Voices for Change

Making the transition from Virginia’s foster care system to the adult world, as told through the art of foster youth.

Volume 2 | 2009

Writing
Art
Photography
What would it be like if you lived each day, each breath, as a work of art in progress?
Imagine that you are a masterpiece unfolding, every second of every day, a work of art taking form with every breath.
— Thomas Crum

There is nothing in a caterpillar that tells you it’s going to be a butterfly.
— Buckminster Fuller
“Expose the Truth”
By Melissa, age 19
Colonial Heights
VOLUME 2 | 2009

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Virginia Poverty Law Center (VPLC) is a not-for-profit organization concentrating in the areas of law that affect low-income families. Established in 1978 to advocate on behalf of low-income Virginians on poverty issues of statewide importance, VPLC is the only state-wide organization providing training to local legal aid program staff, private bar attorneys, and low-income clients, relating exclusively to the legal rights of Virginia’s poor.

For more information, visit www.vplc.org

Voices for Virginia’s Children champions public policies that improve the lives of children in Virginia. Established in 1994, Voices is a statewide multi-issue children’s policy research and advocacy organization. Voices works to ensure that policymakers understand and respond to the needs of the Commonwealth’s children, especially those who are disadvantaged or otherwise vulnerable. Utilizing kids count data, policy research and analysis, and strategic advocacy, Voices highlights unmet needs and promotes potential solutions.

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FACES of Virginia Families is a membership-driven, non-profit association offering information, support and resources for foster, adoptive and kinship families.

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Art 180, a Richmond-based non-profit organization, creates and provides art-related programs to young people living in challenging circumstances, encouraging personal and community change through self-expression.

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When I wrote the introduction to last year’s *Voices for Change* collection, almost 8000 youth were in foster care in Virginia. I am pleased to report that less than 7000 youth are in care. The significant decline in the number of youth in foster care can be traced to the extraordinary effort of everyone involved in the extensive transformation of our child welfare system that began in 2007 and continues today. The changes in our system can be seen in every aspect and have been embraced by every player, from the family preservation workers who provide support to families so they can keep their children safe at home to the foster care and adoption workers who work to ensure that every child who enters the system exits with a lifetime connection to a caring family. Because of their dedication, the percentage of youth who were discharged from foster care into permanent families this past July was up to 81 percent, a significant increase.

Despite this encouraging news, our system is far from perfect, especially for the teenagers who have grown up in it. Almost 20 percent of youth in Virginia’s foster care system “age out” without having identified a strong, supportive adult they can turn to in times of need. National statistics for youth who age out of foster care tell us that the futures of these youth are generally bleak. According to a study by Chapin Hall, over one-third of youth who age out of care have neither a high school diploma nor a GED by the time they reach age 19. Only slightly more than 20 percent of them complete any degree or certificate beyond a high school diploma. And only 1.8 percent of these youth obtain a bachelor’s degree, as opposed to 24 percent of the general population.

This year’s *Voices for Change* competition invited youth age 14 and older who are or were in foster care to tell us about the challenges they face as they move toward adulthood. The pieces they submitted reveal their struggles to maintain their family connections and carve out a place for themselves within the greater community. They also demonstrate the desires, insight, determination and creativity that these youth carry with them, wonderful traits that we hope will carry them into successful futures.

Along with the original artwork, writing and photography of the youth, this book contains interviews with some of the youth who submitted entries to the 2008 *Voices for Change* competition. The details about their lives both before and during their years in foster care provide valuable evidence of how strong connections to caring adults impact the lives of foster youth.

Please devote some time to learning about the older youth in our foster care system by reading their words and studying their visual pieces. The stories they have shared here will move you and I hope inspire you to work with these youth and others as they strive toward success.

Sincerely,

Anne Holton
First Lady of Virginia
Brandon was five years old the day the police entered the Bakersfield, California home he shared with his parents and 10 siblings and discovered 50 needles hidden inside the kitchen stove.

Karen was 11 the day her social worker came to her school, appearing, disappearing and returning like a detective weaving his way toward the resolution of a case, asking Karen more and more questions about her family until finally, just before the final bell, he announced to her that she was going into foster care.

Elizabeth was only 13 when she began finding herself in her house alone, sometimes for as long as three weeks at a time. She eventually entered foster care after her mother’s admittance to a psychiatric hospital.

Brandon, Karen and Elizabeth are among the more than 6,500 youth who spent all or part of this year in Virginia’s foster care system.

Karen, who began her freshman year of college at George Mason University in August, still has hauntingly vivid memories of her first hours in the foster care system of Arlington County.

“We went into the [Department of Human Services] building and they took [my sister and me] into this little playroom. I remember my favorite line was, ‘make yourself at home.’ How do you make yourself at home where toys are beheaded and books are ripped apart?”

The social worker had taken Karen and her six-year old sister directly from school to the Human Services building, with no stop at home to say goodbye to their mother or collect their belongings. They moved in with a foster parent in Fairfax County, a woman they had never met before. Karen and her younger sister faced a grueling schedule in their new home, waking before 6 a.m. to head into day care, where they remained until they were shuttled to their new school at 8 a.m., and where they returned after school let out at 3 p.m.

“We were no longer in the [same] school system [and] we had to move to a different school,” Karen recalls. “It was hard for me to know I wouldn’t even have my friends there.”

School placement changes were all too common for Virginia foster youth when Karen entered care in 2002. These youth, who frequently experienced three or more foster homes before finding a permanent home or aging out of care at 18, often moved into a new school district each time they moved into a different foster home. The difficulty of entering a new school after the start of the year was commonly exacerbated by the failure of the students’ educational records to arrive at their new school with them. Even more problematic was the lack of required enrollment documentation for the foster youth, whose social workers often struggled to obtain these documents from absent or uncooperative parents. Some schools would delay admitting these students until the records were submitted, sometimes keeping them out of school for weeks.
Karen’s success doesn’t fit neatly inside these statistics, because Karen doesn’t belong to the group of unfortunate Virginia youth who aged out of the foster care system. Following her initial placement, Karen and her sister moved into the home of relatives who were “totally unprepared for the challenges of dealing with a teenager who (began) to be a little oppositional,” said Isabel, the woman who initially took Karen and her sister for a respite weekend and eventually became their adoptive mother.

Unlike many people seeking to adopt, Isabel was looking for teenagers. At age 42, and unmarried, Isabel had no biological children and wanted a way to “ease into” parenting. When she first approached Arlington County, she signed on as a respite parent rather than a foster or adoptive one. “I thought, what could be a better way of getting introduced to child rearing than to sort of back other people up on the weekends,” Isabel felt comfortable with Isabel almost immediately. “Something about her just clicked with me,” Karen remembers. “She made us feel at home. She’d really try to talk to us and get to know us.” Isabel, Karen and her sister decided to live together.

The Virginia General Assembly passed a law designed to solve these problems in 2005, but adherence to the new law has been spotty. Amy L. Woolard is the Lewis F. Powell Fellow at the JustChildren program of the Legal Aid Justice Center, a group that advocates on educational issues impacting at-risk youth throughout Virginia. “In our practice, we have seen how children in care can sometimes be out of school for days, weeks, and even months during these transitions,” Amy stated. “Schools and social services agencies must work diligently to ensure that law does not simply become an unfulfilled promise to these kids.”

Frequent school changes create significant barriers to educational success for youth who come through the foster care system, and few are able to successfully overcome them. Karen’s attendance at George Mason, one of three universities that accepted her, is by far the exception rather than the norm. According to a 2007 study of former foster youth conducted by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, only 30 percent of youth who age out of foster care complete any college. The Chapin Hall study also found that young adults who age out of foster care are more than twice as likely as their non-foster care peers to lack a high school diploma or G E D.
Almost immediately, Isabel recognized that Karen’s educational program didn’t suit her. “She was coming home with no homework, and she was missing some major skills.” At the time, Karen was in a special education class. Isabel pushed the school to mainstream Karen, successfully advocating for her at an administrative hearing on her Individualized Education Plan, which is required by federal law for all students receiving special education services. A month before the school year ended, Karen was mainstreamed, and she has excelled in school ever since.

Brandon’s experience illustrates the path more typically taken by foster youth through the educational system. After entering the California foster care system at the age of five, Brandon moved through 17 different foster homes before being adopted at the age of 12. Frequent moves bounced Brandon from school to school.

“I’d say about every six months I changed schools,” he said recently from Harrisonburg, where he has lived since signing himself out of care shortly after his 18th birthday this past June. “I’ve never had any friends until I came to Harrisonburg,” Brandon added. He also never had an opportunity to reach his potential in school. “I never stayed in a school long enough to graduate from high school, so right now I’m working on my GED.”

