

## Halley Miller: 'Understand that we're human. We're going through some things. We're going to be afraid.'

As an advocate for the rights of youth in foster care, Halley Miller, 20, feels comfortable speaking in front of hundreds of people. It's a significant accomplishment that still surprises her given her own experiences at home and in the state's foster care system when she felt she had no voice. "A lot of people find me to be an asset on panels, before CPS (Child Protective Service) workers or foster parents. I tell my story to make it a positive lesson for others to learn from. I'm growing from it, learning and gaining from it, too."

Raised in Owosso, Halley went into the system because of abuse she suffered from her mother's boyfriend, who she said kidnapped her and kept her as a hostage in a Lansing suburb. Halley and her twin sister later experienced severe neglect at a family foster home where her weight dropped 40 pounds in three months, causing permanent deterioration in her bones and muscles. It left her with social anxiety, panic attacks and depression. To cope, she still hordes food. Halley's sister experienced the same ordeal and spent some time in a mental health facility after threatening to kill herself. Concern for her sister motivated Halley to persevere. "I struggled so hard not to give up," Halley said. "I cried every day in care."



The importance of good mental health support in the child welfare system cannot be underestimated, she said. Halley saw a professional therapist during and after her time in care to help rebuild her relationship with her mother, but said more individualized treatment would have helped her during her time in care. She was further disappointed that she didn't have access to meetings with the judge who oversaw her case. Her case worker told her she wasn't permitted to attend, she said. "We deserve to have our voice heard when we're in care," she said. "Youth in foster care should be able to speak at their hearings and give their input. They should have the final say." Halley said she would have appreciated working with a court-appointed special advocate (CASA). Michigan's volunteer-run CASA operates in just 27 of the state's 83 counties. "I'd benefit from someone who could say, 'I see you're trying to put on a brave face. I'm here for you.'"

Halley has practical advice for those working with teens in foster care. Children in care are often angry and unwilling to share their feelings until they're ready, she said. "Understand that we're human. We're going through some things. We're going to be afraid. We're going to be distant. Just give us time," she said. She has advice for case workers, too. Don't give foster families a heads up when planning a home visit. "See them in their real selves," she said.

Today, Halley lives independently, attends Lansing Community College (LCC), and has a part-time on-campus job helping students who require special assistance on campus. She is dedicated to her education, a drive she credits for helping her survival. She is the first member of the Miller family on her father's side to get past the 9th grade, graduate high school, and go to college. Halley has also become fully immersed in advocating for youth in foster care on a state and national level. She serves as the president of the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI), as a board member of a student advisory panel for LCC's on-campus foster youth support group, and as a youth advisor on a community mental health board. This summer she has an internship with FosterClub Inc., a national network for youth in foster care based in Oregon. It's an opportunity that will put her in touch with policymakers working on foster care issues from across the country. "The goal is to bring knowledge from other states and what works in their foster care programs," she said.