FLORIDA YOUTH SHINE

Youth Voice Action Campaign

#YouthcanSHINEwith:

Our Voices, Our Power!



A Digital Storytelling Series by Florida Youth SHINE!



FLORIDA YOUTH SHINE

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Florida's premier, independent, and impactful
of youth with lived experience in foster care a

About Florida Youth SHINE

Florida Youth SHINE (FYS) is a youth run, peer driven organization of youth currently or formerly in foster care, or who have experienced homelessness, who share our personal stories and experiences to improve the system of care of our peers and siblings currently in foster care, and those yet to enter it.

Our model for creating change is to elevate our voices, inspire resilience in our peers, drive change, develop leadership, build a supportive community, and champion a bright future for all youth as they transition out of care or homelessness.

Our Mission

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 experiences of today's youth and supporters.







ul youth advocacy organization
and homelessness.



Florida Youth SHINE has:

- 350+ members, ages 13-26, who are or have been involved in the foster care system or experienced homelessness.
- 15 chapters of youth advocates across Florida who identify challenges and strengths in the system and educate the public to create a better child welfare system.
- Represented the youth voice in Florida since 2005 and is supported by Florida's Children First.
- Become a national "best practices" model for youth engagement.
- Spoken nationally at the White House, Congress, the press, and on the steps of the U.S. Supreme Court.
- Trained and equipped thousands of youth on advocacy, communication, leadership and life skills.
- Been featured on TV and radio, won awards, given presentations, and received numerous accolades for their advocacy work, their impact on youth, and significant changes to the child welfare system.
- Helped pass dozens of laws and policies that improve the lives and long-term outcomes of youth in foster care.

Florida Youth SHINE are young **CHANGEMAKERS**

www.FloridasChildrenFirst.org
954.796.0860 • Maria.Batista@FloridasChildrenFirst.org

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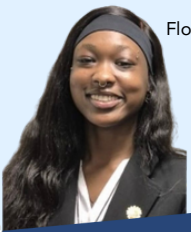
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OUR MISSION

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"Florida Youth SHINE is important to me because it reflects what I wish I had when I was in care. It centers community and lived experience in a way that feels real and drives change. Being part of it feels like coming full circle and nurturing not only the child in me, but in my peers too. I take pride in the difference we have and continue to make in the lives of youth who deserve better!"

-Tee Lamore,
Florida Youth SHINE,
2026 Board Chair



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Our Voices, Our Power!

Florida Youth SHINE is excited to share our latest advocacy project, Our Voices, Our Power – A Digital Story Series. This newest collection features 10 powerful digital stories created by Florida Youth SHINE members. These stories build on our previous series from 2014, 2015, and 2021, continuing a legacy of youth-led storytelling. Our full collection is available to support trainings, spark meaningful discussions, and center the voices of those with lived expertise in your programs.

For over 21 years, Florida Youth SHINE has been advocating for positive change within the child welfare system by elevating the lived experiences of young people. Together with Florida's Children First, we believe that youth are the experts in their own lives—and that their voices must be included in decisions that impact them. Florida Youth SHINE empowers young people to identify the challenges they have faced, share their stories, and advocate for solutions that lead to real systems change. A key part of this work is educating others on both the realities youth experience and the improvements that are needed.

To expand the reach of youth voice even further, Florida Youth SHINE has created a new generation of digital stories. These short videos are fully created and edited by youth, offering an authentic and creative platform to share their experiences and perspectives directly with others.
Through this process, youth not only shared their stories—they also discovered more about themselves by reflecting, listening, and connecting with one another. These stories are not scripted, filtered, or produced by professionals. They are honest, unfiltered experiences shared by young people who have lived within the system. These are their voices. These are their truths.

This series was created to inspire change, educate through lived experience, and provide a meaningful, accessible way to incorporate youth voice into your work. Whether used in trainings, discussions, recruitment, or community engagement, these stories offer a powerful tool to ensure youth perspectives are always part of the conversation—even when youth are not physically present.

We encourage you to use this viewing guide alongside the videos to help bring these voices into your spaces in a thoughtful and impactful way.

Our Voices, Our Power Viewing Guide

1. *Links and Access to all of Florida Youth SHINE's Digital Stories.*
2. *Information to host a Digital Story training in your area.*
3. *A special message and more information written by each storyteller.*
4. *Discussion Guide and Questions*

Thank you for supporting us in Amplifying our Voice!

