



Good Evening to you all, I would like to take this time to thank you all for taking the time out of your busy schedules to hear our stories. It is my hope that in sharing my experience, I can help contribute to the betterment of our foster care system; for the youth, foster care alumni and its workers on all levels.

My name is Ashley Williams and I am a former foster youth. I am a graduate of both Columbus State Community College and Kent State University. I have a job that I love and safe space to call home. However, years ago, I did not believe this was remotely possible. I was navigating life without help or guidance when I was placed in Kinship Care with my siblings.

There were five of us, me and my siblings living with relatives in a small home in Toledo, Ohio. We had not been told why we were there and why we were not able to see our parents. I surmised it was due to their unstable lifestyles but that was something I could not tell to my siblings. I was 14, how could I explain that to them? I would like to see these matters address to the youth; tell them why they are in foster care, explain to them what is going on.

We were good kids, but sometimes that had not been enough for my relatives. We were the 'annoying children' of their sister. We were made fun of, pitted against one another, asked to do things we should not have been allowed to. We had an overworked case worker who just could not keep up with our issues along with the many families in the same predicament. We had a new case worker after her. It was like starting over again. I would like to see resources for self-care for case workers and social workers. They cannot help us if they cannot help themselves.

I asked if we could find out what was going on with our parents to get answers and was angrily told to forget about them. I was too scared to speak up anymore, because it would risk me and siblings to be split up. Not many people could house five children together. In the years that followed, we got older and wondered what would become of us when eighteen years old meant you were out. I was told to save money to get a place at sixteen to prepare. I was perplexed on how that was going to get done when I was a part-time cashier at a grocery store. We all grow up and become adults. I would like to see foster care dive deep to provide all resources necessary for teens in care to become healthy, functioning adults.

Independent Living was established when I was eighteen and I scrambled to learn all I could to be a functioning adult. I had two stellar case workers who stuck by me and made sure I got the resources I needed to apply to college, books when I got accepted and how to manage bills. Independent Living was extremely crucial as I had to explore the world as a adult. I am one of the lucky ones. Other teens I knew did not have such resources and were left behind while others soared. I would like to see Independent Living available for all 88 counties in Ohio so no one is left behind.

I appreciate you all for listening. This is just but a snippet of my life journey. I hope it will encourage unbridled action to provide a sense of normalcy for our foster youth in Ohio and the nation. I believe if we all work together, it is indeed possible. Thank you.