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## ***MARIANNE UDOW: Those who outgrow program need adult help, too***

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**BY MARIANNE UDOW**

For many 17- and 18-year-olds in Wayne County, May is a month of excitement and achievement. Family members gather in backyards, church halls and auditoriums to celebrate senior-year events such as awards banquets and graduations that mark the first steps children take toward leaving the nest.

However, for teens such as Jessica Lindsey -- and the approximately 600 youths in Wayne County who will "age out" of foster care this year -- graduating from high school can be an ordeal. Numerous foster care placements meant Jessica attended four different high schools in Detroit. For many older youth in care, transfers across districts and interruption in attendance often mean watching as your peers accept their diplomas. Through guidance from mentors, Jessica did graduate.

Although recent studies have shown youth who have aged out of foster care experience disproportionate rates of unemployment, homelessness, mental illness and lack of health insurance, Jessica, 19, attends college, works full-time and serves as a tireless advocate for youth in care. She's president of the local youth board for the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a national foundation that helps foster care youth make successful transitions to adulthood.

If you ask Jessica where she finds the energy to pursue her personal goals while trying to improve foster care, she'll tell you she draws inspiration from three mentors.

The first was the referee for her foster care case who now helps Jessica pay for college. Another, Ms. Renee, is a motherly mentor who is available for advice at all hours. She introduced Jessica to golf and has coordinated several trips for her and other inner-city youth to the PGA Learning Center headquarters in Florida. The third mentor, Sean Blume, showed Jessica the power of the youth voice in improving the foster care system by encouraging her to shadow him when he served as coordinator of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative at the Wayne County Department of Human Services. Sean, a former foster youth, was a role model too.

There are currently more than 7,700 youth in foster care in Wayne County; 30 percent are targeted for transitional services and programs. While Michigan is making great strides in changing programs and policies for adolescents in care, the whole community must get involved if our youth are to succeed as adults.

How can you help? Don't be afraid to get to know youth in care in your neighborhoods and schools. Don't let them feel ashamed or isolated. Treat them as you would your own children so they have several families and supportive adults in their lives. At a recent statewide taskforce meeting, youth in care were asked what characteristics they would like in a mentor or supportive adult. This is what they said:

- Understand and accept us for what we've been through as children.
- Be patient as we gradually break down unhealthy barriers we've developed.
- Consistently check in with us in good times and bad, and don't pass us on to someone else again.
- Assist in helping us understand our problems.
- If you share the same professional goals as we do, please consider helping us to learn about your field.
- Offer to attend events with us where a family member is invited.

To learn more about foster youth in transition, tune in to Detroit Public Television on Thursday, for two hours of special programming on WTVS (Channel 56) that encourages adults to make a difference by becoming involved in the life of a foster child. Foster a Future, an American Black Journal special airing at 8:30 p.m., and Aging Out, a documentary airing at 9 p.m., chronicle the lives of young people locally and nationally who have aged out of care.

On behalf of the youth in foster care, I urge you, your family, your church, your neighborhood and your workplace to become involved in the lives of these young people. A small percentage of your time can make a change that lasts a lifetime. For more information about getting involved in the lives of youth in foster care, I encourage you to call your local Department of Human Services Child and Family Services office, and ask to speak to the Youth in Transition coordinator.

**MARIANNE UDOW**, *director of the Michigan Department of Human Services, recently testified on Capitol Hill on behalf of the needs of older youth in foster care. Write to her in care of the Free Press Editorial Page, 600 W. Fort St., Detroit, MI 48226.*