Our Voices, Our Power! Preparing to Host a Digital Story Training

This guide was created to help facilitators, child welfare professionals, educators, advocates, caregivers, and community partners thoughtfully use Florida Youth SHINE's Our Voices, Our Power Digital Story Series during trainings, meetings, discussions, and community engagement opportunities. The digital stories shared by Florida Youth SHINE members are rooted in lived experience. They provide an opportunity for participants to hear directly from young people about the realities of child welfare involvement from foster care or those with homelessn experience. Their experinces include housing instability, mental health, food insecurity, supportive relationships, aging out, family separation, and resilience.

These stories are intended to:

- Center youth voice in conversations and decision-making
- Encourage reflection and discussion
- Increase empathy and understanding
- Highlight systems gaps and opportunities for change
- Inspire action and advocacy
- Promote trauma-informed and youth-centered practices

Before the Training

Review the Videos in Advance

Facilitators should watch all videos before the training to:

- **Become familiar with each youth's story**
- **Identify themes that may be emotionally impactful**
- **Review the discussion questions and activities**
- **Consider the needs of the audience**

Set the Tone

These stories are personal and may bring up strong emotions for participants. Begin by establishing a respectful and supportive environment. Consider sharing group agreements such as:

- **Listen to understand, not to respond**
- **Respect confidentiality and privacy**
- **Avoid judgment or assumptions**
- **Speak from your own experience**
- **Allow space for different perspectives**
- **Share only what feels comfortable**
- **Take care of yourself if emotions arise**

Consider Your Audience

The videos and discussion questions can be adapted for any type of training. Keep in mind the take aways when you know your audience. What do you want a youth, policy maker, or child welfare professional to know after leaving this session.

Access Florida Youth SHINE Digital Stories

Check out the full series of FYS Digital Stories!

Visit:
https://www.floridaschildrenfirst.org/florida-youth-shine/#digital

THE STORYTELLERS



We Will Rise
Sophia Coffey

Grit
Jesepi King

Independence
Selena Rose

Reality
Micah Yisrael

The Fridge
Sean Ford

Temporary Home
Quay Peeples

Lifeline
Alexia Nechayev

Debut
Mel de Miami

No Life Raft
Ethan Jones

That One Person
Nicole Williams



Sophia Coffey

We Will Rise

My name is Sophia Coffey and I'm 24 years old. I lived in foster care from the ages of 16-18 and I was placed in 6 different placements including group homes, shelters, non-relative, and licensed care. When I was brought into the foster care system it was after I had been arrested and placed on home detention which made constantly adapting to new families, schools, and homes even more challenging. Going into care as an older youth was an odd experience. I was constantly in a state of uncertainty and didn't know if today was my last day in a placement or if the next home would be safe. While it was difficult to navigate such foreign territory, it's my experience in childhood that makes me grateful that I did enter foster care. Although my life with my mom wasn't the best, it was the only life I knew.

But thanks to my foster care experience and my journey through advocacy which began in 2019, I have had opportunities I didn't even imagine before. I have worked to form lasting connections with peers while actively learning and discussing policies statewide and nationally. My goal in life is to be the change I want to see in the world, and I have so much more to accomplish. But as I continue to move forward, I never forget where I started. I never forget the experiences I had with my mom and what a long way I've come as an advocate, pageant Queen, and Delegate. I was once a young girl just trying to survive.

I'm sharing my story because I want people to know that every child deserves someone in their life who pushes them to become their best self, just like I did. For my peers who see my success today, I want them to see that it's possible for them too.

I hope you enjoy my story.



Jesepi King

Grit

My name is Jamar King, I am 23 and I shared this story not to highlight the shortcomings of my parents or the trials I faced, but to show that I was able to find my way because I had a few people support me along the way. My journey was hard, but my story is far from the darkest. There are many youth with no support and no guidance, forced to rely solely upon themselves. I wouldn't be where I am today had I not realized that someone actually cared. Life is hard and kids in care deserve a fair shot at it.

They deserve to be supported into adulthood and I hope my story inspires both youth in care to be resilient and know that the sun comes again. I also hope it inspires adults within the system to understand that these kids are real and need to be nurtured into tomorrow. It was difficult making this digital story as I heard my peers' struggles, and brought up my own struggles from the past. I heard stories of hunger, neglect, loneliness, and pain. At the same time, I heard stories of resilience,strength, growth, hope, and grit.

