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A BETTER WAY?

The life outcomes of individuals who grow up in foster care vary widely, and many emerge from the experience not fully ready for the challenges they will face. But has San Diego-based Just in Time for Foster Youth found a better way to help them thrive? Below, a leader of the organization and two former foster youth who work for it talk about the value of community in helping individuals remake their lives.

FINDING SUPPORT CHANGED THE TRAJECTORY OF MY LIFE

BY CAITLIN RADIGAN

People intend to keep the promises they make, then life happens. As much as we hope that everything will be OK, there will always be mitigating factors that alter the circumstances.

My name is Caitlin, and I am the oldest of three girls of the same mother who did not know our fathers. They were absent because they were either murdered, serving a life sentence in prison or faced an unknown fate. Mom moved us around a lot — I attended eight schools in four states by the sixth grade.

Years of unstable circumstances and daily trauma in my childhood led to my survival mentality. I couldn't trust anyone, I felt alone, I ran away and dropped out of school. On the streets, I was given drugs and exploited until I was arrested. At the time, I was a pregnant teenager.

The average well-intentioned and caring adult can see a complex issue like thousands of unaccompanied children running the streets, and think, "Let's build a system to solve this huge problem."

Yet for some reason the system makes it worse, and the problem is never solved.

My experience navigating the juvenile justice and foster care systems wasn't easy — harsh authority figures, degrading treatment, solitary confinement, inadequate prenatal care, questionable mental health diagnoses, drugs and violence.

Despite these conditions, I took advantage of educational opportunities and passed the test to earn my GED diploma in custody. Unfortunately, after being released to a group home in Los Angeles, I ran away in 2009 and found myself addicted and surviving on the streets again.

In October 2016, I learned I was pregnant again, and I knew I had to find the power in myself to change.

I quit everything cold turkey, found a couch to sleep on, and gave birth to a healthy baby girl, the best thing that ever happened to me! I got a job and enrolled in community college. I was still struggling, couch surfing and so scared of this new responsibility of raising a little human. Did I have the power to save her life?

I knew it would take a lot more to provide the life I wanted for myself and my daughter, but I had no idea how I would get there.

Finding the Just in Time community has been life changing for me. Initially, when I heard a radio commercial inviting former foster youth to visit Just in Time, I expected a resource hub for food banks, housing waitlists and free Wi-Fi. Discovering a community of support made up of my peers, caring adults, mentors, coaches and allies has empowered me and changed the entire trajectory of my life.

Through my involvement with a community, I've learned that I am creative, resourceful and whole. I've gained the confidence to face my fears, follow my heart, use my brain and reach my full potential. I've made connections with people from all walks of life who are committed to something bigger than themselves.

Because of this community, I know I am capable of anything, and every young person in foster care should know that, too.

Today, I love myself, I am stronger and there is no limit to my success. I've earned a bachelor's degree in business, launched two

If we do not learn from our young people, historically poor outcomes will stay the same.

social enterprises to support young athletes and student parents, and traveled across the United States to Washington, D.C., to advocate for youth impacted by the foster care and juvenile justice system. I have truly transformed my pain into purpose.

My most recent and exciting accomplishment has been co-authoring the book "Life Changing Choices" with my fellow lived-experience experts to share a mental model that will transform how we, as a society, empower youth navigating the foster care system.

As the unapologetic voice advocating for my peers, I am challenging child welfare and juvenile justice systems to do better. Rather than rebranding, renaming and restructuring the same old institutions, I

challenge them to take ownership of failed policies, to acknowledge decades of hurt that they have caused to families so that we can rebuild trust and move toward a healthier model of care.

Now is the greatest time for lived experts, who have endured every policy and practice, to influence real change and for the community to stand in solidarity with us.

If we do not learn from and respond accordingly to our young people, the historically horrible outcomes will remain the same: over-representation of Black and Brown youth in the system, high adolescent pregnancy rates, low college graduation rates and many of our youth ending up homeless or incarcerated.

Our children are waiting for us to make different choices.

Radigan is a former foster youth, a child welfare and juvenile justice system advocate, and development and advocacy manager at Just in Time for Foster Youth. She is co-author of "Life Changing Choices: The 7 Essential Choices at the Heart of Transformational Change for Foster Youth and Your Community." She lives in San Diego.

FAILING SYSTEM UNFAIRLY LABELS FOSTER YOUTH

BY NATHANIEL MARTINEZ

I spent four years working in the public child welfare system as a social worker, two on the front lines of foster care conducting child abuse investigations and two working in extended foster care.

It was a profound experience because up until that point, I had only known the negative toll that foster care had on me, personally. Much like the youth I worked with, I was also impacted by the child welfare system, when I was taken from my parents and placed in foster care at the age of 7.

My entry into the foster care system (or "the system," as those of us with lived experience refer to it) was traumatic, violent and confusing.

I still clearly remember my mom's urgent command to "Run!" as police officers and social workers knocked on our front door. I remember being pulled from beneath my bed kicking and screaming, and the sound of my 3-year-old brother's sobs filling the back of the social worker's car. I remember the antiseptic white walls of the emergency shelter where we were taken in the middle of the night, the terror and the bewilderment. I did not then realize that I would never again live with my parents.

As a child welfare investigator at Child Welfare Services in San Diego, I was tasked with assessing individual families in my caseload and balancing the need of safety with keeping children connected to their families.

My professional experience tells me that children who have been removed previously for the same safety concerns have a slim chance of ever being returned to their parents. Siblings will likely be split up into different foster homes (if any homes are available), breaking the sacred bond between them. If there are no

homes available, they will languish in our local children's emergency shelter or in group homes.

