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HUFF POST **IMPACT**

Foster Care Youth: The Faces of a Nation's Soul in Crisis

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For some children, the uncertainty of life on the street is better than certainty of violence at home. It was for me. At age 14, I escaped from an abusive home with no money, nowhere to go and only the clothes I was wearing. I remember staring into the night, standing somewhere between fear and freedom. I became one of the millions of homeless teens, yet I was lucky because foster care ultimately saved me.

However, after an emergency placement and three foster homes, the challenges were not over. At 17 I aged out of the foster care system early when my foster parents moved out of state. On my own again, I had to find a job, a place to live and finish high school. Then I climbed the next mountain to graduate from college and medical school. I completed residency, became a physician, a vice chancellor and dean of a school of medicine, and now will be President of the Lasker Foundation.

Shameful statistics

I only recently began [publicly talking](#) about my foster care experience because I realized that speaking out would help foster youth - and I discovered that many people lack an understanding of the harsh statistics and their impact on the country's future. The nation faces a crisis that demands a call to action to start truly caring about foster youth before it is too late.

- Nationwide, more than 400,000 youth were in foster care in [2011](#), more than 100,000 were waiting to be adopted and more than 7,000 entered the system than exited. Nearly [60 percent](#) were children of color.
- More than [10 percent](#) of the country's young adults who age out of foster care lack a permanent family - and have a [one in 11](#) chance of becoming homeless.
- [Less than half](#) of U.S. foster youth who age out of foster care graduate from high school and only [three to 11 percent](#) earn a bachelor's degree.
- Throughout the country, foster youth have [high rates](#) of poverty, incarceration, substance abuse and suicide, and are more likely than other youth to experience depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and chronic medical conditions.

Beating the odds

I was lucky. People cared enough to make the foster care system work for me. Foster homes took care of me, teachers supported me - and I was white, middle class and educated. As I went through the system, I saw children who were not as fortunate... who were failed by the system and society. They were robbed of their ideals, gave up hope and struggled to find a reason to live.

I experienced the unconscionable reality that society too easily creates "throw away children," especially if they are poor, disabled, of a minority race or ethnicity, immigrants or gay, among others. There are so many foster youth and at-risk young adults who need help. As individuals, communities and a nation, it is our responsibility to ensure that all children have the opportunity to pursue their dreams so that they have the chance to lead happy, healthy and fulfilling lives.

The U.S. needs an adequate foster care system to save neglected, abandoned and abused children - and society needs to grasp the scope of challenges that foster youth face throughout their lives as well as the different ways we can extend a helping hand. When young adults are on their own again after exiting foster care, they need complete medical and social services to help them navigate new challenges in transitioning to adulthood. Foster youth cannot beat the odds without hope, compassion and support.

Next steps

The greatness of a society is defined by how it treats its most vulnerable members. By this measure, the U.S. is failing and the cost comes in wasted talent and unfulfilled potential among foster youth. Each of us must care enough to save children one at a time and change the systems to ensure that all children are saved.

I offer three insights from my foster care experience to help each of us as we reach out to foster youth.

1. Foster children need more than physical shelter; they need emotional shelter to help heal the damage that they have experienced. The youth we try to help may be too untrusting and self-protective to accept us - we must keep trying.
2. Foster care parents, mentors, tutors and advocates have enormous impact on children who have never experienced an

adult's kindness and generosity in sharing the wisdom that they have accumulated. Your time can change a child's life.

3. Foster care systems must be expanded and improved, yet so must school systems to provide foster youth with access to the wonderful world of knowledge and skills. And foster youth must have job opportunities so they can support themselves to get to college and pursue careers.

Do the right thing

The future of foster youths depends on their spirit, belief in themselves and sense of realistic opportunities. It depends on us sharing our time, knowledge and resources - and hearts. I believe the path to progress is guided by a simple credo that is too often ignored - "just do the right thing."

I urge everyone to look beyond ourselves, reach out to vulnerable members of the community, and come together to create a brighter future for everyone. Now is the time for the nation - and society - to truly care about foster youth. It is time to stop forcing children to be the heroes of their own survival.

As President Barack Obama stated in his May 2013 National Foster Care Month [proclamation](#), "Whether as a friend, a role model, or a guardian, any of us can be a supportive adult for a child in need. As we honor the countless Americans who are answering that call to action, let us mark this month by showing children and youth in foster care the best our country has to offer." Now is the time to do the right thing.