EVERYBODY NEEDS SOMEONE

The Aging-Out of Foster Care Project | By SalaamGarageNYC

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SalaamGarageLocal
local media advocacy for social change

Cover photo by Ian Spanier

INTRODUCTION

I thought my life was over. I couldn't believe this was what my life had become," said 27-year-old Krista James, who spent most of her adolescent years in and out of the foster care system, and then lived in multiple homeless shelters as a young adult.

Growing up, Krista was shuttled between unfit relatives unable to care for her and a series of foster and group homes. At 21, she found herself on her own. Feeling discouraged and distraught with life, Krista lived in five different shelters over the course of four years. "You feel like you're at the bottom of the earth and everything is horrible and messed up," said Krista.

Krista's experience is not unusual. This year, approximately 1,000 youth will age out of the foster care system in New York City alone. Nationally, 1 in 5 will become homeless; 1 in 4 will be incarcerated within two years of aging-out; about 50 percent of young women will become pregnant within 1 year; and only half of all foster youth will graduate high school.*

Everybody Needs Someone, The Aging-Out of Foster Care Project, is a compilation of stories and photographs of subjects from New York City and Long Island that goes beyond these troubling statistics and puts a name, a face, and a personal story to the challenges of transitioning into adulthood after years spent in foster care. It confronts one central question about the foster care system: What happens when youth age out of the system?

Our society expects foster kids to be fully self-reliant as soon as they turn 21. The reality is that most foster youth find themselves without the necessary skills and resources to live independently. How, then, do they prepare for self-sufficiency? Is there any extended support and guidance beyond the aging-out point that they can rely on?

This book and the larger Aging-Out of Foster Care Project have been produced by SalaamGarageNYC, a humanitarian media organization that produces storytelling projects whose goal is to inspire positive social change. A team of more than 25 New York City-based professional photographers, videographers, writers and journalists volunteered their skills and time to tell these stories and to document the efforts of young adults like Krista James, Brandon Kolin, Shirley Newman, Dmitiry Reibl, and more to emerge from the foster care system prepared to face the world and live a safe and productive life.

SalaamGarageNYC worked with You Gotta Believe, a non-profit organization based in Coney Island, Brooklyn, and the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP) in Nassau County, Long Island, to identify and connect with our subjects. These young people want to tell their stories to impact change in the system. Some, with the help of family, friends or loved ones, have successfully adapted to life on their own; some continue to struggle. All have important experiences to share.

We hope these stories inspire compassion and action.

There are several specific goals SalaamGarageNYC is working to meet with the Aging-Out of Foster Care Project:

- Prevent recently aged-out young adults from becoming homeless former foster youth
- See the number of youth aging out of the foster care system drop further as a result of fewer foster youth in the system in the first place and more older teen and tween adoptions
- See less poverty in the aged-out population because more aged-out youth find the support and resources needed to complete high school, pursue a higher education and receive effective job training
- Benefit effective local non-profit organizations by raising awareness and in-turn more funding for their good work. Local organizations like You Gotta Believe, who work non-stop to facilitate adoptions and placement in permanent families for aged-out and soon to age-out foster youth in Long Island and New York City.

You can help us meet these goals. Volunteer, donate, mentor, foster, adopt or just spread the word. Big or small, every little bit of help does make a difference.

— Daphne Eviatar with Maggie Soladay

**Statistics from The Children's Aid Society 2/28/2005, www.childrensaidsociety.org/issues/aging-out-foster-care*

Photo by Matthew Furman

"You can't let what held you back before hold you back now… I'm limitless."

— Fekri

Fekri

By Tommy Hallissey

Photography by Bruce Byers

Without a word, Fekri's disarming, toothy smile betrays the suffering he endured coming of age in the New York City foster care system. His crooked pearly whites hide the agony of being sold into slavery in Tunisia at the age of 5 for a mere $100. Without parents to dote on him, Fekri has spent most of his formative years in loveless foster homes run by such organizations as Little Flower Children and Family Services of New York. Now 21, Fekri lives in a subsidized South Bronx studio apartment. He is one of nearly 1,000 youth forced to navigate life as a self-sufficient individual after aging-out of the city's foster system on the day of their first legal drink.

These youth, who often have endured traumatic upbringings, must transition from a system full of familiar structure to the cold realities of independent living. Roughly two-thirds of the 16,000 foster youth in America, including Fekri, age out of the system without reuniting with their family or being adopted, according to a September 2011 report by The Center for an Urban Future.

"I've been through hell and back," explained Fekri, who wore faded, ripped jeans and a trendy white t-shirt. But, he said, his inner strength fuels his drive to succeed when others would have quit. "The intensity I've been through is only a motive."

Fekri, who has persevered through such obstacles as slavery, poverty, abuse and solitude, now enjoys the gifts of his independence, including no direct supervision or curfew. Yet, Fekri, similar to half of the foster youth who have aged out of the system, has been unable to land full-time employment. "It's quite apparent to me that former foster children fare poorly in the job market," said Richard Altman, executive director of the Jewish Child Care Association, one of the city's largest foster care agencies. "Children in foster care are behind on every indicator for future employment success once they leave care."

Researchers have also found that employment is a principal predictor of success in the transition from the structure of foster care to independent living. However, there are 14 million Americans competing for work today, including those with more experience than Fekri. As a result, Fekri has been forced to navigate his early days of independence without a full-time job to anchor his life.

In lieu of college, he has been working part-time for the Coney Island non-profit You Gotta Believe. An organization that works to place older and aged-out foster youth in permanent families. "You can't let what held you back before hold you back now," articulated Fekri. "I'm limitless," he added with a smile.

Fekri is fortunate among his peers. According to a 2008 New York City Administration of Children's Services and Department of Homeless Services study, 21 percent of all youth ages 16 and older who left foster care in 2004 entered a DHS shelter within three years. "Their outcomes are not as beautiful as this," he said seated in his spartan studio.

Daniel, Fekri's friend of 11 years, now lives in the same building on Melrose Avenue in the South Bronx. These two close friends aged out of foster care in December 2011. "He's been there when I need someone to talk to and vice versa," Daniel said in a phone interview.

Fekri, who has limited contact with his biological family, said he feels very much alone in New York. The added support from Daniel, whom he considers a brother, has not been enough to keep him psychologically and spiritually afloat.

Recently, Fekri sought out a reconnection with his family; however a reunion has remained elusive because of a recent revolution in Tunisia. Even though his family offered to pay the flight to his homeland, Fekri is ashamed of sharing his experience in the stigma-inducing American foster system. "I don't want to let my mother know what happened," he said. "I don't really need to put that on her."

Without work, family or social structure locally, the odds are stacked against a 21-year-old former foster youth such as Fekri. "The consequences of not effectively supporting foster youth in their transitions to adulthood are serious," according to the Urban Future report. "Many foster youth slip from being minor wards of the state as children to adult wards of the state as prison inmates, welfare recipients or residents of homeless shelters."

Fekri and Daniel, on the other hand, are lucky enough to have forged a mutually beneficial friendship that has helped both of them transition into the freedom of adulthood. "It's a stepping stone to full independence, or should I say, being self-sufficient to the extreme," Fekri explained, his gaze fixated on the horizon outside the bay window of his first New York apartment.

"Having to leave there was one of the best things that ever happened to me."

— Aquarianne

Aquarianne

By Amy Sernatinger

Photography by Yvonne Allaway

Aquarianne is expecting me, so before I have the chance to knock, she opens the door with wide eyes and a broad smile. The radio is playing from inside, sweeping music across the floors and ceilings. A small child pops out from behind her mother's leg. If I had any expectations before meeting her, I knew she was about to exceed all of them.

Aquarianne lost her father when she was 11. Her mother was an absent figure, sick with addiction and hopelessly unable to give her children a home. Aquarianne, never able to grieve the death of her father, locked all her sadness and confusion inside. "Kin-care" is a common step before foster care, so Aquarianne and her brother were sent to live with their older sister and her new husband. Their new environment turned chaotic and unhealthy fast and shortly after they moved in, the sister sent the two children to live with a foster family. "Having to leave there was one of the best things that ever happened to me," Aquarianne says. She no longer speaks to her sister.

Aquarianne's "favorite" foster home was in Brooklyn, N.Y., where she lived with her brother. Her foster mother was strict but caring; a "mother figure" or wise "aunt" as she liked her kids to view her. Aquarianne does not forget how it felt to be accepted into a stranger's home. The unfamiliar sense of safety and the notion of being valuable were slowly introduced. Aquarianne and her foster mother remain in contact.

Aquariannne met adolescence with curious rebellion. From ages 15 through 17 she became familiar with the culture of a group home, where she was sent to live on three separate occasions. Aquarianne admits it was her darkest time. "I could have easily gone the wrong way," she says. "I just decided to pick myself up and make something of myself." Determination had her graduate from high school on time. Resilience helped her keep a job. Her dreams kept her going.

On Aquarianne's 18th birthday, the state gave her a soft push from the foster care system. At 18 years old, Aquarianne was officially aged out. After high school, with the help of financial aid loans (which she is still paying off), she attended Queensborough Community College. It was there that she tapped into her passion for the performing arts and met her current partner and father of her daughter and unborn child. She talks of her resolve to graduate from college on time, recalling, "One semester I took 17 credits." That same inspiration led her to attend a final exam on the day before she gave birth. She earned her college degree – an accomplishment that at one time seemed unfathomable. Now 21, she continues to prove that nothing is out of her reach.

Aquarianne became certified in October 2011 as a CNA (Certified Nurse's Assistant). She will return to school and get her RN (registered nurse) license. She has been living in an apartment in Rockville Centre, Long Island, for almost one year and is saving as much money as she can so that she can buy a house one day—"maybe in Brooklyn." The fact that she sometimes has to go weeks without email or days without a phone ("You have to prioritize your bills," she explains) does not bring her down. She tells me her daughter will begin dance classes in a couple years and swimming when she is four or five (Aquarianne never learned to swim and she wants her children to know how).

Aquarianne takes the soft hand of her daughter and they follow me to the door. We say our goodbyes. This young woman has shared her struggles with me and has touched me on a level no one ever has. Her strength, her spirit and her drive are inspirational beyond anything I have known personally. We can all learn from her bravery in defying history; in proving history does not always have to repeat.

"I was just a puppet on a string; I was so used to being pulled wherever I was told."

