

TENTH ANNUAL



Child Welfare Fund Awards for Youth in Foster Care



YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE WRITE ABOUT:

- one thing they would change about their foster care experience
- the help they've given to others

The College Board

June 16, 2008 • 5:30-8 p.m.

Welcome by Alonzo Mourning

Dramatic reading by
Sharahn LaRue McClung

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The Child Welfare Fund

The Child Welfare Fund was established in 1992 by an anonymous benefactor to improve the well-being of children and families in New York City. The Fund supports projects in two broad areas: system-wide reform in child welfare and direct services that prevent foster care placement or improve the lives of children and families.

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A special thank you to **Robert Danzig**, a motivational speaker, former foster child, and former top executive at the Hearst newspaper chain. Mr. Danzig makes a donation each year to supplement the prizes.

The **College Board** generously hosts the awards ceremony. We would especially like to thank College Board President Gaston Caperton and the staff for their help in making this event happen.

Autumn Spanne and Laura Longhine, the editors of *Represent: The Voice of Youth in Care*, managed the selection process. Al Desetta, founding editor of *Represent*, edited the winning essays for this program. Youth Communication's marketing director, Loretta Chan handled the program logistics.

Speakers



Sharahn LaRue McClung

Sharahn and her co-creator & director, Tamilla Woodard, presented Youth Communication's *Here.This.Now.* at the New York International Fringe Festival in 2006 and their 25th Anniversary Celebration at Symphony Space that same year. As an actress, Sharahn has worked at the Culture Project: Impact Festival & Women Center Stage, Syracuse University, UNYYC, FringeNYC, Six Figures Theatre Co., Hypothetical Theatre Company, Carnegie Mellon Showcase of New Plays, Denver Center Theatre, Mill Mountain Theatre, Epiphany Theater Company. Readings and workshops include: Primary Stages, Urban Stages, Williamstown Theatre Festival, NGO Commission of the Status of Women, Lark Theatre Company, New Georges, Urban Stages, New Jersey Rep. Co., and Emerging Artists Theatre, and THAW.



Alonzo Mourning

Video introduction to event by NBA star Alonzo Mourning.

Also, read an interview with him on page 15.

Grand Prize Winner

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE



Provide More Resources to Keep Families Together

Pauline

Age: 20

Good Shepherd Services

It was around 2:30 a.m. when I was awakened by the cries of my grandmother. I was shocked to see her down on her knees in her bedroom, crying in agony. All my life she was my childhood protector—an inspirational, strong, and independent woman. The chilling sight of her crying to God for strength weakened me.

As I stood beside the door unsure of what to do, my grandmother started stuffing her purse with legal documents and toiletries. When she finished, I followed her to the front door. With tears clouding her vision, she explained that she was going to the hospital and would be back sometime the next day. She assured me that food was in the fridge, handed me money, and gave me the most compassionate hug I ever felt. As she hopped in a cab I waved goodbye, looking forward to her return. I was 17 at the time.

My grandmother ended up staying in the hospital for months after she was diagnosed with major depression. Since no other family members could care for my sister and me, we were sent to a temporary foster home until my grandmother got better. That day never came.

When I was 14, my parents were stripped of their parental rights because they were both mentally ill and unable to care for us. My grandmother did everything in her power to gain custody of my sister and me so we wouldn't end up in a stranger's home.

We were thrilled to be living with her. We always had a close relationship. I felt so loved in her presence. But there were many disputes and family crises that led to my grandmother's mental breakdown. My sister was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, my grandmother's only sister died of a severe illness, and my

grandmother's daughter was hospitalized with schizophrenia. There were times when it was hard for my grandmother to raise my sister and me because we were teenagers. These tragic incidents came crashing down on my grandmother and took a toll on her health.

After my grandmother didn't come home, my sister and I were placed in a high-crime neighborhood. We were once greeted by a bullet hole in our front door. My foster brother became a gang member. I never knew what it was like to go hungry until I lived in a foster home. My sister's mental illness worsened and she was sent to a group home. With her gone, I felt lonely and scared.

If I could have changed one thing about the foster care system, it would have been to provide more resources to keep my family together. Services like family and individual counseling, as well as better medical attention for my grandmother's and sister's mental illnesses, would have helped our family survive through rough times. My family also suffered when we didn't have a social worker to advocate for us.

Several years after my sister and I were removed from my grandmother's home, I found out about a program to assist grandparents raising grandchildren. The Grandparent Family Apartments provides families with residential housing, but also offers additional services, such as parenting classes, child tutoring, counseling, and organized activities. To my knowledge, this is the only program of its kind. Had it existed when my grandmother had custody of us, I strongly believe our family would not have been separated. □

Grand Prize Winner

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE



Shaqueta

Age: 17

Catholic Charities

Constant Moving Has to Stop

I remember the day the cops came. Just like that we were handed over to ACS and our family was broken up. It never occurred to me that they would split us up. We were a family. There were tears in our eyes. We cried out desperately with our love for each other. I was robbed—the family that I had was taken from me. My heart was ripped out and my soul was shattered. But I had to snap back into reality. Tanaya and Nathaniel went to a home somewhere in Brooklyn, and Helen and I were sent to a home in Queens.

