

TRANSFORMATIONS

DCJ's DYOI Program Helps Transform A Withdrawn Foster Care Teen Into A Vibrant and Prospering Young Adult

Each year, approximately 80 youth age out of the foster care system in Delaware. The hardships they face often make their successful transition to an independent, productive life very difficult. Homelessness, lack of education and unemployment are often the reality for these young adults. Recognizing their challenges, the Delaware Center for Justice's (DCJ) Delaware Youth Opportunities Initiative (DYOI) brings together the people, systems and resources necessary to assist young people who leave the state's foster care system.

These efforts culminated last year on September 19, 2013, when Governor Jack Markell, surrounded by current and former foster care youth, signed House Bill 163 ("Ready By 21") to enhance services and supports that will better prepare young people who have experienced foster care as they transition into adulthood. More than 25 volunteers (including both professionals working in child welfare as well as concerned citizens) worked with youth to draft the legislation.

Maggie, a former foster care youth who "aged out" of the system at 18, was one of the youth who helped draft the Ready By 21 Bill, and was also the featured speaker at the bill signing last year.

Maggie attributes her public speaking skills to her involvement in DYOI. "I met (DYOI Program Coordinator) Julie Miller and connected with her as a person and as a foster youth when I was 17 years old. There were things in the system I wanted to improve, so I became a DYOI Youth Advocate" Maggie said, explaining how she got involved with the program.

Julie, reflecting upon Maggie's growth in the program, said "Initially, Maggie was closed off, but I've seen her transform. Maggie was noticed immediately for being articulate. And everyone listened to her. She sees the good in people. She understands boundaries and priorities. She does well balancing school, her job and youth advocacy work. All the kids love her."

Created in 2001, one of DYOI's partners, the Youth Advisory Council (YAC), helps current and former foster youth, ages 14 and older, take decision-making roles and become active participants in directing their own futures. In addition, through their involvement in YAC, youth gain self-advocacy skills that will help them navigate the adult world.

YAC provides a safe and respectful forum for youth to share ideas, opinions, and concerns, and to develop leadership skills by planning and facilitating activities. No voice goes unheard, and a new foster care policy, "nothing about us without us," emphasizes the need for foster care youth to be involved in the system that determines policies and laws that specifically affect them.

At age 20, Maggie became a YAC Instructional Advocate. As a result, she says she got support for her growth, and further developed her skills and confidence. Having the opportunity at the age of 20 to speak at the Ready By 21 bill signing was "breathtaking and magical," Maggie gushed. "Representing 'my kids' was the best moment of my life!"



Maggie, DCJ's DYOI Family Court Mural Project Coordinator, and a former foster care youth, helps paint the mural, which will be permanently displayed on the second floor of the New Castle County Courthouse.

"I found my purpose—to help give foster youth the equality everybody else asks for," Maggie shared, "to show them someone their age is saying, 'I see you and you're important. Your voice matters. Your words are important.'"

Maggie sees herself and the sacrifices she's made, having gone through a system she believes needed improvement and which was previously fixed by trial and error, as a bridge to help guide others in the system behind her to a better place.

Maggie entered the Delaware foster care system when she was 15. She was initially placed in a group shelter (designed specifically for short-term housing) for seven months before "bouncing around" in the system until age 18.

Maggie lost an older sister to a drunk driver, and her younger sister was adopted through a closed adoption. Maggie has had little to no interaction with her younger sister because of the adoption.

Looking back on her life, Maggie often shares her favorite quote by Helen Keller:

"Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it."

Many kids in foster care are at risk of dropping out of school, but despite all her personal trauma and suffering, Maggie never gave up, and through her own drive and determination, with support from adults in her life, she graduated high school with a 4.0 grade point average and was voted "senior of the year." Maggie now attends Delaware State University and is set to graduate in the spring.

This summer, Maggie worked part-time at DCJ as a Project Coordinator for the DYOI Family Court Mural project. Maggie assisted in coordinating all aspects of the project.