— Shirley

Shirley

By Amy Kolz

Photography by Alejandra Villa

Shirley Newman is a consistent mother. A former foster child, the 29-year-old keeps her three children on a rigid daily schedule: school, snack time, homework, dinner and bath. Most importantly, Shirley's children, ranging from ages four to eleven, can count on her constant presence. "I'm the first thing they see when they wake up and the last thing they see when they to bed," she says proudly. "I'm always there, and my kids know that," she says.

Shirley had a far different upbringing. She was only three years old when her mother left her with her drug-addicted father and took Shirley's two younger siblings with her. Shirley and her father moved in with his girlfriend, Marie, an alcoholic who was just as abusive as Shirley's father. When Shirley was eight, neighbors reported the abuse, and Shirley was placed briefly with an elderly Korean couple, an event she remembers mostly for its jarring confusion. "I remember being taken out of school by total strangers and having to sit all day in a tall building near the Grand Concourse [in the Bronx], and the next thing I knew I was on Long Island," she says. Ten months later she was taken back to her father without an explanation. "I was just a puppet on a string; I was so used to being pulled wherever I was told," she recalls.

Shirley remained in her father's care for the next five years, but his presence was sporadic and destructive. After Marie died, her father would disappear for months at a time, often leaving Shirley with strangers: she remembers staying in houses with no electricity and sleeping in cars. When her father was around, he was high and often violent. He was arrested for stealing jewelry from his then-girlfriend when Shirley was 14, and spent a few months in jail. Upon his return he threw Shirley down a flight of stairs during an argument, knocking her unconscious. She reported him to social services and was removed from his care and, fortunately, this time it was for good.

But Shirley's next foster home was no less chaotic. She went on to live with an older woman named Theresa, who cared for a revolving cast of five to six teenage girls, including relatives, an adopted child and two other foster children. There were few rules, and many of the girls would come and go as they pleased. After just nine months, Shirley moved again, joining the family of a friend in Queens, an environment that was more stable.

Shirley, however, began acting out. She associated with the 'wrong crowd,' and began drinking and using drugs. "I didn't care what anyone said. I felt like the world was against me," she says. Having never been given the safety of rules and boundaries she began to rebel against authority. "I was horrible. I was always saying, 'Who are you to tell me what to do? You don't know me, you don't own me'," she says. She fought with her foster mother Randi and moved in with Randi's mother Cybil. Then at age 17, Shirley became pregnant.

Shirley gave birth to her daughter Kayla a week before her 18th birthday. Two months later Shirley accidentally gave Kayla a spiral fracture while trying to relieve her colicky daughter's gas with a leg manipulation. Kayla was taken away, and Shirley was moved to another foster family for four months. Shirley cleared her name in court and got her daughter back, and yet again was placed in a new environment, joining a caseworker named Mary in her home in Yonkers.

Mary has been more of a "mom" to Shirley than anyone else in her life. Unfortunately, Shirley has continued to have more than her share of challenges over the past decade. After aging out of the foster care system at 21, she had two more children, Brandon, 6, and Dylan, 4, with a boyfriend and moved to Florida. The relationship became mentally and physically abusive, and Brandon was diagnosed with autism. In September 2009 Shirley found the courage to leave. Mary bought plane tickets for Shirley and her kids, and the trio moved back to New York, living in a series of domestic abuse shelters.

Shirley, now a single mom, is trying to give her children the security and attention that she never had as a child. "I'm strict with them," she admits, noting that she doesn't hesitate to yell at her children in front of strangers if they misbehave. "I know what it's like to not have rules, or to have rules and have them be ignored." But she's just as careful to reward good behavior and to listen closely. "My kids tell me everything," she says with pride. "That's something I never had growing up."

Shirley still hasn't given up on the dream of finally claiming a mother of her own. A year ago she began the process of being adopted by Mary. "I always grew up thinking that no one wanted me, that I was too old to be adopted," she says. But for more than a decade, Mary has lent Shirley an open ear and a willingness to always see the good in her. "She's always been the one I run to," Shirley says. "So I thought, why not?"

"Each time your stuff is packed up and the social worker is standing there telling you that you are going somewhere else, you feel abandoned. You feel unwanted. You feel you aren't worthy."

— Krista

Krista

By Mollie Neal

Photography by Heather Walsh

Krista spends her working hours tending to a woman with dementia in an assisted-living facility. Like so many health-care aides, she is a nurturing soul. Some would call it ironic that this is her job. She spent most of her childhood being shuttled from one foster home to another without experiencing any stable nurturing relationships.

For just five short years Krista had a secure home life. Her parents were young adults with "conflicts" and were unable to care for her and her 9-year-old sister so the girls were sent to live with their grandfather. The stay was short-lived. Krista remembers sitting in a hallway next to a closed door. Inside the room, she says, a babysitter would rape her sister.

This was the end of any real home life or permanency she would experience until she reached her teen years. While most kids were enjoying family traditions and forming life-long friendships with neighborhood children, she spent the next eight years being shuttled to different houses where she was raised by foster parents, nannies and group home employees. Being placed with her sister was her only real comfort until they were separated. "I was hurting 'cause I then knew I didn't have any family," says Krista.

"Each time your stuff is packed up and the social worker is standing there telling you that you are going somewhere else, you feel abandoned. You feel unwanted. You feel you aren't worthy," says Krista. That happened 10 times and these invisible wounds don't heal even as an adult.

As a 27-year-old woman, Krista reflects on her life and believes that she would rather have stayed with a troubled family than have lived with "people who don't really care for you."

After her parents recovered from crack addiction she was reunited with them. First living with her father in Oswego, she enjoyed middle school and simple pleasures such as walking to a scenic lake. High school was spent back in her hometown, Hempstead, N.Y., getting to know her mother who encouraged her to drop her tomboy persona and become more girlish. With a high school diploma and no job prospects, she took care of her grandmother until she was 23 and briefly lived again with her mother. She was rebellious against her mother's discipline and their relationship was contentious. Krista did what she had learned to do when things got rough: she moved.

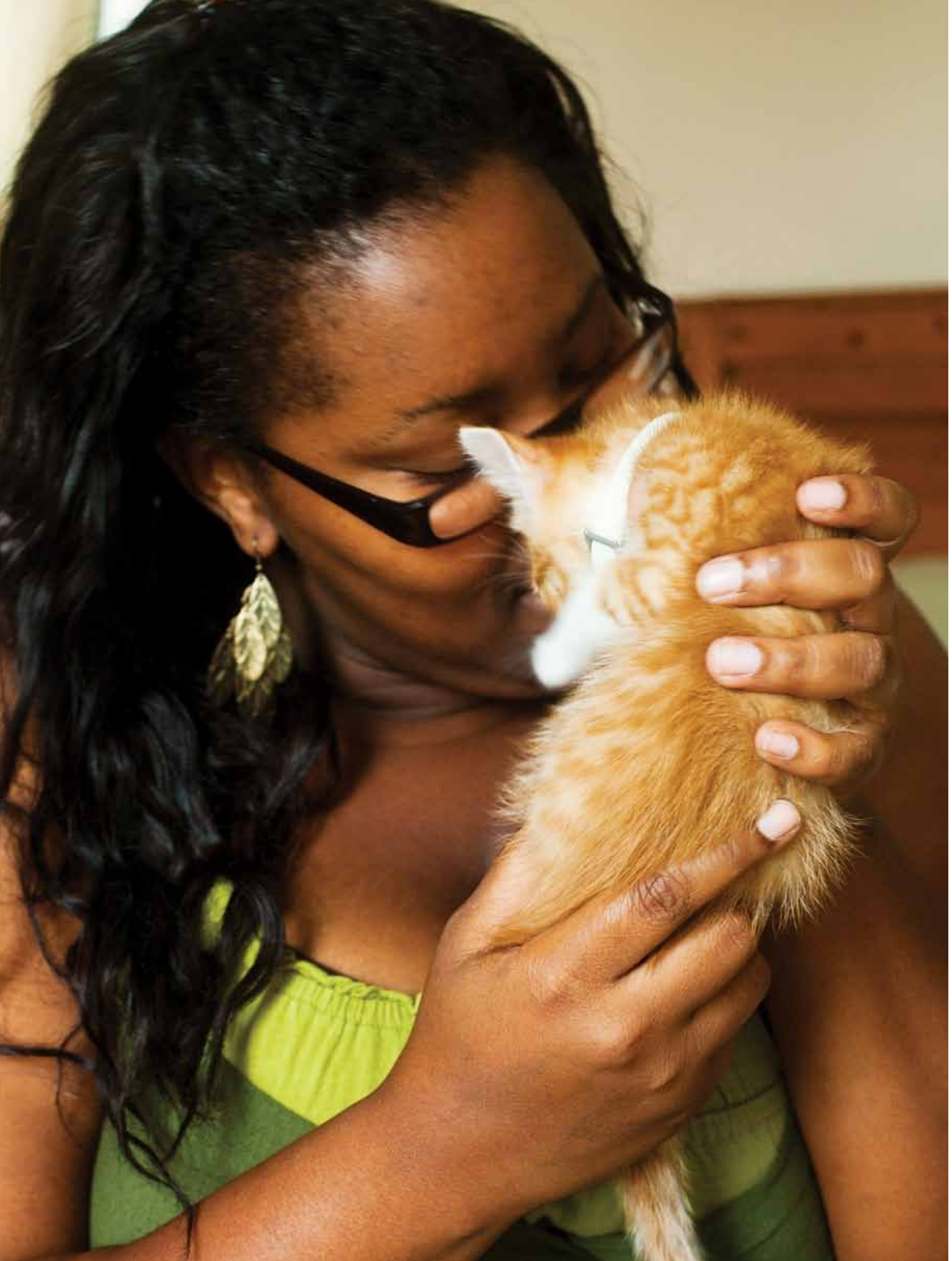
"It was the biggest mistake of my life," says Krista. With nowhere to turn, she ended up in a homeless shelter. "You feel like you are at the bottom of the earth. Everything is horrible. I thought my life is over. I can't believe this is what my life has become."

