

## Mentors prove a savior for foster children

22 comments by **John Faherty** - Jan. 31, 2010 12:00 AM  
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Nina White entered the Arizona foster-care system at age 12.

She bounced from group homes to foster homes to detention centers for six years.

She was never returned to her mother and was never adopted by a family.

On her 18th birthday, she left the system by aging out of it.

**Social workers**, youth advocates and state administrators agree that youths like Nina, who go directly from foster care into adulthood, are perfectly prepared to fail miserably.

They are less likely to have an education and more likely to be homeless or incarcerated.

But, experts agree, there is one simple way to save these young adults.

When Nina turned 18, her education was wanting. Her social skills were deficient.

She didn't drive, couldn't trust and wouldn't ask for help.

But Nina, now 20, might make it.

Today, she is a student with plans to become a nurse. She has a car and a home and chance for a future.

She is on her way because one person decided to care for her.

A mentor, she said, saved her.

### Prepared to fail

For each of the 10,112 children who enter the Arizona foster system each year, the ideal result is for them to leave it.

They may be returned to their families, placed with another relative or guardian, or adopted.

But some foster children - 723 in Arizona last year - leave the system another way. They remain foster children until they legally become adults. Most are jettisoned on the day they turn 18.

Their prospects are undeniably bad.

Among this group, one in five ends up

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homeless. One in four is incarcerated.

Only 58 percent graduate from [high school](#), compared with 87 percent for non-foster youths. Only 3 percent graduate from college, compared with 28 percent of the general population.

Those are the findings of a national study by the Pew Charitable Trusts from December 2007.

Foster children who age out are likely the ones who have suffered the most. On average, they enter the system the latest - meaning they most likely spent more time in a troubled home beforehand.

They stay in foster care the longest. In Arizona, those who age out do so after an average of nearly four years in the system, compared with 15.8 months for all foster children.

And they move the most, averaging 7.5 different homes or "placements" during their time in care. That is three times the average for all foster children.

Setting out as an adult can be difficult for even the most well-adjusted young person from a stable and loving home.

For foster children leaving the system at 18, it can be significantly harder. They already had been neglected or abused by their family. The state was never able to find the right place for them.

The result is predictable.

"Our prisons are filled with these kids," said Pete Hershberger, a former state representative and now executive director of the Arizona Center for the Study of Children and Families.

### From home to home

Nina remembers feeling relief when she first went into foster care.

"My mother quit being a mom," she said. "It felt like somebody came to my rescue. I was excited. And then I realized it might be worse."

She was not, she acknowledges now, an easy child. She resisted discipline and trusted nobody.

She remembers spending her first two years in group homes and treatment facilities.

Then three months in her first foster home. Two weeks in the next. She returned to a

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group home until she was 15. After that, another foster home for six months.

It ended badly. "I got my ass kicked," is how she remembers it. The police were called, and she was taken to the Durango Juvenile Detention Facility.

Then came a six-month stay at a drug-rehab center where she eventually found more trouble. She returned to Durango.

What she did not know was that this was the place where she would get her first lucky break.

### Someone who cares

Social workers, foster-care experts, academics and former foster youths almost universally agree that one thing can help a young adult get beyond years of a difficult childhood:

"A caring adult in their lives. That's it," said Gena Metroff.

Metroff said she aged out of foster care "a long time ago." Now, she is a therapist with Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest. "It took me a very long time to realize that was true, but it is."

Dave Sanders agrees. He is an executive vice president with Casey Family Programs, the nation's largest foundation entirely focused on foster care. "It seems clear from all the research that having one adult is a factor on those youth functioning as adults," he said. "When a person makes it, they invariably are able to point to somebody in their life who stayed with them."

Regeanna Mwansa knows the challenges of aging out of the system because she did it.

She went into foster care in Arizona when she was 16 because a relative, she said, abused her.

She also knows exactly how much good can come from just one good relationship.

When she turned 18, she was mature enough to see the value in staying connected to her last foster family, so she made the effort.

And it worked.

After enrolling at the [University of Arizona](#), it was her foster parents who called to check in on her. They were the ones she went home to on holiday breaks.

"They cared about me, and I cared about them," Mwansa said. "It's hard to overstate

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how important that was to me at that time."

On Mwansa's wedding day, the groom walked her mother and her foster mother down the aisle. Her foster mother made her veil.

