

**My name is Jonathan Thomas.** I am 24 years old and a former foster youth. I spend my time advocating for foster care youth and abused children. I also spend a considerable amount of time trying to implement change within the child welfare system with other advocates, and fellow foster care alumni.

**I entered the system when I was 14 years of age.** My nine siblings and I had been removed from my biological father's custody due to neglect and abuse that was going on in the home. While undergoing this abuse, we leaned on one another. We were each other's support group. You can then imagine the stress that we each felt when we came into care and were separated into different homes.

**Because there were 10 of us entering foster care at the same time,** there was no available foster home large enough to house all of us together. They separated us into groups, and sent us into different homes. I was placed with my oldest brother, and my youngest brother.

**I was grateful to be initially placed with my eldest brother,** because he had always served as our leader, motivator and encourager. However, within 11 months of us entering care, his biological mother became involved. She was able to successfully remove him from care, and gain custody of him, and my other brother.

**This left me shattered.** Losing contact with my oldest brother left me feeling completely lost. Everyone loved my brother, and he was always a shadow that I could go after. He was the living example that encouraged me to make myself better. The trauma of having been removed from our biological home was beginning to set in as well.

**While my agency allowed me once a week visitation with my other siblings,** they too began to be placed with their biological mothers – at which point, sibling connections were no longer maintained.

**One week, I came to visitation and no one was there.** I felt completely and utterly alone. I lost all motivation, and sense of direction. Outside of school there was nothing consistent that I was a part of. No community center, no summer camps, no anything. I had even dropped out of the school band. My motivation left me, and every aspect of my life began to suffer from it.

**I believe that it is very important that each agency does everything it can** to maintain sibling relations in a child's family. I also believe it would be an awesome idea to have some kind of Big Brother program or Peer Mentorship group made up of current and former foster youth, and supported by caring professionals, that could help teach youth how to build positive relationships outside of their bio families.

*Thank you for taking the time to read over my testimony, and for understanding and caring that sibling connections matter,*

*Jonathan Thomas*