In fact, Brandon started studying for his GED when he was only 15. His adoptive family, with whom he had moved to Harrisonburg, returned him to foster care after a few years. Initially, his adoptive parents placed Brandon in a locked facility in Marion, approximately 200 miles south of Harrisonburg. The facility housed not only foster youth but also youth who had been placed there after being determined “delinquent” by a court due to unlawful acts they had committed. Brandon had no involvement with the juvenile justice system before entering the Marion facility. “Before I was there I didn’t even cuss.” Predictably, exposure to these troubled youth changed his behavior. “After I came out of [Marion] I got charges for assault, I started cussing my mouth off and all kinds of other stuff.”
Youth at the Marion facility received their education on site, in a private school Brandon characterized as an “alternative school, that bad kids go to because they can’t go to regular school because they always get into trouble.” While the on-site facility at Marion may not officially be considered an alternative school, Brandon’s description certainly matches the definition of regional alternative schools in Virginia. According to a 2008 study by the Virginia Commission on Youth, Virginia’s 29 regional alternative education programs were established for students who have been suspended or expelled from traditional public schools.

But the student body at these alternative schools sometimes expands to include youth who have not recently been expelled or suspended — youth like Brandon with spotty educational or family histories. When Brandon left Marion he moved into a group home in Chesterfield, County. Brandon said most of the youth in the group home went to a regional alternative school rather than the local public high school. “I guess [your school placement] all depends on this one guy [at the public high school] who tells you whether you get to go to public or alternative school.”

Brandon explained that he met with a man at the local high school who asked him about his history, including his former grade point averages and the number of foster care placements he had been in. Shortly after that meeting, Brandon was placed in an alternative school, where he continued to study for his GED. Brandon’s approach to his education reflected a grim reality: Only 3.26 percent of the youth in Virginia’s regional alternative schools have a goal of achieving their high school diploma, according to the Commission on Youth study. This is hardly surprising, since the Standard of Learning passage rate for students in alternative schools is only 48 percent for English and 33 percent for Math. Traditional high schools in Virginia must obtain a 70 percent passage rate in each subject in order to be accredited by the state.

Brandon hopes to take his GED exam soon. He continues to see his social worker, Dan, regularly. Dan has worked with Brandon since Harrisonburg Department of Social Services took legal custody of him when he was 17. “Brandon came into care at 17 so he could benefit from services, such as Medicaid coverage,” Dan explained. Although the Department suspended services when Brandon left care in June, Dan made sure Brandon knew he had a 60-day window during which he could have those services restored. “Before Brandon left, I told him about the 60-day option and invited him to come back and see me in a few weeks. He did, and we entered into an agreement restoring services before time ran out.”
Today, Brandon’s working in an Indian restaurant, playing guitar in an alternative rock band and creating art. Brandon, whose drawing won first place in last year’s Voices for Change contest, is hoping to open an art studio and gallery in Harrisonburg with a few of his friends. “I love art,” he said. “Art gets me away from everything that is bad.”

Art has also been in a constant presence in the life of Elizabeth, who began drawing when she was seven. “What started me was my brother’s dad. He was an artist so he always had me drawing.” While Elizabeth lived for a while with her brother’s father and her mother, it was really her mother who cared for her until she turned 13. But Elizabeth’s mother had a very limited ability to care for her due to her mental illness, and eventually she was admitted into a psychiatric facility and Elizabeth moved into a foster home.

Things at the first foster home were rough. Elizabeth’s first foster mother had recently lost her husband, and as Elizabeth struggled under the weight of her own depression she frequently talked of killing herself. As Jan, Elizabeth’s current foster mother, explained, “The foster mother was still trying to deal with the loss of her husband, and meanwhile this child in her home is talking about killing herself. It just wasn’t the right time.”

When Elizabeth moved out of her first placement, she went to live with Jan and her family, where she has been for the past year and a half. Jan says the change in Elizabeth since she first arrived at their home is striking. “I thought I was taking a New York City goth child to my home because she had black makeup, heavy jewelry, a studded belt. It was sort of like, ‘Come at your own risk.’ Now, she’s a cheerleader and dating a football player and has healthy interactions.”

Jan attributes part of Elizabeth’s transformation to her having been weaned off the psychotropic medications she was taking when she first came to Jan’s home. “It’s given her a clearer head. When she first came to me she was sleeping a lot. Now, she’s woken up to life and she’s enjoying it.”

Jan, who previously worked as a social worker in a psychiatric setting, suspected that Elizabeth’s medication regimen was inappropriate and perhaps even unnecessary. She advocated to get Elizabeth off of her numerous psychotropic medications soon after she arrived. She was very concerned about how Elizabeth was sleeping almost constantly, except when she was in school or eating. Jan strongly believes that medication is often inappropriately given to youth to control their behavior, and she is very vocal about that belief.
Jan’s medication concerns are somewhat supported by a 2006 report of the Texas Department of State Health Services on the use of psychoactive medication in Texas foster children in 2005. According to the Texas report, which studied a group of Medicaid eligible youth, use of psychotropic medication among foster youth ages 10 to 14 years is 3.5 to 11 times higher than among Medicaid-insured youth who qualify based solely on family income. The study also found that 72 percent of the youth in foster care who received psychotropic medication took two or more drugs, and 41 percent took three or more. Many of the drugs were prescribed “off label,” meaning in a different dose, for a longer duration of time, or for a different medical condition and/or age group than recommended in the prescribing information.

Jan’s own advocacy on behalf of Elizabeth has extended beyond her medication issues. She worked hard and fast to get Elizabeth a desperately needed root canal, taking her to her own dentist and then two more before finding one willing to complete the paperwork required by the local department of social services. And she has encouraged Elizabeth’s continuing relationship with her birth family. Elizabeth remains very connected to her aunt and uncle and grandmother, and even visits her mother. “I think she has the best of both worlds right now,” Jan said.

“I Choose My Future”
By Elizabeth, age 17
Buchanan
Even children who are adopted out of foster care can maintain contact with their birth family, if their adoptive parents support the contact. Karen and her younger sister regularly visit for the day with their birth mother, cooking and talking for hours. Karen’s essay depicting these visits garnered a first place prize for her in the 2008 Voices for Change contest. Isabel has always supported Karen and her sister maintaining a relationship with their birth mother. “It was nice to know . . . I can still have a relationship with my birth mom and not be fearful that it’s breaking my other relationship with my other mother,” Karen explained.

There is nothing legally binding Karen and her sister to their birth mother. Youth in foster care who are adopted after July 1, 2009, however, can have contractual rights to visit with or have other ongoing contact with their birth parents. Virginia’s new “cooperative adoption” law affords birth parents, adoptive parents and youth the right to agree on certain ongoing contact between birth parents and youth after the adoption is finalized. While birth parents can’t reverse the adoption if the agreed upon contact is denied, having a legally enforceable contract saying that they can see or receive information about their child may give some birth parents peace of mind.

Brandon, Karen and Elizabeth all spoke highly of the agencies that oversaw their care, praising the commitment of some of the social workers that helped them through the system. However, none of them hesitated when asked to suggest improvements that could be made.

“Following the Music Notes”
By Brittany, age 15
Mechanicsville
Elizabeth voiced concern about multiple appointments she was required to go to during school hours. Bi-weekly counseling sessions, coupled with the occasional doctor or dentist visit, frequently caused her to miss Spanish and Geometry class and her grades suffered as a result.

The question brought Karen back to her jolting entry into the system, the isolation she felt sitting in a playroom for much younger children and the way her request to accompany the social worker to get her six-year-old sister was abruptly brushed aside. “If you want to be with your sister when they’re telling you the news, that would be really nice.”

Brandon’s experiences in California foster homes, where he and his siblings were often physically abused, led him to appreciate the value of background checks and oversight by child placing agencies. “[They should] keep a closer watch for the first few months after a child enters a new home, make frequent visits to the home, have frequent conversations with the child. Just make sure that it’s the right place.”

For all of the hardships Brandon has endured in foster care, he is neither bitter nor blaming. He praised his social worker and the director of the Harrisonburg Department of Social Services, calling them great men. And he declined to blame his mother, whose heroin addiction led to his life in care, noting, “I don’t know whose fault it is because it’s a chain, and it might have started off with just one guy drinking too much, you know; it might have started off with someone just psychologically not able to have a family but they did anyway.” What Brandon does know is that he won’t give any of his future children the life he had.

As for his own future, his present job, determination to obtain his G.E.D., and musical and artistic talents predict better outcomes for Brandon than for most youth coming from foster care. Karen the college student and Elizabeth, who hopes to get her cosmetology license after graduating from high school so she can get a job to support herself while attending college, are also on paths much brighter than those so often travelled by former foster youth.

