

Graduation for Foster Children - An Uncertain Future

During the graduation season, 18-year-olds across the country celebrate their achievements, plan for the future, and revel in their growing independence. But, for foster children, their 18th birthday is clouded with uncertainty and fear. In many states, the extensive support system that has helped them since their families were unable to care for them abruptly ends.

Buy the book: [On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Age Out of the Foster Care System?](#)

"Each year about 20,000 of the nation's 500,000 foster children 'graduate' from foster care," says Casey Family Services executive director Raymond Torres. "For many, this means moving out of their foster homes and a system that has provided counseling, housing allowances and health care. Too often, for a variety of reasons, these graduates have no one in their lives who is willing or able to help." The results -- personally and for society as a whole -- can be disastrous: 30 percent of America's homeless people were once foster children.

Holly Moffet is one former foster child who made a successful transition. She prevailed despite an extremely difficult childhood: During high school alone, Holly lived in seven different homes and went to five different high schools. She credits the "constructed family" she has relied on throughout her life, particularly during the transition out of foster care, for her success. That family includes Casey Family Services social worker Ginny O'Connell, her first foster parents and her boyfriend's mother. When Holly graduated from high school in 2000, her "constructed family" was all there. "Graduating from high school was the biggest thing I'll ever do," says Moffet. "Even if I go on to get a Ph.D., my high school diploma will still be my biggest accomplishment." She will graduate from college this spring and start work on a master's degree in education in September.

Holly is one of 10 teens profiled in "On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Age Out of the Foster Care System," an upcoming book by Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler. Not all the stories are as triumphant as Holly's, but they all share a similar struggle.

"It concerns me greatly that many youth who age out of foster care have no significant relationships with adults whom they can consult about either the mundane or the profound, let alone a physical place they call home," says Shirk. "Many of the problems they encounter in their first years out of foster care are those that all 18- and 19-year-olds encounter. But the consequences of their mistakes are much worse than they were for my children because most don't have the safety net that an involved family provides."

Ginny O'Connell, who was Holly's social worker since she was 12, has been one of those "significant relationships." "Ginny was different," says Moffet. "Once I started moving around, she was the only consistent influence in my life. She came to my recitals, my concerts, my birthday parties, and all my visits with my mom and my sister. She's really had a hand in raising me. She's more interested in my life than my birth mother is."

"A lot of foster kids have great foster parents they can rely on. Holly didn't have that," says O'Connell. "And with all the times she had to move, she didn't have anyone else to be her anchor. There are important rituals in a child's life. There was no one else to make sure she got to experience them, so I decided to be the one."

"While there has been an increase in public policy initiatives to help foster children make a successful transition to adulthood, the funds and the system to deliver services to these young adults are inadequate," says Torres. "We need to prepare foster youth to make the transition and we need to promote a network of caring adults and community connections to help them through."

Shirk agrees. "In the first few years out of care, the keys to not just surviving, but flourishing are: good preparation for independence (especially in financial matters), supportive family and social connections, and engagement in the larger world. It goes without saying that these young people need secure housing and participation in either higher education, skills training or a career-path job."

"In addition to supporting public policies that promote a wide array of transition services for foster children, there is so much each of us can do to help these young adults," continues Torres. "You can tutor a foster teen, provide job or internship opportunities, offer to take a foster teen into your home for an occasional weekend or during college breaks. We all can make a difference in a young life. At this time of year, when so many of our young stand on the threshold of their adult lives, it is all the more important to reach out a helping hand to those less able to step into productive independence."

For more information, call (203) 401-6993 or visit www.caseyfamilyservices.org .

EDITOR'S NOTE: Casey Family Services was established by United Parcel Service founder Jim Casey in 1976 as a source for high-quality, foster care. Casey Family Services today offers a broad range of programs for vulnerable children and families throughout the Northeast and in Baltimore, Md.

The direct service arm of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Services not only provides foster care (including treatment care and services supporting youth making the transition to independence) but also post-adoption services and numerous family-based programs. These programs include family reunification, family preservation, family advocacy and support, programs for families affected by HIV/AIDS, programs for teen parents and young families, and family resource centers in four states. Casey Family Services is a fully licensed and accredited nonprofit child welfare agency operating an administrative office that houses the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice and eight divisions in Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont.

To arrange an interview with Raymond Torres or Ginny O'Connell, contact Wendy Christian at (203) 401-6904.

For more information, consult these Web sites: Casey Family Services (caseyfamilyservices.org), Annie E. Casey Foundation (aecf.org), National Foster Care Month

(fostercaremonth.org), Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (jimcaseyyouth.org).

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