Current and former foster youth painted the mural to brighten the spaces most commonly seen by children and youth who come to the court for various proceedings. The mural was painted and artistically guided by youth who are currently in or have formerly experienced foster care, and will serve to inspire hope and encourage those youth involved in Family Court. The large mural was unveiled at the New Castle County Courthouse on September 23, 2014.

A further testament to her good judgment, as much as Maggie would have liked to have seen all of her hard work come to fruition at the unveiling, she opted not to attend the event so she could take a mid-term test that evening, and while she was greatly missed, another youth advocate delivered Maggie's poignant message of hope and inspiration.

Maggie, now 22, is doing well. She is majoring in criminal justice with a minor in forensic biology, and works part-time as an intern at the Delaware Criminal Justice Council (CJC). She also continues to be a YAC Instructional Advocate and will soon be traveling all over the United States to help influence national foster care policy as a Jim Casey Young Fellow.

"I would like to work within the child justice system, working with foster kids, to help not just those in the system now, but also those who will come in the future, to further improve policies and laws for all foster care kids," Maggie said. "My message to those kids is to never give up on you! We are one big family, and we know how to love!"

DYOI is a program of DCJ, which works in cooperation with the Delaware Department of Services For Children, Youth and Their Families (DSCYF) and with support and generous technical assistance from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

DCJ Provides Hope and Support To Help A Former Probationer Set and Reach His Goals To Succeed



Andre, a former probationer, publicly praised his case manager, Jessica Alicea, at the DCJ Annual Meeting Fundraiser in June.

"I love every opportunity that my employer has given me. It has been a long journey for me, and I am pleased to share my story," said Andre. "Before I was working and up for a promotion, I had a bit of trouble in my life, and was going down the wrong path. I was drinking excessively, partying and doing things that were just not me. I did some things I would have never imagined doing, all because I never wanted the party to stop. This led me to get into trouble, which resulted in a criminal record, which I regret having to this day," he said, recounting his experience with the justice system in July 2010.

"Well, this little wakeup call made me realize that I had ruined my life and getting it back was going to be a task," he continued. "To my dismay, no one was hiring people with convictions, even if it was only a misdemeanor. It dawned on me that this was really going to be hard, but I needed to keep going. I was always taught that God would never put more on you than you can bear, and then low and behold there she was, this angel sent from above to help me, more than I could have ever imagined."

"Andre had a theft charge, but never did any actual level five (prison) time. He was sentenced to probation for his charge, and he was referred to the Community Reentry Services Program (CRSP) through his probation officer at Cherry Lane via the referral process," DCJ CRSP Program Coordinator Jessica Alicea explained, indicating how Andre came to participate in DCJ's reentry program.

"I remember it was a Tuesday, the first time I met Jessica, and even though I was nervous and didn't talk much, she was still very polite, helpful, and forthcoming. Well, after she and I finally cracked the ice, she helped me more than anyone throughout my journey for employment," said Andre.

"My initial impression of Andre was that he was a young man with lots of potential, but no hope. He was at his wits end, and had no support or guidance," Jessica said.

"Not only did she help me with my job search, but she encouraged me to be a better person," said Andre. "She helped me and encouraged me to go back to school to get my diploma – and in six months I had earned it!"

"I was able to assist Andre by providing him with the support he needed to set and achieve his goals," said Jessica. "As his case manager, I assisted him with housing, utility assistance, interview attire, free haircuts, and transportation to various appointments. I also got him connected and enrolled with the Culinary School at the Food Bank of Delaware, where he graduated and shortly after secured full-time employment."

The Culinary School at the Food Bank of Delaware in Newark, a Delaware Department of Education certified trade school, provides valuable job training to the unemployed and underemployed. The School's mission is to teach students skills that are highly desirable to employers in the food industry and which have the potential to lead to jobs that provide security and economic stability.

DCJ continues to support its former client, as he works with Jessica to navigate the APEX program, through the Delaware Department of Labor's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, to receive an expungement (which seals a criminal record) or pardon, so that he can pursue future promotions.