Hopefully, with the benefit of insights shared by these thoughtful youth and others like them, Virginia can clear the path for the thousands of other youth in its foster care system so that they too can look forward to brighter futures.
“Poetry Is My Future”
By Nicalous, age 14
Manassas

Poetry is everything
A juvenile running the streets
Trying to be a thug
Thinking it was cool
To disrespect females
Maturity knocks and I let it in
Allowing it to reside within my mind, my soul
Realizing how ignorant I was
Poetry is trying to define myself
Searching within myself
Trying to figure out why I’m here
Scars defining me
Poetic devices marked upon my body
Telling different stories
These wounds should’ve destroyed me
Physically, emotionally, and mentally
Because
I once contemplated suicide
But poetry is the fact that
I realized that I deserve to live
Poetry is
Having the confidence to ask yourself
What is going on with me?
Waging more internal wars
Than external
Searching your soul for the answer
The one you need to know
But don’t want to hear
I love poetry because
Poetry resides deep within me
Just like it resided in my mother
When she decided to
Discard her ways to save her son
But he cannot be saved
Because he became as corrupt
As the system that devoured him

Along with many young people
Their way of cleansing the streets
I guess
And I say I guess
Because this poetry in my heart
Deep within my soul
Is telling me that
As corrupted as the system is
There are individuals who care
Your success is theirs
Your accomplishments are theirs
They help write your future
Your poetry
Poetry
Along with the future
Is what you make it
Coming to this realization
Has possibly saved my life
And corrupted as the system is
It has saved my life
Without help
I would’ve been
Having conversations with nine by nine walls
Or
Allowing toxins to seep into my veins
Conspiring with the devil
Or
Letting what I thought was my friend
Spit thirteen times
Biting flesh
Making thirteen holes
Maybe taking thirteen lives
Or
Communicating with my body
Taking advantage of females
Feeding off their moans and cries
Stealing everything that holds them
Dignity, security, pride
And what we call virginity
Those were my choices
Now
Life is beginning to look up
Mostly because of my own decisions
But I couldn't have changed my persona
Without help from the few
Mature, understanding people that
Have walked into my life
I say few because
Many didn't believe in me
My background spoke
Instead of my intelligence
They listened to the whispers
And negativity of my past
Not understanding all my struggles
Just judging
And me
So confused
Contemplating how to handle different circumstances
Believing I was alone in life
Until
I realized I couldn't do it by myself
But too afraid to ask for guidance
Until it became so unbearable
That I withdrew into myself
So that people started to recognize
How unstable I was
And that
I couldn't do it by myself
The people that cared
That's who noticed
And I was so used to surviving on my own
That I shunned help
Until my soul told my mind
I was tired of being abused
Physically, emotionally, and mentally
That's poetry
It's because of those caring individuals
That my life has shifted

I now have goals,
A family and am able to love myself
Which in turn helps me love others
And I now understand
That I am not a bad person
But that I have been put
Through unforeseen circumstances
Poetry was brought to me
And it has instilled in me
The ancient saying
What doesn't kill you
Only makes you stronger
And it's because of the system
That I have emerged
Once
Frightened, contemplative, misunderstood,
Misjudged, aggressive, and misguided
Into an
Optimistic, courageous, misunderstood
Misjudged, assertive young man
Slowly evolving into a poet
With goals of sharing
My pains, sorrows, achievements, and failures
With everyone
Repairing them with my words
Helping them understand
You can only proceed to your future
By confronting your past
That is poetry
Still writing
As I am still writing my future
And without caring individuals
By my side
I couldn't make it
I would probably end up
A look-a-like Sean Bell
“Job”  
By Bradley, age 14  
Stafford

“Flying Away”  
By Brittney, age 17  
Richmond

“Overcoming Obstacles”  
By Taylor, age 15  
Rocky Mount
I am Erica, 14 years old and about to become a sophomore in high school. I came into care as an infant, something I have in common with my biological mom. From then on, I was a traveling kid, home again, gone again, over and over. I did not question this, it was just life as I knew it. At age 9, my mom’s rights were terminated and I was placed in “permanent” foster care. I was probably not the daughter they expected but my “permanent” foster parents stuck by me just the same. I was (and probably still am a little bit) oppositional, reckless, rebellious, self-centered, obnoxious, ill-mannered, disorganized, pretentious and a bit of a brat.

When I was with my biological mom, I had a lot of freedom and was allowed to know things and do things a child my age should not know and do. My mom preferred drinking and drugs to parenting and was overwhelmed by life most of the time. When I fell out of the tree and broke my arm, it took her days to arrive at the conclusion that I should go to the hospital. When I stepped on a rusty nail she was too busy to bother with it until the next morning when it was swollen up twice its size with pus oozing out.

Though there was always money for getting her nails done, going clubbing and shopping and bringing home new dads, we never had money for school supplies, had to wear clothes that were donated from do-gooders and were evicted from trailers, apartments and even motels for nonpayment of rent. There were happy times too, but I am just not clear on the details anymore. My memories are blurry pictures that pop up in slideshows in my mind and in my dreams. Some are happy, some are stressful and most are just there and not particularly meaningful at all. I love her and miss her even though I don’t belong with her, at least for now.

Fast forward, here I am 6 years later, belonging to this new family. And though it is good, it is also odd. I am Erica, daughter of Lisa, and yet, also daughter of Norm and Jeanne Wilson who are the polar opposite of everything I came from. I am the same, but different. My teeth don’t stick out anymore (thanks to years of braces and countless trips with my foster dad to the orthodontist) and I’ve been told I am “blossoming” into a lovely young lady (whatever that means).

It has taken me years to accept this family as my own and I honestly don’t know why they never gave up on me, but they didn’t. They promote education and church, and encouraged my talents for basketball, soccer, gymnastics, dance, karate, volleyball and everything sports. They got me to every practice and were always there to cheer me on, no matter how busy their schedules or how many other kids they had at the time. They hang up my pictures, read my poems, ride roller coasters with me, sit in the sand with me at the beach every year, and are helping me design the second half of my life.

I am diagnosed with ADHD, ODD, some type of mood disorder and RAD for which I spent years in counseling with my foster parents by my side. When I began cutting, got confused about church, God, sexuality and even pushed them away with all my might, my foster parents still kept giving me love. I don’t know if being in foster care is the best life I could have had, but I know my opportunities are greater because of it. I am serious about school and about making a new blueprint for my future. With financial assistance and the commitment of my foster family, I hope to attend college, study law or criminal justice and grow up to make a difference in the world. I am not there yet and will probably make a bunch more mistakes before I get there, but I am definitely on my way.

When I think about my life, I am reminded of the chorus to my latest favorite song that goes, Caterpillar in the tree. How you wonder who you’ll be / Can’t go far but you can always dream. Wish you may and wish you might / Don’t you worry / Hold on tight, I promise you there will come a day / Butterfly fly away.
“Self Portrait”  
By Elvira, age unknown  
Winchester

“Friendship Is Everything”  
By Kim, age 15  
Martinsville

“Lion”  
By Heather, age 14  
Chesterfield
One hill is crossed – another is in view.
No time to rest before climbing number two.
The worst of my battles are over with now,
But the uncertainty ahead seems to drag me down.
And so I wish for love and encouragement,
I wish.

I try to laugh – yet something makes me cry.
With my head held high I gaze up to the sky.
I pray for some guidance on which path to choose,
All these empty promises just make me confused.
And so I wish for love and encouragement,
I wish.

I want to sing – but the notes cannot come.
I wish for the day when I can be less glum.
Perhaps if I move away from my sad past,
Then my life might begin fresh and anew at last.
And so I wish for love and encouragement,
I wish.

Stitching my life up – one piece … then another.
Maybe by college I’ll finally lift my cover.
Foster care’s helped me to discover who I am,
All I need now is support in the path I choose.
And so I wish for love and encouragement,
I wish.
“Mirror”  
By Melissa, age 19  
Colonial Heights

You look in the mirror all  
You can see is yourself  
Looking back.  
You ask yourself who am I?  
You cannot say a thing.  
So you ask yourself again.  
You look into the mirror a  
Little bit harder.  
But you still cannot say a thing.  
So you look again.  
But you do see hopefulness.  
You also see joyfulness.  
You ask yourself why you  
Could not see them before.  
You said because I was  
Looking at the out side not  
The in side!

“My Life In Foster Care”  
By Tania, age 15  
Henrico

When I first came to the Greene home I was thinking  
why did they put me here with these people, I don’t  
know them, I don’t know them, I don’t want to know  
them, and I am not staying here, I am leaving first  
change I get. They said hang your clothes in the closet,  
and put your things in the drawers. They were crazy,  
I was not going to be here that long.

Every day she would come in the room and tell me to put my clothes away, boy she was really getting on my  
nerves, so I told her to get out of my room because  
I didn’t like them and I didn’t want to be here because  
I didn’t like them. She said she was sorry, but we  
are stuck with each other, she tried to hug me I said  
get away from me you will not touch me or my baby,  
because I don’t like you or Mr. Greene. I just want to  
be in this dark room. She said open your blinds. I said  
no, leave me, alone. I don’t like you or you food. Mrs.  
Greene went to the store every day buying food she  
thought I would like, but I told her I don’t like you food,  
and I want to go home. Mr. and Mrs. Greene took me  
to the store to get whatever I want and I said I didn’t  
want anything. The Greene’s and I fought all the time.

