who we are instead of going by the file they have.

Living in care is not easy but sometimes it’s the only option that we have. How we end up getting into the system is not always our fault,

and the things that happen to us before we come into the system, like the stuff that I went through, really affects how we feel about ourselves and others. Being stigmatized and looked at differently makes being in the system that much harder. I lie because I don't want people to think of me any differently than they would think of anyone who were not living in a group home or elsewhere in the system. We need good workers that care about us as kids in need of help and support, and workers that will help us get on our feet when we leave our foster homes or group homes. We need people to believe in us, and help us reach our goals – I'm lucky in that I have workers around me that do these things for me and the other girls I live with. Some of my friends, like the girls I talked about earlier, haven't been that lucky but all young people deserve the same chance at becoming successful.

## **I'm A Conscientious Objector**

**Written By Greg Littleford, Social Worker**

The OAPSW/CAPSW's "Code of Ethics" tells me quite clearly that I am breaching ethical boundaries by developing loving and nurturing relationships with my young people.

I'm a conscientious objector, am not and will never be a member of these organizations.

Sadly, the system seems to be moving so far away from the importance of relationships. I believe Child Welfare to be a truly unique genre of social work that in fact demands that relationships be the primary task, and that the "functional" tasks be the secondary focus of my work.

I'd like to give you an example if you'll indulge me for a minute. I was just chatting the other day with T, one of my girls/women who left care 5 years ago and who is currently at St. Thomas University in Fredericton NB in their BSW program (crazy lady!). It seems as if, from almost the very first day T and I met and I became her worker, we've always had these long philosophical chats about many things including of course being in care. She was 14 when I became her worker; she's 26 now, has 2 little boys, works 2 jobs and attends school full time. T has always been one of those people who have kept me very, very honest about what I do...sort of the "Social Worker Police" if you will.

Anyway, the other day we were talking about Christmas time. We were saying that it's a time of year that breeds so many different emotions for all of us but, given the paths you guys have all had to walk in your lives, especially so for Youth in and from care. She told me that she is currently taking a course on ethics in social work and that she has often been put in the position of defending our ongoing relationship both to the professor and some of her peers based on the dictated ethics of the profession. Regardless, T was saying to me that even though we are miles away from each other, it's so important to her that she's able to talk and maintain a relationship with me, and how it rings especially true around Christmas time. My response was that our (and any) relationship is mutual and it is equally as important for me to be given the gift of knowing that she is a part of my life, now and forever. I said again what I have said to her and other young people many times: that there is a very distinct aspect to my life's work that is in some

respects quite self-centred. I take as much learning, caring, nurturing and love out of many of these relationships as I put in. Despite what the white shirts' are more vehemently trying to dictate more and more these days, nurturing and caring is a two-way street.

My feelings are steeped in questions, hope and fear.

My questions are around the fact that despite perpetual red flags and feedback from Youth and Children, the system I am a part of continues to fail.

My hope is that your work at the National Youth in Care Network, and the work of Youth on local levels will have as profound an effect on both new recruits and established workers as it does on me.

My fear is that we will not listen or have the will to fight the trend and bend to the power of what I see as the de-evolutionary attempts to "over-professionalize" the field of Child Welfare.

It means a great deal to me to think that we (you, the NYICN, me - the lowly worker, and all other youth) have mutual dreams.

"The world weighs on my shoulder's but what am I to do...  
I see the tip of the iceberg and I worry about you."

- *Gedde Lee* -



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## **Resources**

National Youth in Care Network Publications:

Regularly. The Networker, our quarterly youth in care newsletter  
Annually. Funk'd, our annual youth in care magazine  
Semi-Annually. Bifocal, our semi-annual magazine geared at adult supporters and service providers

2006, Primer Anthology: Sharing Our Stories to Make a Difference  
– A Compilation of Stories and Research

2006, Primer DVD Presentation

2004, Speak the Truth in a Thousand Voices – It is Silence That Kills:  
Stories for Change

2004, Broken Fairytales: Teenage Parenting and the Child Welfare  
System – Research Report

2004, Broken Fairytales: Teenage Parenting and the Child Welfare  
System – Stories for Support and Strength

2003, The Power of Support: A Guide for Supporters of Youth in Care

2003, Primer: An Educational and Sensitivity Training Program for  
Caregivers

2001, From the Roots Up: The History of the Development of the  
Canadian Youth in Care Movement

2001, Who Will Teach Me To Learn: Creating Positive School  
Experiences

2000, The Network Connection: the Guide to Network Development

1999, Coast 2 Coast: A Nation of Youth United

1997, *The Real Deal: Rights and Resources for Youth in Care*

1995, *Gambling With Our Lives: Consumers of Social Programs Speak Out*

1995, *Into the Hands of Youth: Youth in and From Care Identify Healing Needs*

1993, *Pain, Lots of Pain: Family Violence and Abuse*

1991, *Thursday's Child – Child Poverty in Canada: A Review of the Effects of Poverty on Children*

1991, *The Choice the Struggle Upward: Caring for Children and Youth Who Have Been Sexually Abused*

1989, *Literacy and Youth in Care*

1988, *To Be On Our Own*

1987, *The Special Needs of Youth In/From Care of the Child Welfare System*

1987, *Who Cares What I Have To Say - Nobody Cares. Nobody!*

1987, *On The Other Side*

## **Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> See Trocmé and Brison, 1997.

<sup>ii</sup> See Raychaba, 1993.

<sup>iii</sup> See Raychaba, 1993.

<sup>iv</sup> See Black, 1983.

<sup>v</sup> See Raychaba, 1993.

<sup>vi</sup> See Cruikshank, 1991.

<sup>vii</sup> See Raychaba, 1993.

## NOTES



