

Transcending Trauma

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This essay is the college winner of *The Nation's* Third Annual Student Writing Contest.

Some contend that before I was born, my future was predetermined. My mother met my father in a mental institution where she was being treated for schizophrenia. I was conceived at that institution. By one year of age I would be in my first foster home placement.

My sister was born a year and a half later; she too would enter the foster care system. We would be placed back with our birth mother several times a year, she would have a mental breakdown and we would be thrust back into yet another foster care placement.

There is a scar that remains above my left eyebrow that reminds me of the inadequacy of state oversight and concern. My mother, having a psychotic episode, thought I turned into the devil and slashed me with a butcher knife. I was young, but understanding something terrible had happened, I ran for my life.

A police officer found a bloody 6-year-old running down the road and rescued me. The state returned me to her home several times after that, and it wasn't until she had failed to show up for court that the judge had had enough and terminated her parental rights. By then, my sister and I had been placed into other foster homes, where we would eventually be adopted separately.

With my exposure to forty foster homes, three group homes and finally adopted parents, I would ask this president to focus resources and attention on improving mental health services for dependent children in this nation.

The *Sacramento Bee* reports, "There are more than 500,000 children and youth in foster care in the U.S.; approximately 20,000 youth 'age out' or emancipate from foster care each year." Most of these children will not receive the counseling, guidance or training that young people need to survive in the world. They will rely on what is instilled in them in the "system" and will end up in jail, sometimes after committing terrible crimes.

That system raises children to become criminals without access to the basic common-sense knowledge necessary to succeed at work or school. They have no foundation to build solid family values, but they procreate, and when they bring their own children into the world the cycle remains unbroken. They will be the responsibility of the state from birth to death. These are humans who, given half a chance to live a good life, could flourish. All they require are resources and training to save them before they turn to a life of crime and drugs. We fight wars on drugs and terror; we have task forces, raids and

immense resources to apply to our problems. We have to attack the source of violence against children in society.

It would be my request of the president to commission a federal oversight panel to overhaul the treatment of those in foster care and others who cannot care for themselves. That panel would be made up of people who have been in foster care. They would not be misled by the clichés that are too often heard by those who have not experienced its horrors. There are atrocities that the human mind cannot comprehend. I was once pissed on by one foster sibling while being held by another. I watched the parents in that same home treat their biological children and their foster children differently. My caseworker wrote off my accusation, and it was not until years later, when the foster parents were prosecuted for abuse of other children, that my claims were validated. I would ask the president to speak to these individuals, to gain perspective as he charges the panel to reconstruct the failing system.

The president should add competent staff to the already overworked state and private agencies. Because most caseworkers have more than 100 children on their caseloads, they have no time to give the youth for which they are responsible any kind of help or attention. Additionally they would make sure that there would be well staffed independence programs and funds established to make certain that the minor coming of age is well prepared to function as an adult. This board would assure that there are not just clever labels on reports, such as "independence," but that the youth are actually ready to brace themselves for the adult world. There is also a greater need for mental health services. We should have national health insurance that will pay for psychiatric care and better community resources for people with mental health problems.

I was fortunate to be adopted as an adult. I am now studying to become a journalist and attend a college in North Carolina, where I receive above-average grades and yearn for knowledge. I am one of the fortunate few who, despite years of mental and physical abuse, have made it out to the other side of life reasonably intact. Though my nightmares haunt me when I sleep (those horrid dreams of yesteryear), when I wake in the morning I am loved and supported.

What will come of those precious souls hidden in lost statistics that will enter the system? What of those who will be released from the foster care? What will come of them? Absent the emotional tools needed to survive, they will protect themselves at the cost of others, with crime and violence. When we look in the mirror of humanity, we need to help these brokenhearted angels see a glimmer of hope. To do less would be a crime against our nation's young.

[Victor Lopez](#): This essay, the **college winner** of *The Nation's* Student Writing Contest, argues for a federal oversight panel to overhaul the treatment of those in foster care.