One day Mrs. Greene said she couldn’t wait for the  
baby to come so she could hold her, boy was that the  
last thing I wanted to hear. I told her she was not going  
to touch my baby. Mr. Greene told me not to talk to his  
wife like that, so I told him he would not going to touch  
my baby either, he looked at me and said go to your  
room, and I stayed there all day.
The social worker came every day because I was doing bad things. One day I decided that the Greene was pretty nice people after all, and her food was great, now I eat everything she cooks because she is a very good cook, and Mr. Greene do pretty good too. When I go home I will cook meals for my family the way Ms. Green has taught me. I have learned a lot from Ms. Greene. She is a lot like my mom. I love her next to my mom.

The Greene are great foster parents, any child that get to come to there home is very lucky. She love me like I was her own and so do Mr. Greene.

Well, now I get along with the Greene’s. Ms. Greene help me through with my questions about being pregnant. She takes me to my doctors appointments and answer questions that I don’t understand. Mrs. Greene has brought me a top of the line baby bed, car seat, strollers and I that her for it. I know she loves me and my baby. Mr. and Mrs. Greene understand how much I want to be with my family, and they want me to be good so that I can go home.

I am trying very hard to be the kind of mother my baby needs. I don’t do bad things anymore, and I read every book I can find trying to learn how to be a good mom. I love my little girl so very much. I don’t want her to go through all the bad things I had to go through. I raise my self, and I don’t want that for my little girl. I will give my life for my baby. I will make sure my child will never suffer, no matter what I have to do. I love going to church with the Greene’s and I want my baby to grow in the church because it will be good for her. I thank the Greene’s for taking me to the church because that has turn me around.”Thank you lord.” I thank umfs and their team for all you have done for me with people like you all would will be a better place for children like me.

May god bless you and keep you.
Tania

(See Tania’s “Letter to My Daughter,” on page 58.)
“In the Eyes of a Foster Kid”
By Shannon, age 20
Staunton

As a foster kid you lay in bed wondering why me. I was in that place for a long time. Being in foster care changed my life. Growing up I could only see the bad affects it had on me. I was mad at the world and ashamed to let anyone know what I was going threw. I would cry thinking if I would have been better maybe this wouldn't have happened. And then I would get mad and blame it on my foster parents. I hated my life in foster care and couldn’t wait to turn 18. All the way until I moved out I saw no good in being in foster care. Moving out and having to grow up made me realize all the good being in foster care can offer. I had the chance to go to college and not have the stress of paying it back. I had financial help when times got ruff and had a social worker to get advise from. If I wouldn't have been in foster care I probably would not have went to school, pregnant and been in debt over my head. If I could went back in time I wouldn't change anything but my attitude toward life and my foster parents. My one piece of advise to give to all the foster kids is you might not see why you were put in this situation but everything happens for a reason and you are put in foster care so you can have a better life. Foster care is here to help you not bring you down.

“I Want It All”
By Richard, age 18
Stafford

I want it all I want it all for me
But no handouts
I don’t want it for free
I’m prepared to give
So that I can receive
They Say it takes Faith so I’m Ready to Believe
Tha best things in life come to those who work
But that comes to they
That have come through the hurt
A Childhood of Pain Hate and Homeless in the Dirt
It Never Got Better No It Only Became Worse
Until at Nine I Wad torn from Those I Love
A Blessing in Disguisse
A Chance to Rise Above
In The Fight of Life I Got New Gloves
Now It’s up To Me to Show What I’ve Become
To Show The good and Keep The Bad at Bay
For Tha Best Im irreparably Changed
So Now Yes I can definitely Say
I will Have It All Someday

This verse to the song discusses the challenges I had growing up, the changes I have made growing up and how I have tried to make the best out of what has happened and my goals to achieve and attain all my desires in the future.
“The Man I Am Going to Be”
By Daekwon, age 14
Richmond

I am the man that God wanted me to be. As a little boy, my dad yelled all the time and my Mom and I cried. As I got older I became more responsible, graduating from group homes and becoming a mature young man. I am going to have my own career and this is the man I am going to be.
Devitta’s Poetry
By Devitta, age 17
Suffolk

I wake up each Morning with a smile on my face
and a love in my soul.

“Expectant”
As I ran that night I could do was cry
I was so angry and hurt
I knew that things would always be the same
I knew that I would always fall for their little game
I would always be the gullible one
The one that fell every time
The one that would never fit in
As the hot tears ran down my face
I know I’d always go from place to place
Waiting for the someone to tell me I belonged
Waiting for the days I would no longer long
As my tears became sobs I began to pray to God
Knowing and believing that he had a plan
Hoping he’d send me someone who’d understand
Someone who’d lend a helping hand

“The Fear That is Held in Me”
The fear that is in me
Is that you won’t love me
That’s the fear in me
That I’ll just be a shadow in your bright moonlight
The fear that your love for me will fade
The fear that the love that is needed will vanish
The fear that I’ll vanish
The fear that is in me
Is that I’ll be alone the that I’ll lose my mind
That’s the fear in me
The fear that you won’t want me

“Words for Safehaven”
Always know when you enter this place
You have the choice to make your experience great
You can leave with a heart that’s filled with pain
Or
You can leave with a heart that’s learned and gained
It’s all up to you
To do what you need to do
But make sure you choose wise
For this will be a decision
You live with for the rest of your lives
“Unknown”  
By LaQuita, age 15  
Charlottesville

The rain and clouds represent my sadness, pain, and tear(s) of leaving everything I know behind. The golden buildings and single star, kind of shows my loneliness and the bigger and brighter things promised for me in my future. My pink flower is a sign of beauty, and the colorful sky shows my imagination and my hopes and dreams. This piece is titled unknown because it's like a puzzle. There is no telling how the pieces fit together, not knowing how or where my future is going. Where I will go. What my future will bring me.
“Life's Turnovers”  
By Hailey, age 14  
Stafford

Life has its ups and its downs,  
no matter how bad life gets,  
you have to stick with it,  
I used to think  
the reasons my life is dead  
to me is because its all my fault.

I blamed myself for everything,  
everything bad that has ever happened to me.

I missed my life when it was good,  
I had all of my family,  
my confidence,  
and my happiness,  
when no one ever hurt me.

But now I ask myself,  
why do I even want to live,  
well I don’t,  
but I live for the people who love me,  
my friends, my family, even the people who have hurt me,

I want to show them,  
that I am living and working out my problems,  
and that even though they hurt me,  
I can live my life, and I can succeed in what I love to do,  
and that makes me happy.

Even though I don’t like my life,  
I can continue to live my life,  
and learn to love it.

“A Second Chance”  
By Michael, age 17  
Gladys

What I feel about moving from my teenage years  
to my adult years is a new chance. A new chance  
to do what is right, a new chance to behave, and a  
new chance for a better life. Being in Foster Care  
has changed my life in a very good way. Yes, I didn’t  
always like Foster Care, but most kids didn’t like it  
at first either. They never gave up on me even when I  
was fighting more than three times a week. Instead  
of giving up they urged me and motivated me to  
do better. When I said “I can’t get better” they just  
said “You can get better. You just need to believe  
in yourself. You need to do it for yourself and no  
one else.” As soon as I decided to do that I became  
happier, I felt better about myself, and I could  
control my anger better than ever before. I went  
from fighting every week to not fighting for a whole  
year. My social worker, my family, my lawyer, and  
the Judge were so impressed in how good I was  
doing that they let me come home for good. Now  
everyone tells me how much better and happier I  
look. So I would like to thank the Campbell County  
Department of Social Services for not giving up on  
me and giving me a second chance!!!
I really enjoy art and I think I'm good at it. I entered the contest because I thought I could win the prize. My poster tells about my life in the future. It works like a long road going up a mountain from the bottom to the top. It shows different problems and successes I may face.
My name is Kevin. I live in Dryden, Virginia at Jean’s and Charlie’s house. I have been in the system since I was 13 years old, and I will stay in the system until I am 21. I am writing this paper to express the changes that I have had during my time through foster care. I want people to please not judge my past. I have changed and I am better because of it. This is my story.

When I was placed in the system I was lost, angry, sad boy with no hopes or any goals. My life has been extremely difficult but somehow I have always found ways to deal with my everyday problems. I was a regular kid with a regular life until they separated me and my father when I was 13 years old. After that I was sent to a residential facility in Virginia. Where I spent 2 months in a group home and the whole time I was there I felt nothing but sadness and I was so miserable I would cry myself to sleep because I was still too young to really understand what was going on. Then finally my dss worker (Julie) found me a foster family that I could live with. I was so happy but when I got there I was up for a rude awakening.

A week later I went to moved to Richlands, Virginia in a foster home. When I first got there they were the nicest people I had ever met but as the weeks stormed by it all changed. They became evil they made me feel like I was nothing. Out of all the things I did they never appreciated one single thing I did they treated me different than my foster brother. They got him everything that he wanted and they didn’t get me anything. They would always make me do all the work around the house nobody would help but then after 2 years it all changed my dss worker finally found out that they were mistreating me then finally I got to leave this evil place.

