

“Teens Are the Future” Scores a Home Run

Nearly 100 Casey teens attended the first Casey Family Services Youth conference last fall in Waterville Valley, New Hampshire. The event, “Teens Are the Future,” was presented as part of Casey’s 25th anniversary celebration. The conference drew raves from youth and adults alike and precipitated a commitment from Executive Director Raymond Torres to make the event a standard feature.

“We’re not yet sure how often we will present the conference in the future,” Mr. Torres commented. “It’s a wonderful event, and I am thinking that the Foster Parent Conference, which we offer bi-annually, would be a good model.”...

“This is an important event for several reasons,” Torres told the teens in his welcoming remarks. “It provides Casey Family Services a wonderful opportunity to meet with all of you, to hear from you, and to share with you. More importantly, it provides a chance for all of you to meet one another, to share your thoughts and experiences, and to grow together.”

“I have spoken with several of you and have been especially moved by listening to the aspirations you have expressed,” Torres continued. “You have told me that you are hoping to improve your skills in job seeking. You have said that you want to be ready for college. And you have told me that you want to have healthy relationships in your lives. “Those are very worthy goals,” he stated, “and we hope in turn to be able to help you meet them.”

Torres recognized the members of the Youth Steering Committee, presenting each with an award. “A special thanks goes to all the members of our youth steering committee for their many hours of planning,” he said. “Each of you has shown a level of commitment and leadership that makes us very proud.” Committee members were Takia W. of Baltimore; Tonnisha L. of Bridgeport, Connecticut; Shainetta J. and Michael R. of Hartford, Connecticut; Monica W. of Maine; Laura A. of Massachusetts; Courtney F. and Cindy S. of New Hampshire; Desmond P. of Rhode Island; and Jason M. of Vermont.

For many of the foster youth who attended, the conference marked the first such event they had ever attended, and for some, the first weekend they had spent away from their foster homes. Ranging in age from 15 to 19, the youth also included several young people from the Casey Baltimore Division.

Some of the comments from youth attending included the following:

“It started to snow when I got to Waterville Valley. It was awesome. I went to the ‘Tell Your Story’ Workshop. We all told our stories. We laughed. We cried. It was awesome.”

“I met many new people this weekend. I enjoyed participating and interacting with everyone. The CityKids woke everyone up to reality with their Interpretation of breaking into someone’s personal space. I really found this conference fun and informal.”

“I really enjoyed how – when I was deeply touched by the panel and cried – many people I didn’t know showed that they cared.”

And from an adult:

“I have loved the energy that the teens and young adults from seven different states brought to this conference. When I think of this weekend, I will remember the faces of the teens and how they grew more comfortable walking up to each other and introducing themselves, spontaneously breaking into dance, and getting up to perform and speak on stage. I hope that something that the young people take from this weekend is the knowledge that their voices are full of power!”

Designed by the youth, the conference offered a wide range of workshops, including “How to Get What You Want, Most of the Time,” “Is College Ready for Me?” “Sexual Responsibility: What Does That Mean to You?” “Don’t Break the Piggy Bank,” “You’re Hired: The Before and After of Finding A Job,” and “The Song I’m Singing: A Journal Workshop.” Also offered were sessions in beadery, painting, improvisational acting, drumming, and the martial arts. Hearing from foster youth who had successfully made the transition out of care into independent living was a highlight for participants of all ages.

The youth were entertained by CityKids, a multicultural youth repertory company that is part of an organization whose mission is to engage and develop young people to positively impact the world, and by Comedy Sportz, an improvisational comedy troupe. Both groups also presented workshops. Guest speakers included Patrick McCarthy of the Annie E. Casey Foundation; Alfred Perez, a research analyst for Westat, a research corporation in Rockville, Maryland; and Gary Zerola, an attorney from Massachusetts and foster care advocate.

Perez spent 11 years in foster homes and children’s shelters before graduating from high school and earning both a bachelor’s degree from San Jose State University in California and a master’s in Social Work from the University of Michigan. Zerola, a former foster child, earned dual degrees in law and public administration from Suffolk University, an accomplishment he credits to the encouragement and support of his foster parents (now Casey foster parents) Bob and Millie Bowes.

In his keynote remarks, Zerola offered advice to foster youth and adults alike:

- Prepare,
- Ask for help, and
- Do the right thing.

He followed with his 21-point formula for building character.

- Marry the right person.
- Work at something you enjoy that is worthy of your time and talent.
- Give people more than they expect and do so cheerfully.
- Be the most positive and enthusiastic person you know.
- Be forgiving of yourself and others.
- When you make those (inevitable) mistakes acknowledge them, apologize for them if you have to, and move on.
- Learn from people older than you. They too have made mistakes and you can learn from their mistakes.
- Be generous.
- Have a grateful heart.
- Have persistence.
- Discipline yourself to save money even on the most modest salary.
- Treat everyone in the world that you meet like you want to be treated.
- Commit yourself to constant improvement.
- It's going to be easy for people to label you, a foster child, as a statistic or a problem child or give you a reason why you didn't succeed or give you an excuse for why it was okay to fail. Failing is not trying and not succeeding; it's trying and not succeeding AND not trying again.
- Commit yourself to quality.
- Understand that happiness is not based on possessions, power or prestige, but on relationships that you have with other people that you respect.
- Be loyal, to yourself first and foremost, and to the people you love.
- Be honest.
- Be a self-starter.
- Be decisive even if it means making those wrong decisions sometimes.
- Stop blaming others. Take responsibility for every area of your life because you can only blame others for how miserable you think your life is for so long – until you find out that every decision you make in your life determines your future. Who cares that you were in foster care? You know what I say to that: Nothing is going to make you slow down and nothing will make you quit.
- Don't do anything that wouldn't make those whom you respect very proud.
- Take good care of those who love you and whom you love.

Casey Family Services
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At the conference close, Torres thanked Casey Family Services staff members who attended the conference. "I'm also very grateful to former Massachusetts Director Donna Reulbach, and to all of the staff members who have been part of the conference steering committee," he said. Committee members were Jessica Perrotti, Baltimore; Natisha Vidal, Bridgeport; Tracey Bombaci, Hartford; Martha Virgin, Maine; Anita Marshall, Massachusetts; Regina Mattrella, New Hampshire; Grace Dole, Rhode Island; Cynthia Collea, Vermont; and David Johnston, Patrick Lyttle, Lee Mullane and Linda H. Scott of Administration.