

LIFE EXPERIENCES THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE INDEPENDENCE
AND SUCCESS IN THE LIVES OF FOSTER CARE ALUMNI

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the factors which helped these foster care alumni to persevere and to succeed. The intent was to provide a framework for equipping youth in foster care more effectively by building on their strengths and the resources available in foster care. The study's method incorporated the interviewing of ten ethnically diverse individuals who had experienced the foster care system. Based on their insights and the themes which emerged, the *WARRIORS* Model was created. This acronym represents the key themes derived from the interviews: **W**ounded, **A**dvocacy, **R**eality of **B**elonging, **R**esources, **I**nspired to Succeed, **O**btain Life Skills, **R**esilience and **S**pirituality. A *Wounded* past was the reality of every participant yet many found purpose and meaning in their *Advocacy* roles. The *Reality of Belonging* was vital in each of their lives in addition to accessing *Resources* for post-high school educational and housing options, both implicating the significance of foster parent involvement. All were *Inspired to Succeed* both personally and educationally and were receptive to *Obtain the Life Skills* necessary for their future independence and success. They demonstrated such hopeful countenance and profound *Resilience*, in addition to accessing and benefitting from their chosen avenues of *Spirituality*. Finally, while navigating through both the negative and positive aspects of their lives, these youth have revealed the strength of the human spirit which has given them every right to be identified as WARRIORS. The *WARRIORS* Model can be utilized by clinicians and professionals involved in the systems addressing the needs of youth in foster care and training foster parents. Greater opportunities are needed for youth in foster care to advocate for themselves and others with the hope of gaining a sense of worth as their opinions are valued by the adults claiming to represent them. Finally, further research is needed concerning the spiritual development of youth in foster care and ways in which we can assist in this promising aspect of cultivating resilience as evidenced in this study and other established research. The electronic version of this dissertation can be found at the OhioLink ETD Center, www.ohiolink.edu/etd.

DEDICATION

Mahalo to my husband and favorite friend, Kevin, who shares my vision and compassion for youth in foster care and has loved me unconditionally for the past 24 years. I love you and could not have completed this monumental task without your patience and support.

Kisses to my long-awaited daughter, Isabella Hope. You have brought Mommy more love, delight, and laughter than I ever dreamed possible. I love you, Princess! Happy 4th Birthday!

Much affection to my precious Mama and Mexican family for their love and ability to see the best in me. Thank you for believing in me and for making it possible for me to be the first in our family to graduate from college and to later attend graduate school. Much love to my Auntie Betty who instilled in me a love of learning and an irresistible thirst for education. This work is not a personal achievement. It is an accomplishment for every one of us as I am and always will be a reflection of you.

Finally and most importantly, I dedicate this dissertation to Jesus Christ, as it is He who created me to be an agent of change in this world as a foster and adoptive parent, an educator, a clinician, and soon to be doctor of psychology. You really did want to give me ALL the desires of my heart! May my life reflect the immense gratitude for all of which You have entrusted to me.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Imagine growing up with people who truly love and care about you. Envision being fortunate enough to not have to worry about whether there is food on the table, whether you have decent or even clean clothes to wear, whether your rent is getting paid, or whether you will have the prospect of quarrelling with your siblings the following day. Perhaps you are able to attend school every day in addition to looking forward to the hope of college. As part of your growing independence, imagine attaining and maintaining a part-time job while experiencing the inner pride that comes from such an opportunity.

For many of us, these were functions in life taken for granted, simply assumed because we never had to think of our lives without them. A few of us may have even been privileged enough to live with our biological or adoptive parents, complete with their imperfections, plus the added bonus of growing up with our siblings. Possibly we grew up never having to doubt whether we were loved, whether we would ever see our families again after short periods of separation, or whether our very existence even mattered.

Such is not the case for many children who have lived in various placement settings whether through the foster care system, group home experience, or other placement alternatives. These children endure neglect and abuse, at many different levels, at the hands of those who are supposed to care for and love them. Depending on their circumstances, life as they know it is radically

changed and they are suddenly at the mercy of the system. Although intended for their best interests, major life decisions are made without their consent and expected adaptations are required (Whiting, 2000). Foster care alumni describe the paradox of living their childhoods without any input while being expected to transition to adulthood without any difficulty (Geenen & Powers, 2007). While it is true that some youth in foster care are well-equipped for independent living, as they have attained educational degrees and maintained steady employment, this is not the reality for the majority of children raised in foster care (Pecora et al., 2006).

During the fiscal year of October 2008-September 2009, the number of children placed in foster care in the United States of America was 700,000. On September 30, 2009, there were 424,000 children in foster care and 50% of all children during that time were age 10 or older (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Moreover, 22% of youth in foster care (89,000) were age 16 or older. Of the 280,000 youth exiting care in 2009, 11% (29,500) left foster care through the process of becoming legally emancipated (when a youth in foster care becomes a legal adult).

In 2009, there were 423,773 children served by the foster care system in the United States of America with 276,266 children leaving care in various ways that same year. States vary greatly in terms of numbers served: In California, at the end of 2009, there were 60,198 children in the foster care system. In Hawaii

during the same year, there were 1,455 children in foster care (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

As reported by Casey Family Programs (2007), youth in foster care demonstrate a number of problems in academic attainment and independent citizenship. First, the general population completed high school at a rate of 86%, whereas only 74% of foster care alumni completed high school. Second, 37% of foster care alumni attended college as opposed to the general population of 51%. Third, completion of a Bachelor of Arts degree occurred in only 3% of foster care alumni whereas 28% of adults in the general population completed Bachelor of Arts degrees. Fourth, only 52% of foster care alumni were employed at 12-18 months after leaving care and 25% had experienced being homeless. Fifth, 12-18 months after leaving care, 10% of female foster care alumni and 27% of male foster care alumni had been incarcerated. These findings are abstracted from the Casey National, Midwest and Northwest and WESTAT studies, among others (Casey Family Programs 2009, 2008; Pecora et al., 2006; Pecora et al., 2003). More specifically, if these statistics are not sobering enough, according to one study of these Midwestern states, 25% of youth in foster care will be incarcerated within their first two years of emancipation (Courtney, 2004).

In 2008, 3.3 million children in the United States of America were identified as potential victims of abuse or neglect. In addition, an estimated

772,000 children were actual victims of abuse or neglect (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

Finally, an additional study completed by Leathers and Testa (2006) explored gender and racial differences. They found that African American young men are at a greater risk for poorer independent living skills (Mech, Ludy-Dobson, & Hulseman, 1994) and incarceration (Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000) than Caucasian young men. However, Caucasian young men had a greater likelihood toward mental illness and substance abuse than any other group, although African American young men experienced a greater risk for unemployment, problems sustaining employment, and truancy (Leathers & Testa, 2006). Regarding the racial differences for women, African American young women were more prone to be pregnant and parenting than Caucasian young women, but they were also less likely to be victimized (Leathers & Testa, 2006). In combination, this study found that 33% of all foster care alumni, regardless of race or gender, failed to complete high school (Leathers & Testa, 2006).

These are undoubtedly appalling statistics and accentuate the need for ongoing research as to what can be accomplished to better prepare youth in foster care for independent and successful functioning once they age out of the system. Based on these results, it is not surprising that there are numerous hindrances surrounding these youth as they navigate their way into young adulthood. Their developmental capacity has been altered (Nollan et al., 2000); yet they are placed

in a system where they are expected to acquire the necessary skills to develop the independence essential for transitioning successfully into adulthood.

Policy advocates may benefit from a clearer understanding of what foster care alumni find helpful during their time in the foster care system, with the hope of strengthening and emphasizing those areas, thus further enforcing that which is beneficial (Whiting, 2000). In attempting to achieve such goals, it appears obvious that we must ask these youth themselves what they found helpful or not during their time in placement.

The role of extending support beyond the age of 18 has also been found to produce more successful outcomes for youth who are struggling as they transition to adulthood (Kerman, Wildfire, & Barth, 2002). Research and evaluation are vital aspects in assessing outcomes for youth in transition. Policymakers must be informed of the effectiveness of placement in nurturing healthy adults, in addition to improving already established services (Williams, McWilliams, Mainieri, Pecora, & La Belle, 2006).

One of the goals of the present study was to provide a voice to the many unspoken and unsolicited opinions, thoughts, and feelings of foster care alumni. Acquiring an awareness of the life experiences that played a role in preparing them for independence and successful functioning was the basis for this research. Sharing their stories in narrative form was intended to lead to a sense of empowerment along with the assurance that their voices have meaning and are

worth being heard. The present research seeks to provide a forum for their stories to be told, in their own words, to potentially validate their life experience (Whiting, 2000) and to add a valuable contribution to the current literature.

Youth in foster care are vulnerable as they are certainly one of society's marginalized groups. We continue to place them in that familiar category by not seeking their perspectives, in their own words (Unrau, 2007). If we as a society are to expand our awareness of the ongoing experience of youth in foster care, then we must give them the opportunities not only to tell their stories, but also to listen and apply what is gained from such information. Whiting (2000) reflected on the purpose of Festinger's (1983) interviews with youth in foster care, stating that these interviews were "meant to be a springboard for more dialogue and research regarding foster children's views" (p. 93). The purpose of this study was to extend this dialogue by eliciting a meaningful contribution from this silenced and sometimes forgotten population.

Finally, more information and education require responsibility. Perhaps we are more content as a society to ignore the specific needs of this population because once we become cognizant of such information, we are required to act. It is hoped that this contribution to the literature regarding life experiences that played a role in preparing youth in foster care for independence and successful functioning, will inform and inspire society at large, and policy makers, more

specifically. Truly this is a costly endeavor, as it requires motivation and change. However, these youth are the future and certainly, they are worth the investment.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Much of the present literature concerning the preparation for independence in youth in foster care is quantitative in nature, seeking to establish those areas in which the majority of these youth struggle. The goal of nearly all research regarding this population is to identify their specific needs and to inform policy with the hope of inspiring change.

While quantitative research has proven valuable to our understanding, there is far less qualitative research available where these youth are interviewed personally and asked to explore that which assisted or hindered them in their transition to adulthood. Most studies incorporate the valuable advice and opinions of experts in the field including social workers, psychologists, those within the legal system, and many others.

However, if we are to gain an awareness and clear insight regarding the specific ways in which we can assist youth in foster care in preparing them for future independence and success, it is imperative to seek the perspectives and suggestions of those who have actually lived and experienced life within the foster care system. It seems an obvious conclusion yet one that is not often pursued and discovered. Unfortunately what most often occurs is that this population is once again marginalized and given the message that they have nothing of significance to contribute to their own well-being, which is a sure way to keep them in their victim state, without any sense of power.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, seeks to empower youth in foster care giving them the sense of identity that comes from telling your story, being heard, and given the message that your views are received as a serious and meaningful contribution to the research. More studies such as these are needed to understand more fully the needs of youth in foster care (Leathers & Testa, 2006).

The items most cited in the literature which enable successful and independent functioning through the transition to adulthood include educational attainment, employment, and housing stability. These variables will be reviewed in addition to the constructs of interest such as spirituality, meaningful relationships, and resilience, which may or may not have had an impact on the development of independence and successful functioning in the lives of foster care alumni.

As is true in most effective and successful therapies, assessment seems to be the most logical place to begin as we consider what would best prepare youth in foster care for their transition into adulthood. More specifically, the assessment of life skills has played a key role in preparing youth for life after care. The Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (Nollan, Horn, Downs, & Pecora, 2002) is a strengths-based measure and was created to identify whether or not youth are ready to live independently and to discover which skills, whether tangible or intangible, still need to be acquired (Nollan et al., 2000).

Tangible skills are necessary for self-maintenance, daily living, acquiring and sustaining profitable employment and would incorporate skills such as household and money management, transportation, vocational interests, and abilities (Nollan et al., 2000). Intangible skills are necessary for functioning well in interpersonal relationships and for continuing employment and consist of skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, planning, self-esteem, communication, social skills, and finally, anger and grief management (Cook, McLean, & Ansell 1989; Ryan, McFadden, Rice, & Warren, 1988).

The scales contained on the ACLSA are quite comprehensive--including Social Development, Educational and Vocational Development, Physical Development and Self-Care, Moral Development, and finally, Money, Housing, and Transportation. After being assessed on all of these measures, youth and caregivers have an excellent sense of which skills are still needed in their preparation for independence (Nollan et al., 2000).

Skill development is an essential aspect of the transitional process to adulthood. Obtaining employment, educational attainment, and sustaining housing literally depend on one's level of skills, both tangible and intangible.

Indeed, there have been a number of foster care alumni who have reported feelings of regret for not taking advantage of opportunities presented for learning independent living skills during their adolescent stage of development,

providing even more reason for us to offer and make available these learning opportunities even after the age of majority (Nicoll et al., 2006).

Educational Attainment

Education and academic success appear to be a recurrent problem for youth in foster care for the most part due to placement instability. In one study, although 65% of youth experienced seven or more school changes from elementary school through high school, they completed high school at similar rates of the general population (Pecora et al., 2006). However, nearly 30% of those completions were accomplished through the GED as opposed to receiving a diploma (Pecora et al., 2006).

Smith (2003) affirmed the fact that completing high school by means of the GED is certainly a major accomplishment. However, Bozick and DeLuca (2005) found that individuals who achieve diplomas rather than GEDs are more successful, in addition to being more likely to enroll in post-secondary education.

Although 42% of foster care alumni participated in some form of postsecondary education, less than half of them actually finished any degree beyond high school (Pecora et al., 2006). Even more alarming is the fact that only between 3-12% of foster care alumni completed a Bachelor's or higher degree when tracked beyond age 23 (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Pecora et al., 2006).

Jones and Lansdverk (2006) proposed an interesting alternative to traditional foster care and education, and although more rigorous empirically

based data is necessary, they built a convincing case for residential education. Their goal was to provide a stable home-like environment and to emphasize the educational component of the program with the hope of equipping youth in foster care. There were specific guidelines regarding acceptance into the program and the first three graduating classes have offered promising results, as school completion and college attendance rates are higher than reported in other findings. The benefits of this model are permanency, time allotted to establish long-term relationships with staff, teachers, and peers, a strong educational component, and an integrated program which teaches the life skills necessary for emancipation.

Pecora et al. (2006) found that children would be in a better position to succeed if their classroom teachers were more informed and equipped to meet their needs while being more aware of the ongoing difficulties experienced by this population. Perhaps residential care could create the much needed environment for this type of individualized care to be implemented. Although it is true that critics of residential care point out its inability to help youth develop strong, enduring caring attachments with caring adults, and its sometimes harmful environment.

Yu, Day, and Williams (2002) contend that placement constancy and a secure and established school atmosphere will improve the educational outcomes of youth in foster care. Based on that information, residential treatment may be a more promising option than has previously been considered or researched.

Employment

Achieving financial independence and freedom is yet another challenge for foster care alumni, as they struggle with unemployment (Courtney & Heuring, 2005). Therefore, it should be no surprise that they rely on public assistance at a higher rate than the general population (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001). With the lack of achieved educational success, it seems to follow that they would have difficulty in obtaining and sustaining employment (Courtney & Heuring, 2005). For those who actually acquire employment, they tend to receive the least wages, well below the poverty level (Choca et al., 2004; Goerge et al., 2002). Many youth in foster care struggle with medical and mental health problems, in addition to early parenting, which they cannot afford (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Generalized Anxiety, Depression, and Social Phobia are a few of the mental health issues that are typically diagnosed in foster care alumni and their inability to attain and maintain medical and mental health treatment is an ongoing problem (Pecora et al., 2006). It is not difficult to understand why some youth, in their attempt to support themselves, have sold drugs or even prostituted with the goal of taking care of themselves financially (Reilly, 2003), and thus find themselves in the criminal justice system (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

Housing Stability

Homelessness is a stark reality for many foster care alumni (Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Choca et al., 2004). Unless they have achieved a degree, obtained and sustained a profitable job, and are able to remain in contact with past mentors, they do not stand a chance at affording housing costs. The standard of living continues to rise while wages continue to falter for foster care alumni. Choca et al. (2004) continue this line of reasoning by suggesting that these three factors promote emotional well-being. Clearly, the issues of education, employment, and housing are interrelated, as each one builds a foundation upon the other.