Well here I am again, nowhere to go but finally they found me another place to go and it was at Bristol. This family was so much better. They treated me with respect. They understood. They cooked good meals and they got me what I wanted but after 2 weeks I started developing attitude problems and anger issues. Finally they started making me see a counselor but he didn’t help then they recommended that I should see a physiatrist but he made it even worse he put me on the wrong kind of medicines. After my foster parents said they couldn’t deal with me anymore and then they kicked me out.

Well here I am, once again nowhere else to go, but finally again, they found me another place and it was in Danville. Only this time it wasn’t a foster family it was a boys home called The Hughes Center for Exceptional Children. When I first got there I thought it was going to be like a juvenile center but after a few days I really liked it, they treated me good. I got a job making money. I took classes in maintenance and everything. It was great. I spent a year and two months there then finally I wanted to go back to my hometown, so my dss worker put me through a program down there called Values, it is really great. They place kids with foster families. The people are great and so they placed me with the best family they had.

Their names are Charlie and Jean. They’re the greatest people ever. They worship God. They treat me good there, helping me plan my future. They are just wonderful. I also have two brothers there names are Josh and Hunter. They are they greatest brothers ever. Hunter is the smart one; Josh is really cool laid back and goes with the flow. So, you can see this is my life story.

Well, as you’ve read my story I think you can see the changes I went through it went form good to bad and back again. How, I realize what life is all about, all the changes I went through helped me with that. How, I’m a better person so now I look forward to the future now whatever life throws at me I’m ready to take it down. Like my old saying, life is like a garden so go out and digg it.
ART - HONORABLE MENTION

Untitled
By Whitney, age 15
Woodbridge

ART - HONORABLE MENTION

“Where I Am”
By Willy, age 14
Richmond
“Survival Story”
By Stephanie, age 17
Richmond

We all have a story
A story of our own
And each one is different
Just let it be known

My stories not all bad
Don’t feel sorry for me
For this is my life
My survival story

I’ll start when I was young
When I lived with my dad
And even though he wasn’t mine
He was all I had

But he will never know how he changed my life
Or put me through such agony
What could I have done when he made a command
As he took my purity

I was afraid to disobey
And scared to death to fight
No child should be put through that
It just isn’t right

I never had a mother to love me
To teach me right from wrong
Mine only filled my life with woe
Acted like I didn’t belong

She treated me with so much hate
Called me nasty names
Ripped away my hopes and dreams
Now only the scars remain

I’d go to bed with bloody wrists
Lie awake and cry
The pain was just too much for me
I wanted her to die

And she was never there to be a mom
So it was all on me
To worry about my next meal
About the next time I might eat

So I had no choice but to grow up fast
To raise my sister and myself
I did everything but pay the bills
And I did it without any help

For this was my life
With each day I grew stronger
I can handle almost anything
And I will suffer no longer

Cause the day I came in foster care
Gave a golden opportunity
To take everything I learn each day
And make it a part of me

For now I see the little things
The beauty in each day
And I look to see the best of me
In each and every way
I took this picture on my recent mission trip to Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota. It tells a story about changing lives through love. We are carrying the children piggyback on the daily 2 mile walk they make to the local elementary school for a free lunch. I chose the black and white photo because it hides the dirt on the children’s faces, the suffering in their eyes, the bruises on their bodies, and the lack of shoes on their feet, thus giving the appearance of “equality” between the children and their hosts. Seeing the impact these 2 weeks make, helps me appreciate my foster parents who have devoted many thousand weeks to children like me.
“Get Tough”  
By Elizabeth, age 16  
Colonial Heights

When life gets tough  
We get tough right back  
Life is hard but it will get better  
We just need to give it time  
Life is rough  
But my life is just a life  
I’ve learned that things can’t control  
What I do but it’s the thoughts before the  
Actions that should break through  
I’m not the same person I was when I walked  
Through foster cares doors  
But I am  
Stronger  
Smarter  
Braver  
Tougher  
And not to mention  
Much more able to understand that………………

Life is good  
God is great  
All that we need to do is believe and have faith  
And we can get through this safe

“Made It Through”  
By Katherine, age 18  
Christiansburg

My dreams have long since come true  
I have broken the chains that held me back  
I have surrendered my pain and made it through.  
My hopes were the puddle of water by my side.  
Stepped on, sometimes dried up.  
Out in the cold I was, wishing I could hide.  
But then the Lord came through and I could stand,  
He helped me find my way and now here I am  
My chains are now rusted and melt with time.  
I have let it go with my memory and I never rewind  
My friends and the people who have came into my life,  
Have helped me go forward, and help me survive.  
Little did I know I’d end up going this far,  
And I know that because I had love for the Lord  
Growing in my heart.  
I know its because my future is more promising,  
And each day I’m discovering…  
Me.  
And who I want to be.  
It would take many years to say a million thank you’s.  
To everyone whos helped me through  
The remainder of my pain.  
And I have learned that there’s still so much to gain  
That’s where this journey of life has taken me,  
I have learned slowly who I am and who I want to be.
My foster dad, John, taught me so much since I’ve been in foster care. He served as a marine when he was younger. He was also a teacher who taught social studies. The class that I’m horrible at. My foster dad taught me a lot the past year. He helped me study for the World History SOL test last year. I passed it and I’m glad, thanks to him. John also taught us some fighting moves. He said if you go out there in the world, you should know how to protect yourself. My foster dad is easy going, and I get along better with him than my foster mom. The funniest thing that he does is lose his fake teeth. He take it out of his mouth and leave it somewhere and he won’t find them until months later.

One time Gust (dog) found them and carried my dad’s teeth in his mouth to my mom’s hands. I thought it would be sweet to take a picture of a special person that will make a difference in my life to enter in this art contest.
“Life from a Different Perspective”
By Adrienna, age 19
Mount Jackson

Orphan. It’s a word that is commonly associated with children who have no parents or relative to tend or care for them. The only problem with this situation is that I was not considered an orphan until I was fourteen years old. The worst part was that I had two parents at the time. I will show you through the eyes of a child no longer, what it was like to grow up an orphan.

I was raised in a highly abusive household. The abuse started at the age of eight. I was physically abused by the hands of my biological mother after she and my step-father married. She had never hit me a day in my life until she was married. I never understood the reasoning behind it until I was twelve and it was all downhill from there. At twelve, I was sexually abused by my step-father one night after a family Christmas party. Highly traumatized I continued life in a state of shock. The physical abuse I endured from my mother only got worse after I told her the horror that happened that night. The abuse from my step-father continued in a vicious cycle for two years after my confession of rape. My mother feigned ignorance and lived a life of bliss whilst in this euphoric utopia that only she inhabited. No one from the outside ever suspected the abuse until my loud vocal confession to anyone who would lend me an ear. I was finally removed from my house and placed with my great-grandmother who had raised me until I was six years old.

The point to this very tragic story is it is autobiographical. I am the outcome from this horror of my adolescents. I overcame multiple obstacles and broke many statistics on abuse, both physical and sexual. I have lived in two group homes, hundreds of miles apart from the other, and an independent living home. I, just recently, moved back in with my great-grandmother after three years of being apart and journeying a difficult road by myself. This travesty is my internal drive. It is the reason for my grades never slipping below a “B” and my unquenchable thirst for knowledge, in all forms.

College is my next goal to accomplish. I will be the first person in my family to have attended college at all. College will allow me to prove myself to others who, like my mother and step-father, said I would never become anything in life nor would I make it to college. It will also allow me to prove to myself that all my hard work and dedication has finally paid off. Every struggle I have endured will not have been wasted. I want to be able to tell the next generation in my family that I finished school and overcame the odds that were against me. I am forever thankful to the family I have made along the way who has shaped me into who I am today.
It wasn’t just one person who made a big impact in my life, it was the people around me who knew me. Who knew who I was and knew what I was going through. They were very supportive of what I did. This image reflects many of the people who have been in my life for the past year and a half, and represents all of the many people who have helped me while I have been in foster care.
“Rewritten Past”
By Taylor, age 15
Rocky Mount

It’s home number four,
And in the beginning I feel as if I’m an injured whale washed upon the shore,
But this home seems to be different,
So now I’m starting to regain my lost spirit,
The spirit in which I lost at age eight,
The age when my life changed and the war of my
family was calling my fate,
I was shifted from one family member to another,
And I felt as if I was a Mustang colt searching for a new herd,
But I see no one from one side to the other,
So I’m looking for hope but my vision is blurred,
But this new home is like a reminder of why god put me here,
And anger is something I no longer fear,
I start to dream bigger than ever before,
For my life is changed once more,
But now I know what’s better for me,
And now my life isn’t full of burdens and misery,
And I don’t feel like that lost colt or injured whale anymore,
For I’ve closed my past behind a door,
Now my life is starting over,
And I feel as if I’ve picked a luck clover,
For now I’m no longer battered and abused,
Nor am I beaten and refused,
I always felt as if my life was something I would always rue,
But that’s no longer true,
For now I’m nearly grown,
And to people my past is not yet know,
Not the horror or screams,
But just unfolding dreams,
For the hope that I’ve gained from my foster family,
I bring hope to children like me,
I help them feel free.
PHOTOGRAPHY - HONORABLE MENTION

