

Sunday Forum: Every kid needs a family

STACY JOHNSON wants the foster care system to help every child, teenager and young adult find a permanent home

Sunday, May 31, 2009

You probably have other things to do today, but please take a few moments to think about the 20,000 children, teenagers and young adults who pass through Pennsylvania's foster care system each year.

These are kids who have no permanent family, no stability in their lives, no place to go where they know they'll be loved, no place to go where they can relax and laugh and feel safe. Nearly 2,400 of them live here in Allegheny County, some of them in your neighborhood.

While the system may not have forgotten about these kids, they often feel forgotten. I can attest to that. I was one of them.

After years of neglect by my parents, who suffered from drug and alcohol abuse, I had pretty much started taking care of myself when I was 12. I was placed in the foster care system when I was 16.

I first went into kinship care with my paternal aunt, who also was taking care of my younger brother. I thought this would be the end of my hardships and the beginning of a normal life, but I was wrong. I know from many other young people who have been in foster care that living with relatives sometimes works best for them. This wasn't the case for me.

I lived with my aunt for two years. When I left for college, my aunt's home was no longer mine. I found myself essentially homeless, crashing on friends' couches during semester breaks. One time I even stayed at my pastor's house.

I didn't know adoption was an option. This happens often with older youth. Some people who run the child welfare system think families won't adopt teenagers; others think teenagers don't want to be adopted.

I probably would have been open to adoption because I wanted to feel connected to a family. But I never knew older kids like me were even eligible.

My caseworkers changed so many times that it seemed I was assigned a new person every three months. I understand that being a caseworker is a really difficult job, but youth in foster care count on their caseworkers for help.

In my case, there was little communication. I wished someone would have checked in with me more often. If they had, maybe they would have known how unhappy I was and would have worked with me to do something about it.

Through most of my teen years I never felt the stability of a permanent family. Finally, at 19, I was placed with a foster family and lived with them until my senior year of college.

This wasn't easy, either. I had to fight to get an extension so I could stay in foster care until I turned 21.

I really wanted to do well in school and succeed, but I knew that probably wouldn't happen without much-needed supports like health insurance and housing assistance. Which I also had to fight for.

Not all foster youth get to stay in care until they turn 21. Many "age out" at 18. Youth need to understand they have this choice.

My determination has enabled me to graduate from college and find a good job and start graduate school. My story has a happy ending, or at least a happy new beginning.

But I know from friends who spent time in foster care that the system's alumni are more likely to wind up unemployed, homeless or in jail than working on a college degree. Most stories of young people leaving foster care do not end happily.

From someone who felt forgotten in the system, let me say that kids 13 and older in foster care need a permanent family connection. It's so important to have that stability. It makes them feel they belong somewhere.

 Subscribe and save	 Pittsburgh Mom
 Report news to the PG	 Post your pictures
 Get Email headlines	 Games
 Place a Classified Ad	 Coupons
 Place a Celebrations Ad	 Shop the PG store

When kids can't be sent back home or to live permanently with a relative, adoption should be the goal.

Today, I work for the Allegheny County Department of Human Services as a youth support specialist to try to make the foster care system a better place for children, teenagers and young adults. There are many changes under way to improve the lives of children in foster care, but we still have a long way to go to make sure that every child in foster care finds a permanent family. We shouldn't settle for anything less.

Stacy Johnson, in addition to working for Allegheny County, helps with the Porch Light Project, which seeks reform of the Pennsylvania child welfare system to assure a "forever family for every child" (porchlightproject.org). She lives in Penn Hills.

First published on May 31, 2009 at 12:00 am

Online: [Contact Us](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Advertise](#) | [About Us](#) | [What's New](#) | [Help](#) | [Corrections](#)

Print: [Home Delivery](#) | [Payment](#) | [Vacation](#) | [Address Change](#) | [Rates](#) | [Customer Service](#) | [Delivery](#) | [Questions](#) | [Back Copies](#) | [Specials](#) | [Gift Subscriptions](#) | [Newsstand](#) | [FAQ](#)

Copyright ©1997 - PG Publishing Co., Inc. All Rights Reserved.