Many foster care alumni “couch surf” (Choca et al., 2004, p. 471) to avoid living on the streets or having to go to a shelter. However, not everyone has friends or mentors on whom they can depend. Unfortunately, this population lacks the familial support that much of the general population is able to rely upon during this time in their lives (Courtney & Heuring, 2005).

Research indicates that more housing options are needed for foster care alumni at affordable rates; even intergenerational housing has been suggested. Choca et al. (2004) noted that many youth in foster care reach the age of 18 and have never been employed. It seems apparent that in order to obtain a lucrative job and to be able to afford housing, one needs to graduate from high school with a diploma. In fact, youth in foster care would be much better prepared if they had the opportunity to get a job before they turned 18 with the opportunity to learn the

skills necessary to sustaining a job. It seems reasonable to assert that providers and foster parents could play significant roles in preparing youth for independence and successful functioning (Choca et al., 2004).

Courtney et al. (2001) questioned youth in foster care concerning their circumstances surrounding the time period of leaving care. It was reported that approximately 40% of these youth had to leave their placement due to the fact that they were emancipated from the child welfare system. It has been suggested that it would be more favorable for these youth in foster care to remain in care even after the age of majority to continue their educational goals. This continues to be an ongoing debate within our government (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

Choca et al. (2004) suggests that any one realm of the system attempting to conquer this problem alone is a “recipe for failure” (p.491). It appears to be a systemic problem and will take the efforts of many departments and programs to accomplish this monumental task of equipping youth in foster care during their transition to adulthood.

Some youth have remained close to their family of origin and have the option of living with them once they are emancipated, although they must take into consideration the ongoing familial conflicts and decide whether that is a help or a hindrance to their well-being (Courtney & Heuring, 2005). Obviously, their options are limited since the only other alternative is homelessness (Reilly, 2003).

Meaningful Relationships

Foster parents have the unique opportunity to play a vital role in the lives of youth in foster care. Foster care parental acceptance has the potential to change the direction of the way youth in foster care will perceive not only themselves, but the way in which they will perceive and develop relationships with other people (Dozier & Ackerman, 2005). In addition, this study noted that in the absence of a supportive environment, youth in foster care are likely to regress into the same negative expectations with which they started.

The impact of such relationships includes improved positive self-concepts (Turner & Scherman, 1996) and educational attainment (Shiner, Young, Newburn, & Groben, 2004; Thompson & Kelly Vance, 2001; Zippay, 1995). The mentoring relationship has also been found to decrease drug and alcohol use and violence; and finally, improvements in parent-child and peer relationships (Grossman & Tierney, 1998) have been attributed to the mentoring relationship.

Youth in foster care described their relationships with their mentors as helpful, supportive, dependable, consistent, and encouraging. Much of their time was spent participating in recreational activities such as going out to eat, going to church, and even shopping. Mentors found time to accomplish more task-oriented activities such as helping youth with homework, acquiring necessary services, and modeling independent living behaviors (Osterling & Hines, 2006).

These youngsters were able to articulate the types of changes they experienced as a result of their mentoring relationships. They reported being more open with their feelings, understanding their own emotions at a deeper level, and becoming less angry. They also stated that they were less likely to get into trouble and were able to attend court dates and complete other necessary tasks (Osterling & Hines, 2006).

Regarding preparation for independent living, youth in foster care received assistance from their mentors in areas such as opening a bank account, saving money, filling out applications as they applied for jobs, completing various forms, and completing their education. One youth described her mentor in the following manner: “My Advocate teaches me things, but not like a teacher in a class; it’s more emotional and spiritual” (Osterling & Hines, 2006).

In another study, the mentors came to the conclusion that beginning the mentor relationship before the youth is 18 years of age is more beneficial as they have the opportunity to establish a trusting relationship rather than waiting until the age of majority. Mentors also mentioned the value in receiving a checklist from the court regarding the various items their youth should possess by the time they reach the age of 18, including their birth certificate, social security card, and resume, to mention a few.

Resilience

Osterling and Hines (2006) present a poignant study integrating the miraculous dance between the mentoring process and resilience of adolescent youth in foster care. From its inception, research on resilience has continuously recognized the presence and importance of a caring and supportive non-parental relationship in the lives of youth experiencing adversity (Werner, 1992; Masten & Garmezy, 1985). The importance of relationships and the concept of having a family were also revealed as key themes of successful outcomes (Geenen & Powers, 2007).

In a recent study, Daining and DePanfilis (2007) attempted to identify the personal and interpersonal factors that contributed to the resilience discovered in youth in foster care navigating the transition to adulthood. The rewarding aspect of studying resilience is the fact that by virtue of its definition, a focus is placed on an individual's strengths as opposed to the deficit models which inundate our thinking and understanding. The findings revealed that the majority of youth demonstrated resilience across multiple domains of functioning. This is indeed remarkable due to the fact that most of the sample included African American youth who often get stereotyped for negative behavior and abilities. This should encourage us as professionals to continue studying the strengths of our at risk youth in the hope of discovering their ability to adapt to adverse circumstances and how we may facilitate that process.

Based on the established research, it is imperative to implement models for fostering resilience in youth in foster care so that as they enter the process of emerging adulthood, they will be better prepared. One aspect of that preparation is providing the opportunity to model relational skills as they are in contact with social workers, therapists, program providers, and caseworkers. All of these team members have the opportunity to play vital roles in the lives of youth in foster care, assisting and equipping them for future independence and success (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007).

A holistic approach to fostering resilience would be most beneficial if it included components such as individual and group therapy, drug and alcohol abuse prevention, health care education and services, emergency assistance, recreational activities, and finally, employment readiness and training (Burt, 2002).

A focus on resilience could assist in the process of identifying protective factors such as individual skills and personality traits, positive relationships with people who are supportive, and involvement in churches, clubs, and other community groups, in addition to risk factors (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005). Moreover, while a focus on resilience includes identifying strengths and weaknesses, individuals are encouraged to be a part of the process of identifying and achieving their own goals as opposed to being told what they are going to do or perhaps what they should do (Osgood et al., 2005).

Regarding the sense of advocacy that is often a positive experience in developing confidence and a sense of security, Cashmore (2002) found that in their attempts to be involved in their own care, youth in foster care are not seeking “their own way,” but rather they desire to simply “have a say.” It is established that self-esteem and confidence is increased as children believe that their views are respected and taken seriously as reported by Melton (as cited in Cashmore, 2002) but even to a greater degree for children who have experienced traumatic life events in the forms of abuse and neglect. The hope is that the proposed self-advocacy gives youth in foster care a sense of being agents of change in their own lives as opposed to powerless victims vulnerable to the inclinations of well-meaning adults making decisions that have substantial implications for the rest of their lives.

Characteristics such as assertiveness, independence, goal orientation, persistence, the determination to be different from abusive adults, the ability to accept help, a flexible and adaptable self-image, and the ability to make conscious changes also enabled these individuals to include competent and caring adults in their lives in contrast to the negative familial role models that most experience. Furthermore, the research reveals that the ability to establish healthy relationships with non-abusive adults is vital in promoting resilient outcomes (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005).

Contrary to some beliefs, resiliency can occur at any developmental stage as studies of resilience support the view that human psychological development can be improved (Luthar, 1999; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Consequently, there is still hope if one has not yet developed resiliency during the early developmental stages of life.

Additional research states that there may be a window of opportunity for change in the lives of those who are attempting to develop an adaptive capacity while heading down a maladaptive path. The possibility of redirecting the life course or responding to new opportunities with the hope that positive change can be attained was seen through individuals obtaining good quality jobs, marrying into much healthier families, experiencing religious conversion, and pursuing higher education (Masten et al., 2004).

The term “late-emerging resilience” has been identified and suggests the potential for those who have grown up in adversarial backgrounds and made poor life decisions as a result. Normative development allows for this opportunity during the transition to adulthood as neurobehavioral and ecological changes come together to produce fresh options for integrating positive development or perhaps shifting development in new directions through the actions of self and others (Masten et al., 2004).

Finally, “The Resiliency Wheel” as created by Henderson (1996) proposes six attributes of resilience which have been a significant contribution to

the literature on resilience. They include caring and support, high expectations for success, opportunities for meaningful participation, positive bonds, clear and consistent boundaries, and life skills.

Spirituality

Jackson et al. (2010) conducted a study exploring the spiritual beliefs of youth in foster care, the resources which potentially assisted them in healing and coping with adversity, the spiritual and positive activities experienced, and finally, possible spiritual goals. They found that these particular youth in foster care appeared to believe much in the same manner as the general population regarding God, prayer and collective worship being essential to spirituality. Almost half participated in spiritual activities on a weekly basis. Many reported finding meaning and hope in their lives even in the midst of their life difficulties, in addition to finding joy and strength in God.

In exploring protective factors in the lives of foster care alumni, the concept of spirituality and/or religiosity may play a role. Osgood et al. (2005) stated that there are several sources of protective factors including skills and personality traits, positive relationships with people who are supportive, and involvement in churches, clubs, and other community groups.

Cook (2000) describes various ways in which the church can produce resilience in children, thus providing more potential for independence and success, such as the provision of mentors, development of self-regulatory

abilities, fostering of identity development, provision of a supportive and stable community, and the offering of a relationship with a powerful and loving Other.

In the resilience literature, religious faith is often presented as a protective factor (Wright & Masten, 2005; Masten, et al., 2004), in addition to established developmental outcomes of spiritual development (Crawford, Wright, & Masten, 2006). There are five potential outcomes which include the following:

1. *Attachment Relationships*: Relationship with the Divine, marital relationships and family cohesion, pro-social peers and pro-social mentors;
2. *Social Support*: A sense of community, belonging, rituals for birth, marriage, death, and burial, counseling, and support groups;
3. *Guidelines for Conduct and Moral Values*: Promoting integrity, compassion, forgiveness, empathy, altruism, kindness, and love;
4. *Personal Growth and Development*; and
5. *Transformation Opportunities*: Regulation of affect and arousal, prayer, meditation, music of worship, celebration and comfort, reinforcement of family values, provision of meaning and a philosophy of life, reframing of trauma, acceptance of God's will, conversion and transformation.

White, Havalchak, Jackson, O'Brien, and Pecora (2007) confirm several of the preceding characteristics of spirituality among youth in foster care in addition to acknowledging the fact that spirituality is defined in multiple ways.

“Most youth embraced a view of spirituality that includes reverence for God, a Creator, or a Higher Power as a source of protection, love, and fulfillment” (p. 39).

DiLorenzo and Nix-Early (2004) implemented a project with the intent to explore what difference spirituality and faith make in the lives of youth in foster care. They also sought to explore the existence and importance of spiritual development activities as a part of the caseworker’s “tool kit.” Finally, they were interested in developing a set of guidelines for working with youth in foster care on issues related to spiritual development and religious exploration. Their findings were significant.

First, their research suggested that all children have a deep need for caring and affirming permanent relationships that also provide them with a spiritual foundation. Second, they discovered that the process of providing a spiritual foundation for youth in foster care must be intentional and definitely not assumed or ignored. The process could include providing access to spiritual outlets which could be a joint effort by foster parents, community organizations, and cultural and faith-based organizations. The idea suggested is to “create space” for anyone who chooses to explore that part of their lives.

The importance of allowing this opportunity is that it can provide children with the reality and sense of belonging that they may lack. Perhaps their cultural heritage includes some form of worship, rituals, or spiritual practices

which can now be provided and utilized during a vulnerable time when they need the support, encouragement, and sense of community.

In addition, DiLorenzo and Nix-Early (2004) inquired of their participants how they morally decipher between right and wrong. The answers included less information regarding spirituality but rather suggested American culture, the media, friends, siblings, and parents. These researchers came to the following conclusion: “It is not the case that these young people reject spirituality. Rather, they are interested; some searching quietly and others more intensely for meaning and hope and yearning for relationships that are ‘real’” (p. 4).

In their desire to provide relevant ways to intentionally address the spiritual lives of youth in foster care or to at the very least provide opportunities for such, DiLorenzo and Nix-Early (2004) suggest a few ideas. First, they suggest creating a sense of shared responsibility for others, as most faith traditions have some element of others-directedness. Second, they suggest being intentional by supporting spiritual expression, including the arts. Third, it is recommended that providing information about various opportunities to engage in a range of spiritual activities could be beneficial to youth in foster care seeking spiritual connection. Fourth, they propose connecting spiritual leaders with backgrounds and cultural origins similar to those of youth for not only the spiritual aspect implied but also to give the youth in foster care one with whom he or she may identify.

Youth in foster care could be encouraged spiritually if foster parents take the initiative in focusing on the beauty, mystery, magic and hope in daily living. Foster parents could cultivate a sense of belonging, care, identity and spiritual development by taking the time to create and maintain a life book with each youth. Foster parents could nurture spiritual hunger by asking challenging questions, discussing moral dilemmas, listening to their answers, and responding to the ensuing questions. And finally, foster parents can facilitate spiritual development by helping youth in foster care to envision a future, thus, providing hope (DiLorenzo & Nix-Early, 2004).

Badeau (2004) found that spiritual development is of great value to youth in foster care in particular and suggested ten reasons why and how they could benefit. First, spiritual development can build identity and self-esteem as it is a natural process to ask questions such as “Who am I?” and “Where did I come from?” Second, she suggests that it can support a sense of belonging and connection. She uses the term “anchor” implying the sense of security that developing a spiritual life can create for youth in foster care experiencing many placements. Third, links to a history or a past can also cultivate strength as they may identify something valuable in their histories, looking beyond the immediate abuse from which they have suffered. Fourth, the element of hope can be fostered for those who may struggle with the idea of an optimistic future. This hope can assist them in gaining a larger perspective of their lives, being encouraged that

there is a plan for them. Fifth, legitimizing grief can have a profound effect as they have experienced intense grief and loss over their parents and siblings, even temporarily, not to mention the abuse they often endure. Sixth, spiritual development offers a sense of meaning and purpose in the lives of youth in foster care who may be more likely to ask more philosophical questions regarding the meaning and purpose of life as their experiences have been traumatic. Seventh, spiritual development may provide a safe and structured opportunity to mark major life passages such as birthday parties which are often ignored or forgotten for youth in foster care who experience various placements. Eighth, the role of self-advocacy can easily be facilitated in the realm of spiritual development as children are given the opportunity to represent themselves and others in addition to learning how to problem solve. Building such confidence and a well developed spiritual foundation may give them an opportunity to voice their thoughts and opinions to biological parents, foster parents, social workers, judges, lawyers, and others making decisions which impact their lives forever. Ninth, the prospect of giving back can also be made possible through the experience of a spiritual community as the concept of being needed seems to be a natural human yearning. The feelings of being needed, valued, and belonging are essential in the lives of youth in foster care and do not come easily. Finally, spiritual development has the potential of cultivating resiliency which is clearly a necessary attribute to succeed and to become independent members of society.

Indeed, established research addresses some of the salient issues pertaining to the preparation for independence and successful functioning in the lives of our foster care alumni, confirming concepts such as educational attainment, steady employment, and stable housing. Perhaps meaningful relationships, resiliency, and spirituality play a more significant role than we once imagined, thus cultivating in them the abilities to accomplish such success.

Finally, although some research has been accomplished, there are additional improvements that can be contributed to our present system of preparing youth in foster care for independent and successful living. The ramifications of failing to assist them during their transition to adulthood are devastating. It is crucial that we discover what is necessary to ensure they are well prepared for their futures and can have the opportunity to become productive members of the communities in which they live (John Burton Foundation, 2006).

Therefore, additional documentation is needed regarding the specific life experiences which led to the independence and successful functioning of foster care alumni. Consequently, the overarching research questions for this study were as follows:

- (1) To identify specific services of the foster care system that assisted these youth in their development of independence and successful functioning;

- (2) To report the value of relationships in the development of independence and successful functioning in the lives of these young people;
- (3) To become more informed regarding the experiences that led to better preparation for independence and successful functioning; and
- (4) To discover which attributes of the placement contributed to independence and successful functioning.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

Description of Research Design

This qualitative study included the interviewing of ten ethnically diverse foster care alumni with the number of participants being reached through the concept of theoretical saturation. Youth were between the ages of 18 and 25, all of whom were living independently whether in college, trade school, or employed full-time. Participants were asked to identify the life experiences that contributed to their own independence and successful functioning through the process of a structured interview which provided an opportunity for them to tell their stories with the hope of informing future policy.

