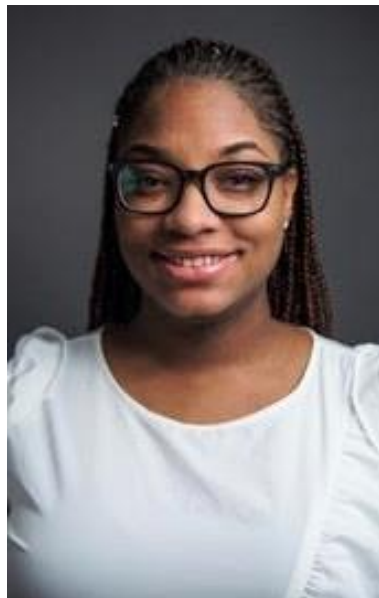


Ashley Watkins: ‘You shouldn’t have to be ashamed to admit you were in foster care.’



In her brief life, young professional Ashley Watkins, 23, of Kalamazoo has already beat the odds. Employed, self-sufficient, and working on a master’s degree, Ashley spends her days as a Family First of Michigan worker for Bethany Christian Services intervening in the lives of families in crisis in Paw Paw in southwestern Michigan. It is work that feeds her passion – helping others. Ashley was once on the receiving end of social services as the only child of parents whose lives were consumed by heroin and crack cocaine. At birth, she was born addicted to cocaine and weighed just over 1 pound; doctors didn’t offer much hope for survival. As an infant, she and her mother were homeless for a time, and she led a chaotic early life punctuated by visits to drug dens.

Originally from Detroit, she went into Michigan’s child welfare system as a young teen, but not after experiencing years of hidden abuse, including sexual abuse starting at age 3, other physical harm, and emotional hurts along with serious neglect. By age 14, she went to live with an aunt and a beloved grandmother and the process of interventions and healing began with help from social workers and other support programs geared to children in foster care. She was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder for which she eventually refused medication for fear of becoming addicted. Years of counseling, along with physical activity – she ran track and cross country in high school – and a strong determination to improving herself through education – were her salvation.

The vast majority of children in her circumstances don’t end up as well as Ashley, a self-described “miracle child.” She is a fortunate exception in Michigan’s child welfare system in which only 2-4 percent of children from foster home enter college and fewer graduate. Living in a kinship care arrangement also provided a much more stable home life than many others in foster care experience. “The person I am now is very self-aware, transparent. I am no longer timid, ashamed. I feel self-worthy, confident today. I want to be an inspiration to others.” In college, she started an empowerment group named HUSH (Her Untold Stories Heard) as a safe haven for those dealing with struggles associated with insecurity and abuse, and is now contemplating a spin-off for adult women. For her own recovery, she credits support she received through Western Michigan University’s award-winning Seita Scholars Program for giving her a new start in life and remains connected with former Seita mentors and as an

advocate for the program. Michigan's Educational Training Voucher program also made her college years possible by providing additional resources for non-tuition college costs.

As a Job Shadow Day participant, she wants lawmakers to understand the importance of eliminating the stigma of spending time in the child welfare system. "You shouldn't have to be ashamed to admit you were in foster care," she said. It would also help youth in foster care to become aware of the public and private resources that are available to them, she said. "I've seen people where they were in the same situation I was in but didn't know what existed and were missing opportunities."