

## **Charday Penick: 'I am better able to look back over the years and see how my past has shaped my present . . .'**



Wayne State University graduate Charday Penick, 30, has an intimate knowledge of the pain that hurting people can inflict on those in their care. When her own mother was unable to care for her and her two siblings because of a substance use disorder, they were placed in foster care. Charday was just 6 years old. She and her siblings lived in several foster homes until a woman named Peggy adopted them a year later. It turned out to be an unhealthy living arrangement for the children. Charday said there was abuse and stress levels were high. Peggy often accused her falsely of stealing from her. Events took a dreadful turn when Peggy institutionalized Charday in a mental health institute for a couple of months. The cause? "She said I was bad," Charday said. "The staff kept asking me if I wanted to go back home, and I said, no." At age 12, Charday was back in the child welfare system and she and her siblings lived in family foster homes in Wayne

County and a group home in Ann Arbor until she turned 18. Looking back on her childhood, Charday counts she's lived in 10 different foster home settings.

When her biological mother died a few years ago, Charday said her emotional life went into a tailspin. This year she started to receive therapy and medication after being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. It's helped immensely. Today, she's better able to identify the triggers that threaten to destabilize her life. "Therapy has helped me be able to talk to someone, so that I don't feel like I have to carry the whole world on my shoulders. Now I am better able to look back over the years and see how my past has shaped my present and I don't dwell on it anymore. That's why I am who I am. I've grown and have confidence today."

**Besides therapy** and her own determination, Charday freely attributes her growth in part to help from sources inside the system, too. A school social worker she met when she was 12 brightened her life, she said. The woman is still a valued mentor. Charday remains in touch with her siblings and describes them as close. That's important to her. "I don't have parents but I still have people surrounding me who are able to help me," she said.

Today, Charday is an outspoken advocate for kinship care arrangements for children in the child welfare system, and has participated in a statewide task force on abuse and neglect in the foster care system. From her perspective, the system doesn't do enough to assess the mental health of prospective foster parents or weed out those motivated by money. "Some people are unaware of things that happen to children in the system" she said. She advocates for placing children with relatives because it's less traumatic for children to be among people who care for them. "They feel loved and they're not placed with people they don't know," she said.

Charday is continuing her education with plans to achieve a master's degree in social work. She has spent a decade helping others by working in group homes for youth and adults dealing with mental health disorders. Her personal experiences have informed plans for a dream youth home she'd like to build one day – one that focuses on educating youth and preparing them for the time they're no longer in the foster care system. She developed the details for the program during an internship when she was given a grant-writing assignment. She continues to tweak its components in her spare time. "Education is the future," she said of children in care. "The ones that don't go to school, they don't have it easy, especially if they don't family. Education has really helped me."