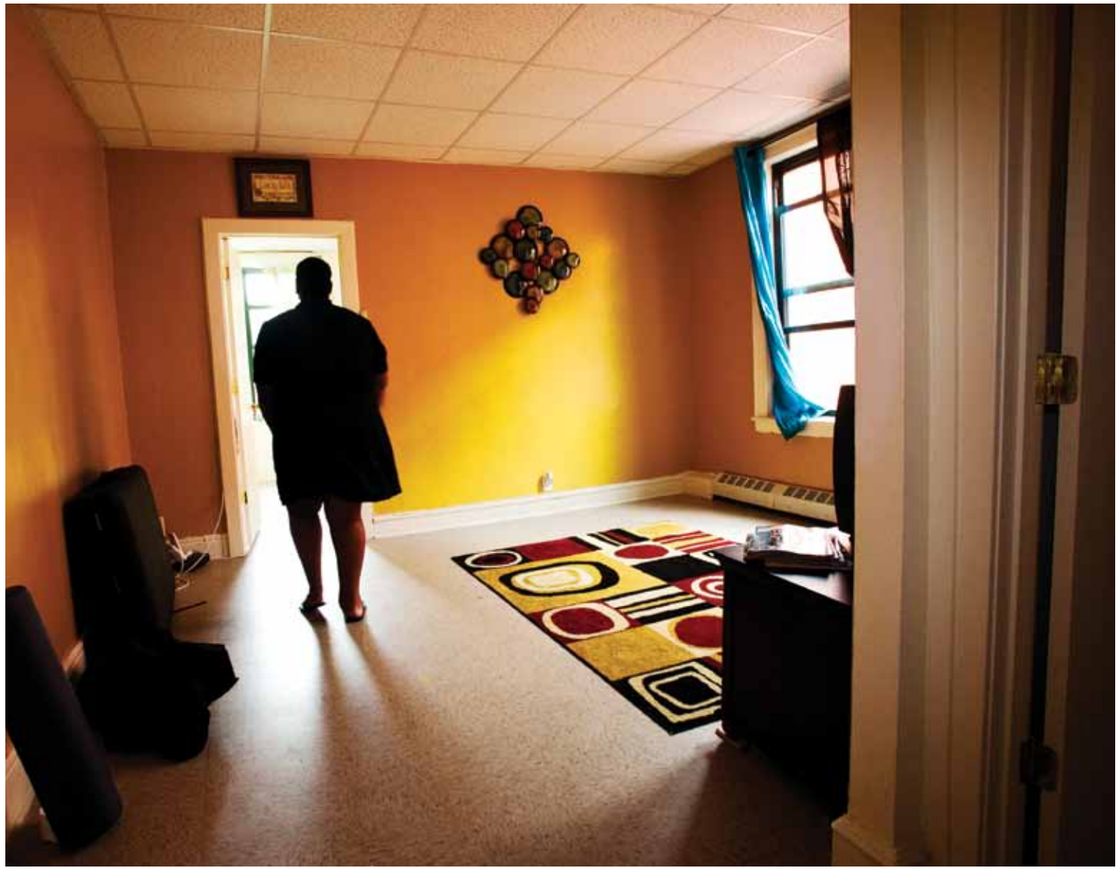
Working dead-end jobs, sleeping in dangerous shelters on cots next to strangers and living in rooms for rent, became a new pattern. At times Krista relied on government assistance for room and board. She recalls one home where she lived in cramped quarters and was fed nothing more than peanut butter and crackers. When the landlord found her taking ice from the freezer, she slammed it shut on her hand and then placed a lock and chain around the appliance. No matter where she lived, it never felt like a real home.

One cold winter night after finishing a 12-hour shift at Macy's, she had to wait outside the closed store for three hours for a taxi. While other employees had gone home to welcoming family members and the comfort of their own beds, she went alone to a homeless shelter. "You walk in this dark room and all you see is cots and people sleeping," says Krista. "You don't know who you are laying next to. I didn't sleep all night."

She was living without any emotional or financial safety net — until she regained her faith in God. "I kept saying I need to get back to church and to Christ," says Krista. She reached out to government agencies for rental assistance only to be rejected. In the meantime, she tithed her entire tax return to her church believing that she would receive a major blessing from God in return.

Krista's life began to turn around. She got a call from Barbara Boyle, a senior case manager for the Nassau County Office of Housing and Community Development. Through the Homelessness Prevention & Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP), Boyle was offering to pay part of her rent, help her move into a decent apartment and give her a furniture voucher. The same week she landed a full-time job as a health aide at a nursing home. The next call from Barbara was an even bigger surprise. The agency offered to pay her entire rent for a full year. "I was in shock. Nothing like this ever happens to me," says Krista. "HPRP gave me an outlook that I can do anything I





put my mind to...I feel like I can conquer anything...That void I got from foster care is lifted because I still have a purpose."

With her new living situation and a scholarship for a massage therapy training program, Krista is building a better life for herself. She enjoys learning how to heal people with her hands and having real potential for future employment. "I am grateful to have the opportunity to learn…you can't live without an education."

Life, however, is grueling. Most of her days she works the night shift at the assisted living facility. Then she goes straight to school and, after a short stop at home, heads back to work. Four days a week her sleep consists only of short catnaps. Relying on public transportation, simple tasks such as grocery shopping can take hours out of her precious free time. Instead of resting on Sundays she dons her prized purple and gold choir robe and heads to church. Attending church gives her spiritual strength and wearing the robe "makes me feel like royalty," says Krista.

She is now optimistic about her future and would like to give massages on a cruise ship. "I want to work and explore the world…and make people feel better," says Krista. She also dreams of having her own family. "I want to have a great husband, to have a house, a bank account and a whole mindset to have children," says Krista, and she refuses to ever be dependent on anyone to take care of her.

"HPRP gave me an outlook that I can do anything I put my mind to...I feel like I can conquer anything."

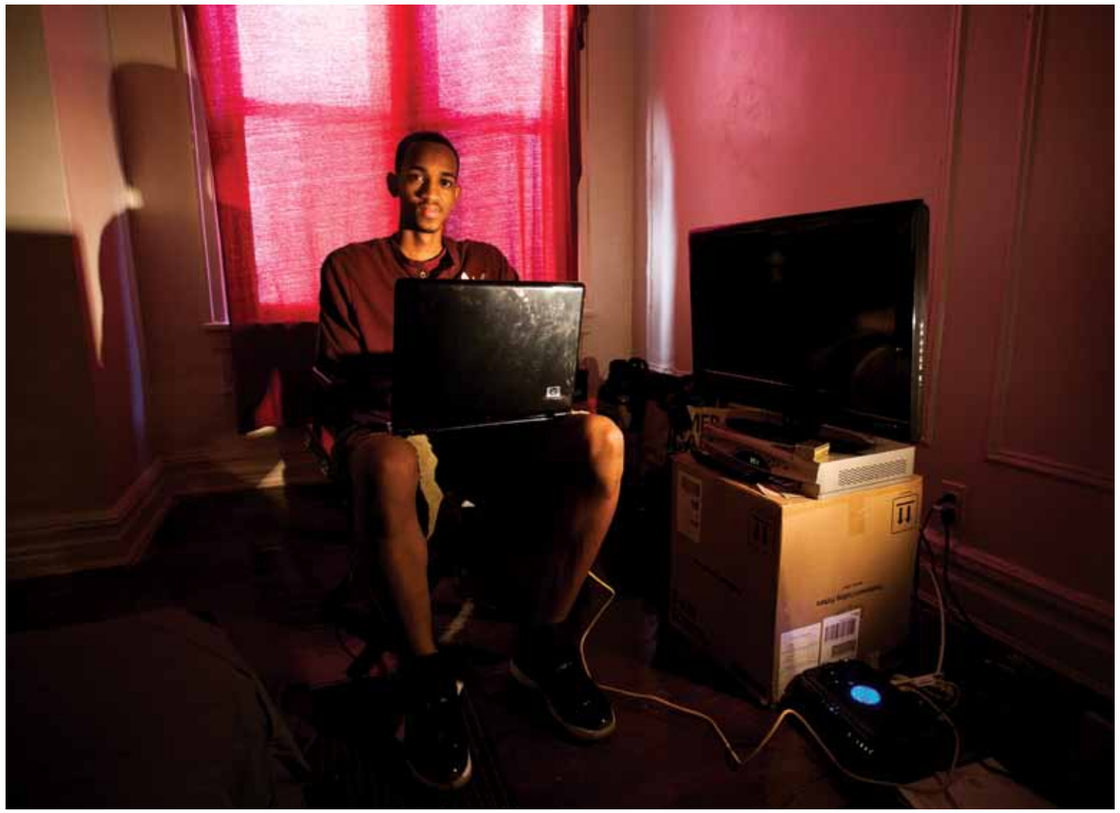
"There was no warning. They said the placement isn't working. It was scary being in one place one day and another the next."

— Renald

Renald

By Mollie Neal

Photography by Heather Walsh



Renald is a quiet, soft-spoken 22-year-old living in his first apartment and attending college. Adjusting to independence and adult responsibilities can be challenging for any young person, especially if there is no immediate family or mentor to turn to for guidance and support.

Renald had a traditional family and the comforts of home— until he was 13 years old. Suddenly, one day he and his younger brothers were placed into the foster care system on Long Island without any warning for reasons he is unable to explain. He would never return home.

The foster parents bought the boys clothes and got them involved in sports. It was apparent, though, that this was not going to be a real warm loving family life. “They were kind of nice people,” says Renald, but the relationship was formal “We called them mister and misses.”

After just a couple of months, their lives were turned upside down again. The boys were told to come right home from school for an appointment with the social worker. “There was no warning,” says Renald. “They said the placement isn’t working. It was scary being in one place one day and another the next.”

The boys settled into another house in Baldwin but were uprooted again after a fire. The only good fortune they had was staying together since siblings in the foster care system are often split up. The move to Hempstead was the third relocation in just four years. The woman was welcoming and Renald stayed from the age of 16 to 22 along with his brothers. He aged out of the foster care system at 21 and stayed there for a short time, paid rent and started college.

As a young adult, Renald is beating the odds. While many foster kids never complete high school and end up jobless and homeless, he is attending The College at Old Westbury State University of New York. He plans to graduate in spring of 2012 and aspires to become a lawyer.

After eight years of living in the foster care system, Renald was ready to head out on his own. With the financial help of HPRP, a pilot program operated by the Nassau County Office of Housing and Homeless Services, he is living alone in a modest third-story walk-up apartment in Hempstead, N.Y. Renald had to leave his younger brothers behind in the care of his former foster parent. He does see his siblings but says keeping in touch is a challenge while juggling studies and a job at Lowe’s.

