

“BUILDING OUR WORLD” CONFERENCE EXPOSES YOUTH TO REAL WORLD SITUATIONS

The academic halls of Bentley College, nestled in the mountains of Massachusetts, were the ideal setting for Casey Family Services to host its second agency-wide youth conference, which carried the theme “Youth Building Our World” and focused on the challenges today’s young adults face as they transition out of foster care and into independent living.

Nearly 100 Casey teens between the ages of 15 and 19 gathered for the two-day event. University of Oklahoma’s National Resource Center for Youth Services served as consultant, providing a program format, which included a “fictitious” city to give participants a glimpse of the costs and complexities of moving out on their own, as well as life skills exercises and workshops.

A youth steering committee consisting of 18 youth representing all Casey divisions was also extensively involved, handling everything from selecting the keynote speaker and developing workshop titles to creating storefront names and choosing menu items. During the event, committee members manned registration tables, served as workshop monitors and introduced speakers.

Casey Executive Director Raymond Torres opened the event with an encouraging speech to the foster youth. “There is no way to prepare completely for the adventures you’ll encounter in the future, but the intent of this conference is to be able to offer some opportunities to look at what happens in the real world and ways of addressing them.”

A panel of Casey alumni then shared their experiences, insights and suggestions. “As alumni we have seen difficult times, but most importantly we have overcome them,” said Tammy, panel moderator.

Lori, a young single mother, who has been with Casey since the age of 9, talked about her struggles raising a child, going to college part time and holding a part-time job.

Meanwhile, Derek, who also was placed in a Casey foster home at the age of 9, today attends college, speaks two languages and is learning a third. “Stay focused,” he advised the youth, “and always be proud of where you’re from and who you are.”

Later in the day, youth began their journey through “Success City,” a simulated downtown complete with storefront stations that represented utility companies with creative names like *Plug It In*, to insurance agencies like *Rest Easy Insurance*, to financial institutions such as *Casey Family Savings* and *Cash & Carry*. The city also included rental centers, childcare providers, and real estate agents, as well as department stores.

Each participant was provided information on their job, salary and savings and given a passport to be used for identification when visiting different businesses. Youth then had to visit either *Mug Shots* or *Picture This* to obtain a Polaroid photo of themselves, which was affixed to the passport. Participants competed for the highest number of stamps, collected from “proprietors” at each storefront.

Success City challenged the youth in making decisions about how they might live on

their own, with questions arising such as: “Should I obtain insurance before renting an apartment?” “How do I obtain a checking account?” “Can I afford cable television along with the electric and water bills?” Together, roommates learned how to find an affordable apartment, budget their money, negotiate with each other and communicate with adults in the community. Wherever possible, actual employees from local businesses served as proprietors, teaching the teens, while also learning about the needs of foster youth.

Sixteen-year-old Dan, from Hartford, Connecticut, who was recently adopted by his foster parents, found he has a new appreciation for what they go through every day. “I give credit to my parents because it’s a lot harder than people think ... like me and my roommate, even our combined income wasn’t enough to pay for an apartment.”

The conference was an eye-opening experience for Kelly, a 17-year-old youth from Hartford. “I’m learning that life is hard, really hard, especially if you’re not making much money.”

The afternoon event was filled with lighter moments, as well. “Why are we going to get cable?” one roommate asked the other. “We don’t have water or electricity yet.”

At *Cozy Casas* a youth asked a potential landlord if he could apply for an apartment if he didn’t have a checking account yet. At *Rest Easy Insurance*, two youth learned they had to buy separate rental insurance policies, since they were not married and had different last names. Meanwhile, two female roommates discovered that water and electricity were included in their rent after they had already signed up and paid for both. With receipts in hand, they returned to the utility company requesting a full refund.

“They’re taking this so seriously,” laughed Donna Reulbach, a Casey consultant. “They really want that refund.”

Meanwhile, a crowd of a dozen youth waited patiently at *Cash Connection*, where bank representatives, including Anna Williams, Baltimore division director, guided them in setting up checking and savings accounts and with balancing a checkbook.

In addition to learning life skills and meeting new friends, the conference provided some youth with time to themselves. Nikita, a 20-year-old single mother, said, “I feel like a kid again. I can be myself.”

The evening closed on a lively note with Efraim Silva and Ginga Brasileira Dance Company performing and recruiting youth to the stage to practice Capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art dance. The group also performed Maculele, a dance involving the use of sticks.

A talent show followed with several youth reading poems they had written, performing dances, and singing. Former foster youth George Duval served as motivational speaker and comedian during breaks.

The second day provided youth the opportunity to attend workshops, including “Don’t Believe the Hype, Success is in Your Hands,” which taught youth different ways to build their self-esteem, along with how to make good decisions, how to define their values and identify simple ways to take responsibility and increase their earning potential by increasing their value. In “Career Choices,” youth had the

opportunity to identify a career they'd like to pursue, understand its benefits and educational requirements, and figure out how to get started toward their goal and overcome potential barriers.

Youth were able to share their personal experiences in foster care and receive feedback from other foster youth as well as Casey alumni during the workshop "Telling Your Story."

"To the social workers at Casey you're not just a case, you're a person ... they don't judge you, they just try to help you out," said one youth from Vermont.

"I refuse to go on social services," said another youth. "I have a lot of dreams ...it's just going to take me a longer time to get there. A lot of my friends don't see my visions, they don't understand." After describing the young single mother's struggles to pay for everyday necessities like groceries and diapers, another foster youth tried to lighten the mood and asked, "You were eating Spam?" Responding with a tissue in hand and wiping away tears, the mother laughed and said, "No, it was worse than that."

A 17-year-old youth described what Casey meant to him. "When my grandmother died, my life just went downhill," he said, his head hanging low, his eyes on his sneakers. "I started drinking, getting into trouble. ... Casey is like my father. I never had a father. Casey has been with me every step of the way and I know that if Casey believes in me ... then I can go anywhere in this world." He paused and added, "I want to be the second person in my family to go to college."

The conference wrapped up with an impassioned speech by the keynote speaker, Shane Salter, a former foster child, who today is Chief of Staff in the Executive Office of the Deputy Mayor in Washington, D.C. After sharing his journey living in multiple foster homes and residential facilities, separated from his younger brother, Salter talked about the importance of acknowledging one's pain but also "turning that pain into triumph."

After all, he said, his life was the perfect example. "Who would have ever expected that this abused, abandoned, repeatedly rejected child would end up being a chief of staff in the office of the Mayor of D.C.?"

His life changed, he said, when he realized he needed to make the effort. At 16 years old and living in yet another foster home, he decided that he had only two years left to turn around his life before he'd be living independently. For the remaining two years of high school he studied hard, he said, and graduated as valedictorian. He went on to college, joined the Navy, later married and today is the father of seven children, four of whom he adopted out of foster care.

Salter ended his speech to a tearful crowd of youth, who seemed to look more empowered with every word he spoke. "There's no telling what you're going to be able to contribute ... I have no doubt that anyone of you could be the next president of the United States or that one of you might find the cure for AIDS...There's no telling the greatness you will achieve...hold onto hope and know that within you lies the power to rise above all you've been through."

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