The hardest part of my foster care experience has been the lack of any permanent structure in my life. If I could change one thing about my foster care experience, it would be to stop moving. The only constant thing in my life has been moving from home to home. I am constantly moving, being transferred, relocated, and reassigned for someone else to deal with. Sometimes I feel like I'm a load that weighs everyone down. As soon as one family feels my weight, they try to free themselves of the burden I am.

Helen and I first moved to a foster home to live with an elderly lady we called "Big Mama." She was nice, but was getting older and could no longer care for us. Our foundation was stolen from underneath us and we moved to our next home in the Bronx. My new foster mother's name was Cheryl—I think. I've had so many "mothers" it's hard to remember them all. Things were going well in the beginning, but soon Cheryl couldn't handle me. I was angry and lonely, and constantly argued and acted up. I moved again.

This time I was sent to Long Island. My foster mother was fine, but her daughter Bianca became my worst nightmare. Whenever my foster mother wasn't home, Bianca watched over me. She used to lock me in the basement for hours. I'd sit there not knowing what to do or when I'd be released from prison. If I acted up, I'd get beaten with a belt. When the caseworker came to visit, I pretended that everything was okay. I knew if I opened my mouth, I was sure to get another beating as soon as the caseworker left. When ACS found out, I was moved once again.

My father was getting his life together and I was able to live with him for a while. For the first time, I had a real dad—he was my family and my blood. He took me to the Bronx Zoo and the park. He did the things I always thought dads do. But then he went back to drugs and my family was ripped apart once again. It was nice, for a moment, to have a father. Since I left him, I've moved about seven more times.

Changing from home to home would be the one thing I would change about my foster care experience. I am a nomad and a wanderer. I have no foundation, no discipline, and no structure to fall back on. There is no room or time for love. When you're constantly moving, you can't afford to love. You love for a moment, and then it's taken from you and the trust is gone forever. Moving from home to home confuses and conflicts the mind. I've lived my life confused, and I'm just starting to figure it out. □

Grand Prize Winner

HOW I'VE HELPED OTHERS



I Put a Smile on the Face of the Elderly

Jeffrey

Age: 18
mercyFirst

During the summer of 2006, I did something that was very challenging for me. I volunteered in a nursing home. It had a big impact on me and on the lives of the elderly, and it's an experience I will remember for the rest of my life.

When I volunteered in the nursing home, I was afraid to work directly with the elderly residents. I didn't know how they would react to me, so instead I worked as a secretary, filing papers and delivering interdepartmental mail. I was comfortable with this job because this was something that I did well. But I limited my restroom breaks to once during my shift to avoid encountering the residents.

Then one day when I was on my way to lunch, I saw a woman in a wheelchair trying to get up a ramp. She couldn't get up by herself and no one was around to help her but me. I started to turn around and go in the opposite direction. I guess she heard my footsteps behind her, because she called out to me and asked if I could get her up the ramp. I was nervous and didn't want to do it. Then I said to myself, "I can't just let her sit here and wait for someone else to come and help her." So I mustered up all my courage, let go of the nervousness, and helped her up the ramp. She said "Thank you" and offered me a hug.

I was once again nervous because she was a stranger to me. But I gave her a hug and when I looked at her face she had the biggest smile I've ever seen on a person. I made her happy.

From that day on, my nervousness about

working with the residents started to fade away. I wanted to do this for the other residents as well. I took on bigger challenges. I volunteered in the recreation department, working directly with the residents. If the residents wanted to go for a stroll through the courtyard, I would guide the ones who couldn't walk well and the people in the wheelchairs. I would talk to them or tell them a joke to cheer them up. If they couldn't remember things, I would help them by asking them questions like, "Remember those seven little people in the story with Snow White? What were they called?" They would answer "Dwarfs!" and would be happy they got it right.

I worked with them every day for the last five weeks of my summer vacation. It made me feel good. Every day I would go to work and greet everyone with an energetic hello and hugs. To know that I did something to make others happy made me feel important. I didn't care that the volunteer experience went on my resumé. Putting a smile on everyone's face had a positive impact on my life as well as theirs. □

Grand Prize Winner

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE



If I Could Bring Her Back

Donnie

Age: 20

Children's Aid
Society

I was young when I realized that my mother was struggling to overcome an alcohol addiction. As much as I wanted to be there for her, I couldn't understand why she wasn't there for me. I simply couldn't understand why I couldn't see her more often. I didn't know she would pass away before I could get out of care.