In addition, participants completed a demographic questionnaire. The concepts of interest were “independence” and “success” and were defined by the participants. Undoubtedly, the literature review explains how professionals may define these terms, yet the present research sought meanings and definitions specifically from participants. Additional constructs which were explored included what these foster care alumni defined as meaningful relationships, resiliency, and spirituality.

Selection of Participants

Criterion sampling included ten foster care alumni who were excelling and achieving positive goals between the ages of 18 and 25. These participants had recently completed the emancipation process and were able to describe their

experiences more readily. Participants were recruited through Family Care Network, Inc., in Santa Barbara, CA and through The Hawaii Coalition for Foster Youth (HCFY) on the island of Oahu in the state of Hawaii.

Description of Instrumentation

Instrumentation included a demographic questionnaire as well as a structured interview. The interview used open-ended questions and was designed to be like a casual conversation, inquiring of life experiences that contributed to the independence and success of each youth, asking questions that elicited stories and memories which in turn reflected answers to the present study.

Attention was given to the opinions, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that were expressed by the participants. The researcher attempted to provide an atmosphere conducive to transparency with the goal of receiving valuable information about participants' life experiences. Gratitude was emphasized to each participant for his or her meaningful contribution to the present study.

Procedures

1. Foster care alumni between the ages of 18 and 25 were recruited through Family Care Network, Inc. in Santa Barbara, CA and through the Hawaii Coalition for Foster Youth (HCFY) on the island of Oahu in the state of Hawaii. A study information flyer was placed at both locations. In addition, each participant who volunteered and followed through with

the study received \$20.00 for the gift of their time, energy, and contribution to the research.

2. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes, school settings for foster care alumni or through cell phone conversations. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Confidentiality was respected.
3. Participants were required to sign an Informed Consent document (Appendix A). Before the study began, the Researcher completed a form insuring the informed consent of participants in the study (Appendix B). Participants were asked a set of specific questions during the structured interview (Appendix C), with the assurance and understanding that they could withdraw from the study at any point. Finally, participants were asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire (Appendix D). Study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Antioch University Santa Barbara.
4. Participants received the following instructions:
 - a. Sign the Informed Consent once understanding is complete and ask any and all questions for clarification.
 - b. Complete the demographic questionnaire and answer questions as clearly as possible. Ask for clarification on any questions, if needed.
 - c. Converse in an open and honest manner to the best of your ability.

5. Informed Consent was explained at an appropriate level of understanding. All questions of participants were answered and clarified. In addition, rapport was established by providing an atmosphere of safety and trust. Listening attentively and affirming the value of the participant's contribution to this research was emphasized.
6. Permission was requested to use an audio-recording device which was utilized during the interview process. The intent was to avoid the distraction of taking copious notes. A journal was also used to note impressions and reactions.
7. Once the data was collected, it was transcribed with the appropriate confidential documentation exercised. Various themes, patterns, similarities, and differences were then identified to make meaning from the results. The data was translated using a specific coding system and when data was not being analyzed, it was kept in a locked cabinet guaranteeing confidentiality.
8. Two pilot studies were conducted prior to the formal data collection with the purpose of refining interview questions, receiving feedback from participants, and eliciting an overall sense of the most conducive method of drawing out the life experiences that contributed to the independence and success of participants.

Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative research is inspiring as it allows for the opportunity to enter into the lives of participants, to see the world from their perspective, and in doing so create meaningful discoveries. It is a process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, increase understanding, and develop empirical knowledge as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008).

Throughout the analysis process, significant concepts were identified and their relationships were explored. This qualitative approach included a set of generic data analysis procedures including open coding, comparative analysis, and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding is defined as “breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data. At the same time, one is qualifying those concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions” (p. 195). Comparative analysis is described as “comparing incident against incident for similarities and differences” (p. 195). And finally, axial coding includes the process of “crosscutting or relating concepts to each other” (p. 195).

A recording device was utilized during the interview process for all ten participants and later transcription was completed by the researcher as a function of the analysis sequence. The interviewing process and transcription procedures continued until all categories and themes were well developed and thus reached the point of theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) which for this study included ten participants.

Although qualitative research is not designed to generalize to the rest of the population or to represent other foster care alumni, we can learn from these ten participants, specifically. If we are receptive, we can acquire insight and understanding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) about how and why some youth in foster care are able to reach a place of independence and successful functioning in their lives while others struggle to attain such autonomy.

Ethical Assurances

Participants received a copy of Appendix A, which included the following Informed Consent issues: (1) Purpose of the study; (2) Selection process; (3) Expectations of the participants; (4) Confidentiality; (5) Benefits to be expected; (6) Risks inherent in the procedures; (7) Participation; (8) Financial statement; and (9) Results.

During the interview process the researcher was careful to do no harm in the manner in which questions were asked and in the researcher's ability to listen in a caring and responsive manner. The researcher made every effort to establish an atmosphere of trust and transparency, and clearly stated the goals for the current research. Every effort was made to promote the integrity of the researcher by attempting to facilitate and conduct interviews in addition to summarizing the results in an accurate, honest, and conscientious manner.

The researcher remained cognizant of personal biases and was careful to safeguard against any inaccurate conclusions regarding participants, with the goal

of treating them in a fair and just manner. Cultural, individual, and role differences, including those based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status were all respected by the researcher. The dignity and worth of participants was highly valued in addition to their privacy, confidentiality, and self-determination. The researcher safeguarded interview notes and recorded information in a locked cabinet. In addition, identities were recorded with pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Ten foster care alumni between the ages of 18 and 25 from the states of California and Hawaii were interviewed for this qualitative study exploring the life experiences that played a role in the preparation for independence and success in the lives of foster care alumni.

The mean length of the interviews was approximately 41 minutes with interviews ranging from 28 to 55 minutes, and interviews resulting in a total of 49 transcribed single-spaced pages. The interview content was reviewed and analyzed according to set determinants. The contents were then arranged on progressive levels to identify categories and ultimately themes. The themes identified were as follows:

(a) **W**ounded, (b) **A**dvocacy, (c) **R**eality of Belonging, (d) **R**esources, (e) **I**nspired to Succeed, (f) **O**btain Life Skills, (g) **R**esilience and (h) **S**pirituality.

Participant Profiles

Each interview consisted of 13 predetermined questions that were intended to elicit the life experiences that played a role in the preparation for independence and success in the lives of foster care alumni. Each participant profile is presented with the purpose of introducing participants and providing a

larger context for the results of this study. Pseudonyms were selected for each participant to guarantee confidentiality. Information that could possibly identify a participant was likewise concealed for the same purpose.

Audrey

Audrey is a 19-year-old heterosexual female who is presently dating. Her ethnicity is Pacific Islander and she identifies as Christian. At birth, Audrey was abandoned by her biological parents and raised by her grandma until the age of 12 when she began living with her biological father as he had just been released from prison. A year later, she was placed in the foster care system due to her biological father's alcohol and drug addiction. Audrey experienced a total of six different placements and reported a history of drug use and arrests for stealing and running away. At the present time, Audrey attends culinary arts school full-time as she plans to become a pastry chef in addition to advocating for youth in foster care through various venues such as mentoring and speaking engagements.

Bashawn

Bashawn is a 20-year-old single, heterosexual female who identifies as Christian. Her ethnicity includes Pacific Islander, Asian American, African American and Hispanic. When Bashawn was seven years of age, her biological father experienced a heart attack and died. Her biological mother had long since abandoned her and as a result, Bashawn was living with her father's girlfriend. Three months later, Bashawn was sexually abused by a friend of her biological

father. The next morning she was taken to the hospital due to the abuse and it was at this time that she was placed in the foster care system as she had no guardianship in place. Bashawn experienced a total of eight different placements. Yet, at the present time, Bashawn attends college full-time as she is working toward earning her BA.

Candace

Candace is a 20-year-old single, heterosexual female who identifies as Christian. Her ethnicity is Korean and Caucasian. While incarcerated for robberies and arson, Candace's biological mother found out that she was pregnant. Therefore, Candace was raised by her grandparents until she was 13 years of age. It was at this point when she was placed in the foster care system due to behavioral problems. Her grandfather was unable to care for her and was convinced by a neighbor to place her in the system. Candace experienced a total of six different placements and reported a history of arrests for running away. Presently, she attends college full-time as she is working toward her BA in Psychology, in addition to holding a part-time job.

Christopher

Christopher is a 20-year-old heterosexual male who is presently dating and identifies as Christian. His ethnicity includes Finnish, Japanese, and Italian. He was seven years of age when he and his younger sister were placed in the foster care system due to abandonment by his biological mother and unfit living

conditions with his biological father and step-mother. As a result, he experienced a total of seven placements. At the present time, Christopher is attaining his degree through the United States NAVY with plans to become a fire fighter, a life guard, or a massage therapist.

Denise

Denise is a 20-year-old heterosexual female who is presently dating and identifies as Christian. Her ethnicity includes Irish, German, Puerto Rican, Scottish and Portuguese. Denise was six years of age when she and her two younger siblings were placed in the foster care system due to issues of domestic violence, physical abuse by both biological parents, and sexual abuse by her biological father. She experienced a total of 15 placements and reported a history of experimenting with drugs and alcohol and being arrested for running away. Denise attended a year of college and is presently saving money to continue her goals of attaining her BA and then working toward her MA in Social Work.

Denzel

Denzel is a 20-year-old African American, heterosexual male who is presently in a relationship and does not identify with a formal belief system. He was placed in the foster care system at the age of two due to his biological mother's drug addiction and time spent in prison. Denzel never knew his biological father as he also struggled with drug addiction and actually died in prison when Denzel was age five. He experienced a total of seven placements

and reported a history of arrests due to fighting and anger problems with the result of boot camp attendance. Presently, Denzel attends school full-time on a football scholarship and is NFL bound. He is working toward his BA and plans to attain his MA in Sports Science and Communications.

Jorge

Jorge is a 19-year-old single, homosexual, Hispanic male who identifies as Agnostic. Jorge was abandoned as an infant in Guatemala and raised until the age of ten by his grandparents. He met his biological mother at the age of ten as she sent for him from the United States of America. He lived with her for two years until she once again abandoned him due to her own drug addiction and mental illness. At the age of 12, Jorge was placed in the foster care system and experienced a total of five placements. Presently, Jorge is attending school full-time working toward his BA in Nursing with hopes of continuing his education and becoming a plastic surgeon. In addition to school, Jorge holds a part-time job.

Keoki

Keoki is a 20-year-old single, heterosexual male whose ethnicity includes Hawaiian, Caucasian, Filipino, Hispanic, and Chinese. He does not identify with a formal belief system. Keoki was nine years of age when he and his younger five siblings were placed in the foster care system due to issues of domestic violence and neglect as his biological mother and her boyfriend had

alcohol addictions. Keoki admitted to knowing his biological father, but not associating with him. Keoki and his siblings experienced a total of three placements. Presently, he attends school full-time as he is working toward his BA in Psychology while holding a part-time job. His future goals include attaining an MA in Social Work.

Sarah

Sarah is a 20-year-old bisexual, Caucasian female who identifies as Christian. She is presently married yet separated from her husband. At the age of three, Sarah was placed in the foster care system due to issues of neglect as her biological mother was addicted to drugs and alcohol in addition to spending time in prison. Sarah has one older brother and one younger brother and has never known her biological father. She experienced a total of four different placements. Recently, Sarah graduated from cosmetology school and works full-time as a stylist and manager of a hair salon.

Veronica

Veronica is a 19-year-old single, heterosexual female who identifies as Christian. Her ethnicities include Native American, Filipino, and Mexican. She was three years of age when she and her two brothers, one younger and one older, were placed in the foster care system due to issues of neglect and abandonment. Her biological mother had drug and alcohol addictions and later spent time in prison. Veronica's grandmother had been gang-raped and this was how

Veronica's biological mother was conceived. Veronica's father was a drug dealer who had drug and alcohol issues and spent time in prison as well. He was later deported and as a result, Veronica and her brothers experienced a total of 28 placements. At the present time, Veronica attends college full-time as she is working toward her BA in Political Science, in addition to holding a full-time job.

Life Experiences Contributing to Independence and Success

As mentioned earlier, the objectives of this research were as follows: (1) To identify specific services of the foster care system that assisted youth in foster care in their development of independence and successful functioning; (2) To report the value of relationships in the development of independence and successful functioning in their lives; (3) To become more informed regarding the experiences that led to better preparation for independence and successful functioning; and (4) To discover which attributes of the placement contributed to independence and successful functioning.

It is hoped that the discoveries of this study will provide useful information and insight to the social service system, the mental health system, specific advocacy groups, and foster parent training programs in providing appropriate services for youth in foster care.

While not the central focus of this research, it is important to acknowledge the fact that there is an overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minority groups in our present foster care system which was confirmed in this

study. The Casey Family Foundation (2010) found that African American children represent 30 % of the children in foster care, yet only 14% of the United States of America child population. Additionally, American Indian and Alaska Native children represent 2% of the children in foster care, yet only 1% of the United States of America child population.

Interestingly enough, although the participants of this study lived in California and Hawaii, only one identified as Caucasian with two others identifying as Caucasian only as a small part of their mixed ethnicity. Most carried mixed ethnicities which included the following: African American, Asian American, Chinese, Filipino, Finnish, German, Hawaiian, Hispanic, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Mexican, Native American, Pacific Islander, Portuguese, Puerto Rican, and Scottish.

As the interviews continued and themes began to emerge, there were a number of categories that evolved which ultimately identified key themes regarding the life experiences which played a role in the preparation for independence and success.

The *WARRIORS* acronym represents the key themes which were derived from the interviews of this study: (a) **W**ounded, (b) **A**dvocacy, (c) **R**eality of Belonging, (d) **R**esources, (e) **I**nspired to Succeed, (f) **O**btain Life Skills, (g) **R**esilience and (h) **S**pirituality.

Wounded

Being deeply wounded is perhaps an obvious theme that would emerge from this study, but it was no less difficult to witness. The mean age of foster care placement for these participants was 4.3 years. All of them experienced some form of neglect and abuse, whether it be physical, sexual, mental, and most often, emotional. Many biological parents had drug and alcohol addictions that led to prison sentences which obviously hindered their ability to adequately care for their children. However, there was one participant whose father died when she was seven years of age. Three months later, she was sexually abused by one of her deceased father's friends.

A primary goal of this research was to identify which life experiences contributed to the success and independent functioning of youth who had experienced the foster care system. Although their stories were moving, the end result was inspiring. The inspirational segment will be discussed in the following pages. But for the moment, it is imperative to understand and to perhaps imagine as best we can, the pain and suffering, and ultimate betrayal that was endured by all of these participants.

Jorge begins by sharing his history and initial placement experience as he reflects on the events that have shaped his life:

When I was born, my mom left me out in Guatemala...I lived with my grandparents till I was 10... I didn't meet her (biological mom) until the age of 10 and then I lived with her for two years and everything just

went downhill from there. I was supposed to come here (USA) on vacation and then my mom told my grandma, 'He's not coming back.' I was like, 'Who the hell is this strange woman, I don't even know her.' I lived with my step-dad who my (biological) mom has a daughter with and then she ditched him and went to live with a drug dealer. Then everything went chaotic and I was taken away.

I was put with my aunt...that was the placement I wasn't going to talk about because my aunt tried to kill me...I went to school and they noticed the marks on my neck because she tried to strangle me and a teacher filed a CPS report. My social worker came to pick me up, got my stuff, and I left. I was 13.

I learned English within the two years that I was with my mom. I've always known what to do, I mean it's gotten me this far...When you're in the foster care system, you create a survival mechanism like you know what to do to survive.

My mom was abusive. She suffers from Bipolar Disorder; she's very violent. Reasoning with her is not possible. She's like mentally ill...I don't talk to any of my family really. I talk to my grandparents in Guatemala. But the only two family members that I have in the US, I don't talk to because one is crazy and the other one tried to kill me.

Veronica explains her story with maturity, emotion, and ultimately acceptance as she shares her process of relating her pain to her biological mother:

I know my father was a drug dealer. He and my uncle did time in prison and they were deported. My mother was a druggie and a drunk and she left my brothers and I abandoned. I was 3 and my brothers were 2 and 5. My older brother was taking care of my younger brother and I. I remember him trying to feed us Ramen noodles but they weren't cooked and he was trying to just break them apart...I remember reading a police report later when I was 17. It was so sad because my (5 year old) brother would go to school but then he'd leave and they'd find him in the cafeteria, stealing food because he was trying to take care of us.

