



Everything Michigan

Michigan foster children describe struggles; 'Most people don't care about children,' one says

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Julie Mack | Kalamazoo Gazette



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Cherish Thomas, a Social Work graduate student from the University of Michigan, reaches out to Western Michigan University senior Mercedes McLean after she spoke about how she succeeded from the foster-care system to high school juniors and seniors now in foster care Wednesday morning.

KALAMAZOO — Her mother is a drug addict. Her father “wants to do his own thing.”

At a young age, Jazzi was sent to live with relatives, moving between households and never feeling a sense of belonging. There was emotional abuse, sexual abuse.

“It gave me a lot of reasons to act out,” she said. Finally, she ended up in foster care last year because her relatives “didn’t want to deal with me.”

Jazzi is now a 16-year-old living in Detroit. While her past is bleak, she desperately seeks a more hopeful future.

What she wants most now, she said, is a caring adult in her life — “someone to be encouraging. Someone who really wants to help a child.”

For 90 minutes Thursday, a dozen teenagers and young adults who have been in Michigan's foster-care system told their stories to a spellbound audience at Western Michigan University. The Kalamazoo Gazette is not printing their last names due to the nature of some of their stories.

Billed as "KidSpeak," the event was the conclusion of a three-day WMU College Exploration Camp for high school juniors and seniors in foster care. The camp was organized by the Seita Scholars' Program, a comprehensive program to support WMU students who were in foster care. Those who spoke Thursday include both high school campers and Seita Scholars.

Part of the power of KidSpeak was the repetitive nature of the stories. Abusive parents. Foster parents who seem in it for the money. Indifferent, overwhelmed caseworkers. Teachers who don't seem to care.

De'Ante, a 17-year-old from Jackson, talked about how his relatives "sold him" for drug money. "I just can't understand why people do those things," he said.

But he also has learned, he said, that "life isn't going to wait for me to sit on the couch and cry."



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The students were attending a summer college camp at Western Michigan University.

Marida, 19, now a sophomore at WMU, said she was put into foster care because of an abusive mother who once beat her so badly that she was hospitalized. Now she feels that she's making something of her life, but she still feels a void — she has two younger brothers in foster care and has been unsuccessful in trying to find them.

When asked by someone whether she has a court-appointed attorney who could help, she shrugged. She's had three attorneys over the years, she said, and she's only seen them briefly in connection with court hearings.

Cheyenne, an 18-year-old who attends Parchment High School, had Kristin Hart read her testimony. "Everybody needs a voice, so I'm her voice," said Hart, a Sieta Scholar. Through Hart, Cheyenne told how a troubled home life has undermined her education.

"Being in the system, I have all this stress and it messes up how I learn," she said. "It's hard to pay attention in class

when I have so much on my mind.”

Amber, 17, of Detroit, said she doesn't have many memories of her birth family, but she struggled for years with her foster mother, who would beat her with “anything she could find. A spatula. A wire hanger.”

She said she told her caseworker about the abuse, but she was never believed. The foster parent eventually lost her license for using corporal punishment on another foster child, and Amber ended up in a residential home.

“They said I was out of control,” she said. “They just drugged me up, because they said that I was just a girl with anger problems.”

She urged better screening of foster parents. “You get in a house, and two months later, they're beating on you,” she said. “It's just not right.”

Among the “listening panel” assembled to hear the testimony were area educators and representatives for local lawmakers and social service agencies. Many of them said they were moved by the stories, and Sandy Standish, superintendent of Comstock Public Schools, invited the Seita Scholars to speak to her staff.

The youngsters said they appreciated both the college-exploration camp and the chance to share their experiences.

“Most people don't care about children,” Nicholas, 18, of Detroit, told the panel. “It's clear to me that you do, or you wouldn't be here. Children just need someone to talk to.”

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