Matthew Miller: 'No one can really understand what is in the system other than someone who's actually lived it.'

As a three-sport high school athlete, Matthew Miller was busy enough with football, wrestling and track to keep the trauma of his past at bay. Academics came easily for the well-spoken, analytical teen, so that an opportunity to attend Olivet College and play football seemed like an easy move - until life started unraveling. "I was 17 turning 18 and I was not ready," recalls Matthew, who at 23 just completed requirements for an associate's degree at Washtenaw Community College (WCC). "I didn't know how to balance sports and college, and be responsible enough to just go to class. It was hard being on my own for the first time with no support. A lot of the trauma and issues I was able to hide behind in high school emerged."

In 2014, the wheels came off his life. He tore the ACL in his left knee and his weight slowly ballooned by an extra 120 pounds. He ditched his plans to become a police officer, dropped out of school, and moved to North Dakota to re-establish ties with his biological family. But too much time had passed and Matthew said he was radically different from them. So he spent some months living in his car, and couch-surfing at friends' homes, finally deciding to head back to Michigan. Matthew had been living in foster care on and off in Michigan since he was 5 years old.

Before giving college another try, Matthew spent a couple of years working as an assistant store manager at a Wal-Mart. He had knee surgery in 2017, and took out loans to prepare to return to college. Meanwhile, he was given a prescription for severe depression; later, symptoms worsened and he began having suicidal thoughts. Enrolled at WCC, he found a college therapist he felt comfortable with to address the trauma and pain in his life. The therapist helped him realize that the uncharacteristic hyperactivity and rapid speech pattern he was experiencing weren't normal. One day last year the therapist called a psychiatrist for a consult, but Matthew learned his Medicaid health insurance wasn't accepted by the doctor's clinic. Months went by before Matthew got an appointment in a federally qualified health clinic that did take Medicaid. There, Matthew learned he was being mistreated – his symptoms matched bipolar disorder not depression. "It was the first time in my life I had I had a physician seriously listen to what I had to say, to listen to my concerns, and incorporate them into a health plan," Matthew said. "Growing up in the foster care system, everyone tells you how you feel; everyone tells you what you should do." Matthew told the doctor he wanted help becoming emotionally stable and physically healthy. Matthew changed his lifestyle and started to go to a gym to get fit. He gave up pop, caffeine, fatty foods and lost 20 pounds in six weeks. He still has panic attacks but they occur less frequently and with less intensity, he said.

The youngest of three brothers, Matthew and his middle brother, Bryan, were living with their biological parents in Atlanta in northern Michigan when they went into foster care in 2000 when his father was jailed for sexually abusing a half-sibling and his eldest brother went into a youth detention facility. He's read the court filings since then and believes that his mother was offered a deal "to get her

boys back" but inextricably it didn't happen. Four years later, Matthew and Bryan were adopted by a couple from Lewiston. Five years after that in 2009, Matthew, Bryan and adopted brother Max were removed from that home and returned to foster care when school officials reported that a younger male relative of the couple's was sexually abusing the children. Matthew said his adoptive parents didn't believe him when he told them. Matthew was 11. "There's always the stigma when it comes to foster youth that regardless of what we say and whether or not collaborating evidence exists . . . there's always a layer of distrust. Even after you've been adopted, you're still treated like foster kids." When children from foster care get adopted, the social workers stop coming around, Matthew deadpanned.

Matthew and his brother moved numerous times. One foster mother, a dental hygienist, helped Matthew get his teeth fixed. He hadn't owned a toothbrush in his life and had a mouthful of cavities and crooked teeth. On the negative side, another foster couple recommended the boys be split up because they were always fighting. Matthew doesn't dispute the fighting got severe at times. "We were two young teens who were constantly in survival mode. The smallest triggers would set us off," he said. The boys were split up and Matthew was next moved to a family home at a country farm with a dozen cattle, some chickens and peacocks. He called it "a decent placement" instead of home. He liked the foster parents but said they weren't trained in dealing with children who experienced trauma; one of the other boys in their care suffered from schizophrenia, and needed more knowledgeable care. The couple offered to adopt Matthew, but after the process took too long, Matthew said they gave up. He was 15 or 16 by then and just a couple of years away from aging out. "I had anxiety issues for years that were never addressed," Matthew said.

His final placement was in LeRoy, also in Osceola County, where Bryan had been placed. Bryan was soon aging out of the foster system and wanted Matthew with him. But Matthew, who prided himself on rationalism and reason, was flummoxed by these foster parents who were Pentecostal Christians. When his foster father started "speaking in tongues," writhing on the floor and foaming at the mouth, Matthew called an ambulance. Matthew said the foster parents said his constant questioning of their religious practices was causing their biological son to have night terrors and worry about demons. Matthew was emancipated from the foster system and went off the college without any help from his final foster parents.

Matthew has strong and considered views about the foster care system in Michigan. While in foster care, his mental health suffered for years; he lost track of an adopted brother; and he barely acquired the skills a young adult needs to get through life, he said. He gives credit to the farm family he lived with – the ones who lost interest in adopting him – for teaching him how to change a car tire. That's the kind of handy skill most people growing up picks up from their family, he said. He's only just this year learned about budgeting, thanks to his girlfriend's parents. And at 23, he's just now learned how to properly trim his nails. "No one can really understand what is in the system other than someone who's actually lived it."

Matthew has great ambitions for himself and wants to "plant seeds" for change in foster care for others coming up. He wants to address food insecurity among youths aging out, housing instability, and improving educational opportunities among a group of people for whom just 40 percent graduate from high school and just 2 percent graduate from college. That's why he ran for state Senate in the Democratic primary for the 18th District last year even though he said he knew he didn't have a

snowball's chance of winning. He wanted a platform to talk about foster care. "The point wasn't to win. The point was to have these conversations," Matthew said. Matthew still keeps in touch with the other candidates, including the champion, Jeff Irwin, and he's still talking about foster care with them. He's also been giving a lot of thought to developing a "transitional toolkit" for youth aging out to address "everything typical parents teach that we don't have." It would address housing and food security, for example, through policy changes, such as making Section 8 housing assistance available to all youths from foster care; and expanded SNAP benefits for nutritional support through EBT (electronic benefit transfer) cards for youths from foster care. For job security, he would include where and how to get job training. Someday, Matthew would like to attend the University of Michigan Law School and study Constitutional Law and Civil Rights. "I want to do good work to help other youths from going through the same things I did," he said. "We felt the pain of growing up through system; what it's like to be there, a no one there to reach out and help us. We don't want see that happen to anyone else."