I never really knew my mother as a person. I never knew how she grew up. All I remember was how much she drank. After she passed, I really wanted answers. I just couldn't see how a woman in her early thirties could drink herself to sleep. She was such a beautiful person. Every time I saw her she would make me laugh.

At her funeral so many people appeared that I never knew. I thought to myself, "Where were all these people when she needed them most?" I was hoping my father would appear, but he was a no-show like he's always been.

I sometimes wondered what she thought of me after I told her how much I hated her. I wonder if it made her drink more or cry in pity. I didn't really mean it, but I was hoping it would force her to be more of a mother.

In my search for her true identity, I discovered that her mother has a drinking problem and that her father was a war veteran who died from drinking when she was 14. The more I found out about her early childhood, the more I regretted her death. If only she had told me how hard life was for her as she was growing up, I would have been more willing to help.

Saving her life would be the only thing I would have changed. She was my gift from God. She was the most precious item a child could ever have. She was supposed to be the gift I would give to my children. The hardest thing to bear from her death is her last child, who is currently four years old. He will never know who she really was. If saving her life could bring him one day of joy, I would do all that I could to bring her back. □

Grand Prize Winner

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE



I Wanted to Keep My Baby

Patience

Age: 17

Jewish Child Care Association

I survived a lot of horrendous things to get to the U.S. from the civil war in Liberia. When I finally got here, I thought my problems would be over. However, the bad experiences continued and foster care has been very hard for me.

My experience in this country has been hard because I didn't know anyone. I was new in the U.S. and had a very strong accent. In school the other kids made fun of my accent. I was jumped and beaten because I was different. After all I had been through to escape the violence and trauma I had been through in Africa, school and foster care were no sanctuary.

In order to survive I joined a gang. I sold drugs and dropped out of school. I became pregnant at 13 from a man who was much older than me. I had my beautiful daughter Destiny, and it was the first time that I did not feel alone. But I kept running away, so they took her away from me. It looked like they were never going to give her back. I knew I was too young to take care of her. She had to go into foster care, just like I was. Being separated from her hurt so badly. I became depressed, angry, and aggressive.

If I could change one thing about foster care or my past, it would be to keep my baby. I know that I was aggressive and dangerous, and that I had to go to residential treatment at Edenwald, but it would have been so much better to keep my baby with me. The thought of her feeling as alone as I was killed me. I wanted to take back all the terrible behavior that I did to cause to her be taken away.

It was also very hard to visit my baby. It was obvious that the foster mother wanted to adopt her and wouldn't leave me alone with her. I couldn't feed her the food I brought for her. The foster mother would not take the toys or clothes I had given my daughter. All of this should have been different.

Now my daughter is with a foster mother who is nice. She leaves me alone with Destiny, lets me feed her, and accepts my gifts. This mother accepts me and even wants Destiny to come back to me.

I am now doing well with my program, and staff and teachers have told me how proud they are of me. I am beginning to feel proud of myself. I almost feel like I actually have a life. The only thing that will make me whole is to be back together with Destiny. If I keep going the way the way I have been doing, I just might attain this goal. Then I will truly have a life. □

Special First Prize Winners (Excerpts)

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE

Someone Should Say “That’s Enough”

Isaam, 14, Jewish Child Care Association

I have had many unforgettable experiences growing up in the foster care system since the age of seven. The foster parents I was placed with were supposed to help me, take care of me, and treat me as their own. It is upsetting and sad that I was never treated or felt like part of the family I was placed with throughout my childhood. I was told that foster parents were obligated to give me three meals a day, provide me with clothing, and a bed and pillow to sleep on.

However, as a child I experienced constant and unnecessary beatings and severe emotional abuse by the foster parents I was placed with. To my surprise and anger, no one stepped in. No one from the foster care agency suspected anything, said anything, or helped me. I wouldn’t see the social worker I was assigned to for several months because she never visited me.

When I finally disclosed what was happening, my social worker thought I was lying and blaming my past neglect on my current foster parents. I wore clothes that were worn, torn, and that I had outgrown because no one bothered to pay attention to what I needed. I usually didn’t get a new pair of shoes until there were holes in the last pair. I watched as foster parents took their own children shopping for new clothes. If I had a disagreement with a biological child in the home, it was always my fault. If I complained of anything, I was viewed as jealous or ungrateful. When I tried to talk to my social worker about these things, I was viewed as being difficult. What amazes me most is that I was taken from my mother to have a better life.

I waited for someone to step in and say something. No one ever said, “That’s enough” when I needed them to. I was sent to a mental health hospital on a few occasions for behavioral problems. It was easy for everyone to assume that my behavioral problems were because of things that happened when I lived with my mother. No one ever stopped to consider there were other things affecting my behavior.

