



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.

We Spoke, He Listened, I Believe

On the 7th of August, several members of the Broward chapter of Florida Youth SHINE (FYS) sat with Secretary Sheldon (the guy in charge of the Department of Children and Families) to discuss changes to the rules that govern the Road to Independence program. As we reviewed the potential changes prior to the meeting we came across a few things that concerned us, including: new rules for how often GED students should take the test each year, how income would be calculated, how often RTI could be reinstated, and how our attendance in school would be measured. At the meeting Secretary Sheldon listened closely to our concerns and asked us what we thought was fair. Understanding that something needed to change, he knew how important it was to get input from youth currently struggling to maintain their RTI stipend and those who had recently turned 23.

When I entered the system seven years ago I never felt like any one cared about what I had to say. When I left the meeting I was on cloud nine knowing my voice finally mattered. Someone actually cared about what I had to say. This is where the Florida Youth SHINE came in. Being a member of FYS gave me the opportunity to stand up and speak my concerns as that aged out youth who is struggling to obtain her G.E.D. while balancing my time and finances. Next time (because there will be a next time), I want you there with me.

Florida Youth SHINE was created in 2005. The idea came from a group of adults who knew that the youth in foster care needed an outlet for their unheard voice. We now have four active chapters throughout the state: Miami/Dade (where it all began), Broward, Palm Beach, and Northeast Florida (Jacksonville). From 2005 to now FYS has tackled a lot of our issues. Most recently we actively advocated to prevent our RTI stipend from being cut from \$1,256 to \$675. Two of our chapter members here in Broward went to Tallahassee to meet with our legislature to speak on this issue. In the end, the letters that RTI recipients wrote and FYS's presence at the state capital ensured that our stipend remained the same.

There are moments every day where FYS has the opportunity to stand up and speak out. Florida Youth SHINE is open to youth ages of 13-26 who were ever in foster care. We meet at the FLITE Center the first Monday of every month from 4-5:30pm (unless it is a holiday). We are aware that our lives are busy, so if you cannot attend a meeting keep up with us and share your concerns by visiting us at www.floridayouthshine.org, by becoming a fan on Facebook, or following us on Twitter (FLYouthSHINE). Because if you don't care for yourself who else will? As FYS Broward founding member, Mez Pierre, says, even if we can't change what happened to us "at least we can go to sleep knowing there is hope for tomorrow." So join us and let's work together to make our system better.

Tamarra Lestage, *Broward*

Upcoming Event...

DCF Dependency Summit August 24th - 26th!

Attend a Meeting...

Jacksonville

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

Broward

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

Miami

miami@floridayouthshine.org

West Palm

2nd Saturday of the month
palmbeach@floridayouthshine.org

Meet our Chair



Derrick Riggins

As a child, Derrick Riggins rarely had a regular place to call home - bouncing around between his parents and various family members, stability wasn't a luxury he was afforded. It wasn't until he entered foster care at age 12 that he began to find his place. After several placements, Derrick found a loving home to stay in as he finished high school. With his foster parents love, support, and guidance Derrick has become an incredible success story. He is a graduate of Florida A&M University and received his masters degree in social work from Florida State University in the spring of 2009.

Derrick was introduced to Florida Youth SHINE by Secretary George Sheldon in 2007 and has been proudly serving as our chair since May of 2010. His involvement with FYS comes from his deep passion for giving a voice to all youth in state care. As a positive role model for all young adults aging out of foster care, Derrick is inspired by their stories and the thought that the work Florida Youth SHINE sets out to accomplish will make their path an easier one than he endured.