



Foster Care Youth United TIPS

*For Independent Living Coordinators, Social Workers,
Teachers, Caseworkers, Group Home Staff, and Supervisors*

September/October 2001

Letters to the Editor

FCYU welcomes letters to the editor. Encourage youth to write to us about their reactions to the stories—the letters can be quite brief. Some of the lessons below can result in short letters to the magazine.

Poetry

See pps. 10-11. Encourage young people to send in their poems.

SPECIAL WRITING CONTEST Teen responses to the Terrorist Attacks \$400 in prizes-see p. 29.

Thanks to an anonymous donor, we're offering \$400 in prizes this month. We want to encourage teens to write about their feelings and reflections on the terrorist attacks. We include a range of topics and writing prompts on page 29. Here in New York we've noticed that many foster teens feel especially vulnerable and anxious after the attacks. Their lives already have a lot of uncertainty, and these events only increased their anxiety. Putting feelings on paper often helps teens feel like they have more control over the events around them. Please encourage teens to write about their fears, hopes, and suggestions. We'll publish the winners, and we may use excerpts from other entries in a special section to run in the next edition of *FCYU*.

As always, ask the young people to be as specific and descriptive as possible. Don't assume the reader knows what they mean. You may want to discuss the topic with your group before they begin writing. Our Website [youthcomm.org] has 14 articles on tolerance, loss, revenge, and other topics. You may want to download some of those stories for teens to read to put them in a reflective mood for writing their essays.

DEADLINE October 29

GETTING THE SYSTEM TO LISTEN

Intro

In the following articles, *FCYU* looks at how foster youth can engage in self-advocacy—the ability to get what they need and are entitled to in the system. Some of these teens use writing to help themselves, while another joins an advocacy group in California.

Writing as a Tool for Change

In "Dangerous Diary," p. 2, Stevisha Taylor describes how she has a difficult relationship with her social worker, who treats her with disrespect. Stevisha begins to keep a journal, recording their conversations, and when she shows it to a supervisor, she gains an ally who takes her side.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing

—Stevisha describes having conflicts with her social worker, such as not being allowed to go on home visits and being treated with disrespect. How would you describe your relationship with your social worker? What is positive about it? What is negative about it? How would you like to change it?

—When you have conflicts in foster care, as Stevisha did, how do you try to resolve them? Have you been successful in resolving them? Why or why not?

—Stevisha writes in her journal to deal with her feelings and gain evidence about her relationship with her social worker. Have you ever used writing to deal with a problem? What was the problem and how did writing help?

—In addition to writing in a journal, what other steps could Stevisha have taken to deal with her conflict with the social worker? If you were in her shoes, what would you have done?

Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Tell each group to come up with a list of steps they could take to resolve a conflict with a social worker or another adult in foster care. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.



Speaking Up Pays Off

Tiffany Johnson, in "Proud of My Big Mouth" (p. 5), applies herself to preparing to leave the system when she realizes she won't be going home to her family. She saves money, goes on to college, and eventually works full time for the California Youth Connection (CYC) as an organizer, advocating for foster youth.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing

—Tiffany always had a big mouth, which some adults criticized her for, but it has helped her in many positive ways, leading to a career in youth organizing. Is there a part of your personality that other people consider negative, but which has been a positive force in your life? (For example, you may be criticized for being angry, but it could also mean that you stand up for your rights.) What is this part of yourself, and how does it help.

—For a long time, Tiffany didn't know about her rights in foster care (such as the fact that she had a lawyer). How well-informed are you about your rights in foster care? What questions do you have? What would you like to know more about?

—One of the challenges Tiffany faces when she leaves the system is worrying that people wouldn't accept or understand her because she'd been in foster care. She says she puts up a "brick wall" with people who

—About the lessons

The following lessons are designed to promote reflection on issues raised by the stories in FCYU. These lessons can be used with foster youth in independent living meetings, counseling sessions, or in other group activities, as well as in individual work with your clients. Each story is summarized briefly, followed by prompts that can be used to initiate discussion and/or brief writing assignments. In addition, group activities and roleplays are suggested for more active learning.

—How to do a roleplay

You will need two or three teens to act out the suggested roleplays. Make sure the young people understand their roles by briefly reviewing the characters in the stories. Each roleplay participant has to try to convince the other of her point of view. Let the roleplay go on for about five minutes. Then have the group discuss what they've seen and relate it back to the story.