There’s room for a lot of improvements in foster care. The money given to foster parents should be monitored more

closely to assure it’s being spent on the foster child’s needs in care. Background checks on foster parents should include a mental health evaluation to make sure they are mentally stable to take care of a child. Parenting classes should be mandatory for all foster parents and should include the foster child. Supervisors should regularly check on social workers to assure that they’re working in the best interests of the child. □

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE

Help Youth Become More Independent

Sean, 20, Lutheran Social Services of New York

The one thing I would change about my foster care experience is the way it makes me feel as though I should be dependent on it for everything.

I’m not saying that I’m not grateful for all of the resources and options that are given to me because I’m in foster care. I wouldn’t have gotten this far in my life without them. Nonetheless, in my eyes these resources almost seem like a double-edged sword. You receive all of this help, but at what cost? In order to be in foster care, something must have happened in your past. I, as well as my family, have come to terms with the demons in our past. However, nothing makes these memories come rushing back more than a handout from the state.

Can I honestly say I’ve worked for these opportunities? Can I say that I’m lucky for what happened in my past? Can I say I feel entitled to these privileges? Can I even say that it’s fair to have all of this help? Frankly, the answer to these questions is no.

Not only this, but there are other adverse effects. The dependent feeling takes away from my own independence. A dog that is reliant on its master all its life can’t survive when it’s on its own. Although I don’t feel that my relationship with the state is that of a dog to its master, I do feel that if I don’t do things for myself now, I won’t know how to stand on my own two feet.

Nothing made me feel more like a regular teen than trying something on my own and failing on my own without anyone’s help. For instance, getting a job was a

Special First Prize Winners (Excerpts)

bit of a struggle and it took a long time for me to land an interview. I never had the experience of job hunting before. On the other hand, I never really had the need for a job since I received money from the state. But there was something about doing it for myself that made all the effort worth it. Working hard to get a job made me forget that I was in foster care and proved to myself that I can stand on my own.

If I need a job, or information on internships, or housing, I know the agency is there for me. But I don't think I will always need someone to lead me. Sometimes what I need isn't a handout, but just for someone to believe in me. □

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE

Children and Teens Need More Support From Staff

Loniesha, 18, Catholic Guardian Society and Home Bureau

If I could change one thing about my foster care experience, it would be the lack of support I received. When my mother got her kids taken away from her for the second time, I went to talk to a child care worker at the group home where I was living. I wanted her to support me and tell me that my mother would change and that her kids would be alright. Instead, she said, "That's what drunks do" and that eventually I would follow in my mother's footsteps, too. I felt belittled, mad, and hurt.

It's important for children, teenagers, and parents to have support so that they don't end up destroyed in life. Kids in foster care especially need support because they're not with their biological parents. Some don't even know their families, and when they see other people who do have families, they feel pain. They feel like a part of themselves is missing.

Support is important because it helps to keep us emotionally stable and makes a positive impact on us. It makes us feel like we have someone there for us. If we had more support, it would change the way most kids think in the system. With support they would feel more comfortable with their living situations. That would prevent AWOLing, curfew violations, confrontations between staff and residents at group homes, and result in less

stress for everyone, including the workers.

If I had support from that child care worker, I would have been able to talk to my brothers and sisters to let them know everything would be alright. I wasn't able to do that at the time without the advice that I needed. When I become a child care worker, I will do everything I can to support every child and teenager, and help guide them to the right decisions. □

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE

Adoptions Should Happen Quickly for Eligible Children

Milagros, 17, Salvation Army

I was a foster child for 16 years and the experience was anything but easy. My mother was addicted to cocaine and lost her visitation rights when I was three. I had to deal with many social workers and strangers who had more control over my life than I did. The worst experience I had was being abruptly moved out of a foster home where I had lived since I was four. This was a lot for a little kid to understand, but no one even bothered to tell me I would be leaving or why. When I was three, my sister and I were supposed to be adopted by a family in Florida, but somehow at the very last minute the agency failed to pull it through.

If I could change anything, the first thing would be to have people actually understand how much of an effect they will have on a child's life. I have always felt that most social workers see children as cases, files, and paperwork that can be dealt with indifferently. I understand that one person has to deal with dozens of cases at a time, but this doesn't make any of them less important.

There should also be a better system, where adoption is the most important goal as soon as the child is eligible. There are plenty of families waiting to adopt, but somehow foster children get lost in the shuffle until it's too late. There is something terribly wrong if there are families willing to adopt, but somehow adoption never happens for most children. Adoption would give these kids the stability and security they need and deserve.

I know that there will always be children who will end

up in this system and we can't change that. But we can do the most for them. You often feel hopeless, as if no one cares. That is why I want to become a therapist or social worker, so I can show these kids that someone understands and cares, and that they should never feel alone. □

HOW I'VE HELPED OTHERS

I Stood Up for Abena, and Myself

Freda, 18, Lutheran Social Services of New York

Abena stood in the hallway alone with a very sad face. I knew how she felt, because I could see myself through her. That was me a few years back — lonely, neglected, sad, and angry.