I have depression and I think my grandmother (has depression). It's a whole perpetuating cycle...My grandmother was actually gang-raped

and after that, she had a lot of mental issues, like who wouldn't? And that's how my mom was conceived.

My mom was raped by her heroin addicted aunt and uncle and my grandma was institutionalized for a long time...I was so angry with my mom. She just got paroled from prison...She was in for drugs; she had a meth lab going on. I was like, 'Doesn't it bother you that you don't know your kids? You should be really proud of yourself. You're a really good role-model. Look at your son.' She said, 'Well, you're doing good.' I was like, 'Not because of anything YOU did! You don't know anything about us... You don't feel any regret for that?' She has the mentality of a 16 year old... And my dad's deported. I haven't seen him since I was 2 or 3.

Bashawn described the way in which she entered the system including the pain endured after losing her father:

I was placed in the foster care system at the age of 7. My dad had a heart attack...and he passed away and my mom wasn't in the picture so I was living with my dad's girlfriend at the time. (Three months later) we were sleeping over at a friend of my dad's house and in the middle of the night, he came and took me into his room and sexually molested me. In the morning, I told my dad's girlfriend and we did the whole procedure with the hospital and police and getting checked so that's when they found out that I had no real legal guardian.

One thing that has happened in the last year is that I found out that the man who hurt me when I was younger was released from prison during my first year of college and it kind of spooked me because...people constantly recognize me. I haven't seen him for a very long time and when I did last see him, I was really young and I don't remember him. So it was just really scary to know that he was out.

Audrey openly gives an account of her destructive relationship with both of her biological parents yet also sharing her response to such verbal cruelty:

I kind of grew up fast. My grandma was old when she raised me. I was with her from birth to 12 and then my dad took me, my biological dad, and that's when I got put into the system. But he was a recovering drug

addict and had just got out of jail. His girlfriend and he relapsed so things went downhill again. I was taken away from my family. I didn't have a choice.

My dad's girlfriend put me in a psycho hospital because of the voices in HER head. She was the one who needed to be there. And because my dad was always intoxicated and never home, he listened to her; it was one of those 'I'm going to choose my girlfriend over you.' I went along with it. The hospital was safer and calmer and I was sure I'd have a bed and three meals a day. But docs kept sending me home because I didn't need to be there.

Put me in residential group home thing and when my dad came to visit me, he had his girlfriend come to talk to me to distract the staff. He punched my chest and the refrigerator moved back, so that's how hard. Staff heard and his girlfriend was trying to block them. They saw that I was turning blue, kicked him out of the house and he tried to pull me out. They called the cops...then they put me in CPS (Child Protective Services) and I was not allowed to see my dad until court 6 months later.

One of life's scariest moments, walking into that courtroom, and seeing him. He was asked by the judge if I was his daughter. My dad said, 'No, that's not my daughter.' The judge laughed and then said to my dad, 'Well, you're stupid. You can only tell that's your daughter. She looks just like you. Are you sure this is not your daughter?' (Dad's) girlfriend nudged my dad and he said, 'Yes, I'm sure; she's not my daughter.' So ever since then, when someone asks, 'Where's your dad?' I say, 'He's dead.' Because it hurts so much.

Then he decided...to come back into my life and ended up showing up at my graduation ceremony, the same day as my 18th birthday and said, 'Wow. This is a day I never thought I'd live to see.' I said, 'Yeah, me either. I thought you'd be dead or in jail.' He never apologized for what he did in the courtroom...just shook his head and said, 'I don't regret anything...You're going to end up just like your mom.' And he walked out.

My mom is a prostitute...so yeah, I grew up not knowing either of my parents. I met my mom when I was 8 and stayed with her for 2 days and that was the last time I ever saw her. I've seen her (on the streets) and she's called me a couple of times but I don't want to see my mother like

that. I went over to talk to her once and said, 'Hi mom.' She said, 'What are YOU doing here?' I said, 'I'm going to trade school. I want to become a baker.' She said, 'Well good luck on that. You'll probably end up just like me.'

I looked at her and said, 'If I wanted to be like you, Mom, I would have been pregnant at 16, dropped out of high school, and I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing.' She looked at me and said, 'Why are you talking to me like that? It's disrespectful.' I looked at her and said, 'Because you are not my mom.' And she said, 'What do you mean? I gave birth to you.' I said, 'Yeah, you gave birth to me but the woman who raised me is dead and that person is my mom: My grandma!'

Candace explained her life experience and the suffering endured, not only with her biological family but in her initial placement:

My grandparents raised me since I was 5 days old...but I was placed in foster care (age 13) because I was going through a really...like I didn't care about school and I was getting suspended. I was just acting out a lot because of the mess my life was and how different my life was compared to everyone else's. Especially being a teenager who doesn't live with her parents and doesn't know anything about her family...that was difficult. My grandfather couldn't take it anymore...his neighbor convinced him to put me into the foster care system.

My mother was incarcerated when she had me. She just found out she was pregnant and then she ended up going to prison for about 12 years. But because I was taken from her, she can't make the connection that I am HER daughter. She put up a mental barrier saying, 'Okay, that's not my child.' She got out on parole and she had the opportunity to have me come and live with her and she never took it cause...she wanted to run around and do her thing. I don't know my biological father at all.

Even when I met her in the summer she was just so amazed at how I am as a person. She was just amazed that I was her child...She wished that she could have done what I've done now. It's like she's always wanted to be who I am. She ended up asking me to borrow money and I told her, 'No' and she never talked to me again. I kinda knew she had an ulterior motive when I came up. It's okay; it just reinforced everything I thought of.

As if Candace's history of abandonment was not enough to cause the wounds she carries, she continues her story of abuse in her first "therapeutic foster home:"

While I was in that home, I was being sexually abused for 2 ½ years by my foster sister's husband and no one knew of it...They basically manipulated me to believe that nothing was wrong and that it was a therapist home so they were trying to pinpoint all the issues on me and not try to think deeper as to what might be going on...they just blamed it all on me and said I was acting out for no reason and that I'm playing mind games and all kinds of horrible things...It all affected me big time. When you realize that the world is so much more different than I thought it was and that people can be just so mean and I cannot even fathom why they would even do such horrible things to others.

I think it's probably why I don't get into relationships; that's why I don't trust other men either cause that's hard...I feel like I'm kinda like broken or tattered, you know that kind of thing...But then I look at it like you know that was ONE PERSON who did that and it's gonna affect me for the rest of my life because he took my virginity; he took that away from me. So I see that as being like really bad like I'll never have that again...Like when older men look at me, I get really upset. It just makes me feel like Oh my god! This is how it's gonna be now. And that's true of my experience, I don't feel like I'm beautiful or anything.

As I listened to each participant, it appeared to be therapeutic for each of them to process their life experiences and to be given an opportunity to share their lives, in the hope of helping others. There were tears, deep sighs, and silent moments...and a voice given to those who have suffered much.

Advocacy

The American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology (2007) defines the word *advocate* as “a noun; an individual who represents and defends the interests of another individual or of a group or cause.”

When discussing foster care alumni in the midst of adversity or perhaps even in spite of it, most of them have found themselves in unique roles of advocacy. This is true whether they are gifted at pleading their own case or supporting and promoting the interests of others. Most of the participants seemed to capture the gratification that comes from helping another person and perhaps finding meaning in their own lives as well.

Audrey expressed her passion for advocacy through various established programs which afforded her the opportunity to be involved:

Through the Coalition (Hawaii Coalition Foster Youth), I got to go to conferences. The state is always telling us that we're just like any other teen but being in the system, we could tell that they treated us different and one of those ways is that we weren't allowed to get our driver's permit because of insurance issues and unpredictable homes. Well, we wrote a bill and I was able to...get it passed. So our group was the first to actually get their permit. To be able to say, 'Hey, I had something to do with that.' We went to Governor Linda Lingle's office and gave it to her.

We've done tons of conferences, meeting with social workers, lawyers, judges, foster parents, and other foster youth. We've been on panels and debated...To this day, I'm still a part of the Hawaii Coalition for Foster Youth...representing foster youth, abuse, etc...giving stats on foster youth.

Bashawn shares Audrey's enthusiasm for youth in foster care as she articulated her hope for her own future as she desires to positively impact the lives of others:

I'm hoping to go to Washington DC for an internship. It's for the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute. It's to help make laws for foster youth and legislation. I'm trying to be an advocate. I want to touch one person's life or help somebody in some kind of way. Knowing that would make my world amazingly perfect...Just to be able to help people grow or make a difference.

Denise describes her present work and future goals which have been inspired by her life experience and suffering:

My on-call job is to co-train foster parents. I tell them, 'Be sensitive to the child's background and feelings...Foster children are normal children; they just need a little extra tender loving care.' I want to be a foster mom and get a Master's in Social Work.

Clearly, many of these participants were able to find a sense of purpose for their own lives through the avenue of advocacy. They seemed to have developed a desire to focus on others rather than to be consumed with their own pain and suffering. As a result, they were able to make a difference in the lives of others, which proved quite rewarding.

Reality of Belonging

This was perhaps the most moving of all the themes represented as all of these participants were ready and willing to articulate the magnitude and meaning of belonging to someone. The American Psychological Association Dictionary of

Psychology (2007) defines *belonging* as “the feeling of being accepted and approved by a group or by society as a whole.”

Most of these youth in foster care were not difficult to please regarding where they attained this sense of belonging. Nevertheless, they were undeniably and acutely aware of what they needed and whether or not they received it.

Veronica expressed her perspective regarding her perception of belonging and how her foster family greatly impacted her life:

My foster parents, they treated me like I was their own kid...We did a lot of really neat things as a family...Just being a part of a family that does things together, helped me to feel normal, what that means...They did so much. We did bond like every night...I got home from work each night at like 10:30 PM and I drove their car cause I was on their insurance policy and I'd just lay with them in bed...I would sit right in the middle. It was like our little ritual at night time to watch the news and catch up and tell them what my plans were for the next day for school and whatnot. We bonded...I was definitely favored like they called me 'Princess.' But sometimes I wonder about that too...Like if it weren't for this placement, I wonder where I'd be.

People think it's in the best interest of the kids and the (biological) parents for them to get the kids back and it's REALLY NOT. Kids are taken away for a reason and you can't give someone like 3 months to change...I mean the road to Hell is paved with good intentions...There cannot be real change in that amount of time. I think about how my life could have been different if I had been adopted. My mentor wanted to adopt me but I was too old.

Denise had experienced sexual abuse and as a result was vulnerable and fearful. She articulated what a sense of belonging meant to her, personally:

What stands out for me is how I was taken in as part of the family...Being treated like I was one of their own has helped me feel

like I have people there, like family who has definitely benefitted me. Like I can go to them, and they'll love me no matter what.

The lady (foster mom) was super sweet. I never met someone so sweet and real at the same time...very caring, understood my background, understood how I was treated before, so very sensitive. The man (foster dad) was very sensitive, cause I'd been molested, and he made me feel very comfortable and they just spoiled me rotten, but it was because I did well. So they rewarded my good behavior and they were so very loving to me...gave me freedom that I chose not to take because I just loved the home.

Bashawn communicated her feelings regarding her perception of belonging and gratefulness for her foster family:

I've been lucky to have family, or people who care about me and want the best for me, who are still in my life today...They have always been there supporting me and taking care of me and helping me just being a really great support system for me. It's like they adopted me into their family. So they are like my parents but they're not my birth parents...I go home to their house during the breaks (from college) and at Christmas and stuff like that...they never gave up on me...they see me as their own child.

In contrast, it was not often that Denzel articulated a feeling of belonging. Although he did identify one area of his life that felt most like family:

People ask who my family was when I didn't have it. My teammates, the guys I built companionships with, you know, those are the guys that be my family. My coaches and stuff like that...My coach, he gave me a place to live when I needed it most.

However, when asked what advice he would give to future foster parents, he articulated well what he seemed to have longed for himself:

Make sure that if you're gonna take this kid in, want to keep that kid. Don't take that kid just because he's almost 18 and you can kick him out. If those kids are what you're there for, then be there for the kid.

Make them feel like you're their family. Make them feel like they're something because you know, there were times when I felt like I was just nothing being in foster homes. And if they wanna be something and they're doing what it takes to do it, you know like good grades, get out there and try with them. You never know if he'll be the next famous tennis player...Not everyone can be the president but everyone can develop a talent.

This is an interesting response as it is coming from a young man who is NFL bound, and has a phenomenal chance of making it. He certainly found his inspiration, just not in the same manner as most of his peers.

The reality of belonging is a concept that most of us have never considered. We have perhaps never needed to think about such a reality. We are born into our families or chosen through adoption. We grow up assuming what many may never know which will affect their very foundation for an independent and successful future.

Resources

One of the significant themes that emerged from the present study was the availability of post-high school living options and educational resources which prepared these foster care alumni for independence and successful functioning. They were able to utilize such opportunities which afforded them the confidence and ability to succeed. Accessibility to mentors and to staff members within these programs was consistently offered with apparent support from foster parents.

Some of the programs which assisted these particular youth included the Independent Living Program in Santa Barbara, California (ILP), the Hawaii

Coalition of Foster Youth (HCFY) and the Independent Learning Skills Program in Hawaii (ILSP).

Keoki described how he was personally affected by at least two programs created to inform and assist youth in foster care regarding their plans for their futures, post high school:

I've had some good role-models from programs like ILSP and HFYC. If I had never gone or if no one had introduced those programs to me, and like not have communicated with them, I probably wouldn't be in college. Getting into college is so complicated...there is so much paperwork, payments, scholarships, my financial aid. Those programs are so awesome...there is so much help. Like I always had questions in high school and they were there and helped me.

Christopher described the impact of one program on his life and how it afforded him the opportunity to advocate for other youth in foster care in his position:

One year through Hawaii Coalition for Foster Youth, we went to Washington DC and we talked to the foster care board...they gave topics and we wrote down ideas on how and what we think should be the solution for it and we presented it to the board. That was one of the biggest things that I did and also doing other things on different islands, talking to other foster kids about things that we believe need to be worked on...HCFY affected my life. It had a big impact.

Finally, Jorge articulated clearly how one program profoundly affected his life and his grateful attitude:

ILP helped me out with living, renting a room and deposit. I was in charge of rent. Thank God I never had to sleep on the street but thanks to ILP.

One fascinating observation regarding programs offering assistance and resources for educational goals and options is that the male participants were by far, more influenced by such programs. One male participant stated, “I’ve had some good role-models from programs...” Another male participant expressed that programs such as these made a “big impact” on his life.

Conversely, it appears that the female participants’ inspiration and encouragement came from more direct and personal relationships such as foster parents, teachers, or specific mentors. Such discovery seems to remind us of the mystery and beauty of gender differences and our ever-growing curiosity in that of the other. But because of the small number and potentially non-representative nature of this sample of alumni, caution must be exercised in generalizing any particular finding.

Inspired to Succeed

Each participant exuded an absolute palpable desire to succeed in their lives and to become independent members of society regardless of adversity. Many were confident in what they wanted to achieve while others continued to search for their specific callings, so to speak, never missing opportunities to explore all of their potential options.

In addition to reporting on how these participants described their personal journeys of determination and desires to succeed, it is significant to note that many had a distinct idea of how they defined such a term. Christopher

articulated, “Success is what you get and independence is how you handle or deal with your success.” Sarah mentioned, “Successful means being genuinely happy and also your job, being comfortable with where you work and with what you’re doing.” And finally, Bashawn described how she would encourage youth in foster care as she stated, “Just always have hope for a better future for things to work out. Hoping that you are gonna be loved and just have amazing life experiences and changes coming your way.”

Veronica expressed with confidence her resolve to attain independence in her life and to succeed in her present and future endeavors:

I consider myself to be an optimistic person. I learned that if I focused on the negative, honestly, it makes you crazy. And one of the things my foster mom taught me, the Christian one, was to take responsibility for your own life and whatever you want out of your life, is what you’re going to get.