—A note on the group activities

These activities are designed to have students work together in pairs or small groups. They can then share their work with the larger group.

weren't in the system. Do you do this? If so, how could you get beyond these feelings? If not, what keeps you from putting up a brick wall? If so, how does your brick wall make you feel?

Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Have the groups list three problems they have had in foster care that they didn't receive enough help in solving. Go around the room, list the problems on the board by category, and discuss ways the youth can get help in solving them.

Roleplay

Two teens, playing Tiffany and a friend. Tiffany's friend warns her that her big mouth is not a good thing and will get her in trouble. Tiffany wants her friend to know why having a big mouth has been a good thing for her.

Words Can Make a Difference

In "Power of the Pen," p. 8, Karolina

Kwiatkowska describes her satisfaction in writing about her foster care experiences in FCYU. Yet it also bothers her that many of her fellow group home residents refuse to be interviewed for the magazine. She worries that teens feel they can't make a difference, when the evidence proves otherwise.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing

—Would you write about your experiences for FCYU? Why or why not?

—Why do you think many foster youth are reluctant to be interviewed for articles in FCYU?

—Do you think the magazine has an impact in changing foster care or in helping youth in foster care deal with their problems? In what ways? If not, why not?

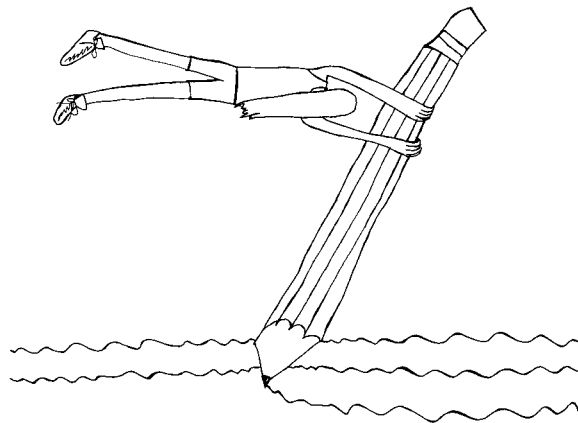
—Do you think writing about problems in a magazine such as FCYU can lead to positive change? Why or why not?

Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Have each group come up with a list of ways in which the foster care system could be improved by the youth who are in it (such as writing about problems in the system, forming organizing groups, meeting with adult staff, etc.) Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

Roleplay

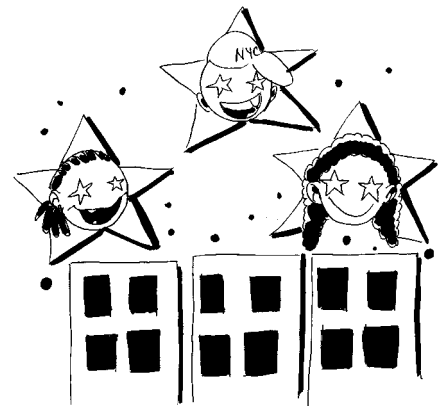
Two teens, playing Karolina and a friend in her group home. The friend doesn't want to be interviewed for an article in FCYU. Karolina wants to convince her that being interviewed could make a difference for her.



NEW HOOD OR OLD?

Intro

In the following articles, FCYU looks at whether foster youth should remain in their original neighborhoods when they go into care, or be moved to new ones. Some youth find it hard to adjust to new schools and new people and



miss their families; others want to get away as far as they can from the negativity they grew up with.

No Easy Answers

In "Distance Makes the Heart Grow Sadder," p. 22, Shawn Fred describes how he misses his family when he leaves his Brooklyn home and goes into foster care in upstate New York. When he returns on home visits, he feels alienated from his childhood friends. While Shawn feels the system saved his life, he also feels he has been hurt by having to move so far away.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing

—What part of Shawn's story can you relate to the most? Why?

—Did you, like Shawn, miss your family and friends when you went into foster care? Why or why not?

—Shawn's friends feel they can't relate to him after he goes into foster care. Why do you think they reacted that way? Did that happen to you? What eventually happened?

—When Shawn tells his group home staff about how his friends rejected him, their first reaction is to laugh at him. Was there a time you had a serious problem that the staff didn't take seriously? What was it? Were you able to get the staff to take it seriously? If so, how? If not, why not?

Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. The groups have to decide whether to keep Shawn on his campus far from home, or to place him in a group or foster home closer to his family. The groups have to consider that Shawn is lonely being far from his family, but also that he might go back to bad behavior if he lives in his old neighborhood. Go around the room, list the groups' decisions on the board, and discuss.

