

Fostering Change

*A Critical Eye on Foster Care
in Massachusetts*

From Executive Director Jane Lyons

Inspiration Becomes Reality



In May of this year in Boston, Friends of Children honored Dr. Eli Newberger with our Children's Champion Award and cele-

brated our FOCUS Program work supporting young adults exiting the foster care system without permanent family or community connections.

Two of the speakers for this event were a brother and sister who were the inspirations for our FOCUS program. Each spoke eloquently and emotionally of their hardships and how Friends of Children helped see the best in them. Our impact could not have been clearer. Jorge wrote to our Executive Director, Jane Lyons, afterwards and said this:

Friends of Children has “made a huge impact on my life, which impacts the life of my wife and kids. The ripple effect is tremendous and I couldn't thank you enough. More importantly, you've made such a big difference in (my sister's) life and introducing her to Friends of Children has got to be one of my greatest achievements.”

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Focused on making a difference

Some children don't have safe and loving homes that they can call their own. For whatever reason, the parents of these children are not able to provide for them and nor is extended family. When this occurs, the child is placed into the foster care system. In Massachusetts, thousands of children are placed into foster care every year.

We make promises to these children when we place them that they will have the chance for a safer life and a secure one. While true for some who can safely and permanently return home or who are adopted, there are thousands for whom these are just empty words. These are children who “age out” of care as young adults with nowhere to turn. Because they have no safety net, Friends of Children created the FOCUS Program to offer mentors, resources and opportunities to build skills to last a lifetime. It seems unconscionable to ask young people who have had no grounding in family, no secure place to live, no consistent, trusted adult to offer guidance and support, and no ability to practice independent life skills, to suddenly

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sort out how to be on “own their own.” In an agrarian economy, 18 was a magic age of maturity, when a young person was expected to manage independently. This is not who we now are as a society or economically, and it is unjust to accept that a part of our population already at such risk will be even moreso.

Read on to learn more about the how and why of FOCUS 2022 and how it is helping young people chart their courses to adulthood in successful steps!

Did you know?

Nationally, more than 20,000 young adults exit foster care systems with little to no support.

In our state, it is estimated that close to 900 young adults transition out of the Department of Children and Families’ supportive care each year (the data on this are not well reported by DCF).

Recent national data suggest that the average American youth lives at home until 27. How can we expect foster youth to thrive on their own at the age of 18 or even 22 without the skills or support needed to succeed independently?

Without a safety net, the outcomes are poor:

- ▶ **3%** will graduate from college (10x less than the general population)
- ▶ **29%** will be unable to pay rent (4x more than the general population)
- ▶ **40%** will experience homelessness within one year
- ▶ **71%** will experience unemployment within one year of leaving care, those that are working have a median income of \$9,000
- ▶ **42%** will be convicted of a crime (7x more than the general population)



A Gift Of Love

Quilts for our FOCUS young adults

Sunday, September 25th, quilts made by members of Edwards Church in Northampton were blessed and given to Friends of Children to be given to our FOCUS young adults. Two baby quilts had been passed on earlier for Demetria’s newborn.

“We want these young adults to know that the community cares about them” was said by both the quilters and the congregation.

This amazing gift came about when the quilting group reached out to us last spring. A member of their quilting group, Joan Loveless was an integral part of this group and had sadly died last winter. Her family had kindly suggested that donations be made in her memory to Friends of Children. In the picture above, one of the quilters is holding Joan’s picture to make sure she is part of this special moment. Joan’s kindness, heart and care for those around her lives on.

“We want these young adults to know that the community cares about them”

We are so honored to have these amazing quilters and Edwards Church (an ongoing supporter) be part of the family that is behind every young adult we support.

In Their Own Words

In these two pieces we hear from a young adult and a mentor who are both part of our program and share what FOCUS means to them.

FOCUS Young adult

"At 16 years old my brother and I came home from school and were told that we were going to be taken to a foster home. The thought of being taken away from my mom was terrifying, but hearing I wouldn't be placed with my brother was even scarier. We were taken to a run down village and placed on opposite sides. Luckily my brother and I were very fortunate to only spend a total of 4 days in those foster homes and were later placed with our Uncle.

"The journey through DCF was rough. Between caseworkers that made me feel unheard and unwanted and so much miscommunication on many levels, going through the system was difficult to say the least. I had a total of 5 caseworkers in 5 years and I felt that every time I started feeling comfortable with one they would tell me someone else was taking my case with little time in between and sometimes no warning at all. As the time was coming to age out I was worried that I wouldn't be able to survive on my own without the little help of DCF.