When I was in high school, I was the only African there. I had just come from Ghana, West Africa, with a very thick accent. I was laughed at, mocked, and insulted due to my nationality. I thought it was very ignorant and idiotic for people to laugh at me because of my accent or because I'm African. As time passed, I figured I had to do something about the disrespectful behavior before it got out of hand. I talked to my counselor about it but little was done. I then decided to do it in my own way.

One day our school called a town meeting, and after all the announcements had been made, one of the teachers asked if anyone had something to say. At first I was scared, but I took the chance to raise my hand.

As soon as my hand went up, everyone started to laugh. I became very angry and sad at the same time, but I knew what I had to do. I began by letting everyone know that I felt the school was wonderful, but that the students made it the worst place I had ever been to. I informed my classmates about how they made me feel. I told them how I struggled every day with insulting attitudes. I told them I was sad that my peers didn't help me make a peaceful transition to a new country and culture.

After that, no one ever laughed at me or mocked me again. But Abena, who also came from Africa, started experiencing the same things I went through. She stopped coming to school because of how she was being

treated. I decided to have a word with her. She told me she was planning to drop out of school because of what she'd been going through. I knew I needed to do something. I talked to our principal and begged him to call a town meeting. Fortunately, he did. I gave my speech, but this time it was for Abena. I told them everything Abena told me about their behavior toward foreigners.

The mockery stopped completely. Right now there are several Africans in school and none of them are faced with insensitive behavior. They are treated with respect, including myself. I'm very happy I took the chance to do this because not only did I help myself, but also Abena and the rest of the Africans in our school. □

First Prize Winners (Excerpts)

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE

I Would Not Change My Past

Evelyn, 17, Inwood House

“Mommy, mommy, where are you?” I cried. I was scared and alone in the two-bedroom apartment in Bushwick. I had a bad dream that night and didn’t find my parents next to me in the twin-sized bed we all shared. I ran into the kitchen thinking I would find my parents there, either high or drunk with some of their friends, but I didn’t find them. My mother was addicted to crack and alcohol, and was also the mother of 16 children. I was the 16th.

At the time, my mother had lost custody of all her children except me. I went home with her because I didn’t have any drugs in my system. Otherwise, I would have ended up in foster care like the rest of my 15 siblings.

My father was also an alcoholic. I don’t know if he was a drug addict like my mother, but I do know that they argued all the time over things I didn’t understand. But I thought everyone’s parents were the same as mine. I thought my mother’s strange behaviors were normal. They were many nights when I went hungry, while my mother found a way to feed her addiction. My mother would beat me for no reason. I thought maybe I did something wrong and tried my best not to get another beating.

When I awoke in the bed with no one next to me, I began to scream and holler because I thought something bad happened to my parents. Eventually ACS took me away.

My foster mother was 26 at the time and I was six. She adopted me at the age of 11 and I lived with her for 10 years, but we never developed a mother-daughter relationship. I learned that people never really understand how hard it is to cope with the things you’ve been through. I just wanted to forget my past and make all the pain go away.

But as I sit here and write this essay, I say to myself: why would I want to change anything about my past? My past makes me a stronger, wiser, more humble individual, and it is going to make me a powerful and successful person in the future. I wouldn’t change a thing about my foster care experience because without it I would not be the person that I am today. □

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE

Recruit More Heroes and Heroines

Peter, 20, Jewish Child Care Association

If I could change one thing about my foster care experience, I would change some of the people who work there. Kids need people who have time for them. They also need to work with someone they trust. Some people just go out of their way and some don’t.

The foster care system should be filled with people like Keturah Pierre, Allison Newman, and my foster parents, Willa and Harold White (also known as Ma and Pop).

Keturah Pierre is one of the greatest people ever involved in my life. One day I walked into the agency wanting to sign out of foster care. Keturah told me to go home and think about what I was going to do. She insisted that I stay with the agency. Thank god for Mrs. Pierre. I’m now a full-time student at Genesee Community College. If it wasn’t for Mrs. Pierre, I don’t think I would have stepped foot on a college campus because my family doesn’t have that kind of money.

Allison Newman is another amazing person. We have a special bond—I see Allison as more of a friend than a social worker. If Allison doesn’t hear from me in a while, she calls and asks how everything is going. One day I hurt my leg in gym class playing basketball. Allison took me to the hospital and stayed with me there a long time. When the hospital let me out, she put me in a cab to go home. Allison went the extra mile in that situation.

Harold and Willa White are my foster parents. They made my stay at the group home a piece of cake. Sometimes they were a little rough on us, but I see now they were doing it for a good reason. Pop tried turning us into men. He had a huge impact on my life because I didn’t have a father growing up, and Pop was that father figure. When I had a job after school I would get home really late, but Ma and Pop would wait up for me and make sure I ate. They would make sure I had money in my pocket until I cashed my paycheck and, if not, they would lend me the money.

