

A foster child's story

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As a teen in foster care, Nakita Whittmore says she recognizes a lack of support is one obstacle facing foster children. She says working with the TYAC and raising awareness about issues facing foster children. *Josh Anderson/The City Paper*

Whites Creek High School senior Nakita Whittmore has never accepted an invitation to a slumber party. The 17-year-old has a long list of friends, but as a teen in foster care, she had a long list of rules governing her social activities.

“I’ve always wanted to, but when you ask the question, ‘May I spend the night with a friend?’ it ends up that the parents of your friend will have to have background checks and home inspections to make sure it’s OK to go with them,” Whittmore said. “I never really wanted to put myself out there. It’s embarrassing, ya know, to say, ‘I’d like to come over but my [social] worker will have to come with me and inspect your house, and I am not saying your parents are bad people, but they’ll need background checks.’”

The Department of Children’s Services often contracts foster care to independent agencies that can tack on their own, stricter rules. Whittmore was adopted in December 2004, but her practice of leaving her sleeping bag at home and her friends at school has been tough for the teen to unlearn.

Whittmore may have been denied the sleepover, an adolescent rite of passage, but she’s determined not to miss the next milestone — graduating from high school.

“I refuse to end up like my biological parents. That is one of my inspirations,” Whittmore said. “I can’t see myself falling in the cracks and becoming another statistic. I want to stand out.”

Until Whittmore turns 18 and can stare into the three thick folders that are her personal state file, she won’t know the true story of her biological parents and the circumstances that led them to place her and her five brothers and one sister in foster care. But her own experiences — the consequences of their inability to raise her — are revealing enough to motivate her to be different.

Whittmore was 3 when she was sent to live with her first foster family in Lebanon. She remembers that her mother had red hair and freckles, but that is the only memory the teen has of her life before foster care.

She lived with the first family intermittently for 10 years. The foster mother suffered from lupus and debilitating arthritis, so every time the woman was sick, Whittmore and the other children in her care were split up and divided among other local foster families — sometimes for stays of a few days, sometimes for weeks at a time.

Whittmore lost count of how many different families she went to live with, but each left an impression.

“It was surreal, the great variety of homes,” she said. “Different religions, different mind-sets, different personalities, some with two parents, some with one parent, some had lots of kids, some had no kids, some had children with physical disabilities, small homes, big homes, different types of support systems — they believe this, I believe that.”

A new home was more than just a new environment. It often meant Whittmore had to miss school because there was no one to drive her there and back. Sometimes her caseworker was able to pick up her assignments, but the student’s absence from school cost her valuable classroom instruction as well as time with her friends.

When Whittmore was 14, her life took another chaotic turn when she was uprooted from the first foster family without warning.

“[Her case worker] called and said to pack our bags and that we probably wouldn’t be going back,” Whittmore said. “It was hard because I lost touch with my brothers, my family, my friends. My life was fine until that day and it shook me.”

Again, Whittmore was shuffled to yet another family, but this time, her new home was in Davidson County. She stayed there for 11 months before asking to be moved because of clashing personalities between her and her new foster parents. That’s when she went to live with Dorothy Whittmore, a retired Bank of America branch executive, who adopted her a few months later and just a week shy of Christmas in 2004.

When children have multiple homes it puts them at a disadvantage toward reaching the goal of graduation, said Michael McSurdy, the VP of operations at the Oasis Center and the former state director of foster care.

“They face considerable challenges like losing credits. It is not always possible to get your same classes when you change schools or some schools are on block scheduling where you take longer classes each day and get a full year in one semester. So, what if you take a regular semester of English and the go to a school with block scheduling?” McSurdy said. “If you are a kid in care, the assumption is that you are in there because of your behavior, so when you walk in you have a label and that can make school harder.”

With her previous foster care families, Whittmore also found trouble getting support from her “parents” for extracurricular activities.

“After-school activities look so good on your college application, but you can’t get into them because parents won’t drive you to meetings, practices, games. That can be kind of crippling,” Whittmore said.

The largest disadvantage, however, is a lack of support, Whittmore said.

The teen recognizes that there are channels of support available to kids in foster care, but they are not as natural as the bond of a biological family.

“You are in an environment that is not yours in a way. There is just something different with a biological family. With foster children, we have a different type of support. We have foster parents, case workers, case managers, lawyers — so many people in our lives there to help and set out a plan for your life that sometimes you kinda lose yourself in all these people. Sometimes kids are so excited just to be turning 18 and get out of the system, they don’t care if they have to drop out of school to get their own apartment.”

There are 681 children in foster care in Davidson County between the ages of 13 and 18. Rob Johnson, the communications director for the Department of Children’s Services, said that they do not keep statistics on graduation percentages of foster children. According to the Tennessee Department of Education’s 2006 Report Card, Davidson County’s graduation rate was at 68.8 percent.

Despite the odds, Whittmore, a self-proclaimed bookworm who reads four books at a time and calls *Jeopardy!* her favorite show, is excelling in school.

“I just decided to make the best of the situation,” Whittmore said. “Most kids wouldn’t have taken it as I did, but I realize I could make it worse for myself by acting out and being unruly. I don’t see the point.”

To her 11th grade English teacher, Dr. Melissa Fultz, Whittmore is “the kind of student who keeps you teaching even when you want to go be an accountant for some relief.” Fultz was awed by Whittmore’s ability to comprehend and sympathize with the complex reading material, such as the controversial play, *Fences*, by August Wilson — a gift Fultz said she believes Whittmore picked up through life lessons she’s learned in foster care.

“She can interpret literature and see way past what is on the written page,” Fultz said. “She has had a set of experiences that has given her the ability to think and sense and interpret, and I think if you were to test her she’d test in the genius level.”

Whittmore serves on the Tennessee Youth Advisory Council, a group of current and former foster children, who work to improve the foster care system and the lives of young people by raising awareness. She speaks to community and state leaders regularly about her and her siblings’ experiences — she lost one brother to pneumonia complicated by AIDS and another was shot to death in a botched robbery — to help shape policy and meet with other teens to help explain to them their rights as foster children.

“For someone who never had the best of anything, it never occurred to her not to pull people along with her. She’s comfortable leading people,” Fultz said.

(Editor’s Note: Dorothy Whittmore declined to be interviewed because of recent surgery.)