Renald is enjoying his new freedom. “I can come and go and don’t have to report to anybody,” he says. However, living alone isn’t easy, “because you just have to do everything for yourself.” He barely remembers the addresses of all of the places he has lived, let alone the names of most of his former foster parents. He can’t call home for advice, support or guidance. He has had to learn how to cook, manage his money and pay his bills all on his own. Unlike many young adults, he doesn’t have the luxury of returning home if he fails.

Filling his apartment with furnishings and other material possessions isn’t important to Renald. He has a few valued items, including his clothes, a TV that sits on a cardboard box, a laptop and a collection of sneakers stored in their original boxes and neatly arranged in a stack. For Renald, this is home.

"I can come and go and don't have to report to anybody."

— Renald on his new freeedom

"I feel great, I already beat my mom."

— Linda

Linda

By Carrie Vining Spanier

Photography by Ian Spanier

Upon meeting Linda Jackson, I was immediately struck by her confidence and overall presence. She spoke as if we had known each other for years. She shared as if I were her confidant.

Twenty-one-year-old Linda was thrust into the foster care system at the tender age of three. Born in Charlottesville, Virginia, to a drug-addicted mother, she, along with her four brothers and two sisters, were scattered amongst the system after her mother decided she could no longer take care of them and left them at a friend's house. Social services was called.

At first, Linda was kept together with one sibling, a brother. They were separated in subsequent homes, though they have kept in touch. Linda alone has lived in three or four different group homes, two residences and six or seven foster homes. Specific numbers are hard to get from her, as she clearly bounced around as a young child. The longest placement for Linda was just a little more than one year.

She has experienced more in her short 21 years than most people do in a lifetime, including abuse, becoming a runaway, and at age 17, giving birth to her now 4-year-old son, Lavontae. The bond she has with her young son is the strongest and longest bond she has ever had with a family member. When asked how she feels about that, she responded, “I feel great, I already beat my mom.”

At age 14, Linda ran from a group home and officially became a runaway. It wasn't until she became pregnant that she turned herself “back in” to the system. She was then placed in a home with other young moms and pregnant females, and it was there that she received a lot of support. Over the next few years, she requested to go back to that group home three different times after she and her son were moved to various foster homes that didn't work out.

Linda eventually met her own mother and some of her siblings again. They keep in touch; however she rarely speaks to her mother. This past November, Linda and Lavontae moved from a group home into a shelter, and eventually into their own studio apartment. They were now on their own: away from the system she ran from, and yet also away from the system she needed to survive. Because she is now 21 years old, the system will no longer help her. Despite the long odds, Linda has drive. After completing her GED Linda went to school and became a certified home health aide. She is now training to become a medical assistant and has plans to also become a Licensed Practitioner Nurse. She will do this all while raising her 4-year-old son.

In a stunning turn of events, Linda recently met her father, and learned he had no idea she was even in the system. Ironically, he is a licensed foster parent. I asked Linda if there was anything she would change about the foster care system. She said, “Not all foster homes are good, there are a lot of abusive foster parents out there.” I can only imagine this is the cause of those years she was voluntarily out of the system.

Despite the odds and through it all, Linda says she has had a lot of support and has kept in touch with one of her case workers, a woman Linda considers to be a mother figure. Perhaps that is why she immediately impressed me with her strength and confidence.

"Are you going to get test anxiety and not show up? Or are you going to give it your best shot."

— *Richard*

Richard

By Patricia Paine and Jim Sewastynowicz

Photography by Jim Sewastynowicz

Richard Wilkerson has no regrets about growing up in the foster care system. In fact, he believes that his experience as a teenager in various group homes has given him a powerful gift—one of understanding and connecting with people who also have hardships to overcome. Even though Richard is currently unemployed at age 27, he is working hard to better his life. On Mondays and Tuesdays he attends school to earn his GED diploma, and on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays he volunteers as an aide for the disabled and elderly at the Beth Abraham Nursing Center. The gratification he receives from encouraging people who are blind or unable to walk keeps him humble and thankful for his good fortune. After all, there was a time in Richard's life when he, too, needed encouragement — just before he aged out of foster care.

Shortly before he had to leave the system, he participated on a panel for prospective foster parents. They asked questions and he told them without hesitation that even though he was 20, he was afraid of living on his own. Whether it was fate or luck, Mary Chancie came up to Richard that Saturday and invited him over for the holidays. She wanted Richard to mingle with her family and see how they operated, which he did. They shared an instant connection and for the next two years Richard became a member of their family.

Although Richard admits that it wasn't always perfect, he loved being part of the Chancie household and still considers Mary to be his mother. He relished their time eating dinners together, watching sports on TV and going to church. He knows that if Mary hadn't adopted him, he would have struggled miserably on his own. She still keeps Richard's bedroom ready for his frequent visits home.

Richard has nine biological siblings: six sisters and three brothers. Sadly, he has had to separate himself from them as they have only acted as a negative influence on his life. "I realize that at this point in my life, poison people can contaminate a good heart. I feel like I lost a lot dealing with my biological family. At the age of 27 it is hard to walk away. I love my family with every fiber of my being, but they weren't healthy for my heart." Richard says that he wants to become more comfortable with himself spiritually, mentally and physically before reuniting with his siblings.

When Richard turned 15, he moved in with a foster family in Manhattan at a Park Avenue address. It didn't go well and a year later he moved to a group home in the Bronx. Richard did not take school seriously there, so once again he was uprooted and transferred to another group home in Harlem, where he lived for the next five years.

If it wasn't for the foster care system, Richard says, he would not be the confident man that he is today. A lot of people downplay foster care, Richard says, but he has no regrets. He believes that the system helped him out tremendously. He learned how to cook, eat healthy, do laundry, manage money and to be responsible in the group home world. Richard treasures the guidance the group homes provided during his teenage years, which he admits encouraged him to be humble and to have respect for others.

Richard's father did not play a big role in his upbringing at home. But now that Richard is a father of three little boys, he does not use that as an excuse to ignore his responsibilities. "It's tough, it takes sacrifice, it takes dedication, it takes patience. I love my boys with every fiber of my being. A family takes a lot of we and not me," he says.

Even though many people believe that life is about laughing and being happy, Richard focuses on inspiring people. Every day he asks himself how many people he has made smile when they were feeling down. Did he offer a lady a seat on the subway or hold a door open for others behind him? In short, his daily fulfillment stems from helping others — not by concentrating on his own needs. This philosophy is why he enjoys his volunteer job at Beth Abraham Nursing Center. One day Richard wheeled a 92-year-old woman to physical therapy and asked her how she was doing. When she answered, very weakly, that she was tired, he got her to smile. He talks to her every day that he works, and she looks forward to his visits.

Richard says life is like taking a test. "Are you going to get test anxiety and not show up? Or are you going to give it your best shot." For him, failing is not an option. He is giving life his best shot.

"This is my chance to prove myself, to do everything I wish I could have done with my father."

— Alex

Alex

By Shannon Green

Photography by Jordan Hollender

Alex Lonzot is a family man. Nothing is more important to the 23-year-old than his wife Caroline and their 1-year-old baby girl, Harmony Marie Lonzot. The former foster kid wants to give his daughter the kind of secure and carefree childhood he wasn't able to experience.

Alex never knew his biological father, and he was taken away from his mother, who was HIV positive, when he was just five years old. Both are now deceased. Alex does not criticize his birth parents, but he is determined to do better. "This is my chance to prove myself," he says, "to do everything I wish I could have done with my father."

Raising a baby can be daunting for any new parent, especially for one who lacked strong role models. Alex is learning the ropes of fatherhood from Eli Nealy, a man he's called dad for the last three years. "He treats me like I was his," says Alex. He met Eli through You Gotta Believe, a Brooklyn nonprofit that finds adoptive homes for older foster care youth.

Alex currently lives with Eli and his wife, Alexandra Soiseth, in their Yonkers home. They are taking steps to make Alex a permanent part of their lives. "They are there for me, they support me, and they love me unconditionally," he says of his parents.

Alex has been looking for that kind of acceptance for most of his life. His first foster mother beat him and his brothers severely, sometimes using sticks, wires or pipes on the boys. Alex once required 15 stitches after she pushed him through a glass door.

"I really had hoped to have someone that would love me, care for me and protect me," says Alex, "but it wasn't like that." When given the choice of permanent adoption into an abusive home environment, Alex ran away. His two brothers stayed behind, but he says he knew the living situation was not right.

Alex instead spent his teen years living in group residences, and he called members of the Bronx gang, Bloods, his family. "I was the type of guy who was always in the streets, always selling drugs, always fighting people," says Alex. "I didn't care about my life," he says, "so I just went with them, did what I had to do."

Alex's affiliation with the gang proved costly. As a minor, Alex was locked up six times for gang-related assault, drug possession, and robbery. While serving a two-month sentence in juvenile detention for stabbing a man in the chest, Alex decided he wanted out. "I turned my life around after that," recalls Alex.

But eschewing gang life wasn't easy. In order to be released from the Bloods, Alex, then 16 years old, had to fight five girls and five guys at one time. It took two months for him to recover from the injuries he sustained in the fight. But afterward, he was free.

"I left it, folded my flag, and just went on with it," he says. "From there, I would never look back at that." Now that he is a husband and father, Alex has an added incentive to stay on the straight and narrow. "I'm always going to be there for them," he says of his family. "I never want to get locked up again."

When talking to Alex today, it's difficult to detect that the young man has such a troubled past. He is open about his personal history, but has chosen to focus on the possibilities that lie ahead for him in life.

Alex is working as a cook, and he plans to eventually move his family into their own apartment. "I'm saving, saving, saving," he says. But Alex is also pretty content being where he is right now. "I have beautiful parents," he says.

Eli and Alexandra also have a little girl, and Alex sees himself as a guardian for the whole bunch. "I have a very huge family now," he says. "At once it was just me, but now my family has expanded so huge that I could never ask for more."

"I was the type of guy who was always in the streets, always selling drugs, always fighting people. I didn't care about my life."


STATE
CHAMP

"It really felt like nobody loved me. No kid should have to feel like that."

— Elijah

Elijah

By Luke Whyte

Photography by Lisa Weatherbee

Not every foster child finds a family. The forgotten ones grow up alone in the faceless embrace of bureaucracy, waiting and wishing, like runts in a litter of kittens staring hopelessly out of an emptying box. Elijah Callender was one of those children. The state covered his eyes and clutched him tightly until his 21st birthday. Then it dropped him.