If there were more people like these heroes and heroines, fewer kids would be dropouts and drug dealers, and more kids would graduate and go to college. □

First Prize Winners (Excerpts)

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE

Realize Your Life Is Not Over

Efrain, 16, JBFCS/Hawthorne Cedar Knolls RTC

I would not change a moment of my foster care experience. I would just like to send a message to all the parents and their children in foster care. I want them to know that their lives are not over, and even though they might sometimes feel as though they will not amount to anything, they have the power to become whatever their hearts desire. I feel that they need to know this because people always try to put them down.

I say this because I've personally experienced hard times as well, but I'm not giving up. I'm still moving forward, and when life throws me curve balls I smile and keep moving on. I would like to say to my parents that I understand that life is not easy, especially when you are a single parent. We all know children tend to become rebellious. I want parents to know that they have to let their children go, but they do not have to abandon, abuse, or disown their children. Every child deserves to have a parent, even if it's just one.

My mother is everything to me. I was taken away from her at birth. Instead of resting in her arms, I rested in the arms of a foster parent. The feeling of having a mother and not really knowing her is the worst feeling a child can have.

My mother attended a drug program and did everything she could to get my brother, my two sisters, and me back. We were all living in the Bronx. I got older and my mother stopped giving me so much of her attention and seemed to give it all to my brother. I became jealous of my little brother and my jealousy turned to rage. When I was in the 7th grade I started disrespecting teachers and got into numerous fights with other students. I was given the option of staying home or going into placement. I chose placement because I wasn't getting what I needed at home.

I am happy I chose to go into placement. I received the proper attention and I'm in a safer community. I'm doing a lot better in school. I'm receiving proper counseling, and I can express myself without being judged or feeling like I have to defend myself at all times. □

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE

Cross Bridges, Don't Burn Them

LaQuana, 21, SCO Family of Services

My stay in foster care has been an overwhelming emotional experience. There are so many things I wish I could change about it. There are so many days I wish I had taken the advice of my staff. I certainly wish I had taken all their words of wisdom into consideration.

I was raised in one of the toughest parts of Brooklyn and began to travel down a violent, unruly path. I chose to be a rebel without a cause.

My negative actions were unnecessary. I wasted so much time rejecting everyone. I got into a lot of terrible situations that should have been avoided. I especially feel bad because of what I put my mother through.

I'm finally realizing that all the hardship I faced could have been avoided had I only listened to my elders and the people who had my best interests at heart. I want to apologize for not accepting the outstretched arms of so many caring and compassionate people.

It took giving birth to my daughter to see things for what they're worth. I'm thankful that it's not too late. Now, when my old group home staff runs into me, they're shocked with the complete 180 I've done. They are ecstatic when they hear I'm working, a sophomore in college, getting my driver's license and an apartment, and taking care of Alexandria (my 17-month-old daughter). I'm focused and on a positive track.

Although I burned a lot of bridges, I'm thankful that there still are some I'm able to cross. It fills my heart with sorrow that I disrespected people who only wanted to aid me. I wish I could take back all the violent outbursts and irrational and spiteful actions towards others. Today I work hard to not make the same mistakes I made in the past. I'm always listening and my eyes are always open. I'm thinking, learning, and growing with every passing moment. I also pass on my experience to those who I see following the same path of destruction I abandoned so long ago. □

First Prize Winners (Excerpts)

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE

Give Staff the Training and Resources to Take Care of Business

Jamar, 17, Jewish Child Care Association

Though my overall foster care experiences have been pleasant, there are some important aspects of the foster care system that should be improved and changed.

If possible, I would change the manner in which young people's concerns and matters are dealt with by the agencies. Important issues that are of great concern to youth in care—such as obtaining important documents or jobs, destruction of property, verbal and physical altercations, and a wide range of other problems—are often either not dealt with in a timely fashion or are not dealt with at all. This causes much anger and frustration among youth in care. During my short time in foster care, I have encountered much difficulty in obtaining necessary documents, establishing home visits, and getting other necessary things regarding school, work, or social life.

People who work in foster care agencies are very busy people, often attempting to complete several required tasks simultaneously. However, it would be reasonable to assume that those attempting to obtain a job in a foster care agency would know the work required of them and how busy they would be. If one knows the requirements beforehand, there are no excuses for insufficient, lackluster performances.

What can we do to improve the foster care experience? Hire more skilled workers, create a more structured and ordered environment in agencies, increase communication between agency workers, and supply both youth and workers with more adequate resources. Who really knows what can and will be changed? However, one thing is certain—some changes must be implemented to improve the foster care experience for the youth of today and tomorrow. □

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE

Help Others Avoid What I Went Through

Cherry, 17, Inwood House

If I could change one thing about my foster care experience, it would have been to tell someone I was being abused by the sons of the foster parent who took me in. It was so hard to tell someone. I was scared, alone, and confused. I never felt safe and I never felt loved. There was no connection between my foster mother and me. I wanted someone to love me and show me what the world was made of. I thought this is what I would get from my foster mother, but I didn't.