"When I got the option to join FOCUS as aging out was coming close I was very hesitant. After my awful experiences with DCF I wasn't sure if I could trust another adult with everything that was going on. After thinking about it more I decided to give it a fair chance. After my first interaction with someone from FOCUS for the first time I felt heard and respected as the young adult I am. I felt like aging out of DCF was not as scary as it seemed anymore and I knew that FOCUS was going to be a great program to be a part of. I saw a light in my future that I couldn't see before after dealing with being in DCF. DCF eventually closed my case without notifying me what was going on and FOCUS was right there to help. The checks I was getting abruptly stopped with no warning and then over time my caseworker just never spoke to me again.

"Since being a part of FOCUS whenever I had asked

for help whether it was for help with rent or help with finding a computer for school FOCUS was right there helping me out with nothing but support. I was sick with COVID and out of work for over a week. I was so concerned with paying rent and I remember talking to someone at FOCUS once about it and a few days later I had a check to help with rent. I was so scared to lose the apartment I worked so hard to get and with FOCUS I never had to worry about that. I was starting to take a course with work to get closer to my goal to be a certified preschool teacher and I was worried because I did not have a reliable computer. FOCUS brought me a laptop within days to make sure I could take the class and continue to reach my goal. I was never made to feel embarrassed of my situation and I am always

supported in anything I need. I was given a mentor who I adore and feel absolutely comfortable with. It is a great feeling to know there is an adult in my life that I can talk to about anything and who genuinely cares. I know that if I need absolutely anything I can

count on FOCUS to help. For the first time in my life I feel like I have adults I can rely on to help me become the best person I can be. Without FOCUS I would not be as successful as I am in my career and with having my first apartment. I will forever be grateful for all the people I have met at FOCUS and all the help they have given me."

"After my first interaction with someone from FOCUS for the first time I felt heard and respected as the young adult I am."

FOCUS Mentor

"Community Mentoring has been a uniquely joyous experience for me. Developing a stable, reliable and meaningful support system for my mentees feels like some of the most important work I have ever done. I have worked hard earning their trust and helping them reach their personal and professional goals. Being that one person who makes a real difference in their lives is humbling, educational and transformative."

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Wow...his feelings are palpable. How could we not offer this kind of support to other young people with foster care experience? There are so many that need the investment of the community. And that's what Friends of Children has done and continues to do with FOCUS: Foster Futures.

FOCUS makes a difference and changes the odds for young adults we have reached. In this issue of Fostering Change, we want to share some snapshots of the young adults we have gotten to know.

We hope you will take a little time to think about who the young adults are who seek support from FOCUS, and get to know a little more about these vulnerable, yet fearless, young adults. As one so eloquently put it:

"Youth can do a lot of powerful and important things. We just need people to believe in us"

With Thanks,



Jane Lyons
Executive Director



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Founded in Massachusetts in 1990, Friends of Children, Inc., is an independent 501 (c) 3 non-profit leader in child-welfare-related issues. We help vulnerable children and youth who have experienced foster care overcome adversity and thrive—with innovative direct-service programs and through state-level advocacy. We champion critical changes needed for at-risk children and youth—and for the systems entrusted with their well-being.



Welcome Dametria!

We welcome Dametria (pictured with her daughter Zay'Ahnna) to the FOCUS family. When asked what she would like to share about herself, Dametria said " I am a young mother who is doing nothing but trying my best to have a better future for not only myself but my daughter. A year ago I was pregnant and homeless and today I have my own apartment and worked so hard to just be better than I was yesterday. I stay motivated and my daughter is my motivation."

Dametria we see you, we hear you and you are amazing!

Upcoming Events

friendsofchildreninc.org/events

Mark your calendar with these two major events with us this fall:

Race Your Way 2022

An annual move-a-thon to benefit Friends of Children

Saturday, October 22, 2022

In-Person Run to Look Park: 12pm

Friends of Children Office

241 King Street, Northampton, MA

Or Participate Virtually!

► Learn more and donate at raceyourway2022.funraise.org



2022 Changemaker Award Dinner

Honoring Clare Higgins

Wednesday, October 26, 2022 | 5:30-7:30 pm

Garden House at Look Park

Florence, MA

► Learn more and get tickets at friendsofchildreninc.org/event/2022-changemaker-clare-higgins