

## Andre' Markell Foster: 'If you have no guidance, you live your life like a chicken with its head cut off, trying to find where you fit in.'



At 27, Andre' Markell Foster is an entrepreneur with two jobs in the Detroit area – a business start-up he's shepherding as a transportation logistics broker and a steady job as a regional franchise director in the restaurant business. He's also a supportive older brother, cousin, grandson and a sought-after speaker on a topic he's intimately familiar with – foster care. "I've told my story thousands of times," he says matter-of-factly. Advocating for improvements in the child welfare system has become his purpose in life. "Going through the system is definitely not an easy thing. It's going to be traumatic either way you look at it. I had to grow from it mentally and physically," he added.

**Andre' was a young teen** when he went into foster care because his mother suffered from schizophrenia and depression and was deemed unable to care for him, his three brothers and sister. As the oldest child, Andre' looked after his siblings. Two younger siblings, including an infant brother, bounced among several foster homes, while his case worker offered Andre' the choice of living in Children's Village in Oakland County, a youth detention, residential treatment and shelter care facility, or living with relatives. He and two brothers went to live in Sterling Heights with his grandparents; his grandfather died while Andre' was in high school. Living with his grandparents, who had 13 grandchildren in all, Andre' became the older cousin adept at taking care of others including changing diapers.

Over the years, Andre' has developed a clear vision of what helps youths with his experience survive, thrive and find a path to independent living. Stability is the key to success, along with mentoring support and services that not only help youths complete an education and explore careers but provide a sense of community and belonging. Financial support and transportation assistance are also essential.

**The Enterprising Youth Program (EYP)**, a partnership between the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI) and Oakland-Livingston Human Services agency, became a second family for him. Geared to serving youth from foster care, EYP offers youths employment, job training and business opportunities. Andre' was also able to secure scholarships for college courses and a trade program, and help purchasing a car. He continues to speak publicly for the state's MYOI after a decade. "Finding your niche is important. If you have no guidance, you live your life like a chicken with its head cut off, trying to find where you fit in," he said. "We're on a mission to change things and make things better for future foster youths." Andre' says he's particularly comfortable talking to judges and lawmakers who have an impact on the lives of youths in foster care. "I want them to understand the impact their job makes on someone's life."