



The Glass Ceiling Effect in Foster Care

BY BRITTANY BARTKOWIAK, FORMER FOSTER CHILD AND CURRENT FOSTERING MICHIGAN SUCCESS STUDENT AMBASSADOR

*“The world is yours.
 You can do anything
 you set your mind to.
 The possibilities are
 endless.”*

Many children hear similar phrases from their biological parents as they’re growing up. Many of us had childhood fantasies of being astronauts or artists, and parents typically tend to support these visions – regardless of how unrealistic they might be. Youth from foster care often never hear the words “the world is yours” when we are in the system. It can be difficult to feel entitled to much of anything – especially dreams – when you’re carrying your belongings from place to place in a plastic bag. Unfortunately, reality and statistics support this: only 3% of foster youth graduate with a bachelor’s degree after leaving the system (Casey Family Programs, 2011). Consequently, the mean income for alumni of foster care is approximately \$14,000 compared to a mean income of \$32,000 for the general population (University of Chicago, 2012). Why? Why does this happen?

I have a theory. Many have heard of the “glass ceiling” effect, which typically refers to the invisible barriers that prevent women and minorities from being promoted within a corporate setting or being awarded professional achievements, regardless of their personal qualifications. I believe there is a glass ceiling effect for foster youth. There are unseen barriers that prevent the success of youth in care. There are several educational barriers, such as a youth’s ability to maintain high academic standards when being moved around within the system. Educational records and curriculum are often inconsistent, which can make academic success difficult.

Perhaps one of the biggest barriers facing youth in and from the foster care system is the societal beliefs and expectations of what care is and should be like, and what foster care youth are and should be like. The reality is that each foster family is just as unique as each traditional biological family, and each placement has equal potential to be a positive

or negative experience. Each foster youth is just as unique as youth raised by their biological parents. Not all youth from foster care are troubled, and not all have been abused. Despite their experiences, and perhaps especially so, foster youth are certainly entitled to having the same dreams and reaching the same goals as youth who haven’t been in the system.

I will be graduating in April of this upcoming year from Eastern Michigan University and continuing on to graduate school. When I was going through the foster care system, I never thought I’d attend college. This wasn’t because I didn’t want to, or think I was capable, but because all of my energy was focused on

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trying to survive and adapt to new, constantly changing environments. I couldn’t possibly think about applying for the FAFSA or touring colleges when I was preparing for upcoming court dates, or balancing the various emotions commonly relating to being in care. However, when I left the foster care system at age 18, my life changed. I found myself feeling like the possibilities for my future were endless, and embraced the world I suddenly felt entitled to experiencing.

People have often commented on my success and shared their surprise that I – a youth from foster care – have been able to excel in school, hold consistent employment, maintain healthy relationships, and live independently. I often feel frustrated that others think my former foster care status would prevent me from achieving happiness, education, and success. If anything, I feel my experience in foster care has only helped me be successful. I came to college with previous experience adapting to new environments and living in close relation with strangers. I was accustomed to studying amidst chaos, and found a university environment to be surprisingly calm. Foster care taught me to be self-reliant. These attitudes have been extremely helpful as I transition to adulthood. Most people assume that the adversity foster youth face hinders their success, but I think it makes us stronger. I believe it helps us grow, and provides us with different tools and life perspectives

that actually encourage our success.

I want to stop hearing that people are surprised by my accomplishments and the accomplishments of other youth in care. There shouldn’t be a glass ceiling of expectations for youth in the system; we should be supported and expected to shatter it. After surviving my childhood, I feel I can survive anything. Strength is built, and I certainly wasn’t going to stop being strong once I left foster care. If you are a youth in or from care, I hope you feel the same way. My guess is that you’ve had to fight at some point in your life, and I hope you keep fighting. If there was ever anyone (including yourself) who told you that you weren’t good enough, they

were wrong. Whatever happened that led up to your placement in the foster care system wasn’t your fault, and your future shouldn’t be affected or limited as a result. Try not to be ashamed of your past and the fact you were or are in care. Don’t limit yourself; why should you? The world is yours. You can do anything you set your mind to, and the possibilities for your success are absolutely endless.



About Brittany’s Blog:

As a FSM Student Ambassador, Brittany will share all the challenges, victories, and lessons learned leading up to her graduation in Spring. A great resource for students and professionals alike, her blog will discuss what relationships were most helpful, what resources were most valuable, and what challenges Brittany will face leading up to her graduation in May 2014. Her regular posts will cover everything from applying for jobs, finding an apartment, to creating and maintaining supportive relationships as she transitions into her professional career.



On Friday, August 16th 2013, nineteen students representing Eastern Michigan University, Michigan State University, Saginaw Valley State University, and Western Michigan University departed Kalamazoo, bound for the Center for Fostering Success' Student Leadership Retreat in Washington D.C.

2013 CFS LEADERSHIP RETREAT

Day 7: Thursday, August 22nd

WRITTEN BY AMBERLYNNE, WMU SEITA SCHOLAR, SOPHOMORE

Today, we said goodbye to Washington D.C. and made our way straight to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The ride itself was about three hours, give or take, and though it was somewhat of a bittersweet moment for me as we left, I was excited to finally venture out and get the chance to explore another place where I've always wanted to go. When we got there, we were a bit early so, stopping by the hotel, we got our luggage moved into a room before heading to the conference that we had that day.