“My Future”
By Deonte, age 15
Fairfax

PHOTOGRAPHY - HONORABLE MENTION

“Working My Way”
By Keyanus, age 18
Portsmouth
“The Purpose of My Life”  
By Thomas, age 18  
Colonial Heights

The purpose of my life is to be a leader through Christ  
He led what many call a perfect life  
I want to be an example for the young and the old  
So I can make them stand out and be bold  
My purpose is to help all types of people  
Whether they are fervent or even feeble  
I love people of all ages  
From old ages to beginning stages  
When a person is in need  
I do my best to help them succeed  
When they have hindrances in their life  
I will be there to guide them like a light  
When they are poverty-stricken  
I will do my best to provide the needed provisions

“Going Out into the Big World!”  
By Latasha, age 20  
Big Stone Gap

Hi my name is Latasha and I’m a foster child that will be leaving foster care next year. Being in foster care is easy because you depend on some one else to do and think for you. But leaving is going to be hard case  
everything your foster parent done for you is now your job. You have to be an adult while you are in foster care you have freedom to do what ever. But when you get out on your own you have a lot to do. Like finding a place to stay, paying bills, find transportation, holding a job. Now when you in foster they teach you money management, time manage and going out in to world.  
Going out into the big world is going to be hard for me because I’m that teen that dependent on somebody to do and think for me. But thanks to foster care I’ll be able to do it. My name is Latasha and this is my story about going into the big world.

“My Future Me”  
By Lexus, age 13  
Stafford

“Praise the Lord”  
By Cody, age 16  
Colonial Heights
“The Purpose of My Life”  
By Cody, age 16  
Colonial Heights

The purpose of my life  
Is to be a shining light,  
To let the whole world see  
What God is calling me to be.  
I can now begin to understand  
What Jesus Christ has said  
“Be a servant of your Holy God”  
That is what I now live by.

“Don’t Miss Anything”  
By Capria, age 16  
Stafford

You really don’t know what you’re missing  
Life goes once around the sun  
Children grow too old for kissing  
Done can never be undone

Years return as memories,  
Rich or poor, as your invest  
How much value you accrue  
Depends upon your interest

There are joys, and there are pleasures:  
Do not these two things confuse  
One yields charms; the other, treasures  
It would tear the heart to lose

So turn to what in life must matter:  
Love, and all that loving brings  
Friends and family always gather  
Instead of sad things that bring rain

“My Future”  
By Devon, age 16  
Chesterfield

“Eyes and Ears”  
By Ke’Andra, age 16  
Lynchburg
“The Changes in My Life”  
By Marianna, age 14  
Arlington

I feel more like an adult than my mother ever was. I am 14 years old and I feel as though being 18 is right around the corner. My mind is set on my future. They tell me I have time to think and no need to rush, but time is going by so fast. I feel like just yesterday I was 9 years old entering a whole new life adjusting to new things.

Life is about trial and error and you have to learn from it. People around me give me advice and scenarios where they have experience trial and error. It is up to me to listen, learn, and lean on friends and family for support and help through this journey. Becoming an adult scares me honestly, thinking about paying my debts, getting a job, and being on my own. Inside I feel as thought I am learning well and soon I will be ready. Everyone told me to live life to the fullest and to be a kid for once but how can I do that when I practically raise myself and took care of my mother? Adulthood is no joke and it takes responsibility, respect, and a mind full of ideas. It is not to be scared of change but an opportunity to create you own identity and learn to make decisions for yourself.

While moving to adult years I knew will be tough and some days I will feel as thought it’s too much and give up I am stronger than that. I have lots of people in my life to guide me I have family, friends, and my mentors who give me advice and want to see me make it in life. I have witnessed my sister and many people enter adulthood and the advice they give me is “plan ahead.” I look and tell myself that I will be somebody in this world and I will have a voice!
“The Adjustment”  
By Corina, age 16  
Dryfork

The adjustment is impossible when you are moved from home to home  
Different faces, new places and the emptiness of feeling alone  
You wake up one morning and you have a regular day  
And then you wake up the next to be told your moving away  
Your fate is now placed in the hands of total strangers  
With the supposed reassurance of being kept away from danger  
The truth is that the system has made me worse  
I have became emotionless, caught charges and I just ran from this curse….  
6 placements throughout my teenage years  
Trying to find some direction, striving for freedom without fear  
The system has forced me to become strong  
Also to take responsibility for my choices, knowing right from wrong  
Although my life has been tough, I feel for the children being moved around.  
There is no such thing as normalcy, we have cried ourselves to sleep with no one hearing a sound  
I ask you to hear my voice and somehow understand  
The system is complicated with red tape from judges to laws, rules and social workers doing what they can.  
Wake up and imagine as a kid being in our shoes  
And let me ask you this, if you were in the system what would you do?

“Running Toward Freedom”  
By Divinity, age 17  
Richmond
"The Future?"
By William, age 18
Winchester

I think my future is very vague, kinda of like a book that has blank pages. I mean I can think about it and think of many different things to do with it. I mean my latest idea I had was to go to college. I want to pursue a degree in criminal justice and possibly sociology. This would be a great accomplishment, considering my whole family besides my mother didn’t even graduate high school.

She said she tried college, but it just wasn’t her thing. I bet now she wishes she had because for the past ten years my mother has been homeless. My father is one of if not the laziest people I have ever met. He didn’t finish high school and every good job he’s ever had he was fired from. Between the two of them my standards shouldn’t be that hard.

With Winchester Department of Social Services help I have become a more independent successful individual person. My social worker has helped guide me in the right direction. If it had been up to me I probably would end up like my mother or father. My social worker expects me to do great things. She strives for me to do good, which in turn motivates me to want to do more. Now, I go to school. I want to go to college. I want to go to classes and learn things. I think the degrees I’m wishing to pursue will be very beneficial in this kind of an economy. I believe that I will be able to get a pretty steady job in the government.

Even though everyone believes I want be a cop, I want more. I would much rather be in F B I or C I A. So, I believe school will not be the only thing to get me there. I will also have to be in the military, which of course is fine with me. I have expected that my goals are high, but I believe that in due time my dedication will pay off. If I can’t pursue my government job after school, then I will definitely join the military. This is my goal to be achieved in the next five years with the help of social services until I have twenty one, since I chose to stay in foster care. Foster care will help me do whatever I want to do, I mean I could change my mind, but fighting for the public good has always appealed to me. I hope you get a good look at me by reading this. I try to set goals like these so I don’t end up like my mother or father.

"Ant Eater Eating Ant"
By Michael, age 20
Portsmouth
“My Journey”
By Kyla, age 18
Richmond

What is the foster care system? A society created by the government to benefit youth in need. The concept is great but does not always serve its purpose as planned. I have been in and out of the foster care system since I was 4 years old. It has been one of the hardest journeys I have ever had to deal with in my life. There have been times where this journey has made me laugh, cry, smile and be so angry I could pull my hair out.

I was placed in the foster care system at the age of 4. My mother was addicted to crack cocaine and had some very abusive relationships that were not healthy for my little sister and me to be around. This is where my story begins. I was placed in the system that day and my whole life changed for the better and for the worst.

I lived with my grandparents for four years till I was 8. These were the happiest years of my life. They were the only family members who truly loved me. At age 8 I was adopted by a family. They seemed very nice in the beginning but things quickly changed after the adoption was final. I stayed with this family until I was 14 during those six years I was physically, sexually and emotionally abused. We went to court when a friend of mine in school told her mom the things I had said were going on in my house. I was only 14 and very scared of my controlling parents so when it came time to testify, I told them I lied about everything, because I didn't want to get in trouble with my adoptive mom. She didn't believe that her husband has sexually abused me for the six years I lived there. So my adoptive father was a free man and I was stuck living with both of them. This is when my behavioral problems began.

I could not stand living in that house so I acted up in school and at home until I was placed in a group home. After my first group home I was placed in a lot of different types of placements. I followed this destructive path until I turned 18 last year. That is when I realized I was legally an adult and the consequences were a little more than a smack on the hand. I had to make a personal change. This is what I should have done a long time ago.

Although my experience in the foster care system was a rough one, I learned many valuable lessons. I am now 18 years old and I live in an independent living program. I have made a lot of changes in my life. Along the way I have met tons of people to add to my support system. I have met many different girls my age with many different personalities. I have learned to cope with some very tough situations. I have made lasting friendships. They system put me through a lot of things that I had to overcome, but it also allowed me to achieve things I never would have been able to accomplish if I had of stayed with my mother.

I attend college for graphic design. I broke the cycle in my family; I am the first to attend college. I have a long road of change ahead of me. There are many things that I need to work on but I will eventually get there. I have a bright future ahead and many things to look forward to. There are many experiences that I have had to deal with because of my placement in the foster care system. But I can honestly say my journey has had more positive outcomes than bad ones!

