

From hardship to hope

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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"Foster care is not fun for anyone," says 24-year-old law student Amy Peters, who entered Nebraska's foster care system at age 12 and remained until she "aged out" at 19. Fortunately for Amy, she excelled in high school and was accepted at the University of Nebraska, and because she was attending college was eligible for housing, health care, and financial assistance until age 21 through Nebraska's Former Ward Program. Amy knows very well she was one of the lucky ones.

Foster care is intended to be a temporary solution during one of the darkest times of a child's life, but the average length of stay is nearly two years, and every year more than 23,000 youths "age out" of foster care at age 18 or older without being connected to a forever family. These vulnerable young people are at huge risk of dropping out of high school and ending up unemployed, homeless, or in the criminal justice system. Now Amy is one of the thousands of foster care alumni who are sharing their stories in hopes of sparking changes in the child welfare system.

Amy works for [Project Everlast](#), a statewide, youth-led organization committed to providing resources, connections, support, and hope to young people exiting foster care. Through Project Everlast Amy and her peers successfully urged state lawmakers to replace the Former Ward Program with the Bridge to Independence Program, which will extend more services to other Nebraska youths up to age 21 transitioning from foster care so they can continue receiving supports like those that helped prepare Amy for successful adulthood.

Foster care activist and college student Sixto Cancel says he was only 11 months old when he was swept into foster care after his mother's drug habit led to abuse, poverty, and neglect. He was adopted at nine years old, but was later abandoned by his adoptive mother and re-entered foster care. In high school Sixto started a remedial education program for foster children, already determined to make a difference for those following in his footsteps. Today, he is deeply grateful for the financial literacy education provided by the [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative](#) that he received in high school.

Sixto "aged out" of foster care at age 18 and is now finishing his junior year at Virginia

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Commonwealth University. During his college years his financial literacy training has informed all his decisions from what courses to take to how to manage the basics of food, apartment, and transportation. Hardships have come his way. He's not complaining when he says that unlike most of his peers he has no parental safety net to fall back on when the going gets tough. In his work with the Virginia Foundation for Community College Education's "[Great Expectations](#)" program, Sixto is working on a financial literacy and match savings program to help other Virginia youths who age out of foster care get the support they need to attend and succeed at the state's 26 public community colleges. Sixto and Amy are also both members of the National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Policy Council, which presents policy recommendations and youth perspective to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Sixto will be speaking at the Children's Defense Fund/Educational Testing Service June symposium [Advancing Success for Black Men in College](#) in Washington, D.C.

Although Ashley Kuber was only in foster care four months, like Amy and Sixto the 22-year-old has been working to help others still in foster care in Idaho's child welfare system. Growing up in a poor, unstable home, Ashley went to work early to buy clothes and help her family pay rent. When she was 14 Ashley was placed in foster care and lived with relatives until she reunited with her father. For the past two years Ashley has served on the Idaho Foster Youth Advisory Board, where the Board is working to develop a Youth Bill of Rights, a Sibling Bill of Rights, and a peer mentoring program for children in foster care. She and others on the Board have also spoken to groups of current and prospective foster parents and advocated at the governor's office. Last year Ashley was chosen for the [FosterClub All-Stars](#), an intensive summer internship program recognizing young foster care alumni with leadership potential who want to help others understand the foster care experience and assist those still in care.

I am so grateful to Amy, Sixto, and Ashley and for the thousands of other foster care alumni who are now raising their voices and working to make a difference for young people still involved in foster care. May is National Foster Care Month—the perfect time for all of us to follow their example and begin to help light the way for children in foster care. Members of Congress will do just that during the last week of May on Congressional Foster Youth Shadow Day. Sponsored by the bipartisan Congressional Coalition on Foster Youth, 66 young foster care alumni leaders will meet with members to share experiences and discuss changes to help youths still in foster care move toward successful futures.

Beyond Capitol Hill, you too can make a difference and be a light in the lives of young people in foster care and alumni. Learn more about how foster care alumni are organizing for change in your state and how you can help. Support advocacy efforts by asking your own elected officials what steps they are taking to help children in foster care find permanent families. You can also volunteer to help organizations dedicated to young people in care in your own community, support local foster parents, or mentor a child. Find more resources and information by visiting <https://www.childwelfare.gov/fostercaremonth/>

. A common thread among many of these young child welfare leaders is that they found the courage to speak up after being encouraged by an adult and told that they—and their story—were important. By simply opening up your heart, looking a young person in the eye, and speaking an encouraging word you might change the trajectory of that child's life and give them

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hope for a brighter future.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org .