I went into foster care in Brooklyn in 2006. My foster father said, "What goes on in the house stays in the house." That statement was the beginning of my nightmare.

I began to experience emotional abuse, psychological abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. My mind, body, and soul were taken. Every night they would come into my room laughing. I was scared, hurt, confused, and violated, but they didn't care.

Now I'm writing my story and this is the first step in taking control of my life. If there's anything that I could change, it would be to prevent another girl or boy from suffering the nightmare I lived.

A change I would make is to not place younger children in a foster home with older boys. I would also like for children to get regular physical checkups and for caseworkers to make unannounced visits. I would like caseworkers to build a relationship with the children on their caseloads, and I would like to see better communication between workers, children, and foster parents. Also, I want foster parents to take mandated parenting classes, to learn how to nurture and guide children in their care. □

First Prize Winners (Excerpts)

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE

Stop Social Worker Turnover

Stephanie, 18, Catholic Guardian Society and Home Bureau

I was 15 when I was first removed from my home. I wasn't sure what was happening or what it meant to be in foster care. My mother had a serious crack addiction and was unable to properly care for my younger sister and me.

The foster care experience was difficult and switching social workers made it even worse. Throughout the last few years I have had at least three social workers. If I could change anything, it would be to have one social worker. Every time that I began to feel comfortable with one social worker, something changed and I would get a new worker who was unfamiliar with the needs of me and my sister.

After being taken away from my mother, it was very difficult for me to confide in anyone. I didn't feel like I could trust anyone around me. Foster care was so unfamiliar. I didn't know who to talk to or who to contact if something was wrong. A social worker is supposed to fit that role.

Fortunately, I was lucky to have other people in my life to help guide me in the right direction, but having a steady social worker would have provided my life with stability. It would have assured me that the answers I was receiving were correct and that I wasn't being misinformed about anything. By having multiple social workers, I missed out on the opportunity to ask the questions only they could answer. To me, they were strangers. At a time in my life when I needed one thing in my life to be stable, the social workers weren't.

Even though it has been difficult for me to adjust to foster care without having one stable social worker, I am proud to say that I am doing very well. This experience has taught me that there is nothing in the world that can help you adjust to being in foster care, because there is no place like home with your parents. □

HOW I'VE HELPED OTHERS

Poetry Can Help

Jahmon, 16, The Children's Village

My poems help me to express my feelings in many ways. My poetry is about my life and how I grew up and things I experienced. I grew up in a family that not only abused each other, but also drugs and alcohol. When I was seven I was put into my first placement. I've been in the system for 10 years now.

I wrote my first poem at around age eight or nine. I didn't know what poetry was or that I was creating it until I said it out loud and people explained to me what I was doing. My words are inspired by my experiences. The way I speak, the way I talk in my poems, comes directly from my experiences with people. I've put my poems into a book. This has made a positive impact on my life because I have been able to share this book with other people.

One thing I found very surprising was that a few people cried reading my poems. I didn't expect this. I didn't know I could touch other people on such a deep level with my poems. Their reactions have become a huge source of encouragement and support to continue writing.

I hope I can have a positive impact on other kids with my poems. I want to pass on the message that if I can make it through the system, they can too. I also want my poetry to make a positive impact on the foster care system. Perhaps through my words people will recognize the types of hardships people face growing up in the system. □

First Prize Winners (Excerpts)

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE

ONE THING I WOULD CHANGE

This Is Pain

Mike, 17, Jewish Child Care Association

Chorus

It's not enough, this is not the same, I keep
losing my brain, this is pain, this is pain (three times)

Verse #1

When I go through pain, there is something that's not the same, when I go home I lose my brain, and then everything goes loose and it feels like I'm hunting a gray goose. But my momma said, "I will never grow up, because I act like a fool with things I choose." I always get into trouble by my brothers, and they always tell my mother not another would not care about me because she had three of my other brothers to love, and up in the insides of my body I felt like a scrub and low life thug, my momma never show me some love because I was not thinking from my brain, and that's why I'm always going through pain. This is pain!

Chorus

It's not enough, this is not the same, I keep
losing my brain, this is pain, this is pain (three times)

Verse #2

You don't want to know what my punishment was, I had to kneel on rice, and just because I do bad I had to pay the price, and then when I got up blood was coming out my knees, and I said God help me tonight please, because my life is not right, I don't want to die tonight. I remember I was real poor, we got kicked out the house, sleeping in the cold streets. On the concrete floor with no bed sheets, I was praying to the Lord but he was not talking to me no more, but can the God in the sky take me by the hands and talk to my soul, and make me understand and make me a real man, but maybe I can't because my life is upside down, so I better start from the beginning while I can.