I shared my story because I hope it helps at least one youth. I want to inspire them to experience life truly, not fight to survive. To stride into adulthood, not stumble into it. To do that, they need support from people who care.

I hope you enjoy my story.



Selena Rose

Independence

I'm Selena Rose and I'm 24 years old. I recently graduated with my Master's in Social Work (MSW) last May from Florida Gulf Coast University. I was placed in foster care at age 14 until I aged out at 18 and opted into Postsecondary Education Services and Support and Support (PESS) from ages 18-23.

My story acknowledges young adults like me having homelessness experiences. Once a young person ages out of foster care at 18, society thinks we can navigate life on our own. A lot of us experience homelessness once or more. My story highlights homelessness as I've experienced it, which consisted of couch surfing on and off since I was 18. My story also recognizes many former foster youth attending college. Our dorm is our home. If it weren't for various people within my life who housed me anywhere from one month up to one year I would've either lived in my car or been forced to be in an unsafe living environment. Affordable housing is hard to come by but it is a need, not just a want. Many of us have had to worry about where to sleep, wash our clothes, or even where to store belongings.

I want my story to show you that stable and safe housing is a need NOT a luxury. This can benefit a lot of people including young adults from foster care or identified as homeless outside of foster care. I hope you and your peers advocate, volunteer, or donate within your community for programs that assist young people experiencing or getting out of homelessness.

I hope you are impacted by my story.



Micah Yisrael

Reality

My name is Micah Yisrael, and I'm 20 at the time of writing this. I entered the system of care at 16 after a very, very… very, *very* long battle to finally escape an abusive household and worked with my local youth council up-until and after I aged out at 18. I'm currently in college to one day go into Aerospace Engineering. My dream is that something that I've had my hands on ends up with the stars one day

.

When thinking about which one of those experiences to write about, I shifted restlessly. Initially, all I could think was: which story would be the easiest for other people to understand? What story would be the most palatable to the average eye and ear? But the longer I thought about it the more I realized that taking the easy way out and talking about things that people might have already heard about would nullify the entire point of telling my story at all. So I chose to speak about mental illness. I am real, and I am diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder.

I wanted to share that part of myself because, to be honest, I did a good job at hiding it from my family members and case managers. Now that I'm the self-made man of my dreams I'm tired of not talking about it. I think it would be doing a disservice to my younger self to not talk about it at this point.

I hope that with my story, I made the people who haven't experienced what I have a little uncomfortable (in a good way!) and helped make those who have, feel a little bit seen. I've never seen a story like this, anyhow, so maybe that's the real reason why I wrote it.



Sean Ford

Fridge

My name is Sean Ford. I am 25 years old and I was in care from ages 16-18. I experienced food and housing insecurity in childhood before foster care. While I did have a supportive foster mom and I now have a lot of people who look out for me now, my experience is not erased.

I shared my story because it was something very personal to me that I felt others should have the opportunity to understand. Access to nutritious food and safe, stable housing should be a right, not a privilege.

I hope you grow from viewing my story.



Quay Peeples

Temporary Homes

My name is Quaviona Peeples . I was in care from ages 6 to 18. In childhood I experienced hardships that caused a lot of instability in my life and in care the instability only increased. My childhood and experiences in care taught me not to look to adults for help, but a great support system in adulthood is helping me to move forward. I'm a Junior at Florida State University pursuing my Bachelor's degree in Criminology after earning my Criminology AA. Outside of school, I'm actively involved in advocacy work focused on youth impacted by the Foster system and those experiencing homelessness.

I chose to tell my story because I want people to know how I overcame my struggles and my experiences in care. My peers need to know that in spite of everything they face they can still thrive after foster care.

I hope you enjoy my story.



Alexia Nechayev

Lifeline

My name is Alexia and I am 26 years old. After being placed in foster care as a teenager, I experienced firsthand the stigmas surrounding youth in care. Before entering care I thought some of the same things, but it's important to me that people see the reality of what happens when families are separated and have no options or support. Even during my time in care I lacked support or opportunities to advocate for myself. Now, as an adult I have chosen to create change and ensure other youth have the tools and resources I lacked.

I am a survivor, advocate, leader, sister, daughter, friend, and future lawyer. I chose to share this because it felt like my origin story for why I do the advocacy work that I do and it shines a light on issues I felt needed more awareness. I want people to understand my perspective and the need for families to not be separated.