Elijah was two years old when Children's Services found him and his 12-year-old brother, JB, living unsupervised in a Bronx apartment. Mom hadn't been around much — a heavy drug user, she birthed five kids with five men but didn't raise one. So JB and Elijah were sent to live with their grandmother and third brother, CJ, in Atlanta.

Down south, the boys were a real handful for "Grandmoms," Elijah said. "We were wild down there – running around all day and night outside."

Holes the size of 8-year-olds were made in walls and wounds the shape of silverware tips scarred skin. At age 6, Elijah watched cops throw JB into the back of a cruiser. The brothers' eyes met — separated by ten years and a pane of glass — and the 16-year-old said, "Open the door." So Elijah did. And the whole family watched that night as JB jumped fences in handcuffs on the local news.

Aged eight, Elijah found a Glock pistol under a cushion in the living room chair. Boots were thrown and the front door slammed behind JB. Two months later, he was out front with a gas can throwing kerosene on the house. He lit a match. Whoosh.

"I was mad at him," Elijah said, "for burning up all my toys."

JB was sent to prison for arson and the rest of the family returned to New York City. Elijah and CJ had a brief stint living with their mother, but she was still heavy into drugs.

"She beat my brother with a dog chain," says Elijah. "She tried to burn me with the stove."

When Elijah was eight, his grandmother fell off a ladder and snapped her femur. She was left crippled and unable to care for the brothers, which forced Elijah into the foster care system for the next 12 years. He would never be adopted.

He spent the bulk of those 12 years at Children's Village Residential School in the small town of Dobbs Ferry. Surrounded by a barbed wire fence, Children's Village "houses and educates 'at-risk' boys aged 6 to 20 at a school on the premises," according to their website.

For Elijah, however, Children's Village, "was like a long drawn out process of being abandoned."

"Once you spend your first night there," he said, "and you sleep by yourself in one of those beds with all those other kids, you are no longer a child."

"It's like being in jail, the way they restrict your movements, the way they tell you how to act, [and] how to behave.

"It really felt like nobody loved me. No kid should have to feel like that."

Unadopted foster children age out of care between the ages of 18 and 21. Often grossly underprepared, they stand on the edge of a financial cliff without parental lifelines, many having never cooked an egg or withdrawn from an ATM.

"It was very scary," Elijah said.

Statistics are not on their side. In the United States, roughly 30,000 people age out of care each year. By the age of 24, less than half will be employed and almost a quarter will be homeless. Among men, 60 percent will have been in prison. Among women, 75 percent will have been pregnant.

Often, the little things trip them up, the things most people take for granted, "like time management or trusting someone enough to ask for help," Elijah said. "Filling out proper paperwork, forgetting to buy groceries and shit."

When he was discharged at age 21, Elijah had $4,000 — half of which he spent on a car. "Thank God I had a job. If I didn't have a job and I just aged out of care, I'd have been f*****."

But eventually he lost that job and, in turn, he lost his new apartment — and landed on the doorstep of his 18-year-old sister Mariah's dad's apartment in Brooklyn. He slept on the couch, slinging weed to pay rent and kept his belongings in his car. He had planned to save up some money and go out to Arizona to be with his fourth brother Jerry, but one day the cops ran the plates on his car. They found out that Elijah had no registration or insurance because, "I didn't know any better." The car and everything inside it was impounded, and Elijah spent 10 days in jail.

When he got out, he found the remains of his life thrown into the hallway outside the apartment. When he banged on the door, Mariah's dad appeared with a gun in his hand. Elijah got the message.

On the verge of homelessness, he made a last-ditch call to his friend Everett. Everett had been placed with Susan, a woman in Washington Heights by You Gotta Believe, an organization specializing in finding families for foster kids that age out. Susan also took Elijah in and he found work helping another You Gotta Believe representative, Denise, move into her apartment. Denise opened her arms to Elijah, and soon after, her apartment.

At times, their living arrangement resembles a storage unit as much as it does an apartment, but together, they're building a home. Today, Elijah calls Denise mom. He helps her care for her adopted 2-year-old. She helps him plan a future. Recently, he was accepted into a school where he's earning his GED.

For the first time in 13 years, Elijah has the one thing that could keep almost anyone aging out of care from slipping through the cracks. Elijah has a family.

“I want to be successful. I know how life really is. I’ve been through the lowest of lows, so I’m ready for the highs. Sky’s the limit.”

— Andre

Andre

By Patricia Paine

Photography by Matthew Furman

Andre Carter is a friendly 21-year-old who masks his difficult upbringing with an offhand snicker. The details are foggy as he recounts his start in the foster care system. As early as Andre remembers, his father was responsible for him and his two younger brothers. But since his father had a medical condition that hindered his ability to care for them, the boys moved in with their paternal grandmother. Sadly, an uncle, who also lived in the house, beat the three of them on a regular basis. Whether or not their grandmother knew about this is unclear, but their father was unaware.

When Andre was 7, he was taken to the nurse's office at school and asked a number of questions. He was afraid to tell the nurse about the beatings because he feared that his uncle would find out and hurt him even more. He recounts waiting in the nurse's office for over three hours until he and his brothers were taken away in a strange van to a strange home. The social workers promised that they had found them a better place to live. The boys spent that night with a temporary family and were then taken to a foster home.

Unfortunately for Andre and his little brothers, the new family inflicted a different kind of abuse. To discipline the children, their foster father forced them to take freezing cold showers. Andre recalls, "some Spanish guy beating us…dipping us in cold water as punishment." This was more frightening than their uncle's beatings. Andre does not blame the foster care program or his caseworker, who eventually found them a new home with a single older lady. She treated them kindly and they lived with her for about a year. During this stay they attended school and made new friends.

Eventually the boys' biological mother reclaimed them, and they lived with her for the next two years. Here they got to bond with their half brothers and sisters, until they moved back in with their father. Andre is still close with his stepsiblings.

At age 15, Andre got into some trouble and was uprooted from his home again. This time he was sent to live in a group home for teens, which was operated by the New York City Administration for Children's Services. He continued to be shuttled around to different homes for four more years. From age 18 to 21 he lived at Seaford House, where he had his own bedroom. "It wasn't too bad," he said. "I liked having my own room." The staff motivated him to find a job. After training to become a certified nursing assistant, he realized that he couldn't stomach some aspects of the profession. He now works for Babies "R" Us and lives alone in a subsidized apartment.

Andre wants to attend college soon, but his current salary is barely adequate to cover living expenses let alone college tuition. He has a positive outlook, though. "I want to be successful. I know how life really is. I've been through the lowest of lows, so I'm ready for the highs. Sky's the limit. I'd like to have a nice home and eventually start a family."

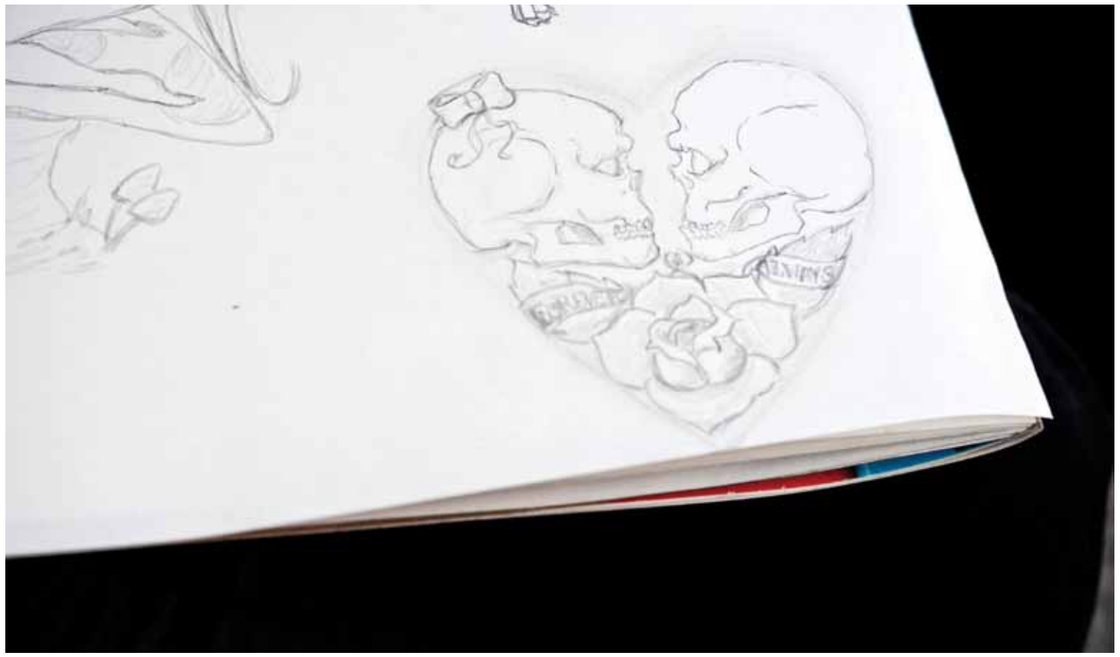
When asked if he was friendly with his uncle these days, Andre said, "Yah, he's cool. I'm bigger than him now."

Teddie has crossed an important line. I see it now, in his eyes and mine, he has hope.

Teddie

By Moya McAllister

Photography by Moya McAllister



Teddie is a 21-year-old trans-gender youth with arresting, long-lashed sherry-brown eyes. Soft-spoken, with a nervous laugh, he favors illustrated cartoon-and-grafitti-style caps and clothes that blend into the area of Chelsea where we decide to meet.

Kicked out of his mother's home at the age of 14 by his mother's boyfriend, Teddie entered foster care and lived in several group homes until he aged out at 18. Since then, he has been homeless, couch-surfing with various friends or romantic partners, staying in LGBT-specific (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transexual) shelters, but never fitting in. His relationship with his mother is mostly non-existent. Although he stays in touch with his two younger sisters, it is mostly through Facebook. His random sleeping arrangements have sometimes been very precarious, putting Teddie into vulnerable situations such as having heroin addicts for roommates, feeling in imminent physical danger and sometimes under threat of forced sexual contact — all in addition to the mental stress of having no money, no job and no hope.

Due to Teddie's transience, his birth certificate with his legal (female) name has been lost. The lack of a legal identity has made his life even more difficult. He is unable to complete some of the paperwork he needs for job applications and for public assistance and food stamps. Teddie is trying to obtain a hearing with social services to find assistance.