Chorus

It's not enough, this is not the same, I keep
losing my brain, this is pain, this is pain (three times). □

Give More Teens My Experience

Sheneika, 20, Jewish Child Care Association

I know that I'm supposed to be writing about how I would change my experience in foster care, but I wouldn't change anything. I have been in foster care since the age of 16 and now I'm 20. I've only been in two homes and I haven't had any bad experiences with either of them. I like my agency, and my workers, supervisors, and peers treat me with respect. This agency has helped me in a lot of ways for which I am grateful.

In my last year of high school I began working with the agency as the JCCA youth advocate. I love it. I get along with the youth and with my co-workers.

JCCA has helped me get into college. I am now in my second semester. I've passed all of the seven classes that I've taken. Every day someone is pushing me and is at my side. This is my motivation and what has helped me to pass. Honestly, college is hard, and if you don't have the right people in your corner it is even harder.

I thank the agency for helping me to become a better person. I am more secure, I have matured, and I can take on challenges without having doubts. □

Finding Your Passion

An interview with basketball star Alonzo Mourning

By Manny

Basketball player Alonzo Mourning is a seven-time NBA All-Star and two-time defensive player of the year. He's also a former foster child.

Mourning was 12 years old when he was placed in foster care. He says that his foster mother has played a huge role in his life, giving him the extra push when he needed it. When she realized how much he loved basketball, she signed him up for a summer program and got him on his way to becoming the person he is today, both the athlete and the man outside the jersey.

Off the court, Alonzo has done a lot to help others. In 1997, he started his own charity, which provides and funds programs for youth, like mentoring, basketball clinics and after-school centers.

Last summer, I got the chance to meet Alonzo at a charity golf tournament in Briarcliff Manor, N.Y. When I first saw him, he was sitting down, and still my height. I was so nervous because he plays for my favorite team in the NBA, the Miami Heat. I had never seen any players up close, let alone talked to them.

But after some trembling and stuttering, I pulled out my notepad and got to it. When he spoke to me, I could feel the sincerity in his voice. Here's some of what he had to say:



Alonzo Mourning and Manny.

Q: How has being in foster care affected you?

A: My experience in foster care has given me the strength and guidance to continue to live my life. I knew there was somebody that cared about my well-being and was willing to take me in and give me a positive atmosphere. When someone was there providing the help I needed, I would be wasting their time if I didn't go out and do the best I could in life.

Q: So you had a positive experience?

A: I did have a positive experience in care. I know a lot of kids don't. But I think it's important for us to try to look for different ways to educate ourselves to find what we're good at. As soon as you educate yourself and you find your niche, you're able to make a life out of that. It's dif-

ficult when you're in foster care. I know many kids think it's an embarrassing situation. But I think it can be an enlightening situation. It's a chance to live life differently, if you have individuals around you who care how you turn out in life.

Q: Who were the positive people in your life?

A: I had a lot of individuals in my life who helped with my development as a professional athlete and as a person, from teachers and coaches to my foster parent and my biological parents—despite being in care, my biological parents were still good, inspiring people in my life.

Q: Why did you start Alonzo Mourning Charities, and what does it do?

A: I started the charity because I realized there was a need for it. It started as a fundraiser and it grew from

there. Now we've raised over \$6 million in the last 11 years. I want to continue to try to help young people who are in similar situations to where I was. Without those positive individuals in my life, I wouldn't be in the place I'm in today. We try to support organizations that give kids that support.

Our next goal is to try to build youth centers across Florida and across the country that provide after-school programming and safe havens for kids who need assistance, like kids in foster care. We want to provide a great resource for them.

Q: Do you have any advice for our readers?

A: I remember when I was 15. I needed a road map back then. I didn't know which direction I was going in, I just knew I wanted to play ball. But if you are able to get an education, that opens up so many other avenues for you to succeed in. You may have an idea now of what you want to do, but if you go to college, you might find out you're good at something else. The only way to find that out is by continuing your education. Follow your heart. Follow your passion. □

This interview originally appeared in Represent, January/February 2008. Manny was a Grand Prize winner in the Ninth Annual Child Welfare Fund Awards for Youth in Foster Care.

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the Adults Who
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Kristin Allen, mercyFirst
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Rebecca Tangen, Children's Aid Society
Starr Tomczak
Yolanda Webster, Inwood House
Amanda White, Legal Aid Society
Denise White-Smith, JBFCS/Hawthorne Cedar Knolls RTC



Thank You to
the Agencies
that Provide
Services to this
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Children's Aid Society: Donnie
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Inwood House: Evelyn, Cherry
Jewish Child Care Association: Peter, Jamar, Isaam,
Patience, Michael, Sheneika
Lutheran Social Services of New York: Sean, Freda
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