My overall experience with the system tells me that the trauma youth experience before and during foster care will often cause them to behave in ways that will be interpreted as violent, distracted or delayed in their academic or social development — never mind the fact that they are simply doing their best to survive.

Wherever they end up, they'll be labeled with diagnosis after diagnosis and medicated. Files will fill up with notes on all the ways they are damaged and broken. Ultimately, many will exit the foster care system as young adults feeling utterly unsure, unprepared and disconnected, positioned

to repeat the same cycles as their parents and their parents before them. Research suggests that the rate at which the children of foster care alumni enter "the system" is substantially greater compared to children of parents who have had no interaction with the child welfare system.

This is the reality for so many of us who have entered this system. This is not to say that "the system" isn't made up of good people who are there for the right reasons. But oppressively high caseloads and insufficient resources, training and time lead to inadequate solutions to keep children safe that have not resulted in their long-term well-being. This outcome is unacceptable and the solution must come from outside of the current system.

Today, I work in the nonprofit sector as the youth services associate director at Just in Time for Foster Youth. More than 50 percent of our staff are former foster youth. Together we are creating an alternative to "the system" approach. That alternative is community.

Whereas the system is hierarchical, unresponsive, reactive, rigid and inflexible, stagnant, difficult to navigate, and resistant to improvement, communities are nurturing, empowering, flexible, innovative and adaptable. Community sees the interconnectedness of the strengths and needs of everyone. Solutions are individualized. In communities, people transform their thinking from believing that life happens to them to realizing they can do more than they ever thought possible. Since community believes individuals are best qualified to lead the discussion on how to address their challenges, the discussion must begin with input from the community.

The end goal is not to find an optimal solution determined by experts, but for participants to lead their own problem-solving and come up with a solution and plan that they feel good about, one that aligns with their values and goals. Only then is it highly likely that they will implement a change and that it will be durable change. In much the same way, the solution to "the system's" woes will not lie in its own expansion, but in the establishment of robust communities. Investing in communities is investing in our future.

Martinez is associate director of youth services at Just in Time for Foster Youth and a former protective services worker for the County of San Diego. He holds a master's in social work from San Diego State University and is a former foster youth. He lives in La Mesa.



At Just in Time for Foster Youth, Caitlin Radigan, left, is development and advocacy manager, and Nathaniel Martinez is associate director of youth services.

TIME TO LEAVE OLD MYTHS ABOUT 'STREET KIDS' BEHIND

BY DON WELLS

Around 1830, the number of American homeless children in large Eastern cities exploded. By 1850, an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 homeless children were among the population of 500,000 living in New York City.

Some children were orphaned when their parents died in epidemics of typhoid, yellow fever or the flu. Others were abandoned due to poverty, illness or addiction. For protection against street violence, they banded together and formed gangs.

This was in 1850.

By 1853, a New York minister became concerned with the plight of street children and founded the Children's Aid Society. Charles Loring Brace initially attempted to find homes and jobs for individual children in New York but was overwhelmed by the numbers needing help, so he decided to send groups of children from the East Coast to more rural areas where they could be adopted by "morally upright" farm families and raised to have better lives.

His program became known as the Department of Foster Care and the transportation of children via the railroad became known as the "orphan train."

Once they reached their destination, orphan train children had no choice in where they ended up. Children were often treated like cattle "up for adoption," and

siblings were separated. Often, they encountered ridicule and prejudice, being viewed as delinquent offspring of drunks and prostitutes. Many were forced to change their names and lost their identities in the process.

In short, they had little choice in how to "lead" their own lives.

Why does this matter? Because many basic assumptions of the 19th century "orphan train of thought" remain today, leading to patterns of negative outcomes rooted in mental models established more than a century and a half ago.

"Broken" children from "broken homes" should be removed for the good of everyone, "placed" outside their communities with upright foster families.

Some children may be put "up for adoption" and siblings separated. Children face obstacles in the system from prejudice to disconnection and abuse. Many people might view them as damaged offspring of deficient addicts and lowlifes and they lose their identity through repeated moves as they languish in foster care for years.

The negative effects from this prevailing "mental model" can be found from many sources. How can we find a different track to

a better future? Without new mental models, we'll be unable to course correct because we can't see outside the system we're used to and recognize that different ways of thinking — not just new ways of working — are necessary to achieve different outcomes.

Just in Time for Foster Youth began in 2003 with the goal to assist San Diego's transition age foster youth (18-26) with attaining and sustaining self-sufficiency levels significantly higher than the national average. But filling gaps in resources really wasn't enough. We realized that the most important gap that foster youth face is a lifetime of disconnection — first from family, then being moved from place to place within a system, and finally being pushed into the world

without the reliable, lasting relationships that all young people need.

That meant the lingering assumptions from the orphan train era had to be challenged, and even the words used to describe foster youth, their families and their potential needed a long-overdue examination because our words create our reality and precede our actions.

Different assumptions change expectations and encourage innovation, unleashing

the power of everyone in our community. It's necessary to discard the "broken children" mental model and replace it with a new way of thinking that leads to very different outcomes.

At Just in Time for Foster Youth, we believe that young people we serve:

- Are creative, resourceful and whole, not "broken" children.
- Are connected to our community, not "placed" in programs.
- Join our community as partner to meet their own identified goals.
- Won't need to distance themselves from their past but embrace their identity.
- See themselves as role models, inspiring and exceptional people with bright futures.
- Have ownership of their story and identity, with a strong sense of self and personal power.
- Not only "learn how to fish" but join a "fishing village" for a sense of belonging and support.

In other words, they become confident, capable and connected, empowered to lead their own lives.

Wells is chief empowerment officer of Just in Time for Foster Youth. He has a master's degree in counseling psychology from National University. He was a Just in Time volunteer for six years before becoming the organization's first executive director in 2010. He lives in Downtown.