At the time of our first meeting Teddie is living with Jenny, his steady girlfriend of seven months. He describes this as the longest relationship he has ever had. He feels that he has a stable place to live, at least for a while, but is always worried that if the relationship fails, he will be on the street again.

Through an LGBT-sponsored program, Teddie has been undergoing hormone treatment to prepare for breast-reduction surgery, and he continues to reconcile the biological gender of his birth with his emotional and sexual identity as an adult male. He is not sure if he will continue to seek surgical solutions to complete his sex-change, but he feels this first surgery is the minimum required for his mental well-being.

At our next meeting, I find out Teddie has secured some public assistance and job training through HRHC (Hudson River Health Care). He's more goal-oriented and focused on what he wants and how to get it. He needs clothes for professional interviews. He wants to lose weight and get fit to be healthier and happier, so he's been walking more. He needs a better resume, so he shows me what he has and asks my opinion about changing it to reflect his new identity. He wants to work with other transgender youth, helping them to make their way, so he's looking into a college course to train for health and human services. It's a significant change from our first meeting. Teddie has crossed an important line. I see it now, in his eyes and mine: he has hope.


DEATH
ISFREE

"I forgive my mother and my sisters. You know why? Because I realize that life is too short to be bitter."

— Brandon

Brandon

By Brandon Kolin
as told to Dimitra Kessenides

Photography by Robert Hooman

God doesn't give you anything that you can't handle," says Brandon Kolin, 27, a Brooklyn, N.Y.-based dental surgery technician who wound up in foster care at age 8. "There's something in every situation that you have to latch on to, whether physical or emotional. There's something that has to ground you through whatever situation."

Brandon found that grounding in Stephan McCall, his father of 10 years now. Brandon met Stephan after a nearly seven-year stretch in one foster care home on Long Island and a period of time in a psychiatric hospital — as he describes the meeting now, he says he knew instantly that this man was different, that with Stephan he had the chance for a loving, nurturing relationship, one to build a life on and grow stronger from. With Stephan's guidance and support, Brandon successfully pursued school and work. He enrolled in and completed a certificate program to become a dental surgery technician at SUNY Downstate Medical Center and has been working and supporting himself from his career for seven years and counting.

Brandon's life might have taken a very different turn. The abuse he suffered from his biological family sent him into the foster care system and in a period of just 18 months, he moved in and out of 24 homes. Then there was almost seven years of life in the one home on Long Island — that was abuse of a different sort, as Brandon describes it, with foster parents who brought in as many children as they could house, took as much money as they could get, and did barely more than provide a roof over the children's heads. There was little if any humanity in that house, but there was always Brandon's belief and hope that he wouldn't suffer the fate of so many other kids who age out of the foster care system. And there was one meaningful relationship that carried him through and taught him enough about trust and love to ultimately accept Stephan into his life.

A dog is like a child. You can give it all the love in the world. It's really about how you raise it.

I used to have a pit bull, it was in the foster care home I lived in on Long Island. I knew from day one, from the moment I walked in there, that she didn't like anybody that came into the house. But the first thing she did when I got there was lick me.

They say that dogs can sense emotion. This dog — her name was Storm — was so emotionally inclined to my feelings. If I was having a bad day, she would come up to me and give me a nuzzle. If I was crying, she would come up beside me. She would sleep with me and wind up with her paws around my neck. As I got older, I didn't want her sleeping with me so I'd push her off the bed. But she'd come back and sneak in while I was asleep and slowly approach me and cuddle up with me. The one thing I'll never forget: if I was lying around my room at home, and you came in, you had to state your name. If the dog didn't recognize your voice, she'd attack.

She was a friend to me. I would sit there and I'd pet the dog, and I'd be like, "I'm ok." And that little bit, just her sitting by me and standing by me, that meant a lot to me, to physically be there and let me pet her. Sometimes with relationships in foster care, you don't really have that affection. There are so many different people with different personalities doing it for different reasons. I grew very attached to the dog. I had a hell of a lot of stuff inside. When I was with that dog, I could be myself and she would be in the room and she couldn't say anything — she couldn't get angry or retaliate. Even though she wasn't a person, at the end of the day, you instill love into an animal just like you do with a person.

It's funny, being in foster care, being ripped from your family, being moved from here to there, it does something to you. It kind of turns you cold, and you learn how to switch the emotions on and off. It's hard to keep a relationship when you come back from foster care. And I'm not talking boyfriend/girlfriend, I'm talking personal relationships. You don't connect with a lot of people after that, at least I didn't. I didn't know how to love anything, I didn't know who to trust and who to love. At the end of the day, I didn't love myself. I think that dog taught me how to love something that was physical, and it taught me to trust and to believe.

I grew up with my mom and my sisters. In the first 8 years of my life, there was a lot of trauma — if I wasn't being abused, I was being neglected emotionally and physically. I didn't have the best relationship with them and there was a lot of insecurity there. Storm happened to be a female — maybe it's something deeper than that, maybe it's not. The female dog attaches more and

is more emotional, from what I know. I've thought about that a little bit.

The family on Long Island had 10 kids in foster care. I saw all the other kids get kicked out. I wasn't worried about that, I didn't think it could happen to me. But by the time I was 16, I was tired of my situation. They let me do whatever I wanted and basically they gave me a place to sleep and a roof over my head. They kept all the money, including my quota — the agency money I was supposed to get. So I had to get a job. I went and my friend got me a job, it just gave me something to do and it put money in my pocket. I started to buy my own brand new sneakers, brand new clothing, I bought everything brand new because I had earned it. I looked around my room and except for the radio, it was all new. And I said to myself, "I'm doing this all myself." A lot of the foster kids I grew up with, they were either in jail or they died. I didn't want to be incarcerated like everybody said I would be. That would just be feeding into what everybody was saying. I went to school every day. I went to work.

It's funny, they're still fostering. I went back a few years ago. That's the thing, God is so good, and I love him but with all the stuff that I've ever been through I don't think I could have forgiven anybody if I didn't have that push from my dad. I forgive. I forgive my mother and my sisters. You know why? Because I realize that life is too short to be bitter. And so I went back there. I was the only child that they kicked out and never begged to come back. The only child that never called them and said, "Hey I don't have any money, I need money." I never looked back. And I told myself, when I entered the dental surgery program, "I got to make this work." And I made it work.

“My mom handed me an orange laundry bag with my clothes in it. She said I was going away for the weekend, but I knew I wasn’t coming back.”

— Nefertiti

Nefertiti

By Vanessa Arriola

Photography by Amelia Coffaro

"I was happy to know things would be different, but I also knew life wasn't supposed to be like this."

— Nefertiti

Wide-eyed and smiling, 24-year-old Nefertiti is anxiously awaiting news from the Borough of Manhattan Community College. "I won't hear back until March or April," she says, struggling at times to get out the words, "but I can't wait that long."

Nefertiti dreams of being a social worker so that she can help kids who are going through difficult situations. Listening to her talk about her plans for the future, one would never guess the obstacles she has overcome. As she openly describes her path from one abusive environment to another, Nefertiti's story is a beacon of hope for children in foster care. She is well on her way to achieving her goals thanks to the support she found in her late teens from her adoptive mother, social service staff, and volunteers from non-profit organizations like You Gotta Believe.

Nefertiti's biological mother was addicted to crack cocaine and likely used drugs while she was pregnant. Nefertiti spent the first three months of her life in the hospital and continued to suffer from her mother's drug use until the age of 8. "I remember being so embarrassed when my mom came outside where I was playing looking like a crack-head," Nefertiti recalls with a self-conscious giggle. Often home alone for extended periods of time, Nefertiti learned to care for herself. Though family and friends tried to help, her mother's drug use continued. Before the Administration for Child Services (ACS) could intervene, Nefertiti's grandmother took her away from her mother. Nefertiti recalls, "My mom handed me an orange laundry bag with my clothes in it. She said I was going away for the weekend, but I knew I wasn't coming back." Nefertiti cried the entire trip from the Bronx to the Marlboro Projects in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn, where her grandmother lived.

Life with her grandmother was better initially. Nefertiti's godmother, Sandy, and her brother helped her adjust to her new surroundings at Marlboro. She enrolled in a new school and began to make friends. But after a year, things changed for Nefertiti. Her grandmother became angry and took out her frustration on Nefertiti. Physical and verbal abuse became routine, and Nefertiti's brother left the home. At an age where most kids learned how to ride a bike, she learned to cook, clean and take care of herself. Feeling unsafe at her grandmother's house, Nefertiti saw school as her escape. She recalls earning academic awards like Student of the Month and Honor Roll with pride. Despite her accomplishments, teachers at school recognized something was wrong.

The relationship between grandmother and granddaughter continued to deteriorate. Nefertiti's grandmother accused her of trying to kill herself by leaving on the gas stove. Nefertiti defends herself explaining she cooked for herself often and the gas stove was unreliable. Regardless of the misunderstanding, she was taken to a mental hospital in Queens for psychiatric evaluation. Diagnosed with depression, Nefertiti stayed in the institution for a month. She witnessed other patients act out and be treated with heavy sedatives or straitjackets. Nefertiti was scared but determined to get out. She dutifully attended individual and group therapy sessions, where she reports staff agreed that she didn't belong in the institution.

Once she was released back into her grandmother's care, Nefertiti bravely announced she didn't want to live with her grandmother anymore. At the Family Court Office in Brooklyn, Nefertiti's grandmother announced, "You can have her," and walked out of the building. Full of mixed emotions, Nefertiti was taken to an ACS office where she spent Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. "I was happy to know things would be different, but I also knew life wasn't supposed to be like this," Nefertiti explained.

Nefertiti spent the next three months at the Euphrasian Residence for Girls, undergoing evaluations and awaiting a permanent placement. Nefertiti recalled, "It felt like jail, but at least I got along with the staff." An opening at St. Helena's Community House meant another transition and another opportunity for Nefertiti. With the help of the trusted staff and social workers, Nefertiti adjusted to her new surroundings. Quiet and reserved at first, Nefertiti eventually opened up and got along well with everyone in the house. She enjoyed family dinners and became close with her housemates and the staff.

Her transition back to school was slow but successful. After the tumultuous year, Nefertiti had to repeat the ninth grade, and she transferred to the Coalition School for Social Change, located within walking distance from St. Helena's. Again, with the help of her social worker and her teachers, the transition went smoothly. She jokes that her favorite subjects were gym and lunch, and praises the tutors who helped her through challenging courses such as math and chemistry.