"My relationship with Andre has continued and I remained in contact with him to help support and guide him through various goals after he completed probation. We are currently working on getting him a pardon through the APEX program. He recently called to update me on his new residence and employment," Jessica said.

"To this day, I really do thank Jessica and DCJ for all they have done for me. I never knew that people who really want to help you still exist, but they do. My journey is still not over. I really have to thank my new friends at DCJ for helping me to continue my journey. With their help, I can finally say that I am happy, and I can't wait to give back half of what DCJ has given me," he said.

DCJ Offers Peace of Mind For A Mature Adult Crime Victim

"It is good to know there is someone to help protect you. I feel very safe and secure now that no one is harassing me!"

Now in her mid-60's, Yolanda had had a difficult life. She'd been disappointed by many failed relationships and had at one point due to her circumstances lost custody of her children. Before DCJ became involved in her life, Yolanda had not had a home of her own for over four years, and had experienced a series of very precarious living situations while residing with other unstable adults from whom she rented or sublet space and by whom she was victimized.

In one instance, the person Yolanda was renting from left the living situation, making off with her personal property. In another, Yolanda was paying rent to live in a trailer with an acquaintance, only to be evicted after finding the acquaintance had used the money Yolanda had given her for professional photographs rather than paying their rent.

In her last living situation, the man she was renting a room from became romantically interested in her, and asked for her to marry him. Unfortunately, the interest was not mutual, and she began to investigate other living options. During this time, she had major surgery on her back and neck, and sometime during her two-month recovery period, the man became aware that she was looking to move out of his home. He angrily confronted Yolanda about her plans and an argument ensued. As the argument became heated, he became enraged and pushed her savagely into a china closet, breaking the glass in the heavy wooden cabinet and ripping open Yolanda's stitches. Yolanda immediately called the police. She made them aware that her assault had not been a domestic situation, but a violent crime perpetrated against a tenant by her landlord.



She was soon referred to DCJ, who provided immediate assistance. The direct help she received from DCJ, along with referrals to other organizations and agencies who were able to further assist her during her time of crisis, helped Yolanda to understand her rights and navigate the court system, allowed her to get the professional medical and mental health services she required, and assisted her in finding an appropriate, low-income, subsidized, senior residential living arrangement, where Yolanda can now feel secure and safe from her assailant.

Thanks to Horizon House, the Delaware Attorney General's office, and DCJ staff, family and friends, Yolanda now has her very own private apartment, complete with furnishings and housewares, where she can enjoy her pets (a dog, a cat, and two birds), her television programs and her hobbies of sewing and cross stitching. She is worry-free, childlike and joyous about her newly found peace of mind.

When asked about DCJ and her Adult Victim Services (AVS) case managers, Yolanda said, "It is good to know there is someone to help protect you. I feel very safe and secure now that no one is harassing me!"

DCJ's AVS Program offers services for crime victims, both male and female, 50 years of age and older, who have experienced any type of crime. Victims should call 911 or the police department directly to report a crime, however, if an older adult victim is for any reason uncomfortable reaching out to the police on their own, that person can call DCJ for assistance and support.

Some of the types of crimes reported by DCJ's mature adult victims have included offenses such as theft, robbery, offensive touching, assault, financial exploitation and destruction of property. The AVS Program also attends to the needs of victims who have experienced domestic violence and/or sexual abuse.

Whether the victim contacts DCJ directly or he/she is referred by the police department or through other referral sources, a DCJ case manager will provide assistance. Services can include home visits, accompanying a victim to a doctor's office, medical facility, court, law office, etc.; mental health counseling and guidance; referrals to other social services and/or established senior support systems; assistance in understanding and filing for the Victims Compensation Assistance Program; as well as long-term follow up that may include nutritional, medical, counseling and transportation support. Clients who use DCJ services do so voluntarily. All clients are treated with the utmost dignity and respect. There is no charge to the client for these services, and all support is provided with complete confidentiality.

The Adult Victim Services (AVS) Program is administered by DCJ and funded through the Delaware Criminal Justice Council by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Victims of Crime. The program is also funded through a state grant-in-aid and United Way support.