One of my brothers blames everything on other things...He was like ‘You don’t even know what happened to me.’ I was like, ‘Sure I do. You’re not the only one. Things happened to me too; things happen to everyone.’ He was like, ‘You have your car and apartment.’ I was like, ‘I work; I’m in school full-time, that’s why I have my car and my place.’ He had this whole, like he was owed something. Everyone has a crappy life and has issues.

I want to write a book someday. I want to break the cycle. I mean my very first day in kindergarten I knew I was different because I didn’t have anyone with me. No one in my family has gone to college and I will graduate with my degree. I want to be different, not another statistic...I changed from victim to independence; taking control of my own situation.

Denzel boldly described his determination and the goals and expectations he has of himself as he reaches for his dreams:

Dude, I had to work for the space I was given. It wasn't easy. Just like the work it took me to get a scholarship. It's not easy but I'm not settling for 17%. I want to start off with that 1.2% that MAKE it to the NFL...I want to put myself in a different box.

Whatever I do, I just want to do football. That's who I am. It's changed me; it's taught me all the lessons I've learned. Now it's just about taking advantage of my opportunities that I have here and anywhere I go. I believe that I can always dream. It's how YOU make life which will define you.

Candace speaks of her professional goals and the purpose and meaning that she has found in her own life, despite adversity:

It makes me strive to be a better person...to create a better life for myself and it also made me realize how much I want to help other people...like teenagers and foster youth...I want to become a psychologist...to get in depth and try to figure out things. A lot of my friends find it really easy to talk to me and they can tell me things that they wouldn't tell a lot of friends. Cause I don't tell other people what they say either.

I know there's a purpose for it all. I know I didn't go through this for nothing. I know that by my sharing my story with other people, I feel like I can share it and they can go on and help others. Success Stories. Like when they find out things that someone has gone through that they can't even imagine. There are so many other things that come along with it. Good things.

Audrey passionately described her direct response to the barrage of discouragement and the negative expectations of others regarding her own life:

When they tell me I can't do something, it motivates me even more so. When my dad said that I was going to be just like my mom who is a

prostitute, it made me more motivated to do something. And when I saw my mom and she told me the same thing, it motivated me even more.

People who meet me and know my story, they see me as successful and independent already because I am happy at what I'm doing. I look at it as another bump I've gone over, another milestone I've achieved, and more of a reason to keep pushing.

Indeed, these foster care alumni have a fundamental desire to succeed and a determination that is utterly untouchable. Their sense of purpose and the meaning they have given to their lives is reminiscent of a quote by Helen Keller: "Is there anything worse than being blind? Yes, a man with sight and no vision."

Obtain Life Skills

Acquiring a range of independent living skills was a common denominator for all of these participants. Most of them embraced and even appreciated the efforts of their mentors to assist them in learning life skills, including ways in which to relate to one another. The teaching of life skills came from a variety of sources such as teachers, social workers, foster parents, staff from group homes, coaches, pastors, and programs established and created specifically for youth in foster care.

Sarah's experience was quite practical in nature as she expressed the skills and values she attained from her foster mother:

She always taught us how to do things; how to grocery shop...how to do housecleaning...how to save money. She taught us values, that main brand clothes aren't everything and the things you should want is to have fun and do things with other people rather than materialistic (things). She'd take us to the grocery store with a calculator and ask us

how much of a value we were getting...she clipped coupons...and taught us that sometimes coupons aren't good because the generic brand may be better priced per ounce.

Christopher's perspective was unique as he developed an appreciation for change due to various placements and easily articulated the independent living skills he learned as a result:

I've had the opportunity to see multiple different families and multiple different lifestyles. So change is not such a bad thing for me. Most people believe change is a bad thing.

With the first family, they molded and shaped me into a person who would be a very good home owner and a very responsible person in those aspects. Also, they had a lot of animals, so taking care of something that's living, breathing, eating, pooping...like a regular human being, possibly getting me ready for a child in the future. We did a lot of yard work, house remodeling, working on cars and just independent living skills and cooking...I've remodeled a house, painted, carpeted, tiled. If I wanted a house, I'd know what to do because I've done it.

I learned how to fish, cut a fish and cook it, cook food...buy a car and just be really independent and honest...on time...just being what is socially acceptable as an adult.

The second family, a very young couple...they were a good example of how a good relationship and how a good marriage should be in the future and so they helped me to see what I want to have as a relationship when I get married. It's kind of a high standard...but it's a good standard. They taught me really good communication.

Jorge communicated that his favorite life skills were taught through the staff at one of the group homes in which he lived:

My first group home taught me the most. They would have like speakers come in and talk to us just about school and success and

workshops like ‘Unmasking a sexual con artist.’ Stuff like that to protect us.

Indeed, these particular foster care alumni had the benefit of nurturing foster families, access to resources, and mentors who desired to impact their lives. They also developed within themselves, the ability and openness to receive the care and life skills necessary to succeed. Among most of these participants, one can literally sense an attitude of gratitude. This is an incredibly valuable lesson that could benefit us all, if we had the courage to embrace it.

Resilience

The American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology (2007) defines resilience in the following manner: “The process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands. A number of factors contribute to how well people adapt to adversities, predominant among them (a) the ways in which individuals view and engage with the world (b) the availability and quality of social resources, and (c) specific coping strategies.”

These concepts have been well established and documented in the lives of these participants. They encompass certain personality traits and ways in which they view and engage the world that set them apart from their peers who have experienced similar levels of adversity. Many of them seem to have a

predisposition to certain responses to adversity which has enabled them to make their life experiences meaningful and as described by one participant, purposeful.

Certainly, as discussed in another theme, these participants had the benefit of accessibility to many resources, both socially and educationally. And finally, they were able to gravitate toward positive coping strategies which assisted them in reaching their present goals.

Veronica was three years of age when she and her two brothers, one younger and one older, were placed in the foster care system due to issues of neglect and abandonment. Veronica's grandmother had been gang-raped and this was how Veronica's biological mother was conceived.

I consider myself to be an optimistic person. I learned that if I focused on the negative, honestly, it makes you crazy. And one of the things my foster mom taught me, the Christian one, was to take responsibility for your own life and whatever you want out of your life, is what you're going to get...If you have a mentality of a victim, you know like 'Poor me, I've been abused,' you're going to get nowhere...I did play the whole 'Poor me, I'm the victim, it's everyone else's fault.' I take responsibility and hold myself accountable. A lot of foster kids end up with that thing like they blame their whole life on the wrongs that has been done to them in the past...it gets them nowhere.

I had about 28 different placements...inconsistency, unstable for the majority...and education...I almost didn't finish high school because...there are different requirements...different districts, different schools...

I have a mentor...I learned a lot from her...and one of the things she told me was 'Your biggest weakness is being defiant and not caring but if you can just turn it around and tweak it a little bit, it can be your biggest strength.' I remember those exact words she gave me...She made a huge difference in my life.

I think...faith has played a big role in it for me...there's this song, 'I'm trading my sorrows, I'm trading my pain. I'm laying them down for the joy of the Lord.' I remember...just feeling, contemplating suicide, honestly...I really listened to that song and praying it, you know...The next day, I honestly felt like a big weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

One of my brothers blames everything on other things...He was like 'You don't even know what happened to me.' I was like, 'Sure I do, you're not the only one. Things happened to me too; things happen to everyone.' He was like, 'You have your car and apartment.' I was like, 'I work; I'm in school full-time, that's why I have my car and my place.' He had this whole, like he was owed something. Everyone has a crappy life and has issues. I want to write a book someday...

I want to break the cycle...I mean my very first day in kindergarten, I knew I was different because I didn't have anyone with me...No one in my family has gone to college and I will graduate with my degree. I want to be different, not another statistic...I changed from victim to independence; taking control of my own situation.

At the present time, Veronica attends college full-time as she is working toward her BA in Political Science, in addition to holding a full-time job.

Denzel expressed his unique perspective, his life experiences and the adversity that he endured as a result:

I had no parents. I don't have a father and that's where honestly started all my anger problems...My father died when I was 5 but he was in that jail the whole time...I guess the feeling of having nothing...I felt like that at the right time cause if I would have felt like that in my teens, I would have never have reached out. But because I felt like that when I was 6 or 7, I had time to grow from that. It was like 'You know what, Dude? You have something. You got gifts. You can play sports.'

I just said, 'Forget it...I can't change the fact that my parents don't or couldn't accept the responsibility or my mother and my father just couldn't stay out of jail. I just gotta move on...I kinda get over it faster

than the average person...I figure having these issues about not having my family isn't going to help me appreciate inside my own family.

If I have a bad experience, it's that I made it bad. It was the situation I had to work with...That's the past...I guess it's the fact that I feel like I have a gift and I'm trying to use my gift...Naturally, I feel like I'm a confident person...Whatever I did under adversity, not having parents, not being able to work out like I wanted to, imagine how I'd be once I get the structure that I need, patterns, and study habits and all the things you need.

Dude, I had to work for the space I was given. It wasn't easy. Just like the work it took me to get a scholarship. It's not easy but I'm not settling for 17%. I want to start off with that 1.2% that make it to the NFL...I want to put myself in a different box.

Presently, Denzel attends school full-time on a football scholarship and is NFL bound. He is working toward his BA and plans to attain his MA in Communications and Sports Science.

Through adversity, Candace expressed how she has found purpose and meaning in her painful life experience of being sexually abused in her “therapeutic foster home:”

It's really like difficult because like even for me to think, ‘Wow, that actually happened to me...look where I am today. I'm going to school; I have a job; I'm getting good grades; I live with really good friends; I have a great support system now.’ I look back and I'm like I went through a really hard and traumatic experience and I MADE IT! If I can make it through that, I can make it through a lot more things.

It's basically just made me see a bigger picture and look outside of what's going on and not sulk and be like, ‘Oh my god, poor me, poor me;’ I act on it and I do it now...A lot of people stay as victims...There is something better. I just have to wait for it. Or I have to push harder for it.

That's what I want people to know me for that I never gave up on anything. I mean you have to take breaks to save yourself and to keep yourself going. And you don't want to lose yourself in all of that. You don't want to forget who you are and what made you who you are.

Like trees, their trunks get bigger and stronger. I feel like that's where you are when you live on a strong solid base for yourself. You're branching out and you create this big tree with all these leaves that are like different people in your lives, different goals and dreams that you have: there's accomplishment, there's memories, there's always a leaf for everything. And there's a reason to have like so many leaves. I feel like when they fall and you really start changing and recreating yourself, to be able to keep going, and that's like the seasons that you go through. I want to say people are like trees; it just depends on the tree. Like they have beauty in the bark, some grow really fast and just keep growing, when other trees just kinda die out and just lose themselves.

I know there's a purpose for it all. I know I didn't go through this for nothing. I know that by my sharing my story with other people, I feel like I can share it and they can go on and help others. Success Stories. Like when they find out things that someone has gone through that they can't even imagine. There are so many other things that come along with it. Good things.

Presently, Candace attends college full-time as she is working toward her BA in Psychology, in addition to holding a part-time job.

Christopher described his unique perspective regarding his own response to adversity and his personality traits that potentially contributed to his present success:

Diversity is something I have learned. I'm a lot more wiser because I've been through so many different things in my life...When I was growing up with different foster families, I had to go from a different house to different rules, to different standards and it was frustrating. It felt like I had to be the perfect child. Then when it seemed like I was doing everything right, I'd move and then I'd go to different standards and it was all wrong. Persistence and obedience...

I'm a very optimistic person...I deal with the hardship. That's just how I am and what I do. I'm not afraid to say what's on my mind...I don't like playing games and I'm straight to the point.

Without a doubt, my faith was the biggest thing that helped me...It's more of a choice and a relationship than a religion and being forced to do this and this and this. It's a deep and personal decision...Most foster kids need a place where people can accept them for who they are and not judge them. I guess for me that's where I went, to church, and everyone was happy to see me and I was welcomed. That's probably one reason why I got through all I went through.

At the present time, Christopher is attaining his degree through the United States NAVY with plans to become a fire fighter, a life guard, or a massage therapist.

Audrey articulated her response to her life experience and the emotional and physical suffering that she endured:

I've been through it and done the drugs, ran away, fights, done it all. But seeing what my grandma went through with her ex-husband, hearing the stories and then going through it with my dad...my bio family is pretty much screwed up. Alcoholics, drug addicts, abusers...that's how they were raised. Just the pain I went through and disappointment, I don't want to be like that and do that to my kids one day.

When they tell me I can't do something, it motivates me even more so. When my dad said that I was going to be just like my mom (a prostitute), it made me more motivated to do something. And when I saw my mom and she told me the same thing, it motivated me even more.

Audrey also spoke of a particular mentor that helped her to believe in herself by sharing the following:

It was my freshmen English teacher who said to me, ‘Audrey, what are you doing? You are failing. How can I help you?’ (In response) ‘There’s nothing anyone can do for me. I’m a lost cause.’ She cried and said, ‘Audrey, you are not a lost cause; I can help you.’ I told her a couple of years later, ‘Miss Mendoza, I am so grateful for you.’ She said, ‘Why?’ I said to her, ‘Because if you hadn’t just sat me down freshmen year, I would not be here (graduating).’ She looked at me and cried and said, ‘You know, I’ve seen a big growth in you from 9th grade.’ And I started crying. I still talk to her every day.

When asked how she might encourage other youth in foster care going through the system, Audrey communicated the following:

One youth used the excuse of her past and I told her, ‘Look at MY past. Use your past as a push to do better. Make it a point to NOT be like them (biological parents). But if you let the negative energy get to you, you are going to be like them.’ I have been mentoring her and helping her get through everything. She will be graduating.

People who meet me and know my story, they see me as successful and independent already...because I am happy at what I’m doing...I look at it as another bump I’ve gone over, another milestone I’ve achieved, and more of a reason to keep pushing.

At the present time, Audrey attends culinary arts school full-time as she plans to become a pastry chef. She is also quite active as an advocate for youth in foster care.

Keoki described his ability to apply himself while also expressing the reality of the stressors of his biological parents which had the potential of hindering his progress:

I had to push myself to do everything. I mean I had reinforcers by then, too, but I had to make myself do everything...get good grades...Pretty much I pride myself in my higher accomplishments and my scholarships; it’s all on me. Like going to school; it’s all on me...It takes

a lot of discipline and if you don't start learning it, it's really hard to get it...But I can do any class cause I'm very disciplined...A lot of people say, 'Oh you got into college. You're smart.' But I'm not really smart; I just know how to apply myself.

There have been stressors from my biological family; like my siblings had to move to a lot of different homes...I mean I tried to help my mom and help my siblings, but I could only do so much.

I need to stay at the dorms...cause I'm working. I visit the kids on Saturdays but I haven't been there in awhile. She (biological mom) doesn't drive so I get up really early and get there.

Presently, Keoki attends school full-time as he is working toward his BA in Psychology while holding a part-time job. His future goals include attaining an MA in Social Work.

Denise credits her mentors and church for her present success and ability to have endured her life experience which included much adversity, as she stated:

So when I was 6 years old, (in a very childlike voice) my biological daddy, my mommy and daddy used to beat us up a lot and very violently, and my dad molested me when I was sleeping with him; he fingered me, sleeping...My mom chose my dad over me.

Recently, I went to go visit them (biological parents)...It went horrible...I am very sad...This time, my Dad called me just the worst names I can ever imagine a father calling a daughter. So it WAS kinda worse actually. But then again, I thank him because I wouldn't be the person I am if he didn't do what he did.

I think it was horrible (Prior placement). They didn't physically hurt me but it was verbal abuse...controlling, psycho stuff...Treated me really badly and making me feel very low in self-esteem. But it's definitely made me a more mature and stronger person...

There are some people in the church that have really positive impact me. You know, I push them away and they're always there and I needed

them when I was struggling...And I felt like I honestly needed God to help me and I still do...And they always take me in and help me with everything.

I honestly think that the people I have LET in my life, that's I've come out stronger. I've let great people that have really like believed in me and saw my potential and pushed me. THAT'S why I am the way I am.

It started with my 4th grade math teacher who...knew what I was going through. She believed in me...She helped me get through so much things...and I've always kept in contact with her. Also, a foster mom of mine. Just positive people who have great hearts that just really helped me and they're still there for me till this day...I want to be a foster mom and get a master's in social work.

Denise attended a year of college and is presently saving money to continue her goals of attaining her BA and then working toward her MA in Social Work.