“No Freedom”
By DaeJshon, age 17
Richmond

I could not stand living in that house so I acted up in school and at home until I was placed in a group home. After my first group home I was placed in a lot of different types of placements. I followed this destructive path until I turned 18 last year. That is when I realized I was legally an adult and the consequences were a little more than a smack on the hand. I had to make a personal change. This is what I should have done a long time ago.
“Flying Away”  
By Britney, age 17  
Richmond

I’ve been through pain  
I thought I’d never see the day  
I see the rain  
The price I pay  

For the last years  
I felt my sorrows  
All I did was shed my tears  
I feel like there is no tomorrow  

But I still feel sad  
Cause I have no where to run  
Why do I feel so bad?  
Because I can’t see the sun  

But today all that’s gonna change  
Cause I’m flying away  
Without no chains  
And I’m gonna have my way  

But I’m gonna shine  
I’m gonna see  
It’s gonna be mine  
I’m breaking free  

Today I’m letting the past flow  
Without the troubles  
I’m not going to get low  
My world is not gonna crumble  

I’m flying away to new adventures  
I can’t be stopped.

“Pictures with Expressions of Myself”  
By Mila, age 14  
Richmond

“Hope”  
By Melissa, age 19  
Colonial Heights
“Golden”  
By Ke’Andra, age 16  
Lynchburg

My heart is like a piece of gold  
It never fades it doesn’t tarnish  
My heart is golden  
Golden like the gate’s of heaven  
Sweet as the morning dew  
Cherish like a new born baby  
Warm like the sun that peeks  
through a shadeless window on a  
cool brisk winter morning  
My heart is loving  
My heart is strong  
My heart is forever golden

The heart of a foster parent  
must be loving, strong, must  
be forever golden. To take in  
a kid that they know nothing  
about and take them with open  
arms as, as if they are their  
own is incredible. A foster  
parent’s heart has been through  
the worst, has seen the worst,  
and has felt the worst. A good  
foster parent that’s been through  
everything; done seen it all  
that foster parent can guide  
their foster child to a  
bright and happy future.  
The heart of a foster parent  
must be a heart of gold. To  
care for someone else’s  
child and steering them on  
the right path and I know  
some foster kids can be harder  
than others, but it takes a  
special kind of heart, a special  
kind of love, a special kind of  
person to be a foster parent.  
It takes a patient parent, a  
kind parent, a loving parent,  
a dedicated parent to be a  
Foster parent.

Being in foster care myself  
My goals are to work  
hard in school, to bring my  
grade point average up, to make  
good decisions, and to work  
with my new foster family to  
help make me a productive  
young man. I can do all this with  
the help of a foster parent.

“The Light”  
By Kyla, age 18  
Richmond
“Dustin’s Poem”
By Dustin, age 17
Stafford

The lightening cracks as the thunder rolls no matter how I try I cannot fill the holes. The holes you left in my life they day you turned your back on me. How could you not take the time to see. The first time I learned to ride a bike and my first banged up knee.

My first basketball game you weren’t there to see. Football, baseball, getting my first car. I just wanted to get in and drive so far. So far away from all the pain and heart ache. There are times when forgiveness comes to me easy and times when the anger inside takes over my entire soul. So I vow to myself to be a better man, the power inside I know I can and this I say to a man I never want to be. I will make you proud to have a son like me.
“Is the Grass Greener?”
By Jordan, age 15
Stafford

Grass is green
Sugar is sweet
Some wishes aren’t so good
And you don’t get wishes made.
Some wishes you want might be a mistake
If you wonder how
Just read what I write…

Grass is not greener on the other side,
When I got put in foster care at the age of seven
The only thing I wished for was to live with my family
I only lived with one foster family before my wish came true.
One day I woke up and went to my counselor
She said I was going to live with my Aunt and Uncle
I was so happy.

I went to live with them, but I got into some trouble at school
I came home and my Uncle was mad
He yelled at me and hit me.
The only thing I thought was
“Is the grass greener on the other side?”
So I moved away from my family
And into a new foster home.

“I’m the Grass Greener?”
By Jordan, age 15
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I went to live with them, but I got into some trouble at school
I came home and my Uncle was mad
He yelled at me and hit me.
The only thing I thought was
“Is the grass greener on the other side?”
So I moved away from my family
And into a new foster home.
"Captured"
By Malcolm, age 16
Stafford

They took me away from my home, I’m all alone
Out here on my own,

Feels like a prison because I’m forced to stay grown
My Moms dying by the second “Can’t to do anything”

Regretting, crying, tears, because of pain
I gave to a single human being my brother blind and so are we
Can’t see our family fallin apart either they are dying or branches
Breaking and fallen apart disappearing in to the dark

This the bad parts of my life I didn't want ya'll to see

“But hey look at me,” I am not as tuff as you think water fallen down my eyes every time I blink.

Cause the memories of my pops, nephew, niece an all the love ones I lost that I never get to see

If you ask me life is easy “I have to say I disagree”

Captured is barred from my sins freedom is gone and so are my friends
But I keep my head up because I lost so much but I got so much to gain and win

Through the rain and wind, thru the pain I’ll strengthen and be humble
Keep a straight attitude no matter how crumble pick up where I fall off
No matter how much I stumble I’m not blaming nobody just want you to feel my struggles

As for my new family I love them, thru thick and thin man I mean it
when I make it we are going to make it best believe it.
“Me!”
By Shawn, age 18
Charlottesville

My future is as delicate as a rose, and as vivid as the sun, for looking at my loss I’ve already won. Triumphant in school is just one thing, I’ve gone as far as to retrieve a State ring. But my sovereignty doesn’t stop there. In my class I was nominated athlete of the year. Also known as the first team defensive tackle, I know without a doubt my future holds no debacle. Victorious in earning the presidential award in the 8th grade, only help my future get brighter in so many ways. I’ve played the violin since before I was ten, part of the reason I’m in the college I’m in. Awarded the “Mustang Pride Award,” at last, little did I know it was the top award of my class. Coming in second in the State for wrestling adds to the score, I know there are so many more awards in store. But I do remember the long dark night, when smoke and alchol clogged the light. Those nights I struggled to survive, I know now that it was my vision and my passion that kept me alive. By no means will I allow my past hold me down. Life is full of chances and opportunities, it holds no bounds. I refuse to let me past mold me, drugs tobacco and alchol, can’t control me. My dreams shall carry me far, I am grateful for my social worker, she’s my star. Isolated and abandoned from my past I must stand. For in my future I must become my own man!

“Glass”
By Dante, age 12
Fairfax
“Growing Up”  
By Tyrell, age 18  
Fredericksburg

My experiences being in foster care  
Have been a journey  
That I’ll never forget  
No matter how old I get.  
Especially the people that have been in my life  
And have helped me get to where I am now.  
Sports has also pushed me  
To stay on the right track.  
Football  
Wrestling  
Basketball  
Shot-put  
Track coaches and teammates are like a family  
When you join a team  
Somehow, people find out a lot about you  
And to me  
That makes a teams bond a lot better  
Because of their support  
I’ll be successful in everything I do.
“Changing Life Story”
By Michael, age 18
Colonial Heights

My story is a little different from others; it’s about two adults whose names are Jack and Shanna who are just twenty-one years old. They serve and help their community out very well by donating money, and they help clean the trash off the streets and sidewalks; they also know everybody in their community. In addition, when people move in to this community called “Dreamville” they throw Christian parties for people to welcome them.

Jack and Shanna are a married couple and they have a beautiful 1-year-old girl named Michelle, and Jack is out of college, he went to the University of North Carolina and got his law degree. Shanna is still going to Georgia Tech; she is a sophomore trying to get her masters degree. Her major is special needs, she loves school and kids. She wants her daughter to be “just like her.” They both go to a “mega” church and they are counselors in the youth leadership. They have kids in the church that are attached to them and love them very much; they go on really fun trips with the kids in the youth ministries to different places such as Atlanta, Georgia, and went tubing at Massanutten in the Shenandoah valley, (that was the number one place they went, which was every couple of months).

They have a campaign running for “Today’s Youth-Tomorrow’s leaders,” and they should win! In addition, they have big dreams they want to fulfill in their lives – they want to help kids as much as possible. They go and ask kids what they want to be when they grow up, and a lot of them say doctors, lawyers, singers, and police officers, and they simply tell the kids “anything is possible if you put your mind to it” and have a little faith!

See it is just like me, I have had a rough life but I want to be a gospel singer just like Kirk Franklin and Papa San and I know I can do it with faith. I love God for taking me out of some of the situations I was in. In addition, I’m a big role model in my school and I help people out a lot with their class work. I have grown up a lot since I have came into foster care; I’m serious about my education and I respect my self and others more now. I take better care of my self and I stopped doing destructive things that could have ruined my life. Some of the times, I get very sad because I’m not with my biological-mom but I love the foster home I’m in now. I could not be in a better place. In addition, I have very big dreams in life and I have a lot of love and heart to give if you treat me right, so that’s my part of the story, I can’t just write about people and not talk about me.
“You and Me”
By Paris, age 13
Fairfax

There were so many dreams we had together as Sisters.
One and the same
But yet so different from each other we were.
The feeling of equality to be ourselves
With you reaching out to strangers
While I, standing away hesitant to revel my hope and spirit.
Somewhere along the timeline of our sisterhood,
We grew distant from one another
When the year separated us from each other
Hoping it would make us strangers
But instead made us nearer
Sometimes this pain is still there
As in order to release the feelings of hurt
I never relieve the dream we once had.

