

## **'I Was That Child'**

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How do we change our foster care system, which has less than a 50 percent high school graduation rate and where substance abuse, teen pregnancy and homelessness are common, to a system that creates a majority of high school and even college graduates and where poverty and crime are no longer a trade mark of our foster care alumni? Unless our government can rely on the numerous adults in the lives of those children, there is no hope.

This is hard to imagine, since some children leave a home environment that the state has deemed unsafe, only to find themselves in an even worse situation. There are foster parents who abuse children, therapists who do not listen to their young patients, and professionals on every level of the system who ignore their legal duties as mandatory reporters and choose to extinguish the cry for help instead of seeking justice. There are terrible travesties. We, as a society, should work to bring these horrors to light.

As I prepared for this event, I knew that if anything were remembered of my words today, it would likely be the pain and suffering that the system perpetuates. That saddens me, for I have been that child. I have also been the child who had an attentive social worker who drove more than an hour to see me because she did not want to throw my life into upheaval by taking away one of my few trusting adult relationships. I have been the child who the judge spoke to personally before making a ruling. I have also been the child whose foster parents introduced her as their daughter, forgetting to say foster.

How is it that I experienced both a life of pain and abuse, and a life of love and happiness, all within the same system? Foster care is composed of unsung heroes and unpunished villains. I still deal with the emotional pain of the negative parts of my past, but I finished high school and then college, I have a home and I am confident that when the time comes I will be a great parent.

I can say all of those things that so many of our nation's former foster care youth cannot because I had something many of them did not. I had people who cared and who were able to help me overcome obstacles placed before us by the system itself.

Many people knew the great lengths to which my social worker would go for the kids on her caseload. Raydene filled out piles of paperwork to get money for everything from the least expensive extracurricular activities to a trip to Europe. She took calls off the clock from kids who were calling to vent about having to wash dishes or clean their rooms, and she spent her weekends writing letters of recommendation for kids who had long since been off her caseload. But no one commended this woman for her outstanding service to young people. After her years of amazing work, in which she refused to be steamrolled by cost effective solutions, she bucked the system one too many times. Instead of being a

“team player,” she spoke out in the best interests of her kids, and for her bravery and insistence on justice, she was fired.

One of the most obvious blemishes of the foster care system is the tendency to tolerate abuse and leave excellence unrewarded. Unfortunately, when abuse is allowed to continue, it often ends up in headlines because an innocent child is found dead or nearly dead. When greatness is left untreated, however, it goes away.

The system needs to reward professionals who choose to be more observant of the children on their caseload. It is only commonsense to pay attention to the individual needs of each child and meet those needs by following individualized case plans and not allowing “cure-all” answers to push aside the needs of real people. In my 10 years as a foster child, there were three huge initiatives in our country that were supposed to fix every case. When I first entered care, it was thought that a successful case should end in reunification with the biological family. Only a few short years later, our federal government decided that adoptions were the real success story. Sadly, I was not a good fit for either of those plans.

As I entered my teens, a sudden burst of independent living mania swept the nation. Suddenly, there was something wrong with any young person who did not want to move out on their own at age 16.

Though any professional who evaluated my case based on my interests would say otherwise, our federal government would call my case a failure because I aged out when I turned 18. States do not want to risk losing federal money for allowing children to age out, even in the minority of cases where it is in the child’s best interest. For my state, serving the best interests of kids like me could cost them \$52 million.

How can one parent take care of 500,000 children individually? Thankfully, no one is asking that. There are plenty of people who want to help in raising our nation’s foster children. We just need to find the best illustrations of social workers, foster parents, judges, and therapists our system has to offer and when we do, we need to make examples of them for others. We need to raise the bar for anyone who might not give their all because they see no point in doing so.

Then, we need to remove obstacles that prevent children from getting their needs met. For example, in my home state, we have the tools to assess a young person’s life skills before he or she leaves the system. Every young person who is expected to graduate from the system can be assessed when they are 16, leaving plenty of time for them to acquire the life skills they still need. And after the young people are assessed, we have nothing. The assessments require training to interpret and are easily misused by anyone who does not understand what the assessment measures. If anyone with the proper training wants to make any use of the assessment, he or she must volunteer valuable time or find a “creative” way to bill for services, otherwise known as lying. The Rehabilitative Treatment Service System does not allow professionals to offer life skills training due to

Title 19 funding. No professional should have to decide whether it is worth their job to live or if it is better to let a child age out without the skills they need to live as adults.

Another unintended barricade in the system is confidentiality. Though it is an important tool in the protection of children and families, confidentiality can be taken too far when it hinders professionals working on the same case from making harmonious recommendations. In a specific case, teenagers in foster care, who were members of an advocacy board and who had already completed a number of forms to allow for the release of information, were forced to remove their own names from a press release they wrote themselves. This prevented them from being reached by interested journalists and thereby killed any potential story about the amazing work they youth were doing. Why did their names have to be removed? The board was sponsored by a human services agency and the agency was afraid it would get into trouble for breaching confidentiality.

When no one hears about the positive attributes of foster care youth, such as their activism in the community or the added joy they can bring to a family, why would anyone act to improve the system? In addition to removing unnecessary barriers, we need to encourage foster parents to advertise the benefits of being a foster parent rather than letting ill-informed “What ifs?” whispered by people who know nothing of the system, scare so many potential foster parents away.

Most importantly, we need to tailor the system to fit each child. In the foster care system, there are children whose parental rights are wrongfully terminated because of a push for adoption that goes too far and fails to consider the particulars of an individual case. There are children who have no health insurance after they leave the system. There are children who are incorrectly placed in special education classes because no one looked past the paperwork to the child before them. I was that child.

However, in foster care there are also children who get quality medical attention and braces to straighten their teeth. There are children who get re-evaluated and placed in accelerated classes once their potential is realized. There are children who have an adult whose presence in their life is unfaltering, money to help them join after school programs and even scholarships for college. I know these children exist and that the system can help them flourish. I was that child.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** After 10 years in foster care, Jackie Hammers began speaking out about foster care at conferences for foster youth and social workers in Iowa. She is certified to train foster parents, and has served as an adult adviser to a council composed entirely of current and former foster youth. Hammers has also completed a term as a gubernatorial appointee on Juvenile Justice Advisory Council and participated in the Pew Commission’s Report on Children in Foster Care. She earned a bachelor’s degree in journalism from the University of Iowa in 2003, and now lives in North Liberty, Iowa. To contact Hammers e-mail her at [Jackie\\_hammers@hotmail.com](mailto:Jackie_hammers@hotmail.com).