

FOCUS

Newsletter of the Foster Family-based Treatment Association



Finding Her Voice —by Lillian Conboy and “Brittany”

Finding your own personal voice is no easy task. It takes insight, honest introspection, and sometimes a little support. In the case of college hopefuls, defining their voice is all too often

boiled down to the formidable personal statement essay.

And for most teenagers, writing this essay is probably their first experience with defining their voice, or

“self-advocating.” It’s a challenging proposition. For 17-year-old Brittany, this essay is an opportunity to share her experience and redefine her future on her own terms. As a transition-age youth in foster care, Brittany has been asked many times to share her story. For years she was asked personal questions about her life so that others could understand what she has been through, but this essay is an opportunity to show that she understands herself.

All too often, the voices and desires of foster youth are defined by the providers and support people around them. Foster youth are left without a say in the forces that shape their lives. They are left voiceless. Transition-age youth



experience many of the challenges that all foster youth face—loss, abrupt placement changes, and a lack of control over their circumstances. However, transition-age youth must also cope with

added pressure to learn independent living skills, prepare to support themselves financially, and begin making decisions about their future. For youth who have grown

up in a system where others make choices for them, this challenge can be incredibly daunting. For Brittany, this lack of control in her own life led her to withdraw and underachieve.

While in her biological mother’s care, Brittany frequently missed school because she lacked support and felt she needed to be home to care for her mother, who struggled with substance abuse. Brittany describes being unmotivated during this time because she felt hopeless and had no control over her life. Brittany lived with various relatives for several years before entering the system at age 15. As a result, she attended five different schools for high school alone. Upon entering her junior year of high school,

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A FOCUS on Transitions in Treatment Foster Care*

*Articles will become available to non-members on a biweekly basis

Brittany was significantly behind on credits and not on track to graduate. According to Brittany, she had no positive role models, and many people she encountered seemed to expect her to fail, leaving her hesitant to share her story or seek support from anyone.

This situation, of course, is not unique to Brittany. Many foster youth experience similar challenges in school due to frequent and abrupt transitions. And, like Brittany, many youth are not given the opportunity to show their real potential or find their voice in all the movement.

For Brittany, the process of finding her voice began by participating in a program we developed with that goal in mind. The Seneca Family of Agencies’ Youth Advisory Board gives young people the opportunity to find support and confidence by working alongside

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EDITOR'S COLUMN

—by Beverly Johnson, LCSW

*“We delight in the beauty of the butterfly,
but rarely admit the changes it has gone through
to achieve that beauty.” —Maya Angelou*

Embracing Change in the Absence of Choice

The new year often signifies a time for a new start. Resolutions are born and commitments are made to change the things we want to be different in our lives. Often such change is self-directed and is a choice we make to improve ourselves and our surroundings—getting healthy, changing jobs, or getting organized. Other changes aren't so self-directed and involve little or no choice—losing a job suddenly, facing a health crisis, or separating from a loved one. These types of change require us to fully commit to the process of change (transition) so that we may learn and grow from these experiences, however painful they may feel at the time. Difficult change, when embraced, has the ability to teach us much about ourselves if we are open to this possibility (and to accepting a little help from our family and friends).

Many of our foster youth experience change in the absence of choice throughout their lives—in many cases, starting well before they first encounter foster care. For these youth to successfully transform themselves into survivors, they must have the supports in place not only to ensure a healthy outlook and outcome but also to develop resiliency and a way to bounce back for the next wave of changes in their lives—changes that, it is hoped, they direct themselves.

In this issue of *FOCUS*, we share ideas and best practices from across the country and from former foster youth to professionals in the field on managing inevitable change and the essential transitions necessary to foster good health. Starting with our cover story about Brittany, a former foster youth and current professional who turned challenges into a voice for herself

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other youth with shared experiences. Brittany's therapist recommended that she join the newly formed Youth Advisory Board, an organization whose purposes are to place youth voices at the forefront of our work and to shift our view of youth as "clients" to that of "collaborators." Brittany was quick to join. The Youth Advisory Board represented a chance for Brittany to engage with other foster youth in a comfortable setting. They could relate with one another. They shared many of the same experiences and hardships. In short, through the group, Brittany could share her feelings and experiences with people who understood in a way that no provider could. They were peers.

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Through the Youth Advisory Board, Brittany now serves as a consultant for Seneca management and is involved in training for new staff and foster parents, sharing her own experiences and insights with providers. Brittany communicates about her needs, goals, and positive and negative experiences working with providers so that they can better work with youth like her. Youth Advisory Board members also provide peer-to-peer mentoring, allowing Brittany to see the impact that sharing her story can have for other youth with similar experiences. The Youth Advisory Board emphasizes that members choose what they would like to share, as they are the experts about their own lives. In sharing her experiences on her own terms and seeing the power of her voice, Brittany has gained a sense of ownership over her story.

In the past year, Brittany has begun to actively take part in planning her treatment sessions with providers, ensuring that she receives adequate support in processing her past as well as planning for her future. Brittany facilitated her own goals meeting, identifying ways that providers and natural supports can empower her as she prepares to transition out of foster care. Brittany is eligible to attend the University of California, has completed and submitted her college applications, and will graduate on time with her peers. In fact, Brittany just received her first college acceptance letter.

It's Brittany's voice that does the best job of telling her story, and her final personal statement is proof of that.

Here is an excerpt from Brittany's story:

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and other youth she represents, this issue includes a call by Hank Marotske for child welfare organizations to engage foster care alumni as the best salespeople for our mission. These two stories capture resiliency at work.

Keisha Bryan writes about shifting the perceived negative image of working in Treatment Foster Care in order to recruit and retain bright individuals in this important work. And an experienced foster parent and supervisor in the field will remind you of effective, child-centered practice interventions for transitioning children from foster care to home.

We also hope you like our new What's Up in Public Policy column and the Chapter Updates.

I think we can all accept that change is inevitable, that it is often not our choice, and that transitions can be painful. Let's commit to preparing our youth with the skills and supports necessary to embrace this understanding so they can fully realize the individuals they are meant to be.

Beverly Johnson, LCSW is the Chief Program Officer of Lilliput Children's Services. She is a member of the FFTA Board of Directors and serves as the vice chair of the FFTA Editorial Committee.

FOCUS

Newsletter of the Foster Family-based Treatment Association

The Foster Family-based Treatment Association strengthens agencies that support families caring for vulnerable children.

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Finding Her Voice

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I have faced countless challenges in my life, many of which were not in my control. As a youth in foster care, adults often made decisions for me about where I could live or when I could see my family. However, because of my resilience, I have made the choice to change my circumstances. I know that I would not be where I am today without my ability to adapt and remain focused on my goals. With a lot of self-reflection I finally understand that although I cannot change my past, I am in control of the decisions that will determine my future. Today, through my participation in a Youth Advisory Board, I have the opportunity to tell my story and advocate for youth like me. I've taught myself that my future starts with me.

Lillian Conboy is a Family Support Counselor for ITFC with Seneca Family of Agencies in the California Bay Area. She has been working with "Brittany" for over a year, most recently focusing on college readiness. "Brittany" has been accepted to a four year university in California.



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