### All alone

Desanne Gonsalves remembers seeing Nina during visitation hours at Durango.

Desanne, now 25, was there as a mentor through a program at Arizona State [University](#), where she was a student.

She was assigned to a young woman, but the two of them never really connected. Nina, however, captured her attention.

Maybe it was because Nina seemed so bright. Maybe it was because she had never caught one break or because she seemed so mad at the world but somehow remained hopeful.

But it was probably because she was so alone.

Desanne would see Nina all alone during visitation hours at Durango.

"There was never anybody there for her," Desanne said.

### Mentors needed

The state of Arizona knows how vulnerable young adults who age out of foster care are and how important a mentor can be.

But the Department of Economic Security is facing an economic crisis.

For the 2009 fiscal year, the state appropriated the department \$808 million from the general fund.

For the 2010 fiscal year, that number is \$546 million, according to the Joint Legislative Budget Committee.

That has meant significant reductions in foster care. Foster families have seen their monthly stipends cut. Clothing allowances have been reduced. School-supply funding has been cut.

And this year the funding for mentor programs is being eliminated.

When DES sent its budget proposal to the governor, the sense of defeat from the elimination of these services for the people who age out of foster care was clear.

"Youth aging out of foster care are already at

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greater risk for a number of negative outcomes, such as failure to complete their education, unemployment, homelessness and incarceration. Reducing supports for these youths will place them at an even greater disadvantage."

The program will continue because the mentors are all volunteers, but without funding to administer it, its future is imperiled.

The cuts come as the age-out population is growing. Five years ago, 531 youths aged out of the system. In the year ending Sept. 30, 2009, more than 700 did.

Janice Mickens, an administrator for the family and youth services division of DES, said matter-of-factly that these young people are "as prepared as we can make them."

Her first goal for children in the foster-care system is to get them back to their families when appropriate or adopted when possible.

For the 18-year-olds who aged out of the system last year, she said she wants to "find some permanent connection for them." "We've given them skills. We provide financial scholarships. What we need to find is some connection for them."

When children age out, they have the option of keeping an open case with the state. This means monthly check-ins with a caseworker, some financial assistance and a mentor.

But most of them walk away.

In the past three fiscal years, 1,857 people aged out of the system. Only 299 are attached to a mentor.

The rest are on their own.

"Seventy percent of them are just gone; they are in the wind," said Tonia Stott, an adjunct professor at Arizona State University who has been studying Arizona foster children for years.

Stott says these young adults already have a sense of abandonment.

"I hear people say they need to pull themselves up by their boot straps," Stott said. "These kids don't have boot straps. They don't have boots."

### Something to prove

Just before she turned 18 - when she would leave the foster-care system and be released from Durango - Nina called Desanne.

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She was smart enough to know she needed help, but she didn't know how to ask for it.

She invited Desanne into her life and then kept pushing her away.

She acted like she didn't want advice. She would seem annoyed when Desanne would show up at a scheduled meeting. It was as if Nina needed Desanne to prove she would stick around.

"You have to pay your dues," Desanne said. "These girls have been hurt their whole lives by the people they should be able to trust the most."

Over time, Nina began to let Desanne into her life. Then it was Nina's turn to prove herself.

Desanne insisted Nina get a job. Then she needed to go to school. Then she needed to choose a profession. Then she needed to get good grades. Then she needed to find a better apartment.

It was exactly what Nina needed.

"There was nobody there to say, 'I'm proud of you.' But there was also nobody there to say, 'Hey, that's not good enough,' "

Desanne said. "She never had anybody in her life she was afraid to disappoint. Now, she does."

Desanne was not pleased when Nina got a tattoo. She was not thrilled when Nina announced she was pregnant.

Nina now regrets the tattoo and has managed to remain a full-time student and a single mother for 7-month-old Zion.

After taking classes at Glendale [Community College](#), she is nearing the end of a program at Arizona College of Allied Health.

In July she will be finished with classes and her externship and will work as a medical assistant.

After that, she plans to return to school with hopes of eventually becoming a nurse.

As a full-time student out of foster care, she receives a subsidy from the state, just over \$700 a month.

"I honestly don't know where I would be without Desanne," Nina said. "Through my whole life, she is the only person who has been there for me. I am going to make it because of her."

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Desanne thinks Nina already has.

"She has come so far. She is a different person," Desanne said. "Just the fact that she is in school and has a plan and her life is good. You don't understand - she already has made it."

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