Without a doubt, the lives of these foster care alumni define the term, resilience. They have tolerated and endured much, yet they continue to strive to achieve their chosen goals and to realize their heartfelt dreams. And as if that were not enough, they encompass the gift of compassion which drives their desire to assist and inspire others along the way.

Finally, as Helen Keller once stated, "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved." The participants of this study are consummate role models of those who have suffered a great deal yet have accomplished much. And this is only their beginning.

Spirituality

White et al. (2007) found that youth in foster care had three primary spiritual goals. The first one was a yearning to pursue God, a Creator, or a Higher Power. The second goal was to work toward becoming an improved person. The third goal was to identify their purpose in life.

It is interesting to note that these youth were looking for purpose through the avenue of spirituality. In addition to finding strength and comfort within a relationship with God, the same was true for many of the foster care alumni who participated in the present study.

Christopher clearly described how his faith in God was a meaningful respite in the midst of his adversity:

All the foster families that I went to had a Christian background. I went to church with every family. I started with them and I continued after them. I mean spirituality, that's the reason that helped me go through the foster care system during hard times. Honestly I can say it was comforting.

You know most foster kids need a place where people can accept them for who they are and not judge them. I guess for me that's where I went, to church, and everyone was happy to see me and I was welcomed. That's probably one reason why I got through all I went through. I'm a Christian and I believe in God and that I had somebody to turn to.

Without a doubt my faith was the biggest thing that helped me. It's more of a choice and a relationship than a religion and being forced to do this and this and this. It's a deep and personal decision.

Audrey described how she was raised going to church and the direction she found in her life through her relationship with God:

I was raised a Christian. In a Hawaiian Christian church...doing good, helping others, doesn't necessarily mean going to church every Sunday cause I don't, I don't have time. But just taking time each day to talk to God, I guess and doing what's right, really.

Bashawn described her relationship with God and how it taught her dependence upon Him and how to support others:

Being a Christian, I believe God has been there during good times and all my bad times and even when I feel like I've been alone. He has always been there with me to support me and to lift me up. I learned this in foster care, but I have taken it with me as an adult.

Some of the homes were really active in churches so I did a lot of that and I did enjoy those. Sports also taught me how to endure and how to support other people and to be there for them. Church also taught me that and to go out with a good attitude and to never give in when you feel like you have nothing left.

My parents now really helped me and a pastor who is a really good family friend who has always supported me. They have helped me to just live life and to move on from the fear.

Like for me, I'd like to say that through God because even in my darkest times when I wasn't as positive or outgoing as I am now. I always had Him to help me.

Denise candidly described her first impressions of church, yet how she was later positively affected by some people who shared her belief in God:

Church was kind of forced upon me. I hated church....Hypocrites do church. The person I lived with did lessons for church. I was kinda forced to go. It's not something I always wanted to do. Until recently when I struggled in life, I've gone back to it. So I guess it did help.

And I felt like I honestly needed God to help me and I still do; so that's why I still go. And they always take me in and help me with everything. And the people in the church, I've been in about 3 foster homes that were in the church; so we kind of coped together.

There are some people in the church that have really positive impact me. You know, I push them away and they're always there and I needed them when I was struggling. And I felt like I honestly needed God to help me and I still do. And they always take me in and help me with everything.

Finally, Veronica expressed a time when she felt drawn to the idea of suicide during her moments of grief and how a particular spiritual song helped her find her way:

I think that religion and faith has played a big role in it for me, and there's this song, it goes, 'I'm trading my sorrows, I'm trading my pain. I'm laying them down for the joy of the Lord.'

I remember one time when I was like 15, it was New Year's Eve and I remember just feeling, contemplating suicide, honestly. And then I really listened to that song and praying it, you know? I was still feeling like really upset, but the next day, I honestly felt like a big weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

But little things like being involved in my church and going on mission trips to Mexico, and my foster parents who dedicated their whole lives to raising kids. They played a big part of that...for the greater good for like humans or like helping one another.

You can tell when someone has inner peace. Like at work, for the most part, I can tell who is miserable. I get a sense of who might be and then there's people who like radiate. That's a huge difference.

Forgiveness was another idea that emerged from the present study. The thoughts of letting go and moving on or being at peace were also expressed by many participants regarding their biological families.

Jorge stated his present feelings regarding the concepts of forgiveness and peace in the following manner:

She (biological mom) suffers from Bipolar Disorder...She's mentally ill. I mean I don't blame her; I forgave her a long time ago. She can do whatever she wants with her life. I have mine. I know what to do. I'm at peace with her.

Denzel expressed his perspective on the issue of "moving on" and his inability to change the past:

I can't change the fact that my parents don't or couldn't accept the responsibility or my mother and father just couldn't stay out of jail. I just gotta move on. I kinda got over it faster than the average person.

Smedes (1984) articulated well the meaning of true forgiveness as he stated, "Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future" (p. 136).

It appears that these foster care alumni have a desire to endure and to not give up on life or themselves. They want to live their dreams and to not be hindered in their attempts to create better lives for themselves. They have in many ways reached a higher level of awareness and success than their biological parents will ever experience, as suggested by a few participants. The easier path would be to remain angry and stuck in a "victim mentality," as clearly defined by participants in this study.

But not these valiant individuals. They are exceptional and inspirational. They are the undeclared heroes who understand yet another concept

of forgiveness as articulated by Smedes (1984): “To forgive is to set a prisoner free and to discover that the prisoner was you” (p. 133).

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

WARRIORS Model

The purpose of the current study was to identify specific services of the foster care system that assisted these youth in the development of independence and successful functioning; to report the value of relationships in the lives of these young people having a direct impact on their independence and successful functioning; to become more informed regarding the life experiences that led to better preparation for independence and successful functioning; and to discover which attributes of the placement contributed to independence and successful functioning.

The present qualitative findings produced a model (*WARRIORS*) which provides a framework for understanding the life experiences of youth in foster care which have played a role and contributed to their independence and success. The created acronym is appropriate for this frequently forgotten population and for those who have not only survived, but are presently thriving as a result of the support they received, the opportunities they engaged, and their determination to succeed:

**Wounded
Advocacy
Reality of Belonging
Resources**

Inspired to Succeed Obtain Life Skills Resilience Spirituality

Indeed these elements are essential to the success and independence of foster care alumni and it behooves us as professionals to identify the ways in which we can guide them effectively in realizing these goals.

The present study sought to discover, more specifically, the life experiences which enabled them to arrive at a place in their lives where they are capable of attaining educational degrees, maintaining steady employment and having the benefit of stable housing.

The proposed *WARRIORS* Model includes the main themes that emerged from this qualitative research. Each theme will be presented along with the established literature pertaining to each concept.

Wounded

The initial theme which emerged from this data was an awareness and acceptance of their intensely personal and wounded histories. Each one experienced some form of neglect and abuse, whether it was physical, sexual, mental, and most often, emotional. Most of their abusers were biological family members. A few participants were re-victimized by those in their foster families

also reported by Jackson et al. (2010), a reality they did not anticipate which only intensified and threatened further their sense of security and safety.

It is established that children who have been maltreated and displaced will experience significant negative consequences. This is true for self-concept, interpersonal relationships, and cognitive abilities, in addition to physical and mental health (Kerker & Dore, 2006; Felitti, 2001; Cicchetti & Toth, 1995). As expected with this population, they lack the support of their families and as a result their ability to cope is temporarily stunted especially when they have experienced other traumatic events (Bruskas, 2008).

Many of these participants admitted to “having the victim mentality” for a period of time in the midst of their pain and suffering; yet, they continued to demonstrate mature perspectives of their abusers and the ways in which their own lives were affected. They expressed the desire to be different than their biological parents and therefore chose life paths ensuring that aspiration.

Nevertheless, the awareness and acceptance of their wounded histories is only the beginning for these foster care alumni.

Advocacy

The second theme as noted in the *WARRIORS* Model was advocacy. These participants had an internal desire and passion to advocate for themselves in addition to supporting others in comparable circumstances. Opportunities were offered through the following organizations: Congressional Coalition on

Adoption Institute, Independent Living Program in Santa Barbara, California (ILP), and Hawaii Coalition for Foster Youth (HCFY) and the Independent Learning Skills Program (ILSP) in Hawaii. Many of these foster care alumni took advantage of these events to utilize their advocacy gifts which in turn had a major impact on their own lives. What they found was that their efforts also impacted the lives of others, and for some, it impacted the present system surrounding foster care.

Regarding the importance of advocacy in the lives of youth in foster care, Audrey stated, “The state [Hawaii] is always telling us that we’re just like any other teen but being in the system, we could tell that they treated us different and one of those ways is that we weren’t allowed to get our driver’s permit because of insurance issues and unpredictable homes. Well, we wrote a bill and I was able to [be a part of it and] get it passed. So our group was the first to actually get their permit. To be able to say, ‘Hey, I had something to do with that.’ We went to (Hawaii) Governor Linda Lingle’s office and gave it to her.”

As a result, many of these foster care alumni articulated the confidence, sense of accomplishment, and the deep level of compassion and empathy that such opportunities afforded them.

This research confirms that without investigating and examining the voices of the foster care alumni affected by the present policies and strategies created to help them, every attempt to improve the system is destined to fail

(Liebmann & Madden, 2010). Clearly, their voices need to be heard for their benefit and for the societal consequences if we choose to not heed their perspectives.

Green and Ellis (2007) embarked upon a youth-led evaluation project that shed light on the issue of advocacy for youth in foster care. They presented a summary of youth empowerment techniques, incorporating the newly developed theory relating to youth empowerment by Jennings, Parra-Medina, & Hilginger Messias (2006). The summary was indicated for future research regarding the necessity and value of soliciting the insights of youth in foster care pertaining to the policies and programs that have a profound impact on their lives: (a) Provide a welcoming and safe environment for youth in foster care; (b) Ensure meaningful participation and engagement; (c) Keep power-sharing equitable; (d) Engage in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes; (e) Let youth in foster care participate in sociopolitical processes to effect change; and (f) Integrate the empowerment of the youth and the community. These foster care alumni developed into discerning, reliable, and dedicated members of the project team. They were able to tell their stories in a compelling manner, thus utilizing their powerful life experiences to make a difference in the system which so often dictates their lives as reported by Weithorn (as cited in Cashmore, 2002). Participants in the present study experienced many of the same principles in their advocacy endeavors.

Lindsay (1995) found that when youth in foster care are given the opportunity to give their opinions regarding particular placements, those placements are more likely to be stable. As expected, the participants in this study suggested the same outcomes had they been given the chance to be more involved in the decision-making process.

Cashmore (2002) found that in their attempts to be involved in their own care, youth in foster care are not seeking “their own way,” but rather they desire to simply “have a say.” It is established that self-esteem and confidence is increased as children believe that their views are respected and taken seriously as described by Melton (as cited in Cashmore, 2002) but even to a greater degree for children who have experienced traumatic life events in the form of abuse and neglect. The hope is that the proposed self-advocacy gives youth in foster care some of sense of being agents of change in their own lives as opposed to the powerless victims at the mercy of well meaning adults making decisions that have immense implications for their entire lives.

Reality of Belonging

The third theme as expressed in the proposed *WARRIORS* Model was a palpable yearning in each of these participants to experience the reality of belonging, especially to a family or as was true for one participant, the reality of belonging to a team. This sense of belonging played a vital role in the lives of all of these participants. Several discussed the importance of feeling connected to

others and being “loved no matter what,” by their foster parents. These findings provided further confirmation of the importance of relationships and the concept of having a family, revealed as key themes of successful outcomes by Geenen and Powers (2007).

Leibmann and Madden (2010) provided interviews, narratives, and poems communicating the perspectives of current youth in foster care and foster care alumni regarding the issue of advocacy and the reality of belonging. As one of their participants stated, “It is the end of my first term in college. All the students here talked about how they went home and spent time with their families during Christmas break. When they asked me what I did, I said I slept and wished that my family would come back to me. All I ever wanted was to be able to spend time with my family. I wanted to have someone tell me ‘I love you so much’ and ‘I believe in you.’” Many participants expressed similar feelings although they had the motivation to seek out those mentor relationships which gave them the familial support they so desperately needed.

An additional area of interest was meaningful relationships and the impact those relationships had on the lives of this population. These findings confirmed that mentors played an extraordinary role in giving these youth, not only a sense of belonging, but also teaching them life and relational skills, and ultimately believing in them. They communicated the belief that these youth

were more than their histories and would not “turn out” like their biological parents.

Mentors came in many forms such as foster parents, coaches, social workers, teachers, pastors and program staff. Turner and Scherman (1996) found that such relationships increased the potential for positive self-concepts and educational attainment (Shiner et al., 2004; Thompson & Kelly Vance, 2001; Zippay, 1995), which was indeed confirmed in this study.

Only a couple of participants were involved in the legal system to any degree and when actually arrested, it was due to familial conflict and running away. None reported addictions to any substances although a couple of them engaged in drinking alcohol “socially.” This confirms what was found by Grossman and Tierney (1998), that mentoring relationships have been linked to decreased drug and alcohol use.

Resources

The fourth theme of the *WARRIORS* Model was that these foster care alumni had the abilities to access and later implement the resources for educational goals and post high-school housing which was presented by program staff, foster parents, and mentors. They were motivated to a greater degree due to their life experiences, their desires to be different and ultimately inspired “to not become another statistic.”

Opportunities were given to seek out information and guidance for post-high school options through some high schools and many programs designed for this purpose. Much of this counsel included resources for education, in addition to employment and housing options, although most of the youth in this study went straight to college with the added benefit of living in the dorms on campus. Thus, housing was not a challenge. These youth exuded the motivation to engage the staff of these programs and later expressed a deep appreciation for such opportunities. The program staff played a significant role in many of the lives of these foster care alumni as they took the time to encourage their strengths and abilities.

In an additional study, one youth articulated the following regarding the necessity of counsel concerning post high school options, namely housing: “I turned eighteen a month before I graduated from high school. The day after graduation, I was kicked out of my foster home where I had been living for two years. I was eighteen, a high school graduate on my way to college in the fall, and I was homeless” (Liebmann & Madden, 2010, p. 258).

Another youth communicated, “When five other foster youth and I got together to talk about emancipating, we felt frustrated and empowered. I heard similar complaints that I’d heard other youth talking about, how they didn’t know about a lot of things they were eligible for, like transitional housing and college financial aid. It was so irritating; it made me mad at the system. The system

keeps you safe and makes sure you get all the things that parents would provide. But when you leave, they don't make sure you are prepared. I think they should make sure everyone who is emancipating knows about the services they are eligible for. They shouldn't put you out unless they know you are ready" (Liebmann & Madden, 2010, p. 259).

The present study confirmed the importance of foster parents being informed and then communicating and encouraging the youth in their care regarding post high school options. These options must include education, trade school, housing, financial aid, and employment. Foster parents and program staff have a significant impact on the independence and successful functioning of these particular foster care alumni, which was clearly stated by a few of the participants in this study.

Access to resources is imperative for youth in foster care preparing to leave the system. There are three interconnected factors supporting the success and independent functioning of youth in foster care, specifically in the realm of homelessness and emotional well-being. They are relationships, education, and employment (Pecora, Cherin, Bruce, & Arguello, 2010; Pecora et al., 2003). The hope is that these three elements will provide a strong foundation when adversity unavoidably strikes. The youth in this study had solid mentor relationships and were attending college or trade school with the goal of graduating and then seeking employment.

Inspired to Succeed

The fifth theme of the *WARRIORS* Model is the inherent motivation to succeed. Personality traits, perceptions of belonging, and access to caring mentors during and after placement, appeared to play vital roles in cultivating their intrinsic desire to accomplish much in the midst of adversity. Some wished to simply make a difference in the world by sharing their stories and engaging in the advocacy opportunities set before them. Others were committed to “not becoming another statistic,” and thus felt empowered to reach for their dreams. Nevertheless, it appears that these particular foster care alumni have utilized their wounded histories as a catalyst for inspiration, motivation, and an ultimate desire to succeed in life.

Schofield and Beek (2009) found that good quality foster families had a major impact on future success and fulfillment in the lives of youth in foster care. They asserted that the implementation of a secure base parenting model, utilizing concepts from attachment and resilience, would indeed have a positive influence on youth in foster care. These concepts were originally designed to assist in the nurturing of infants, yet research has found that they are also useful and even successful in the parenting of youth in foster care. The message appears to be that these ideas can be applied at any age as there is always hope to make a difference.