The time she spent at St. Helena's was the first step toward a stable life for Nefertiti. When the facility announced they were moving locations, Nefertiti was devastated but another opportunity presented itself. She had been spending time with Loretta, a Credit Suisse employee who volunteered at St. Helena's through the company's Reach for the Stars program. "Loretta would come to the house every Tuesday and we started to get to know each other," remembers Nefertiti.

Some might say it was destiny. Years earlier, Nefertiti and Loretta had also participated in a job readiness workshop at Credit Suisse. In 2007, Nefertiti moved in to Loretta's house and spent her first real Christmas with a family. Loretta's friends and family sent Christmas wishes welcoming her to the family.

Nefertiti's face lights as up as she explains what it was like to be part of a new family. The love and support that Loretta gives to Nefertiti comes through as Nefertiti tells her story. Although she stammers when recounting the numerous obstacles that she has overcome, ultimately confidence, optimism and clarity shine through when Nefertiti speaks about Loretta. Their love for one another is unconditional — the main tenet of You Gotta Believe, the organization that supported Nefertiti's adoption. Nefertiti and Loretta are examples of the successful work of this organization. With Loretta's support, Nefertiti is ready to take on any challenges as well as celebrate successes.

For the past 15 years, You Gotta Believe has been working to find permanent homes for older children and teens like Nefertiti before they age out of the foster care system. You Gotta Believe provides families interested in adopting older children with supports such as parenting course, legal advice and counseling throughout the adoption process.

"She was a county saint. She did whatever she could for me and always looked out for my best interest."

— Dmitriy

Dmitriy

By Mollie Neal

Photography by Heather Walsh

At 21, Dmitriy aged out of the foster care system on Long Island. While many young adults in the same situation are uneducated, unemployed and homeless, he has a high school diploma, a full-time job and an apartment to call home.

Dmitriy's life has been fraught with more challenges than any person — young or old — should have to endure. One of his strongest character traits is determination, which has surely helped him on his path to becoming a self-sufficient independent adult.

Dmitriy was born in Russia and, at age 3, was placed in an orphanage four hours southwest of Moscow. Through his eyes, the building looked like a castle, but he wasn't treated like royalty. There were roughly 100 kids grouped into "families" with no formal living standards, structure or discipline, says Dmitriy. The staff members would often get drunk and make fun of the children. Dmitriy frequently ran off to the bazaar to pick pockets, steal candy and beg for change. "I loved feeling like a bad ass outside of the orphanage."

When he returned home, older bullies would burn him with cigarettes if he didn't hand over his money.

While he could read by the first grade, Dmitriy preferred mastering street smarts rather than academic lessons. His excursions were a way to escape the staff and bullying children. "It was survival mode, period," says Dmitriy. He also had a longing for better things, even though he got his money and sweets by breaking all of the rules.

The eight-year stay in the orphanage was punctuated with just one perfect day. The kids got dressed up and former president Boris Yeltsin brought them cakes and toys.

Life seemed to be taking a turn for the better when Dmitriy was sent to the United States to attend summer day camp and live with an American family, who later adopted him when he was 11. His new life with a mother, father, two brothers and a nice house in the Long Island suburbs with a swimming pool appeared to be ideal.

Nevertheless, Dmitriy often felt like an outcast. Back in Russia, the local children treated the kids from the orphanage differently. The school kids in Amityville weren't any different. "It was a culture shock," he says. He only knew a few words of English and the kids called him cracker. Dmitriy didn't fit in with the cliques at school and he was always alone. He hadn't lost his resolve though. "I had a phrase. I can do this. I am Dima. I am Dima."

When Dmitriy turned 14 he hopped on a bus and found jobs at the Adventureland amusement park and a Subway restaurant. He spent as much time working as he could and resumed an old cigarette habit. At home "the honeymoon period was over," he says.

Short on cash one day, Dmitriy reached into his adoptive father's pants pocket to borrow $5. His adoptive mother saw him and thought he was stealing. "Things were never the same," he says.

Whenever he got home from school or work, he had to sit Indian style. "They put me in the playhouse outside day in, day out, week in, week out, month in, month out. When it got dark I would go to bed." His room had been moved to the corner of the basement. "I hated school. I got depressed. I was sitting Indian style in a house. It went on for almost a year," says Dmitriy.

One day, unable to control his anger, Dmitriy got into a physical fight with his adoptive father. He was removed from the home and sent to a psychiatric facility for a year where he felt like a prisoner. After returning home for a short period he was placed in a series of group homes. He would run away and frequently get into fights.

Some people agree with the proverb that it takes a village to raise a child. For Dmitriy, it was just a couple of people who had a positive impact and helped him take all of his determination and channel it toward improving his life.

Dmitriy began to realize it wasn't worth fighting the system and was assigned a new caseworker, Janet. "She was a county saint," he says. "She did whatever she could for me and always looked out for my best interest." He welcomed placement at a small family-oriented group home in Brentwood where the kids looked out for each other and the staff was attentive.

Dmitriy signed up for YouthBuild Long Island, an alternative school that also helps kids develop life skills with apprenticeships and training programs. Finally, at age 18, he could relate to other students and even became class president. He earned his GED, learned construction skills and proudly spoke at fundraisers to help promote YouthBuild.

With his new skills, Dmitriy landed a construction job and got along with his co-workers. "I saw myself getting older…they called me 'kid' but I saw myself fitting in."

Alongside the founder of his group home, he began coaching football. After two years, a person affiliated with the town approached Dmitriy and said, "We see you have been donating a lot of time and don't get paid to do this and you are a young kid. It's good to see. Would you like to work for the Town of Oyster Bay?"

Dmitriy now has a full-time job working at the sanitation department and lives in his own apartment, thanks to assistance from HPRP, a pilot program operated by the Nassau County Office of Housing and Homeless Services. He isn't really sure what happened to his parents. Right before the people at the Russian orphanage sent him to America, they told Dmitriy his parents were politically active and had been executed. Whether that is the truth or not, he may never know. His adoptive mother took him to a Russian barber when he arrived in America and he still visits him for haircuts. This is the only tie he has to his native country.


BALDWIN'S
MASAPEQUA KIWANIS CLUB
MASAPEQUA MUSTANGS

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A former teacher and school counselor, Vanessa Arriola has spent the past ten years working to provide students from low-income areas with a better education. Vanessa is originally from Southern California, and has lived in New York City for the past two years. She currently provides operational support to New Visions Charter High Schools located in the Bronx, N.Y. She holds a B.A. in Political Science and a Masters in Education from UCLA. Vanessa enjoys volunteering in the Minds Matter mentoring program

Amelia Coffaro: Assistant Producer
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Amelia Coffaro is a photographer and producer based in Brooklyn, N.Y. Her studies in Photography and Global Affairs led her to join the SalaamGarage team where she employs skills from both backgrounds to affect positive change through humanitarian and artistic projects. She believes in the power these precious, untold stories have to see past each of our own boundaries into the hearts of others. Amelia plans to continue producing SalaamGarage Local stories for the NYC chapter and can't wait for what is to come.

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Yvonne Allaway is a graduate of the School of Visual Arts whose work has appeared in *Surface*, *Blackbook*, *Bust*, *Urb*, *Map* and *Neuemode* magazines among others. She is most passionate about horses, photography and the issues children over 18 face when aging out of the foster care system. Frustrated by the illusion that foster care is a lovely utopia for children, she joined SalaamGarage to help shed light on those issues and is proud of the success stories that continue to arise, including that of the young woman she photographed.

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Daphne Eviatar is a lawyer, journalist and Senior Counsel for Human Rights First, based in New York. She started her legal career representing children in foster care, and participated in a class-action lawsuit against New York City's foster care system that led to a landmark settlement agreement for reform. As a journalist, she has written for *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Harper's*, *The Nation* and many more. Although now focused on human rights abuses in the United States' global "war on terror," especially in Afghanistan, she's still fascinated and disturbed by much of what goes on around her at home in New York City and was thrilled to work with SalaamGarage to help document the lives of children aging out of foster care.

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A storyteller, who presents a compelling photographic narrative, Bruce Byers' passion and innate ability to immerse viewers in a world of private reflections have led him to travel and photograph extensively throughout the world. From China and the Dominican Republic to the West Bank and Bangladesh, he has documented children's medical missions since 2006, concentrating on cleft and dental missions into third world countries.

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Petra was born and raised in Vienna, Austria, and received her post-graduate degree in Marketing. The passionate world traveler has developed a strong interest in photography over the last years. Petra is convinced that small changes will make this world a better place and that getting involved is a first step in the right direction.

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Matt Furman: Photographer
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Matt Furman grew up in a small town called Hollidaysburg, Pennyslvania, best known as 'The Birthplace of the Slinky'. He went to art school in Greece, and then moved to New York in 2001 to start his photography career. He currently resides with his wife and two daughters in New York City, where he works as a freelance photographer.

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Jordan Hollender: Photographer
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Ever since Jordan Hollender's grandfather built him his first darkroom at the age of 16, he was hooked on photography. At a young age, he was fortunate to realize that he loved shooting and creating. He feels the variables are endless and the lessons are always changing. Jordan believes volunteering helps him to connect with others to hear and share their stories with the hopes of inspiring others.

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Shannon Green: Journalist
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Shannon is a former lawyer, present-day journalist and soon-to-be aunt. She writes mostly about corporate legal issues, but never forgets about the human aspect of her work. Shannon,who has a passion for human rights issues, is thrilled to be raising the voice of the unheard. This project is especially important to her since she grew up with her parents fighting over who would get custody of her and she actually didn't realize how lucky she was.

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Robert Hooman: Photographer
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For the past 12 years, Robert Hooman has been channeling his passion for stories and the visual arts into photography, both motion and stills. Having lived his teenage years under oppressive conditions and war in Iran, bookended by childhood in California and college in New York City, Robert brings a unique insight and sensibility to his work. A graduate of film/tv production from NYU's Tisch School of Arts, his photography fuses a cinematic vision with a photographer's eye for light and darkness, creating indelible imagery. Robert very strongly believes that it is the responsibility of every member of society to help make it better, create awareness and share stories and perspectives that otherwise would go unnoticed.

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Tommy Hallissey: Journalist, Editor
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Tommy is a journalist who has worked as a police reporter for *The Chief* in Manhattan and *The Riverdale Press* in the Bronx. The uncle of 11 nieces and nephews, he has been published in the *New York Post*, *The Village Voice*, *City Limits* and *The Downtown Express* to name a few. He currently works as an Intern Writer/Editor for the non-profit Life's WORC, which provides supportive services to the developmentally disabled and the autistic in Nassau, Suffolk and Queens.

