



Florida Youth SHINE Newsletter

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Florida Youth SHINE (Striving High for Independence and Empowerment) is a youth run, peer driven organization working hard to change the culture of Florida's foster care system. With membership open to 13-26 year olds across the state, Florida Youth SHINE is made up of the best youth advocates across the state who identify the challenges and successes and educate the public to create a better child welfare system.

Our Mission as advocates for the youth in Florida is to Empower, Improve, Educate, and Support the growth of tomorrow's leaders through the combined knowledge and experience of today's youth and supporters. We thank **Florida's Children First** for not only funding and supporting our program, but supporting the growth and development of all our members as well.



From the Chair

The 2010 Dependency Summit was a huge success for Florida Youth SHINE with over 15 young adults from across the state in attendance. The Summit's theme this year was "Supporting Families to Nurture Children" and sticking with this theme FYS had the opportunity to meet a variety of stake holders involved in the child welfare system. We spent time educating and speaking with them about the a few of the issues we feel are important for youth in and aging out of care – sibling visits, normalcy, and quality life skills training were some of our lead topics. FYS also had the pleasure of meeting with Secretary Sheldon and shared with him some of our thoughts on ways to improve the services offered to all youth in care. We also kept busy serving as key presenters on two panels during the Summit. Several FYS members had the opportunity to discuss the trauma of being removed and were honored to see the roomed filled during both workshop sessions with people waiting to hear what we had to say. We also had the unique opportunity to present this workshop with a therapeutic foster parent, a case manager supervisor, and a child protective investigator who shared their perspective of how the trauma of removing a child from their home affected them too. In addition, three Florida Youth SHINE members spoke with court employees about the important of youth in court. While their stories varied (from being present in court to not even knowing they had entered into the dependency system), their message was the same...being present in court is a must at any age.

With all that hard work, we made sure to have a lot of fun at the Dependency Summit too. We were so excited to be sharing the Summit with so many fresh, new faces to Florida Youth SHINE. With our program rapidly expanding, we traveled with 6 new members and met quite a few youth advisory board members while we were there too. We were so excited to share FYS with everyone in the community, that we blew them away at the Build a Bike reception where the winning time included a FYS member who did a toe touch in long pants and flip flops. You should check out our pictures on Facebook!

As the chair of Florida Youth SHINE, I realize we have a lot of work ahead of us but am so excited about the future of FYS and all that we have to offer. I would like give a warm welcome to our new chapters that have joined our organization. Welcome to Hillsborough Kid's Youth Empowerment Board (Tampa), Made by Us (Tallahassee), and FYS Manasota (Sarasota, DeSoto, and Manatee Counties). It is so nice to have you apart of our family and we are looking forward to working with you.

And don't forget, stay up to date on everything Florida Youth SHINE on our new website: www.floridayouthshine.org

Derrick Riggins, Tampa

New Chapters!!

Florida Youth SHINE is proud to announce new chapters in **Tampa, Tallahassee, and Sarasota/Manatee/DeSoto Counties!**

If you are interested in having a chapter in your area, contact Lindsay Baach - (954) 857-9597 or Justin Taylor - (305) 528-1285

Attend a Meeting...

West Palm

2nd Saturday of the month
Eckerd Community Alternatives @ Port Center
palmbeach@floridayouthshine.org

Tampa

3rd Wednesday of the month
DCF Regional Office
tampa@floridayouthshine.org

Tallahassee

3rd Saturday of the month
Kool Beanz Cafe
tallahassee@floridayouthshine.org

Jacksonville

1st Monday of the month
Touchstone Village
jacksonville@floridayouthshine.org

Broward

1st Monday of the month
FLITE Center
broward@floridayouthshine.org

Miami

CHARLEE Program Building
miami@floridayouthshine.org

Manasota (Sarasota, Manatee, DeSoto)
Kalish House
manasota@floridayouthshine.org

"Daddy"

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH AMERICAN COUNCIL ON ADOPTABLE CHILDREN



My name is Jesse Wilson. I am 22 years old and spent 10 years in the Florida foster care system before being adopted as a teenager.

Recently I learned that I am a dad-to-be. When my girlfriend shared the news, my mind turned to dreams of the future, but the dreams were quickly clouded over by nightmares from the past. When I slept, an old recurring nightmare came back—the one where I am just like my father: a cruel, clueless individual. Am I destined to be like him? Eighteen years seems like a long time to take care of someone other than me. Add the fear of turning out like my parents, and being a father seems just about impossible.