The previous work of Schofield and Beek (2006, 2005b,) provides an attachment and resilience-based parenting model which includes concepts which

have proven effective with youth in foster care. Initially, they discuss the importance of family life as it has the power to cultivate self-esteem, plans for the future, and to provide the safety net needed to be both autonomous and to seek help when challenges arise. These family relationships are crucial as they will impact the daily decisions, goals, and ultimate independence of youth in foster care. Granic, Dishion, and Hellerstein (2006) report that parental and family relationships are often underestimated as we assume that teenagers value only the opinions of their peers. While that is a natural tendency, research suggests that it is the family that provides support and that gives youth foundational values.

The four dimensions of the secure base model of care giving in the work of Ainsworth, Bell, and Strayton (1971) were revisited through the research of Schofield and Beek (2009). The first dimension is Availability assuming that such time would help to establish and strengthen trust in the relationships between foster parents and the youth in their care. The second dimension is Sensitivity which is intended to assist youth as they navigate through the various feelings and behaviors of childhood and adolescence in the midst of adversity. The third dimension which is crucial to the secure base model of care giving is Acceptance which is meant to establish and build self-esteem. Their fourth dimension is Cooperation which hopes to assist youth in care in feeling effective and competent. There is a fifth dimension added by Schofield (2008) which is Family Membership, accentuating the specific desire and need for youth in foster care to

feel a sense of belonging. This model has made a significant contribution to cultivating motivation and determination and thus, success and independence, in the lives of youth in foster care. These were certainly familiar concepts within the families of the foster care alumni who participated in this study as they benefitted from the family unit during their years in the system in addition to continuing support and a sense of belonging after leaving the foster care system.

Obtain Life Skills

The sixth theme of the *WARRIORS* Model was the desire of each participant to obtain the life and relational skills necessary to live independently. Many perceived themselves as already living independently to some degree, yet they demonstrated a continued willingness to learn new skills. As expected, the importance of skill development before leaving foster care, whether tangible or intangible was confirmed as in previous research (Nollan et al., 2000; Cook et al., 1989; Ryan et al., 1988). Also confirmed in this study was how these youth were able to accept non-abusive adults who were willing to mentor and teach them necessary independent living skills (Werner, 1992; Masten & Garmezy, 1985). As a result, many expressed appreciation toward those who taught them the life and relational skills which enabled them to live as successfully as they are today.

Choca et al. (2004) found that it is crucial for foster care alumni to be trained and given various skills which will increase their employment opportunities, thus strengthening their abilities to remain independent. It was

emphasized that youth in foster care would benefit as adults if they were able to hold a job before they leave placement. Consequently, they experience the benefit of learning life skills which will assist them in their future independence. A few of the youth in this study held jobs while in placement, confirming yet another venue of learning skill development and the valued aspect of responsibility.

Mares (2010) found that foster care alumni and those preparing for emancipation all find life skills classes beneficial, especially those pertaining to budgeting and financial management. Inadvertently, social skills are acquired and implemented within the teaching atmosphere. These foster care alumni desired the ongoing support and guidance from permanent relationships established during their time in foster care as these relationships have the potential of assisting them as they transition to adulthood and inevitably experience adversity.

Resilience

The seventh theme within the *WARRIORS* Model is the indisputable presence of resilience in the lives of these foster care alumni. Inherent personality traits appeared to provide strong foundations for how they responded to adversity and the meaning created from such events. A few of the personality traits, as suggested by the youth in this study which seemed to play a role in their response to challenges included confidence, boldness, outspoken, ambitious, humble, open-minded, responsible, grateful, and motivated. This finding was supported by

previous research which suggests that characteristics “including assertiveness, independence, goal orientation, persistence, the determination to be different from abusive adults, the ability to accept help, a flexible and adaptable self-image, and the ability to make conscious changes” are individual attributes present in the lives of the youth in foster care which were studied (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005).

It is interesting to note that the preceding personality qualities have been identified in previous literature as an “internal locus of control” which is central to resilient behavior (Masten & Curtis, 2000; Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Egolf, 1994; Cicchetti & Garnezy, 1993).

As stated in the literature review, Osterling and Hines (2006) present a poignant study integrating the miraculous dance between resilience and the mentoring process for adolescents in foster care stating that many of them spend recreational time with their mentors and they accomplish more task-oriented activities such as homework and acquiring necessary services. In addition, these mentors modeled independent living behaviors as these youth were less likely to get into trouble and were able to attend court dates.

Based on this study, it is worth acknowledging the significance of mentors in the lives of youth in foster care. Mentors provided the reality of belonging and many of the resources for educational opportunities. Through the

modeling process, mentors teach the life skills necessary for independent living, and finally they play a role in cultivating resilience in youth in foster care.

The rewarding aspect of studying resilience is that by virtue of its definition, a focus is placed on an individual's strengths as opposed to the deficit models which inundate our thinking and understanding. Without a doubt, the resilience revealed in each one of these participants was nothing short of miraculous, confirming the indisputable presence of resilience in the lives of these particular foster care alumni.

Spirituality

Finally, the concluding theme which completes the *WARRIORS* Model is Spirituality. Many participants expressed receiving a foundation of Christian faith which some youth initially rejected but later embraced in the hope of finding peace and meaning in their lives. A couple of participants were not exposed to any particular faith so it was not a familiar concept. Finally, one was raised Catholic but now declares himself agnostic.

The perspectives of these participants were communicated in a variety of ways regarding this relevant yet sometimes ignored topic. Many foster care alumni described being raised within Christian families and finding much comfort and support within their churches. A few participants spoke of the sense of community they experienced during church and youth group activities. They expressed their relationships with God as though it was their most treasured

attachment relationship and the feelings of acceptance within their church experiences with other people. A few spoke of their desires to forgive, move on, and to be at peace with their biological families and their abusers, which was for some, a direct result of their spiritual foundation and present belief system.

This inspiration to forgive and to cultivate their spirituality had positive outcomes, one of which was they were able to focus on their present goals of completing college and trade school. They have chosen to not remain bitter and angry, as the “victim mentality” was so clearly defined by a few of the participants. Rather, they have accepted their wounded pasts, they have focused on the present, and they are consumed with reaching their goals.

A key interest was to ascertain whether faith, religion, and/or spirituality of any kind, affected participants’ ability to survive and to then thrive in the midst of adversity. Jackson et al. (2010) found that love and forgiveness contributed to the healing in the lives of youth in foster care. The majority of participants reported spirituality as a source of joy, in addition to finding meaning and purpose in life during times of adversity. Another interesting finding as described by Ritt-Olson et al. (2004) and also confirmed in this study was that spiritual coping has often been described as the strengthening of spiritual beliefs during stressful times.

These findings supported what Osgood et al. (2005) found regarding the presence of protective factors in the lives of youth in foster care including

involvement in churches, skills and personality traits, positive relationships with people who are supportive, clubs, and other community groups. A few of the participants commented on how their experiences in church activities added to their sense of belonging, their desire to forgive, and their overall sense of self.

In the resilience literature, Cook (2000) describes various ways in which churches can produce resilience in children, thus providing more potential for independence and success. Contributing factors included the provision of mentors, the development of self-regulatory abilities, the fostering of identity development, the provision of a supportive and stable community, and the offering of a relationship with a powerful and loving Other.

Confirming and adding to our body of knowledge regarding protective factors is the concept of religious faith (Wright & Masten, 2005; Masten, et al., 2004). Crawford et al. (2006) suggests five potential outcomes of spiritual development. First, attachment relationships are cultivated through relationships with the Divine, marital and family cohesion modeled, pro-social peers and pro-social mentors. Second, social support is encouraged through the sense of community, belonging, rituals for birth, marriage, death and burial, counseling, and support groups. Third, guidelines for conduct and moral values are suggested which can assist these youth as they lack the necessary parental support and guidance. These guidelines have the potential of promoting integrity, compassion, forgiveness, empathy, altruism, kindness, and love. Fourth, personal growth and

development through all of the opportunities and relationships stated. And fifth, transformation opportunities are accessible through the concepts of prayer, meditation, music of worship, celebration and comfort, reinforcement of family values, provision of meaning and a philosophy of life, reframing of trauma, acceptance of God's will, and finally, conversion and transformation.

DiLorenzo and Nix-Early (2004) provide specific suggestions for foster parents in their roles of providing a spiritual foundation or ways in which they can facilitate spiritual development. They discuss the importance of respecting and honoring the spiritual and religious experience and heritage the child presently embraces. The spiritual development of youth in foster care could be cultivated if foster parents are able to encourage and model participation in a community of faith and to expose them to a wide range of activities that are spiritual in nature. Engaging in spiritual rituals and ceremonies that induce spiritual awareness can be another way of communicating a willingness to explore spirituality with youth in foster care. Although it may be difficult, it could support them in dealing with their pain if foster parents can encourage them to learn from their wounded histories and not to avoid painful life experiences.

Indeed, spirituality played a significant role in the lives of these participants as they articulated how they were positively affected by their relationships with God and with others. However, these participants were

fortunate in that they had foster parents who were willing and able to take time to facilitate and to cultivate their spiritual lives.

Conclusions

A major benefit of this study is that it allowed foster care alumni an opportunity to voice their thoughts, opinions, feelings, and ideas regarding the care that they received during their time in the foster care system. They desire to “have a say” in their care, as opposed to “having their way” regarding the very system which purports to have their best interests at the forefront of this ongoing discussion.

Based on their insights, the *WARRIORS* Model was created with the intent to provide a framework for understanding the life experiences which contributed to the independence and successful functioning of these foster care alumni.

They have all been wounded in some manner whether physical, sexual, or emotional. They have found strength and confidence in their abilities to advocate for themselves and others, some of which had a direct impact on policy. They have experienced the reality of belonging to a family or to a team and the purpose and meaning that come with such belonging. They have successfully accessed the resources available to them and produced the inspiration to succeed, thus implementing such goals.

These foster care alumni have obtained the necessary life and relational skills to succeed in this world while also embracing an attitude of gratitude for those mentors and programs which provided such skill development. While navigating through every aspect of their lives, both positive and negative, these youth have revealed the strength of the human spirit as their hopeful countenance and profound resilience has demonstrated.

Finally, these foster care alumni have found within themselves and their own meanings of spirituality, the desire and capacity to forgive their abusers, to move on, and to be at peace with their biological families and themselves...which has given them every right to be identified as WARRIORS.

Methodological Assumptions and Limitations

While the narratives of the foster care alumni in this study reveal much about the life experiences that contributed to their independence and successful functioning, it is imperative to keep in mind that the goal of qualitative research is not to form generalizations. Instead, qualitative research pursues the discovery and the emergence of theory in its results. The findings of this study may have relevance to similar populations but there are some aspects that could be viewed as limitations.

One assumption was that the participants perceived themselves as independent or successful in some area of their lives. If they did not have that

perception, the interview was focused on what experiences were hindrances to their development of independence and success.

An inherent limitation to this study was the fact that it only included foster care alumni who were thriving and achieving positive goals. Therefore, it was not a true representation of all youth in foster care in the general population. My sample size included ten participants, and while they had diverse backgrounds and ethnicities, they represented only a fraction of the foster care alumni in our country.

A monetary gift of \$20 was offered to each participant for the gift of their time which could be perceived as a limitation in that this study perhaps only attracted those who came forward due to the financial incentive provided.

In addition, participants were recruited from agencies where they were actively seeking to attain their goals. Inadvertently, this excluded those foster care alumni who were not seeking assistance to reach their goals yet may have had a clear sense of what hindered them as well as what could have assisted them in reaching their full potential. Therefore, the results were interpreted and analyzed with extreme caution.

Practical Implications

This study provides the *WARRIORS* Model which can be utilized by clinicians and professionals in child protective service agencies including social workers, program staff, and those involved in the training process for foster

parents. The emerging themes give insight regarding what types of life experiences best assist youth in foster care in gaining the necessary tools for becoming independent and successful members of society. However, application of such information involves effective training and commitment of foster parents in addition to the necessary staff and potential monetary necessities.

First, youth in foster care would benefit by being placed with foster parents who care and have an appreciation for their wounded histories. Acknowledging their pain proves to youth in foster care their worth and value to their new families, which was not modeled in their biological families. Perhaps facilitating therapy appointments could be a way in which foster parents can display their understanding and care.

Second, if children placed in foster care cannot be returned to a family member or tribal clan member shortly after placement, these children would benefit by being placed with foster parents whose intentions are to treat the children as their own, inadvertently creating a sense of belonging for each youth in foster care. This point was affirmed by all of the participants of this study. Most foster care alumni mentioned that one of their main concerns was that some foster parents “are in it just for the money.” Potential foster parents must realize and recognize the significance of what they are embarking upon and the lives which will be forever changed as a result.

Third, it is absolutely necessary for foster parents to be well informed and proactive regarding post high school options as encouraged by participants in this study. These include but are not limited to educational opportunities, financial aid, trade school possibilities, housing alternatives, and employment options.

Fourth, it is vital to take the time to teach youth in foster care life and relational skills which will enable them to seek and find stable housing, steady employment, and attain educational goals. The foster parent must be willing to facilitate other mentor relationships that will have positive impacts on the lives of these youth. This could include driving them to sports activities, church activities, school activities, and any other venues providing opportunities for them to have contact with other caring and supportive, non-abusive adults. These mentor relationships have made a difference in the lives of youth in foster care in teaching them the necessary life skills to attain independence.

Fifth, as evidenced in a few participants of this study and in other research, youth in foster care can benefit by foster parents providing them with opportunities for spiritual development. This could be provided by transporting the child to weekly meetings, activities, or lectures. Perhaps the foster parent can take the initiative in asking important and relevant questions regarding spiritual issues, thus communicating an openness to facilitate such development.

And finally, youth in foster care need opportunities to advocate not only for themselves but for others. This could involve inconsequential daily decisions, with the hope of giving a sense worth as their thoughts, feelings, and opinions are valued by the adults in their lives claiming to have their best interests in mind. The participants of this study expressed confidence and a deep sense of purpose when given the prospect of speaking for themselves and for others. Additionally, there are many programs available which provide these opportunities as experienced by the foster care alumni of this study.

As professionals, it is our responsibility to equip foster parents and to develop in them the necessary interpersonal skills to provide for the salient needs of youth in foster care. Indeed it is an enormous task. Nevertheless, it is a task worth the investment as it involves the lives of our children, our future.

Policy Recommendations

1. Since having a caring adult in your life is truly one of the key pathways to self-sufficiency, help youth make those connections by finding legal permanency.
2. Organize and implement opportunities for current youth in foster care and foster care alumni to advocate for themselves and others by allowing them to be a part of the curriculum development and training process for foster parents. Engaging in lectures, debate, and in-service trainings

could have beneficial outcomes for all participants as these youth articulate their physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs.

3. Establish more events, conferences, and seminars with the intent of bringing awareness to society regarding the needs of youth in foster care who are preparing to transition into adulthood. These events could incorporate and utilize the advocacy roles of current youth in foster care and foster care alumni.
4. Clinicians working with biological families, foster families, the school system, the legal system, and the social service system can facilitate an understanding of the *WARRIORS* Model, giving insight regarding what types of life experiences best assist youth in foster care in gaining the necessary tools for becoming independent and successful members of society.
5. Clinicians facilitating individual and group therapy for youth in foster care could serve them well by addressing their wounded histories and validating their thoughts and feelings regarding that trauma.
6. Clinicians serving these youth have the unique opportunity to teach and model healthy life and relational skills including emotional and physical boundaries, clear communication, and assertiveness. Youth in foster care have not obtained these skills from their biological families.

7. Create training opportunities to equip foster parents with the knowledge and insight necessary to better prepare these youth with post high school options. These may include educational opportunities, financial aid, trade school possibilities, housing alternatives, and employment options.
8. Enforce more stringent requirements for those seeking to be foster parents so that youth in foster care are less likely to be re-victimized as was true for a couple of the participants in this study.
9. Establish more collaborative relationships between educational agencies and social workers to monitor school progress and deal with the educational barriers which hinder the educational progress of youth in foster care. These youth lack the parental advocacy from which most children benefit.
10. Continue to fund and support the various programs which prepare, instruct, and inspire youth in foster care to access and then implement educational, housing, and employment possibilities. The following programs made a significant impact on the foster care alumni in this study: Independent Living Program in Santa Barbara, CA (ILP), The Hawaii Coalition of Foster Youth (HCFY) and the Independent Learning Skills Program in Hawaii (ILSP).
11. Implement the Educational Liaison model as suggested by Zetlin et al. (2004) which provides advocates who can access the educational

progress of youth in foster care and ensure that they are placed in appropriate programs and services created to assist them in excelling.