Our conference was held at the College of Physicians on the campus and, let me just say that this place is really cool. They had a museum on the first floor where we got to see the different diseases and the history of where each different ailment and disease got their name from.

The really cool part was the fact that they did a collaboration of medical research and the Grimm's Fairy Tales and, since I'm so fascinated with folklore and tales, it was up my alley. The thing that I really liked the most was the explanation about Corsets and the effect that they have on the body. There was also the info about the fact that they have a piece of Albert Einstein's brain there. Needless to say, I learned so much being there.

With the conference, it was definitely really cool to meet new people. Many people spoke; some of them include Maddy and Chris, Celeste Bodner, who is the executive director of FosterClub; Johanna Greeson, who teaches at the University of Philadelphia, and Jennifer Pokempner, who is a supervising attorney of the Juvenile Law Center. Along with that, there were others who were there

and, though they didn't exactly speak at a panel or anything, I enjoyed sharing with them my college experiences and how the Seita Program had changed my life.

After the conference, it was pretty low-key. We went to dinner at Guacamole Mex-Grille, which was pretty small but, sometimes the small places have the best food, and this was such a scenario. I got the taco salad and, it was really yummy. Afterwards, I went back to the hotel and just stayed there for the rest of the night. Today was really fun and I enjoyed getting to know others and helping out colleges that want to help out their foster youth and make sure that they get the same help as we do in Michigan.

This article originally appeared on the Fostering Success Michigan website and has been edited for this publication.



SHARE YOUR SUCCESS STORY

Fostering Success Michigan is seeking student stories to be highlighted on their website!

We are currently seeking students who are interested in being featured on our website. We have all heard the statistics and know about the obstacles students face. This is an opportunity for students and professionals alike to read the success stories and learn about what supports helped youth succeed. The stories will be used as a way to highlight students and their achievements.

If you know of any youth or alumni of care between the ages of 18 and 24 who are currently enrolled in high school or college we would love to hear from them.

Contact Fostering Success Michigan Student Researcher, Brittney Grant, at fostering-info@wmich.edu to have the interview questions sent directly to your inbox.

We look forward to featuring youth and alumni stories from across the state!

ADOPTION AND YOU

BY JENNIFER BROOKS, MARE YOUTH SPECIALIST

Circumstances leading up to adoption are often puzzling and hard to understand for the child involved. Many kids wonder about their biological family. If you are in the process of waiting for your Forever Family, transitioned out of care, or have already been adopted, it is important that you talk to people you trust about your feelings and questions.

As a Social Worker who has been in the field for 7 years I have come across so many amazing youth and families. I found through talking to youth and trying to understand what they are going through and assisting their Adoption Workers to help them find the right path for each youth, whether it be adoption or Semi Independent Living (SIL), or APPLA E. Sometimes kids in foster care do not want to be adopted and that is okay. Often times, not wanting to be adopted is rooted in underlying fears. It is hard to trust and open your heart to a complete stranger. If you feel this way, it is important that you talk about your fears. There may be a family out there for you, if you just take the risk and try.

Some youth report not wanting to be adopted out of loyalty to their biological family. They fear that if they get adopted they will be replacing their biological family with a new family. Another way to look at adoption with the same perspective of today's marriage tradition is when you get married, parents don't lose a daughter, they gain a son. In the same way, a daughter doesn't lose connections with her parents; she gains a whole new set of parents. This different way of thinking was adapted from the FosterClub article on Adoption I had read and it made perfect sense. Being adopted doesn't mean you have to replace your bio-family, or your identity and memories, it means you are simply adding on more family and support to give you the best life you can possibly have. If this sounds like a concern you have regarding why you don't wish to be adopted, I encourage you to process this with an adult in your life whether it be a therapist or a caseworker, and give yourself a chance to be the best you can be with all the supports in place. What may also help you process your feelings is talking to youth who have been through what you are going through and have dealt with some of the same struggles and emotions of being adopted.

The groups listed below range in focus from higher education and career choices to daily living experiences and experiences in the child welfare system. Continue reading below, and find the one that is right for you!



FosterClub - FosterClub is a national network for young people in foster care and young foster care alumni. The site includes blogs from current foster youth, success stories from youth who have come out of the foster system as well as celebrities who faced foster care. It also provides a listing by state of contact information for professionals and hotlines.



Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative - MYOI is a partnership between the Michigan Department of Human Services, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Oakland/Livingston Human Services Agency, and many other local community partners. MYOI's goal is to ensure that young people in foster care have successful outcomes in housing, education, employment, community engagement and health.



Foster Youth in Transition - An organization that is geared towards youth who are aging out of foster care. It's a comprehensive, youth-oriented site with information, advice, interactive features and a useful glossary of foster care terms. This is a website with information on a variety of issues important to current and former foster youth. The site provides links on how to develop supports, find services, get answers to important questions and just keep you posted on what's new.



Camellia Network - Camellia Network harnesses the power of new technology to connect youth "aging out" of the foster care system with a community of resources, opportunities, encouragement and support. Youth have profiles on the site, giving them a place to express themselves, share their goals for the future and articulate what they need to be successful. Individuals and companies from across the country are able to collectively provide the support these young people lack by offering up doses of encouragement, career advice, professional connections, and financial support to help them navigate their way into adulthood.

FEATURED ARTWORK

