

Foster Care Awareness Month

Spotlight on the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI)

May is Foster Care Awareness Month, giving an opportunity to highlight the impact of current policy decisions and the lives of young people and caregivers who have lived within the foster care system in Michigan. Michigan's Children thanks Brandon Youngblood, a current student at Western Michigan University and Center for Fostering Success Student Ambassador, for sharing his story and his passion for making things better for young people across Michigan and the nation.

What MYOI Means to Me

- *Brandon Youngblood*



I entered foster care when I was 14, and a year later I became a part of the MYOI youth board in Macomb County. I was a part of this board for nearly 5 years before I headed to Western Michigan University to be in the Seita Scholars Program. I would not be who I am today without my MYOI board, I have no doubts about that. There are several things over the course of my time working with the board that has improved me as an individual and professional. Public speaking is the first, and number one thing that I gained as a skill from my MYOI board. Before I was a part of this program I did not have many social skills. I would not express myself appropriately, talk out of turn, and I was shy. Through the

help of one of the previous coordinators, and my persistence I overcame these adversities. One thing that helped me was presenting to foster parents who just received their license my foster care story to convince them to take in teenagers. Being able to tell strangers about your most personal details was one of the things that helped me overcome some of my short comings.

The next thing my MYOI board was instrumental in was helping prepare me for college every step of the way until I got here. Every coordinator on the MYOI board in Macomb had persistence with ensuring there was a financial aid night every year to learn about resources, and how to fill various forms out. Along with that, they worked closely with their education liaison to help students fill out college applications, tour colleges, consider other secondary education, fill out financial aid forms, and other things. The constant persistence, and assistance with college

resources was what helped me make my transition into college so much easier when it happened. I am grateful for MYOI for helping me with that.

One other thing I would like to note that helped me was just professional skills. I have already spoke to the public speaking component, but that is only one skill. I learned interviewing skills from my time with MYOI. I had the opportunity to interview people, and to mock interview. These skills have helped me with getting the jobs I have had since high school, and in college. The coordinating staff have also been helpful as I have been able to use them as references, build a resume, and learn to write letters of recommendation. If it were not for MYOI, I would have had to learn these skills on my own or from someone else.

In addition to the professional skills I learned, I think as a person MYOI helped me emotionally. Although I have been resilient throughout my life, MYOI has helped me maintain, and build upon that. It was a place where I could share my experiences, and get support about them. It also was a place that in a way helped me see I was not the only person who went through some rough things. I was also able to see that I can be grateful because things certainly could have been different, and I do not know how I would have done if things were worse than they were before foster care. I also have met several people who played a significant role in my life, and someone I can even call my sister. Without MYOI, I certainly would not be who I am today, and I am forever grateful for that. I hope others have a chance at the same experience with MYOI that I have been.

Aside from what I have already said I would like to point out something my MYOI coordinators went beyond for me to do. The first caseworker I ever had was not always easy to get ahold of, so when I needed things from her I was able to get through to her by my coordinator at the time. Fortunately, I got a better worker through a private agency. With the private agency worker, if I needed something like a YIT request I would do it through my actual DHHS worker since I was able to have my coordinator do it for me. I think if it were not for MYOI in some instances, I could have missed valuable sources that my previous case worker was unreliable to provide in. MYOI should not have to perform this function, but I think when necessary it is an invaluable resource for the youth.

Now when we look at my MYOI experience at large, it was what set me on my career path that I am on today. The advocacy experience I got from MYOI for those who experienced foster care has influenced me to become a case worker. I want to be able to improve foster care, and be a good case worker because of the insider experience that I have. Beyond that, during my time at Western Michigan University, I have become politically active. My goals are still to do case work, but while I do that I want to start working politically on the local level, with aspirations to be at the state or possibly the federal level one day. I want to legislate from a social work perspective to not only improve child welfare, but for everyone that I can help overall. All of this began with me being a part of MYOI. MYOI can inspire our youth to do great things beyond themselves, something I want more of from everyone.

Find out how to support MYOI and other programs that assist young people in foster care in state budget decisions going on now by reading Michigan's Children's recent [Action Alert](#).