Roleplay

Two teens, playing Shawn on a home visit and one of his childhood friends. The friend

thinks Shawn is weird and goes to a home for bad kids. Shawn wants his friend to know that he's not weird or a bad kid, just a regular person dealing with family and personal problems.

Move Me Far Away

In "Doing Time in the Hood," p. 24, Lakia Holmes is happy when she goes into a foster home in her old neighborhood, but that soon changes when the foster parents turn out to be drug and alcohol abusers and the foster father sexually harasses Lakia. But it gets worse: Lakia's mother moves into the home after being evicted, does drugs with the foster mother, and also gets sexually harassed. Lakia doesn't tell her social worker because she can't face the stress of moving to a new home far away. When she finally speaks up and moves to a home in a safer neighborhood far from her old one, she wonders if she would have been better off there in the first place.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing

—Although the conditions in her foster home are horrible, Lakia doesn't tell her social worker because she doesn't want to move to a new home and neighborhood. She also fears she won't be believed and even blamed if she speaks up. If you were in Lakia's shoes, would you have spoken up? Why or why not? Have you been in a similar situation? What eventually happened?

Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Tell the groups they are in charge of Lakia's foster care agency. For two years, none of the agency's social workers noticed the problems in



Lakia's foster home: the parents doing drugs, the sexual harassment, Lakia's mother living there, etc. The groups have to come up with recommendations for recruiting better foster parents and changing how the agency's social workers monitor foster homes. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

Roleplay

Two teens, playing Lakia and a friend. Lakia tells her friend about the problems in her foster home, but says she's afraid to tell her social worker because she doesn't want to move to a new home and may not even be believed. The friend wants to convince Lakia that she should speak up.



Leaving Home Was a Mixed Blessing

In "New Life," p. 16, Antwaun Garcia leaves Harlem to live with his aunt in Queens to escape his family's involvement with drugs and crime. He lives a safer, better life and does well in school. But he misses his old neighborhood, flaws and all, and turns to writing to deal with the death of two friends.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing

—Antwaun says he and his family needed to sell drugs to survive. Do you agree with him, or did they have other options?

—When Antwaun's little sister is born, he decides he has to be a role model and set a good example for her. Has anyone in your life encouraged you to be a role model? Who was it, and how did you become a role model for that person?

—Have you ever been a role model for someone else? How?

—Antwaun misses Harlem, although there were many problems living there. Why did he feel that way? Have you ever had a similar feeling about an old neighborhood?

—Antwaun turns to writing to deal with the death of two friends. What has helped you deal with painful emotions?

—If you were Antwaun, would you want to have stayed in Harlem, or moved in with your aunt in Queens? Explain your reason.

Missing Mom

Chris Brooks, in "Too Far From Mom," p.

34, has so many conflicts with his mother that he eventually goes into a group home three hours away from her. The separation brings back memories of the good times they had together. Perhaps they'd still be fighting if they lived closer, but Chris would prefer that to living so far away.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing



—Do you prefer being close or far from your family in foster care? Explain why.

—Do you think Chris had to go into foster care? Or could more have been done to solve his conflicts with his mother without sending him into care?

—Chris says if he lived closer to his mother they "would have more of a chance to talk." Do you think that is true? Or can they begin to

talk while they are living far apart? What do they need to do to begin to communicate with one another?

Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Tell the groups they are social workers who have visited Chris while he is still living at home. He and his mother are having lots of conflicts and his mother wants to put him in a group home. The groups are to come up with ways to help Chris and his mother solve their conflicts, so Chris does not have to go into a group home. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

POVERTY AND FOSTER CARE

Intro: In the following articles, *FCYU* looks at the poor neighborhoods that send the most youth into foster care.

Where We're From

In the short pieces on pps. 30-31 ("Where I'm From," "The Sounds of Harlem," and "Hiding From the Hood"), several foster youth briefly but vividly describe their neighborhoods. After reading these pieces, either silently or out loud, ask the young people to do the following assignment:

—Write a short description of the neighborhood where you grew up. Include the sights and sounds in the building or house where you lived, and describe what life was like on the streets. What are your strongest memories?

Who were your best friends? What did you do for fun? Who were some of the adults you remember most? What did you like best about your neighborhood? What did you dislike about it?

