

**Arielle Duncan: 'Foster children (are) . . . automatically stripped away from normal life and have to learn to adopt to this life that wasn't their choice.'**



Arielle Duncan knows as well as anyone who has experienced foster care that you grow up faster than most kids. Originally from Battle Creek, the 18-year-old Wayne State University student has lived in five different foster homes and three separate guardianship arrangements from the time she was in middle school. Sometimes she and her younger sister lived together, but not always. For a time, the girls lost track of their younger brother who eventually was adopted by a family in northern Michigan. Her own mother was unable to care for Arielle and her siblings after an abusive husband beat her so severely that the attack exasperated previous brain damage received in a car accident with a drunk driver. Arielle later testified against her stepfather and he was sent to prison for sexually and physically abusing her.

Through it all, Arielle learned how to survive. When she was one month shy of her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, Arielle opted out of guardianship upon realizing her custodian was pocketing state support dollars. Instead, she returned to the state's child welfare system while she was still age-eligible. She knew that going back into foster care qualified her for a Fostering Futures Scholarship and a ticket to college. "Foster children have had things happen in their lives. They're automatically striped away from normal life and have to learn to adopt to this life that wasn't their choice," Arielle said. "We almost have to grow up before we are grownups."

**Some of Arielle's** experiences in state care highlight issues that are common criticisms of the system. Frequent placement changes and the loss of contact with siblings are generally harmful to a child who has been uprooted from their family home. Also complicating her experiences was the ever-changing assignment of case workers she experienced. "All throughout my growing up in the system, I had multiple case workers. It was hard to be consistent. I'd tell one case worker, can you help me with this? Then my case was switched. I had to say what I needed all over again and the process became longer." A case in point was when she was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and ADHD. She was prescribed medications but prescription durations were interrupted each time she experienced a change in guardianship or foster home re-assignment. Her weight ballooned from the inconsistency and at just 4 feet 11 inches she became self-conscious about her body image just when she was starting high school. Another example was one most teens can't wait to secure - qualifying for a state driver's license by age 16. Now 18, she is still waiting to for a driver's permit because the entire process and cost of starting driver's training at age 16 was not a high priority for most case workers she worked

with, she said. “I finally gave up asking.” Getting a driver’s license this summer is high on Arielle’s priority list so that she can secure a good-paying summer job. She has saved money to buy a car.

Several state and college-based programs have motivated her to think more positively about her future. Michigan’s MYOI (Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative) program is available for youths in care from age 14 to 21 and helped her realize her potential for going to college. The college visits they sponsored were eye-opening and she quickly gravitated to Wayne State University which offered a bridge program – Academic Pathways to Success – to help incoming freshmen boost their GPA for college entry. She likewise credits the state’s Fostering Futures Scholarship program, funded through state resources and charitable giving, for making college possible. The campus-based CHAMPS program designed to support youths out of foster care is one of two dozen university-run programs in Michigan and has been a life-saver. When her grandmother died, she was able to purchase a train ticket to Grand Rapids and the funeral through CHAMPS. Programs like these need to be replicated in every college across Michigan, she said. “I don’t see myself failing anywhere because know they’ll be there for guidance if I ask for it,” Arielle said.

**An active advocate** for the rights of children in care, Arielle has worked with groups like the New Foster Care to speak out for legislative improvements in the state’s foster care system. It’s inspired her to declare her major in public relations so that she can develop a career speaking out for children in the system. “My ultimate goal when I graduate is to push other youths who have been through what I’ve been through to see their potential.”