I hope you enjoy my story.



Mel de Miami

Debut

My name is Mel and I'm 24 years old. In the community, I'm known for networking and creating structured tools/resources that help youth better understand their needs, boundaries, and options. I'm a creative whose work spans digital design, visual content development, and storytelling. Before all of this I was just a young girl who sought validation in a space where I felt unwanted and had no place to turn for help.

I decided to share my story because I feel not enough attention goes to homeless youth who were never in foster care. My experience led to the work I do today and I'm happy to make a difference for those who have come behind me.

I hope you enjoy my story.



Ethan Jones

No Life Raft

I am Ethan, a passionate advocate and community leader with a strong dedication to empowering youth and uplifting underrepresented voices.

During my time in care I felt isolated and many times I did not have anyone to go to for help with navigating my teen years or even adulthood while still feeling invisible and helpless. In my life, I've had to show up for myself many times and I survived so that I could get to this point where I do feel hope for my future. I push forward not just for myself, but for all the other young people who need to know that they deserve someone who will remind them they are worth fighting for.

I chose to share this story because it reflects the struggles I've faced and the growth I've experienced. I wanted to be honest about where I've come from, so others can see that despite hardships, it's possible to move forward and create a better path. Sharing this story allows me to not only process my journey but also hopefully encourage someone else who may be going through something similar.

I hope you enjoy it.



Nicole Williams

That One Person

My name is Nicole Williams, and I am currently majoring in psychology at Florida Atlantic University. I serve as the Community Service Chair for the NAACP - FAU Chapter, and I am the President and Co-founder of Enlightened Generations, an organization I created to empower college students to share their stories and use their voice to create change. Outside of school, I work as a camp counselor at the YMCA where I help children build confidence, teamwork, and joy in who they are.

I entered foster care at just 10 months old. Over the years, I was in and out of care, and moved repeatedly between different homes. Being the oldest of three younger siblings, I often felt like I had to be strong for everyone … even when I, too, was struggling.

Throughout my childhood, it was hard to express myself so I kept a lot of my feelings hidden. Even in my darkest times, though, God never left me. He brought me through my hardest moments and guided me to the right people in my life. My Guardian ad Litem, my Assistant Principal, my Independent Living Specialist, my Therapist, my Coaches, and my Florida Youth SHINE family all encouraged me and reminded me that I didn't have to face life alone.

Foster care had its ups and downs, but it gave me something priceless: a support system of mentors that truly care about me. God used those experiences to show me every challenge can become a lesson in faith, strength, and resilience. Today I carry those lessons into everything I do, whether it is leading service projects, mentoring youth, or creating a safe space for others. I want to be for others what those mentors were for me.

Having amazing people in my life who believed in me and wanted the best for me helped me grow into who I am today. I am sharing my story, which I created during my sophomore year in college, because I want to encourage people to value mentorship.

I hope you enjoy my story.

Discussion Guide

This guide can be used to host impactful trainings and discussions utilizing the voice of the youth through their stories. These discussion questions offer a starting point for sharing and discussing the youth stories. These trainings are meant to educate others and each training can be customized and adapted to fit your community. You will find a variety of themes and topics in the videos.

Please read through this guide before a screening or discussion. Because the stories are about real youth's lives they are complicated. Rather than simple themes or solutions, they show complex issues and stories of their experience. Think carefully about which stories to share in a specific setting and about how to lead conversations in a way that educates, empowers, and brings the issues to a forefront.

When hosting a discussion, we ask that you frame each story to give each storyteller ownership of the story they created. You should use the bio included in this viewing guide. Additionally, please ensure that you share with viewers that these digital stories are "real experiences of real children who were involved in the system. They are told by themselves, created, edited, and written by themselves. These are their truths.

To use Digital Stories at a training simply let us know so we can track the impact of our work! We also have virtual and in-person youth trainings available!

E-mail us at fcf@floridaschildrenfirst.org

General Discussion Questions (All Stories)

As you watch each video think about the questions below. These questions can be used for all stories, and are not as specific as the targeted questions to follow.