Ghetto Life

In "In My Projects" and "Ghetto Super Stars" (pps. 32-33), Ms. Chatterbox writes about life in the projects in Brooklyn. While there is a fair amount of crime and gang activity, on most nights it's quiet as a mouse and you can hear birds chirping (for real). She also describes particular types who inhabit her neighborhood, from hustlers to ball players.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing

—Circle a passage in Ms. Chatterbox's articles that you can relate to. Why can you relate to this passage?

—What is the most positive thing about the neighborhood she describes? What is the most negative? Would you like to live in her neighborhood? Why or why not?

—Ms. Chatterbox writes: "Crime in my hood is not the way you see it on TV." Does your neighborhood get a bad rep on TV or in newspapers? How is the image of your neighborhood different from the reality?

—Write a description of your neighborhood. Describe its good and bad points, the kinds of people who live there, and a typical day and night.

—What Ms. Chatterbox likes about her neighborhood is that "we keep it real." What does she mean by "keeping it real"? What does that expression mean to you?

Roleplay

Two teens, playing Ms. Chatterbox and a friend. The friend is afraid to visit Ms. Chatterbox in her neighborhood, because she heard it's a dangerous ghetto. Ms. Chatterbox wants her friend to know that her neighborhood has problems, but it's not as bad as TV or the newspapers say it is.

A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

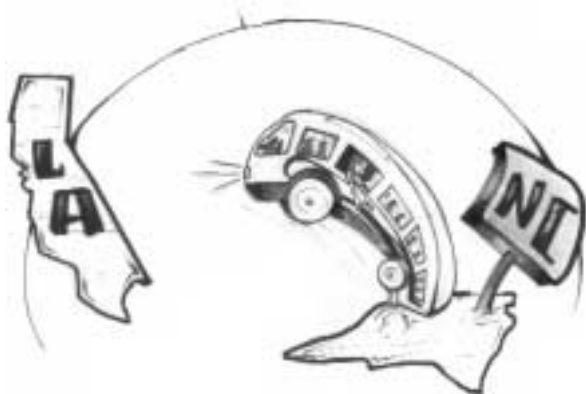
p. 12.

Intro

In this section, biological parents write about what was happening in their lives when they lost their kids, what they did to try to get their kids back, and how the system helped or hurt their families.

Wanting Her Son Back

In "Missing My Little Man" by Nitera Coleman, p. 10, the author writes about how she became pregnant at 14 and, after giving birth, goes into foster care because of conflicts



with her abusive father. Her son stays with her father although Nitera has misgivings. When she returns home and finds her son being mistreated, Nitera runs away to California where she gets a job, an apartment, and enrolls in college, preparing to get her son back.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing

—Nitera gets pregnant at 14 and is not prepared to be a mother. Nor does the father take responsibility for the baby. Why do teenagers get pregnant at such young ages, when they are not ready to become parents? What could be done to prevent teen pregnancies?

—Should Nitera's son have stayed with her father when she went into foster care, or should he have stayed with her in a foster home? What would have been best for the child? For Nitera? Why?

—Nitera's family believes that babies shouldn't be picked up when they cry, for fear of spoiling them, and they discipline Nitera's child by hitting him. What do you feel about these ways of raising a child? Would you do the same

thing as a parent? Why or why not?

—If you were Nitera, how would you have reacted when you saw your child being mistreated at home? Would you have left for California, as she did, or would you have stayed at home and tried to work things out there?

—What challenges will Nitera face in forming a relationship with her son when they're reunited?

Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Tell the groups they are family court judges who have to decide Nitera's case. She is 14 years old and has a ten-month old son. Her father

wants her to go into a group home while he keeps her son at home. Nitera doesn't want to be separated from her son and wants to go into foster care with him. In making their decision, the groups should also consider that Nitera's father has a history of beating Nitera, and Nitera may not be prepared to be a mother. Go around the room, list the groups' decisions on the board, and discuss.

New York Staff: Encourage Teens in Your Agency to Join FCYU!

We need writers for our program, which meets after school in Manhattan. Writers of every ability receive careful, professional attention from adult editors. School credit can be arranged. For information, call Kendra at 212-279-0708, ext. 114, or Rachel at ext. 113.

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Tips can also be downloaded from youthcomm.org in the Teacher Resources section.

FCYU is published in a national edition and a California edition (most stories appear in both editions).

Youth Communication also publishes a series of books on independent living topics, including *Breaking Away* (a guide to leaving the system) and *The Struggle to Be Strong* (an anthology and guide to helping teens develop their strengths and resilience). For more information, write, call, or check our Website, Youthcomm.org