

Foster Care Awareness Month

Spotlight on Essential Supports for College Access

May was Foster Care Awareness Month, and Michigan's Children is choosing to extend the opportunity beyond the month of May 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, Ashley Watkins, a recent Western Michigan University graduate and alumni of the Michigan foster care system, for sharing her story that highlights what is possible when family is utilized and supports are in place.

Ashley benefitted from the Fostering Futures scholarship fund, which has been at risk in the state budget for the last several years but is so far retained in current conversations. The program her high school college adviser was contracted through, the Michigan State University College Advising Corps, receives state funding through the Michigan College Access Network; and through AmeriCorps funding, which was eliminated in President Trump's recently proposed budget.



Ashley Watkins entered foster care during her sophomore year in high school after confiding in a teacher about having experienced abuse.

"I had abusive, drug addicted parents who didn't know how to properly take care of me," she explains.

She entered the foster care system and moved in with her aunt, who eventually became her legal guardian. Currently, in Michigan, there are approximately 13,000 children and youth in care.

"Being a part of the system led to a long process of therapy and talking about issues, as well as being judged, pitied, and looked down upon. Many people don't understand at first that you don't have to be ashamed to admit you're in foster care."

She largely credits social workers with helping her maintain a positive mindset throughout her time in care.

"I had two different social workers who were doing everything in their power to make sure that I was in a safe environment and aware of the resources that could help me live a better life," she recalls. "The

social workers I had were my greatest support system throughout this time. They were understanding, they listened, and they answered any questions or concerns that I had.”

Later in high school, Watkins learned from her caseworker about the Seita Scholars program at Western Michigan University, which provides support and scholarship funding to students who have experienced foster care. She began doing research online and meeting frequently with her college adviser at Hazel Park High School in metro Detroit to discuss her experiences and interests.

“Having the guidance during high school from my college advisor was the greatest support,” she remembers, “as well as learning to believe in myself. I didn’t think I would qualify (for the Seita Scholars program).” After submitting the required essay application and going through an interview process, she was accepted into the program.

“The Seita Scholars program was one of the greatest blessings that has occurred in my life,” Ashley says. “I was able to gain a tremendous amount of support through the Campus Coaches, Peer Mentors, and Lady Butterflies Org (an all women group for Seita Scholar to discuss challenges we have faced). Most importantly, I was surrounded by people with similar backgrounds. The Seita Scholars program also provided a full tuition scholarship and assisted us in accessing other funds to help cover the cost of room and board, books, and either other expenses. Financial aid was one of the most important components of succeeding in college.”

Today, Watkins is a college graduate, making her part of the two to four percent of foster youth who go on to earn college degrees. These low college attainment numbers are in spite of the fact that 84 percent of youth aged 17-18 with foster care experience report wanting to go to college, according to Fostering Success in Education. Watkins is not done yet, though; in fall 2017, she will enroll in WMU’s Master of Social Work program.

“My ultimate goal in life is to be a youth counselor and victim advocate while also doing motivational speaking,” she says. “I want to be a voice for those who have been unable to get help through difficult times in their lives. I want to show them that I am a walking testimony and you don’t have to be ashamed of your past. I also wish people would be open-minded about receiving help while in the foster care system. I want people to know that it isn’t an experience to be afraid or feel ashamed of.”

Watkins looks forward to her future as a social worker and has a message for youth in the meantime: “I want to tell youth to embrace their past. The challenges you have faced don’t make you any less of a person. Learn to love yourself and enjoy the beauty in life.”

Find out how to support critical programs for children, youth and caregivers in the foster care system on [Michigan’s Children’s web site](#). Sign up for our [bi-monthly e-bulletins](#) and keep track of us on [Facebook](#) to make sure you don’t miss opportunities for action. If you’d like to share your story as part of our Spotlight series, contact Michele Corey, michele@michiganschildren.org.