12. Expand life skills courses on budgeting and financial planning to include a “hands on” approach to learning. Perhaps courses may include electronics, technology, mechanics, and the arts. These courses may provide the exposure needed to assist youth in foster care in their decision-making process for employment as they prepare to leave the system.

Research Recommendations

1. Further research is needed concerning the spiritual identity and needs of youth in foster care and ways in which foster parents can assist in this crucial and promising aspect of cultivating resilience.
2. It is vital to further explore the relationships between youth in foster care and the therapeutic process with the hope of attaining more insight as to how we as therapists can best assist these youth as they navigate through their traumatic life experiences in addition to assisting them during their time of transition.
3. Additional exploration is necessary pertaining to the complex relationships between youth in foster care and foster parents as they seek to create a sense of belonging yet seek to honor the biological families represented.

Experience of the Researcher

The use of self-disclosure as a means of allowing participants an understanding of shared experience and frame of reference was utilized with caution. I shared my association as a former foster parent and educator of youth, and did so only as a vehicle for providing a feeling of connection and to reduce the stigmatizing effects. Furthermore, I desired to reduce the implied hierarchy of researcher/participant by relating on some meaningful level my experience and compassion for them personally and their life challenges.

With my experience as an educator and clinician, I was aware of how difficult it may be to not intervene when particular life experiences were expressed. The use of silence within the therapeutic relationship is effective, yet, this was not in fact, a therapeutic relationship. Internally, I desired to provide relief to emotional pain and to assume an advocacy role when hearing of the injustice experienced by each of my participants. But I could not assume the role of advocate as that would have been incompatible with my researcher role. Every story was moving, while some were absolutely heartbreaking.

My intent was to gather information and to listen attentively by providing a receptive and compassionate stance, which I accomplished. The fact that I felt so deeply for my participants was useful in that it reminded me of my initial aspirations for choosing to interview foster care alumni. I wish to make a

difference in their lives and to do so by hearing their stories and adding something of significance to the current literature.

I was able to converse with colleagues and my dissertation chair, the feelings that emerged during the course of my interviews. This process of discovery was revealing as I learned that although my history does not include the experience of being a child who was placed in foster care, I am the first person in my Mexican family to have attained a college degree and to have even considered the idea of a doctoral degree. The similar feelings of marginalization yet overcoming such adversity was not something I had ever allowed to hinder my ambition. And here I was interviewing foster care alumni who were demonstrating and articulating the resilience, advocacy, and aspirations that drove my own passion to succeed amidst tragedy and adversity.

I do not believe that my response to the narratives of my participants created a hindrance to maintaining objectivity in the analysis and subsequent findings of my study. In reality, the experience served to enhance my scholarship while my ability to empathize with others was deepened.

My experience as a doctoral student and scholar has sensitized me to listen carefully to the experiences of others while remaining aware and cognizant of my own personal biases. Thus, I made a significant effort to not project my own survival methods or to assume anything regarding my participants. As a result, I initially failed to recognize significant data that supported an obvious and

essential theme in my research in the realm of spirituality. One of my committee members, Dr. Ryan Smith, challenged me to review my data for the thread of spirituality which was clear to him. Following his advice, the elements of spirituality in the lives of my participants clearly emerged from the data, yet were almost missed due to my overzealous attempt to remain neutral. In my own life, spirituality is foundational to my identity. While my childhood was not completely filled with adversity, I experienced enough to hold fast to my faith in God as my dependence on Him is what literally carried me through seasons of heartache. This newfound awareness prompted a modification to my initial model.

Finally, although my personal and professional development was not the primary purpose of this dissertation, I will embrace the fact that I have grown and matured and as a result, I will never be the same again.

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APPENDIX A

FORM A

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Researcher: Dawn Montgomery

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Dawn Montgomery, a doctoral student at Antioch University, Santa Barbara, CA. This research involves individuals who have spent time in some form of placement whether that is through the foster care system, group home experience, or other placement options. The research will consist of an unstructured interview and a questionnaire including demographic information. Dawn Montgomery is working under the supervision of her dissertation committee chair, Michele Harway, PhD, in addition to the other members of this committee. This information is a part of Dawn Montgomery's doctoral dissertation.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the life experiences that contributed to the independence and success of foster care alumni. It is hoped that this study will give a voice to this population and to enlighten society with a better understanding of what these youth need and to inform future policy regarding the assistance given and programs necessitated.

SELECTION

You have been selected for this study because you are between the ages of 18 and 25 in addition to the fact that you have spent some portion of your life in the foster care system.

EXPECTATIONS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

As a participant of this study, you will be voluntarily sharing information that will be analyzed by the researcher and the dissertation committee. Any information that could identify you such as your name, date of birth, and other potentially revealing information will be removed or disguised by the researcher to ensure complete anonymity.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The Institutional Review Board of Antioch University retains access to all signed informed consent forms. The information provided about you will be kept strictly confidential. All research materials will be kept in a secure file cabinet and

destroyed five years after the completion of the study. The results of this research will be published in the researcher's dissertation and possibly in professional articles or books. No personally identifying data about you will be included in the published reports.

BENEFITS TO BE EXPECTED

You may not experience direct benefits from participation in this study; however, the information gained may be useful to researchers, psychologists, child welfare staff, therapists, and policy makers as it will inform treatment and needs of the stated population. For the gift of your time and participation, you will receive \$20.00.

RISKS INHERENT IN THE PROCEDURES

There are no foreseeable risks that may occur as a result of your participation in this research, except that it may bring up upsetting memories. The researcher will provide a list of qualified therapists if you feel you would like to explore some of these potential issues further. Agreeing to participate simply means that you will allow the researcher to use information from your interview for the purposes of this study. Again, this information will be disguised to protect your identity as a pseudonym will be utilized and all materials will be kept in a locked cabinet.

PARTICIPATION

It is entirely your choice as to whether or not you chose to participate in this study, and there will be no negative consequences associated with your decision. You may withdraw from this study at any time, either during or after the interview. Participants also have the right to decline any questions asked during the interview while also reserving the right to refuse to answer any part of the demographic questionnaire.

FINANCIAL STATEMENT

There is a \$20 gift available to you for participating in this study.

RESULTS

In addition to discussing the preliminary results with the researcher by phone, you may also request a copy of the summary of the final results by indicating your interest on the attached form.

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions about any aspect of this study or your involvement, please ask the researcher before signing this form.

CONSENT

Two copies of this informed consent form have been provided. Please sign both, indicating you have read, understood, and agreed to participate in this research. Return one to the researcher and keep the other for your files.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT (please print)

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE**RESEARCHER'S NAME, ADDRESS & TELEPHONE NUMBER**

Name: Dawn Montgomery, M.A.

Antioch University

801 Garden Street

Santa Barbara, CA 93101

949.677.7010

FACULTY ADVISOR'S NAME, ADDRESS & TELEPHONE NUMBER

Name: Michele Harway, Ph.D.

Antioch University

801 Garden Street

Santa Barbara, CA 93101

805.962.8179 x320

APPENDIX B

FORM B

THIS FORM IS TO BE COMPLETED BEFORE RESEARCH BEGINS

Insuring Informed Consent of Participants in Research
Questions to be answered by AUSB Researchers

1. Are your proposed participants capable of giving informed consent?
Yes, my participants will be capable of giving informed consent as they will be young adults, ages 18-25 who are not mentally or emotionally disabled.

2. Are the persons in your research population in a free-choice situation? (Or are they constrained by age or other factors that limit their capacity to choose? For example, are they adults, or students who might be beholden to the institution in which they are enrolled or prisoners, or children, or mentally or emotionally disabled?) *Yes, the adults in my research will be in a free-choice situation and they will have the option of withdrawing from the interview process at any time or even declining to answer particular questions. An informative flyer will be provided to the agency and the opportunity will be presented for them to participate. If they so choose, they will contact me via email or telephone if they are indeed interested. It will be explained that their receiving services is completely unrelated to whether they participate or not.*

3. How will they be recruited? *I will be contacting participants through Family Care Network, Inc. in Santa Barbara, CA and also San Luis Obispo, CA, in addition to Hawaii Coalition for Foster Youth, HI. An informative flyer will be displayed and those who fit the criteria will decide whether they want to participate or not*

4. Does the inducement to participate significantly reduce their ability to choose freely or not to participate? *My participants will be participating based on their own free will. I will be providing \$20.00 to each participant for the gift of their time, energy, and contribution to my research*

5. How are your participants to be involved in the study? *In addition to filling out a demographic questionnaire, they will be interviewed over a*

period of approximately 60-90 minutes while being asked a series of questions regarding what contributed to the preparation of their independence and successful functioning as foster care alumni. I will interview them either in person or through the use of a cell phone. Participants will have the right to decline any questions asked during the interview while also reserving the right to refuse to answer any part of the demographic questionnaire.

6. What are the potential risks – physical, psychological, social, legal, or other? *Unresolved feelings regarding their foster care experiences may be brought to the surface during the interview. Therefore, as needed, I will be providing a list of therapists that they may contact in the event they need to continue their work in this area*

7. If you feel your participants will experience “no known risks” of any kind indicate why you believe this to be so? (If your methods do create potential risks, say why other methods you have considered were rejected in favor of the method chosen.) *I could have chosen a quantitative study but chose qualitative as I believe that the potential risks of unresolved feelings being stirred would be better supported in the interview setting as opposed to a series of written questions.*

8. What procedures, including procedures to safeguard confidentiality, are you using to protect against or minimize potential risks, and how will you assess the effectiveness of those procedures? *Within the interview with my participants I will strive to benefit my participants by allowing them the freedom to tell their stories, from their perspectives. I will take care to do no harm in the way in which I ask questions and in my ability to listen in a caring and responsive manner. I will strive to establish an atmosphere of trust and transparency, clearing stating my role and goals for the research being studied. My integrity will be demonstrated as I will conduct my interview and its results in an accurate, honest, and truthful way. I am aware of my own biases and will take care to safeguard against any inaccurate conclusions regarding my participants, as I desire to treat them in a fair and just manner. I will respect cultural, individual, and role differences, including those based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. I will respect the dignity and worth of my participants and highly value their privacy, confidentiality, and self-determination. I will safeguard interview notes and recorded information in a locked cabinet. In addition, identities will*

be recorded with pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes. The only exception may be the use of a professional transcriber who will assist the researcher in this process who will be held to the same level of confidentiality.

9. Have you obtained (or will you obtain) consent from your participants in writing? *Yes, I will obtain consent. See attached form.*
10. What are the benefits to society, and to your participants that will accrue from your investigation? *My participants will have an opportunity to voice the ways in which they were prepared for independence and success throughout their placements. Other youth in foster care will benefit from what we learn as it will inform policy.*
11. Do you judge that the benefits justify the risks in your proposed research? Indicate why. *Absolutely, due to the fact that other youth in foster care will benefit from the knowledge gained. In addition, foster care alumni will experience the freedom and empowerment which comes with telling their stories.*

Both the student and his/her Dissertation Chair must sign this form and submit it before any research begins. Signatures indicate that, after considering the questions above, both student and faculty person believe that the conditions necessary for informed consent have been satisfied.

Date: _____

Signed: _____

Dawn Montgomery, MA
Student Researcher

Date: _____

Signed: _____

Michele Harway, PhD
Chair

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do you like where you are presently living?
 - Level of Independence, Rules, Expectations
 - How long do you plan to remain here?
2. Where did you live before your present location?
 - What initially comes to your mind when you reflect on your placement experience?
 - What aspects of your placement experience stand out for you?
 - How has the experience affected you?
3. Tell me about your favorite placement.
 - What was it that made this positive or workable?
 - Are you still in contact with anyone?
 - Did you feel bonded / connected to the family?
 - Mention any negative aspects.
4. Tell me about your least favorite placement.
 - What was it about the experience that made it your least favorite?
 - Were there any positive aspects?
5. Did you ever have special weekend outings/team sports, after school activities, gangs, or clubs in which you were involved?
 - Favorite things you did together? Church? Vacations? Concerts? Sports?
 - Did you enjoy these activities?
 - What did they teach you about success or independence, if anything?
6. What things did you learn in placement that helped you succeed or become independent?
 - Values? Ideals? Spirituality?
 - Overall, how do you think your placement experience prepared you for real life?
 - What things got in the way of your success?
7. If you are comfortable answering, why did you have to move from living with your family of origin?

8. What does being “Independent” mean to you?
 - How do you define independence?
 - Living alone? With roommates?
 - How “independent” do you see yourself?
9. What does being “Successful” mean to you?
 - How do you define success?
 - Educational attainment? Employment? Relationships? Friendships?
 - How “successful” do you see yourself?
10. What would it mean to you to be known as a person who had become “successful?”
11. What would it mean to you to be known as someone who is “independent?”
12. What words of wisdom might you share with children just coming into the foster care system if you had the opportunity?
13. If you had the opportunity to speak to foster parents or other placement members about taking in children who need placement, what would you tell them?

This information will remain confidential as it will be kept in a locked cabinet. Also, pseudonyms will be used in the interest of confidentiality.

1. Age: _____
 2. Gender:
 - ☐ Female
 - ☐ Male
 3. Ethnicity (Choose as many as apply):
 - ☐ Caucasian
 - ☐ Hispanic/Latino/Mexican
 - ☐ African American
 - ☐ Asian American
 - ☐ Native American
 - ☐ Pacific Islander
 - ☐ Other (Please Specify)
 - a. _____
 4. Sexual Identity:
 - ☐ Straight
 - ☐ Gay/Lesbian
 - ☐ Bisexual
 - ☐ Other: _____
 5. Relationship Status:
 - ☐ Married/Partnered
 - ☐ Single
 - ☐ Dating
 6. Do you know if you have any siblings? (Including half-siblings)
 - ☐ Yes, How Many? _____
 - ☐ No
 7. Do you have any children?
 - ☐ Yes, How Many? _____
 - ☐ No
 8. Spiritual or Religious Affiliation?
 - ☐ Yes If so, please describe: _____
 - ☐ No
 9. Are you presently a student?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ Full-time
 - ☐ Part-time
 - ☐ On leave
 - ☐ If so, what are you studying? _____
 _____ (Community College, Trade School, etc.)
 - ☐ No

10. Highest grade completed:
- ☐ 9th Grade
 - ☐ 10th Grade
 - ☐ 11th Grade
 - ☐ 12th Grade
 - ☐ Some College
 - ☐ Trade School (Please describe): _____
 - ☐ _____
 - ☐ Certificate Program (Please describe): _____
 - ☐ _____
11. What type of education do you aspire to or hope to accomplish?
- _____
- _____
12. Your father's highest level of education:
- ☐ Elementary School
 - ☐ High School
 - ☐ Diploma
 - ☐ GED
 - ☐ Some College
 - ☐ College Graduate
 - ☐ Master's Degree
 - ☐ Doctorate Degree
 - ☐ Do Not Know
13. Your mother's highest level of education:
- ☐ Elementary School
 - ☐ High School
 - ☐ Some College
 - ☐ _____
 - ☐ College Graduate
 - ☐ Master's Degree
 - ☐ Doctorate Degree
 - ☐ Do Not Know
14. Are you presently employed?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ Full-time
 - ☐ Part-time
 - ☐ What is your occupation? _____
 - ☐ No
15. How old were you during your first placement?
- _____
16. How many placements have you experienced?
- _____
- _____
17. Are you still in contact with family members or friends from various placements?
- ☐ Yes If so, which one(s) and please describe your relationship(s): _____
 - ☐ _____
 - ☐ No
18. Have you struggled with alcohol and/or drugs in the past or currently?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
19. In what ways did you or do you seek support?
- _____
- _____
- _____

20. How were you/are you able to stay clean and/or sober?

21. Have you ever been involved in the juvenile or adult justice/legal system?

☐ Yes Please describe:

How did you deal with it?
Did you have a support system in place?

☐ No