My birth parents weren't great people. I believe they loved my three younger brothers and me, but they never put us children first or did what it took to keep us safe and together as a family. I lived with my birth family until age six when the police found me in my grandmother's closet with a sock stuffed in my mouth to keep me quiet. My brothers were already in care by then. While we were in foster care, our birth parents rarely showed up for visits and I remember being confused. Foster care itself was horrible. Moving from family to family, I could never be a regular kid—a kid who goes out to movies with his friends or attends his friends' birthday parties. Kids don't know how cruel they are when they ask you questions about your life and tease you for not being able to do what they take for granted. Missing a normal childhood still affects me now. It's tough running into old classmates who don't remember me at all, or just remember me as the odd kid who couldn't participate in any extracurricular activities. Being forced to test out different adoptive placements was difficult too. My brothers and I were absolutely certain that we wanted to be placed together with the foster family we knew the best. Workers would try to separate us, and we didn't much like that. I even recall jumping out of a car on an interstate exit ramp because I didn't like the family who wanted to adopt me. In time, when I was 13, three of us ended up just where we wanted to be—with the Wilson family. Unfortunately, my youngest brother was placed in another family and has faced more challenges growing up. In my life, however, the combination of bad and good experiences has helped mold me into the stronger and smarter person I am today.

In school earlier this year my class completed a risk-taking survey. I ranked near the top of the chart. From the results I concluded that I have been through so much in life that nothing really scares me. This lack of fear has probably helped me to achieve at a much higher level than many other youth in my position. From where I stand, I see nothing ahead that I cannot accomplish. So far I have survived a hard start in life and 10 years of foster care, joined a caring and supportive adoptive family, published a book of poetry (*The Storm Rolling In*), and started college. I am also a member of Florida Youth SHINE, a program of Florida's Children First that brings together former foster youth to help advocate for improvements in the state's child welfare system.

In spite of nightmares and misgivings, I am truly confident that I can be a good father. My girlfriend is an awesome person and in a much better place than my birth mom was when I was born. She is both strong and loving—two very important characteristics—and will be a wonderful mother. I also have a lot of support. About 10 people in my life claim me as their son—from my adoptive parents, to my best friend's parents, to people who have been there for me and with whom I have celebrated my successes. I do not intend to disappoint them, and know that they will be there to guide me. It helps that my parents are really looking forward to having a granddaughter. They have 11 sons, the last three of whom were my brothers and I. Their first eight sons have mostly provided grandsons; so a little girl will be a most welcome addition. Mom and Dad have always enjoyed being parents, but they are ecstatic about being Grandma and Grandpa, and have already vowed to help in any way they can. With our baby on the way, everyone keeps telling me what I should do or what it is going to be like to have a child. That's all great and nice of them, but I want to be unique. My approach shall be different. I intend to accomplish my dreams and help my child, my blood, realize her dreams as well.

Below is an excerpt from a book about my life that I am composing: *The black of day chases the white of night away as it seeps through the door where he awakens in the same dusty closet, on the same ripped carpet he laid his head to rest last night. Breakfast quickly crawls out of a corner in the closet and extinguishes the sleepiness from his face. Today's meal is a big one. Crushing the creature hurts his heart, but he removes the insect from his foot and propels it into his mouth. The crunchiness fights away sounds of drunken chattering. Suddenly, a knock interrupts his thoughts.* Yes, it was a horrible thing for a four year-old to experience, and something I would never wish on any other child. I am resolved that my daughter will have a very different experience than my brothers and I had. I dream that when my daughter writes her story, it will start something like this: *I awoke this morning to a knock on my door as my daddy walked in with a big smile on his face. He planted a gentle kiss on my forehead and we shared a bowl of cereal. Today is Saturday, which means we are going to go play at the park. I have the best daddy ever! Parenthood. Here I come.*

Jesse Wilson, Jacksonville



Member of the Month

Darlene Achille, Orlando

Darlene has always looked out for the welfare of her siblings. Most significantly, at the age of 20, Darlene stepped up to care for her sister, a young woman with developmental disabilities who was at risk of losing her baby (Darlene's niece) to foster care. Even though Darlene had just aged out herself she made the extraordinary effort to work and go to school to ensure her family could stay together. While Darlene attended Edison College, her sister worried about losing her baby to a foster mother who was caring for her little girl.

Barely an adult herself at 20, Darlene stepped in and became the legal caretaker of her sister and her young niece. At one point, she was working three jobs and occasionally took the little girl to class with her. Despite all odds, Darlene received her associates degree from Edison College and her bachelor's from Florida Gulf Coast University. She is currently working as an athletic trainer for a high school outside of Orlando and continues to care for her sister and niece. Darlene is an exceptional role model and we are more than proud to have her as a part of the Youth SHINE family.