

**Michael Davis-Thomas: ‘It’s lucky I have the resiliency to keep going. Most other people end up on drugs or are going to the prison system.’**



**Michael Davis-Thomas**, a political science major at Mott Community College in Flint, was more than just another broke college student. Staying at a shelter in Flint when he had no place else to live, he met a visitor one day in December 2018 who took an interest in his plight. She was the president of his college and offered a suggestion. Would he consider trying out for a key entertainment position at the college that came with free tuition? And that’s how Michael, who considers resourcefulness one of his personal traits, ended up wearing a bear costume as Mott’s mascot for all sporting and major campus events.

Unlike most college students, Michael counts finding secure housing as one of his daily goals. Homeless shelters are only temporary living options and he was stressing out over where to live next when a local pastor offered him another temporary option – a facility his church is trying to have authorized as a half-way house. For now, Michael has a place to live even if it means going to sleep at night listening to gunshots or the noises of neighborhood prostitutes.

**At 21, Michael’s** young life has been fraught with worries and energy spent over finding the next roof over his head. He’s couch-surfed for a time as long as friends were accommodating. He’s had his own apartment and was a good tenant until his car broke down, and without money to replace it, lost his job and was evicted. (He was living in rural Michigan near Saginaw with no accessible public transportation. He still doesn’t have a car.) His sister served as his guardian during his younger years until anger issues made living together untenable. Living with an aunt didn’t provide a long-term solution when she turned him into juvenile authorities after a fight that started with a misunderstanding. As a youngster, he bounced around with different extended family members including a variety of out-of-state relatives who gave him the Cinderella treatment – “clean this, clean that,” he said. For a time, Michael lived in a suburban Detroit facility named Children’s Village, an independent living group home, and a juvenile treatment facility.

Michael is a product of Michigan’s child welfare system and since 15 the juvenile justice system, too. He aged out of foster care this year and is now totally on his own. Michael points out that between the ages of 11 and 18 he never spent a birthday outside of a juvenile or residential treatment facility. Without a family support system, there’s been no ready or reliable help for overcoming rough times except for the occasional kindness of strangers.

**Michael's personal** and family life has been complicated. "Me and my mom have lived a little bit everywhere," said Michael, who grew up with two brothers and an older sister. His parents divorced when he was young and his father immediately disappeared. His mother's struggles with stress-induced illnesses and other disorders have prevented her from being there for Michael. In fact, Michael and his sister have served as caregivers for her, as well as for his maternal grandmother. One year, his mother's health deteriorated so badly she suffered five strokes, and continues to rely on full-time care today. Michael's mother lives with his sister who serves as her guardian because of her severe health problems. His mother was on a ventilator and in a rehabilitation center when Michael was homeless this year.

Michael's experiences working through the welfare system for basic needs haven't easy. During a federal government shut-down one year ago, food assistance was delayed. This year, the Genesee County DHHS office declined food assistance on five occasions because of a question about a closed bank account. Someone had erroneously listed him as a recipient on their state-issue Bridge card which complicated matters for Michael. "I was scammed and had to close down the account," he said. Despite filing the necessary proof online, the denials kept rolling in. "One of my case workers, she gave me a list of contacts after I aged out at 21. None of them were working, though." Michael said it's really hard to establish a secure adult life after foster care without help navigating chaotic systems like these. He said he plans to bring up these and other bureaucratic entanglements when he participates in the first-ever Michigan Foster Youth Shadow Day on June 13, 2019. "Not every youth is ready to be on their own at 21," he said. "I feel the cut-off should be 25 as we have for the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI)." The MYOI partnership involves the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services to help improve outcomes for youths transitioning from foster care to adulthood. "By then you should have a (college) degree and some stable housing."

**Michael is working** at an internship at a mental health facility with the Genesee County Health System this summer, which gives him a sense of consistency. He also works in a minimum-wage clerical position in a college building off campus. Michael's developed a reliable way to reach out for help to get through his studies. "Education has always been my freedom and my outlet for everything I've been through, especially when I found teachers that keep me going," he said. "I had one teacher – an English teacher. I love to write. She talked me into writing about what happened to me to help me heal. Finding teachers who supported me helped me overcome challenges." When he started his new classes at Mott this year, he notified each of his professors that he was homeless and wouldn't be able to use a computer at the shelter. He asked for accommodations to finish his work. "Most teachers are very receptive," he said. Without transportation, Michael typically stays on campus until 9 p.m. when he can visit the food pantry after class and do his work.

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