Tommy knows how fortunate he is to have a big family that can help in difficult times and he admires those who can keep a positive attitude without a family to share in their struggles.

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Dimitra Kessenides is a New York City-based editor and writer.

Amy Kolz: Journalist
New York, New York

Amy is a senior reporter with *The American Lawyer* magazine where she covers the business of law. A mom of two young boys, Amy recognizes how fortunate she is to be able to offer her sons a childhood with stability, security and love. She hopes that the stories told by the Aging-Out project will inspire all of us to correct the gross inadequacies in the foster care system.

Patricia Paine: Writer
New York, New York

Patricia Paine was born and raised on Cape Cod, and moved to Manhattan in her late twenties. She spends her free time writing fiction, and is an avid reader. Her husband and two grown children are her jewels and fuel her desire to work hard and savor every day. Understanding people and listening to their stories is a mission she strives to perfect, for everyone needs to tell their story and enjoy the triumph of being heard.

Moya McAllister: Photographer, Writer
Brooklyn, New York

Moya McAllister is an assignment photographer who divides her time between New York City and Dublin, Ireland. She holds a BFA in Photography from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Moya's previous career as a photo editor spanned multiple media outlets, most notably: *InStyle*, Time Inc., Harry N. Abrams, Roger Black Studios, *Newsweek*, Scholastic & INK publishing. She is also co-founder and administrator of PictureEditors.Org, a network for editorial photo editors. McAllister is passionate about support and funding for New York City public education and teachers, as well as many other social issues including the welfare and needs of children without means and women's reproductive rights. If there's something she can do to change a person's life, her time has been time well-spent.

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Amy Sernatinger: Writer
New York, New York

Amy Sernatinger received her undergraduate degree in English Literature from Hunter College in 2007. Upon graduating she discovered American Sign Language, studying it over the next three years. Sernatinger remains passionate about and dedicated to the art of writing saying, "I fell in love with writing when I learned how it felt to speak without talking; discovering the ultimate outlet for my creative self."

Currently, Sernatinger works in administration at a charter school in Harlem. In her spare time, she writes. With a passion for people's stories she says, "this world is full of characters from a book — except the people I meet and the stories I get to hear are real. I am forever intrigued by where people come from, how they came to meet me and where they want to go next."

Sernatinger believes the United States helps countries abroad and wants to give a heartbeat to the issues that her own country deals with that she believes deserve the same attention and support.

Mollie Neal: Writer, Editor
Huntington, New York

Mollie Neal is a freelance writer and editor who has worked for numerous consumer and business publishers. She has spent the past 15 years focusing much of her time writing about individuals who have triumphed over obstacles with the goal of educating and inspiring readers. Having had a cousin who was adopted into the family out of the foster care system, she has seen the lasting emotional scars of a troubled childhood and the powerful impact supportive family roots can have. Now, she wants to give voice to the young adults who age of the foster care system and the struggles they face while fending for themselves.

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Jim Sewastynowicz: Photographer, Book Designer
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After graduating with a degree in photojournalism, Jim Sewastynowicz spent several years as a photographer at small-town newspapers in Minnesota and Pennsylvania recording daily life before moving to New York. Currently, he is an art director working in publication design. Jim began working in media to shine a light on the stories and people that may not be receiving the attention they deserve.

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Maggie Soladay is an editorial photography editor, producer, and photographer based in New York City. She is a passionate activist, using her knowledge of the old and new media to tackle the world's humanitarian and environmental problems. Maggie believes everyone has a calling to give back to the communities they care about, and photographers and journalists have a special duty, "We can be officers of justice and social change by putting our media skills to use for good."

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Carrie Vining Spanier: Writer
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Carrie Vining Spanier is a stay-at-home mom of two busy little boys and lest we not forget… the CEO, CFO, event planner, social worker and maid of her household! And yes, a writer too. She cares deeply about human rights issues, hunger and poverty, especially when those issues involve children.

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Ian Spanier: Photographer
Long Beach, New York

Ian Spanier began taking photographs at 6 years old when his parents gave him his first point-and-shoot camera. After majoring in photography in college, Spanier worked in publishing as an editor, but making pictures never left him. Having only known 35mm, he taught himself medium and large format as well as lighting.

The original masters of photography have always inspired Spanier as they shot what they saw. For him, there is no "one" subject that he photographs; he also chooses to shoot what he sees.

Currently, Spanier lives with his wife and two sons in New York.

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William Vazquez: Photographer, Videographer
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Born and raised in New York City, William Vazquez grew up reading books about the interesting lives of others and collecting stamps of exotic places, vowing to one day visit and experience what he had been reading and imagining about for years. William's passion and current profession involves quite a bit of travel, providing him the opportunity to meet people with interesting stories he believes need to be shared so as to inspire others to listen and be curious about different cultures and people. Vazquez believes dignity, respect and understanding are three things everyone deserves and hopes his work helps people to achieve these ideals by giving them a voice and raising awareness to their situations.

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Alejandra Villa: Photographer
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Alejandra Villa combines a photojournalist's instinct with an eye for art to capture life's most poignant moments, striving to reveal the essence and beauty of her subjects. A native of Medellin, Colombia, Alejandra came to the United States to follow a lifelong dream of becoming a professional photographer. For the past 10 years, she's been an award-winning staff photographer for *Newsday* in New York, covering pivotal news events. Her work has appeared in publications such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Sun Sentinel*, *Urban Latino* magazine, *Harvard Nieman Report* and *Essence* magazine. Alejandra infuses passion and dedication into every assignment, using the camera as a passport into people's lives. She lives in New York City with her children, Daniella and Moises.

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Heather Walsh began her career in the arts as a fine art painter in New Mexico. As her creative vision took shape she found her passion and life's work as a photographer telling stories about people and places that are often overlooked. With respect, sensitivity and empathy she connects with her subjects and captures authentic emotions about our shared humanity. She is a freelance photographer based out of New York City, living on Long Island. A regular contributor to *Newsday*, Walsh's work has also been showcased at the National Arts Club and Lincoln Center in New York City.

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Lisa is a New York City-based photographer with a special interest in editorial/documentary work. She was an attendee of this year's Phoot Camp, an invite-only creative retreat and photography workshop hosted by Laura Brunow Miner, founder of Pictory and former editor-in-chief of *JPG Magazine*. Lisa enjoys travelling and working with non-profits on a domestic as well as international level, most recently working with Mayan Families in Guatemala. Locally she enjoys working with the Red Cross of Greater New York.

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Luke Whyte: Writer
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Luke Whyte is a freelance writer seeking to tell stories that help us empathize with each other. In early 2010, he founded Voices of Justice, an online multimedia project that focused on telling the real life stories of Californian inmates, parolees and correctional officers in order to humanize and raise awareness about the state's correctional crisis. The means and consequences of aging out are not inexorable. With this project, he hopes to raise enough awareness to put positive progress into motion.

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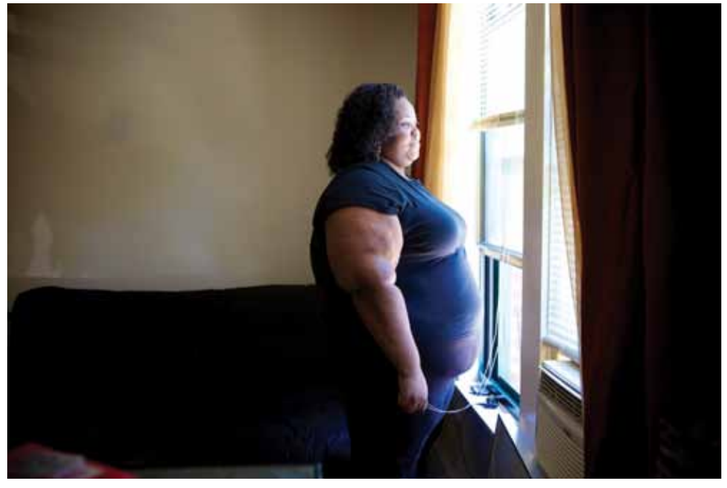
SPECIAL THANKS

This book has been made possible in part by the generous contributions from the following:

Elisabeth Caren
Amy Coffaro
Amy Kolz & family
David L. Lewis
Luckyp.
Luvisia Molenje
Dan Portnoy
Antonio Ragone
Helen Ramaglia
David Spanier
Snorre Wik
Michi Yanagishita
David Kovner

And special thanks to all of the young people who generously shared their stories with us, to You Gotta Believe, and the Nassau County Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program

MULTIMEDIA



For a multimedia story from this project, please view William Vazquez's video interview with Brittny at:
www.local.salaamgarage.com/2012/brittny

WHAT YOU CAN DO

SalaamGarage is a humanitarian media organization. We build teams of professional journalists and photographers who volunteer their skills to help inspire positive social change in our communities. We work closely with local organizations whom we find are making the greatest positive impact on the causes we care about.

For *Everybody Needs Someone, the Aging Out of Foster Care Project*, we are proud to be working with You Gotta Believe. Based in Coney Island, Brooklyn, You Gotta Believe is the only organization in America that focuses solely on facilitating adoptions for older teens and tweens, the hardest-to-place kids in the foster care system. Adopting a teen or older foster child is one of the greatest ways to help youth so they never have to age out of the system. Donate, volunteer or become an adoptive parent. No one should be without someone.

ADOPT an older foster kid. Learn about becoming a permanent parent to a teen aging out of foster care by signing up at:
http://yougottabelieve.org/get-learning/classes.

MENTOR a foster teen by becoming a Finding Family Mentor to teens aging out of foster care. Mentor a teen while helping find that teen a family.
http://yougottabelieve.org/get-involved/become-a-mentor

DONATE to help You Gotta Believe find families for teens.
http://yougottabelieve.org/get-involved/make-a-contribution

CALL You Gotta Believe 718.372.3003

You Gotta Believe
Adopting Older Kids And Youth

You Gotta Believe
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To contact SalaamGarageNYC to get involved with our humanitarian media projects visit http://local.SalaamGarage.com or email chapter chief and Aging Out of Foster Care in NYC executive producer Maggie Soladay at maggie@salaamgarage.com.

SalaamGarageLocal
local media advocacy for social change