1. ***How did this story make you feel?***
2. ***What parts of the story especially impacted you and why?***
3. ***What main themes and messages do you take away and why does the storyteller focus on those themes?***
4. ***What kind of problems does this story bring to light?***
5. ***What did you learn from this story?***
6. ***If you had a magic wand what would you do for a youth after hearing this individual's story.***
7. ***What actions do you think the storyteller would like you or others to take based on their message?***

Targeted Discussion Questions: Sophia's Story

- *How do you think housing stability and food security affected a youth sense of safety?*
- *What impact might these experiences have on a young person's ability to focus on school, goals, or relationships?*
- *What actions can you take, when you are working with a young adult who experienced housing instability as a child?*
- *What actions did a supportive adult take to influence Sophia's outlook and sense of purpose?*

Targeted Discussion Questions: Jesepi's Story

- *What feelings might a young person experience when they are expected to navigate adulthood?*
- *How might lack of mental health support influence a youth's stability and decision-making?*
- *What actions can a young adult do to help young people transition into adulthood with more confidence?*
- *What elements of Jesepi's story highlight the importance of ongoing support into adulthood?*

Targeted Discussion Questions: Selena's Story

- *How do you think Selena felt having to reach out multiple times before receiving help?*
- *What impact might frequent moves or lack of a consistent place have on a young person's sense of stability?*
- *Selena shares that "a place to stay doesn't mean it is a home." What do you think distinguishes the two?*
- *How can we ensure we are providing "homes" versus a placement to young people?*
- *How might relying on others for basic needs, like clothing, affect a young person's sense of independence?*
- *What elements of Selena's experience highlight gaps in stability, and what could help address them?*

Targeted Discussion Questions: Micah's Story

- *How do you think access to mental health services impacted Micah's well-being?*
- *What feelings might a young person experience when their mental health needs go unaddressed?*
- *How can you advocate for a young persons needs?*
- *How might receiving a diagnosis and support change a youth's sense of understanding and control?*
- *What elements of Micah's story highlight the importance of early and accessible support?*

Targeted Discussion Questions: Sean's Story

- *How do you think food insecurity affected Sean's daily life and emotional well-being?*
- *What impact might hunger have on a young person's ability to engage in school or relationships?*
- *How do you think it felt for Sean to be noticed and supported by someone in his life?*
- *Why do you think Sean connects physical hunger with emotional emptiness?*
- *What resources can you help a young person in Sean's situation?*
- *What elements of Sean's story highlight the importance of meeting basic needs?*

Targeted Discussion Questions: Quay's Story

- *How do you think Quay felt during the removal process and subsequent placements?*
- *What impact does being heard have on a young person's outcomes?*
- *How can you help a young person be heard?*
- *How do the quantity of placements affect a youth's sense of trust and safety?*
- *What elements of Quay's story highlight the importance of being listened to, and how can you promote that?*

Targeted Discussion Questions: Alexia's Story

- *How do you think Alexia felt being separated from her family?*
- *How can you protect a child from experiencing harm after removal?*
- *What stands out in Alexia's story as unique?*
- *What resources could Alexia's family have been provided, to avoid her from coming into care?*
- *How do you think the reason for a removal impacts youth differently?*
- *Why do you think Alexia emphasizes the need for compassion and resources instead of punishment?*
- *How might access to support services have changed Alexia's experience and outcomes?*
- *What elements of Alexia's story highlight the importance of supporting families to stay together?*

Targeted Discussion Questions: Mel's Story

- *Why might a young person who was not in foster care need more resources?*
- *What can we do to help community youth?*
- *How might homelessness affect a youth's ability to focus on education and future goals?*
- *What elements of Mel's story highlight the importance of community-based support systems?*

Targeted Discussion Questions: Ethan's Story

- *How do you think Ethan's experiences shaped his sense of self-worth and future outlook?*
- *What impact does consistent support have on a young person's ability to plan for adulthood?*
- *Why do you think Ethan emphasizes that support should not end at 18?*
- *What are ways you can show you believe in a youth?*
- *What elements of Ethan's story highlight the importance of preparing youth for adulthood?*



Targeted Discussion Questions: Nicole's Story

- *How do you think Nicole's experiences with supportive adults impacted her sense of safety and belonging?*
- *What impact do you think sibling separation may have had on Nicole emotionally and relationally?*
- *Why do you think Nicole emphasizes that "it only takes one caring adult," and what difference might that have made in her life?*
- *What can you do to advocate for siblings?*
- *What elements of Nicole's story highlight the importance of connection, and how can those be strengthened for youth?*

TIP:

DEVELOP YOUR OWN QUESTIONS BASED ON YOUR AUDEINCE AND OBJECTIVE

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