Untitled
By Trevor, age 18
Stafford

“The Big Storm”
By Tim, age 18
Newport News
“Transitioning from Teenage Years to Adult Years”
By Jenny, age 13
Arlington

I believe that moving on from your teenage years will be hard but successful. If you have the right people standing by you then I’m sure your transition from teenage years to adult years will be ok. I have three adults who have guided me in the right path and those three adults are my social worker N’dorah, my adopted mother Isabel and my therapist Ms. Virginia P. These are the adults who have stuck by me through my rough times.

Success to me is someone who achieves his or her goals, but I think it is also important to be happy. Some people don’t achieve their goals and that’s ok as long as you’re happy with not doing it. What I’m trying to say is even if people don’t achieve their goals they might be happy.

But getting back to what I think is success: it is achieving your goals. Sometimes people can’t achieve their goals either because they had a baby, drink all the time, partied all the time, and sometimes it’s your friends who get in the way of achieving your goals. I think good achievements for me are going to college, and getting a job in something that you are interested in.

My mother, Gloria, never went to college, and never finished high school she came to the United States from Guatemala, when she was 16 years old. She only spoke Spanish. My mother has come along way from a lot of things, but to me when I see my mother she seems happy. Even though she didn’t achieve her goals she is happy, but she didn’t get to see how it would have been if she’d been able to achieve her goals.

“My First Car”
By Michael, age 18
Colonial Heights

“American Gangster”
By Terrance, age 15
Goochland
“What I Think About the World Around Me”  
By Paris, age 13  
Fairfax

“Reawakening”  
By Leonte, age 15  
Fairfax

“Sunset”  
By Rebecca, age 14  
Palmyra
“Mirrors”  
By Tabitha, age 18  
Winchester

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? I see someone staring back at me who has been handed a beautiful life. Although things may not have been picture-perfect growing up, she had two parents at home. Some can’t say that. She would always say “things could be worse,” even when things got worse. Looking into her eyes through the mirror, I can see the hurt in them and feel the pain as if it were my own. She grew up quick and had to learn fast. At 14, on August 10, 2005 both of her parents went to prison for meth related charges. She had to with her elderly grandmother, who wasn’t capable of taking care of her. She began to live the life her parents had lived. Her grandmother could no longer take care of her, or she would end up like her parents. False assault and battery charges were filed against her by her grandmother in order to get her out of the residence. She then gave up her custody. The girl was arrested in school the day her mom got out of prison and was sent to a juvenile detention center. The charges were dismissed and she was transferred to a youth rehabilitation center, just after turning 16. She spent 4 months there. Then moved to a nice group home where she bloomed. She became a honor student, a self advocate, earned a trip to Europe, and began taking college classes in high school. She had big dreams and wanted to rush things. She took on too much. She was overwhelmed. She felt like a fish out of water. She lost it all, everything she had worked so hard for. When she turned 18, she moved out on her own and was working at a doctor’s office while going to school. In 3 months, she was broke, homeless and stopped going to school. She lived like this for 2 months, until she realized she still had time to change things and make it better. She moved in with her social worker and worked hard to get back on her feet. She still struggled and wanted to give up at times, but she did it. She graduated on time. She finally got a good job and a nice apartment. She signed up for college and finally realized she has all the time in the world and those with patience will see better results. She is wiser when making decisions and takes her time now. She knows where she has been and what has done and is not ashamed because it made her who she is today and brought her where she is in life. That girl is me and I knew what kind of life I want, a comfortable one. What you do today doesn’t change yesterday. It changes tomorrow.

Untitled  
By Trevor, age 18  
Stafford

“One Love”  
By Kashaun, age 15  
Newport News
"Granddad"
By John, age 16
Bedford

I was diagnosed crazy
I’m broken in my mind
The doctor said the Prozac would work out fine
I’m having a melt down in this busted body
I knew I wasn’t losing it
I was just sad
Cause I lost my granddad
There ain’t nothing bad, about missing my granddad
The family took it hard
What hurt the most
Is seeing my mom crying
While her dad was slowly dieing
He was laid up in bed
But now that he’s dead
Mom says he’s in a better place
With sadness written all over her face
It hurts to lose someone you love
Even though you know
There in that wonderful place above
Looking down on us

"TRAPT"
By Chelsea, age 16
Chesapeake

You’re my angel back in heaven
Lost among the free
Trapped up in that tower
Looking down upon my plea
If only I could climb up there
And sort through your debris
I’d bring this angel back to heaven
For all eternity

"Praying for Change"
By Eric, age 13
Richmond

"Things So Good"
By Shawn, age 15
Stafford
“Growing Up”
By Charlie, age 16
Richmond

The flower blooms with beautiful pink and white petals.
Its bright colors catch the attention of all who pass by.
Its perfume fills the air with a breathtaking aroma.
Its calming and yet overwhelming scent sends a tingling sensation throughout your body,
Stimulating your sense of sight, smell, taste, touch.
Even though it is surrounded by hundreds of other flowers just like it
All trying to be better than the rest
All fighting to survive
It still stands alone and grows up to be a beautiful and healthy flower.

As you get older and come into adult hood you will change in many different ways.
Like the flower that begins as a seed and then grows into a beautiful plant,
Fighting to survive in this world can be hard, but it will help you develop your own
Personality, style, and, tastes for certain things. It will help you become a strong and independent adult.

“Life Is what You Make It”
By Devitta, age 17
Suffolk
Dear my daughter

I write this letter because I love you, and you are everything to me. I got pregnant with you at a very young age. I wish I had waited, but now that I am carrying you in my tummy, I am glad that I will be your mommy and I promise you that I will be the best mommy that I can be. I will love you with everything that is within me. When you move and touch you in my tummy, I feel so much love for you.

When you are born and I can finally hold you, I know that I will be very wonderful. I thank you, my sweet little girl for giving me a reason to change my life around for the better. I promise to be your mom, your dad, your friend. I will teach you not to get into trouble like I did. I thought I knew everything and no one could tell me nothing, and I am not proud of that now, because you have given me a reason to change. I will teach you good things because I want you to have a good life.

I will always put you first in my life, and I will never leave you alone. I know that I am young, but I will be a good mother to you. Baby girl I love you with all my heart, and I would never let anyone do anything bad to you my love.

I write this letter with all my love so that you can remember I love you so very much.

With all my love, your mom,
Tania
Stacy Hawkins Adams is the author of five nationally-published inspirational fiction novels, including Watercolored Pearls and The Someday List. She is a former staff writer for the Richmond Times-Dispatch and now writes a parenting column for the newspaper. Stacy also has penned an online parenting column for Gov. Tim Kaine’s Smart Beginnings initiative and serves as a community relations spokesperson for Prevent Child Abuse Virginia.

Laura Chessin is a graphic designer, photographer, and documentarian. She is Associate Professor of Graphic Design in the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University and teaches courses in print design, photography, and documentary studies. Her own work includes a photo and text documentary of self shelters for domestic violence, as well several photo documentary and writing projects around the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Appalachian Mountains. She is working with a local preschool documenting the work of young children as designers demonstrating their rich abilities to imagine, research and create. Her father was a Professor of Physics, and a product of the foster care system in Cleveland, Ohio in the 1920s.

Melanie Buffington is currently works as an assistant professor of Art Education at Virginia Commonwealth University. Previously, she was a middle school art teacher in Maryland. Her research involves technology in education, museum education, preservice teacher preparation, multicultural education, and emerging forms of research. She is active in the local arts community through her work with the VMFA.

Travis Fullerton has a BFA in Communication Arts and Design and received a MFA in Photography, both from Virginia Commonwealth University. Currently, he works full-time as a photographer at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Travis is also a practicing artist and has had several solo exhibitions of his work and has participated in numerous group shows, most recently at Flashpoint Gallery in Washington DC, Wellington B. Gray Gallery at East Carolina University, McLean Project for the Arts in McLean, Virginia, The Peninsula Fine Art Center in Newport News, and the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia in Virginia Beach. Travis also teaches undergraduate photography in the Art Education Department of VCU, and a graduate course in VCU’s Masters of Interdisciplinary Studies Studio Art program. Travis has also been associated with 1708 Gallery since 2002. He has been a Board Member at 1708 since 2005, and served as Board President in 2008.
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Lexus B.
LaQuita H.
Justin B.
Sunny T.

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Bradley W.
Shawn S.
Trevor R.
Donte H.
Cheyenne B.
Megan O.
Michael S.
Timothy H.
Cody D.
Thomas W.
Devitta J.
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