

## A Fifteen-Year-Old Dream

It has been fifteen years since I became a ward of the state in the New Jersey foster care system. One day after a difficult court hearing, I declared to my social worker, “I’m going to become a lawyer.” Her response was that children like myself would not become lawyers because we had been through too much. I indignantly crossed my arms and retorted, “I can do it, just watch.”

My experience of being a child in the foster care system has shaped every aspect of who I am. As a first-year law student, the promise I made myself is just beginning to become a reality, and my commitment to service has played a large role in getting me to this point. My adolescence was rattled with the aftershock of being in the foster care system. I was returned to the care of my birth parents without any reintegration programs and was expected to move on as though nothing had happened. Couple my anxiety with typical pubescent challenges, I was on the path my social worker foreshadowed—that I was not going to become a lawyer, nonetheless finish high school. It was not until college that my outlook began to brighten.

As an undergraduate, I spent a considerable amount of time understanding what my social worker was referring to when she said kids like myself had been through too much. She was speaking to the foster care to prison pipeline, a phenomenon that sends an alarming number of foster care children to jail, instead of on a path toward completing school. My studies introduced me to the school to prison pipeline, which is nearly identical. I was determined to interject, and make my mark by serving as a Teach for America (TFA) Corps member.

During my time in the Corps, I was able to see firsthand many of the issues that affect both students and foster care children. TFA was the stepping-stone into my career of

service. I joined the organization because when I was in foster care, my teachers did not understand I was a normal kid, and treated me differently. Instead of love and consistency, I felt ostracized and out of place. TFA put me in a position where I could empathize and empower all students regardless of their circumstances at home. I felt personally invested in working to end the school to prison pipeline and I worked with families to give them resources to advocate for their children and participate in their community. Although I looked different from my students and their families, I allowed vulnerability to enter our conversations. As a result, I was able to use the education I was giving students as a pathway to begin critical conversations to combat difficult issues that challenged the community in which I worked. While it was heartbreaking to say goodbye to my teaching commitment, I remembered the promise I made to my nine-year-old self, who was determined to prove her social worker wrong.

Although I am no longer in the classroom, I remain committed to a service-oriented lifestyle and work with a number of organizations that put me in touch with students who have stories similar to my own. My biggest asset to our community has been mentoring third and fourth grade boys at the Washington Nationals Youth Baseball Academy. The organization combines academics to build character and athletic success. I chose to work with nine-year-olds, because that is the age I was when I was in foster care. I kept a journal during my time, and documented what I wanted adults to give me. I asked someone to listen, even if I was wrong. At the Academy, I work to be a listener for my mentees. I believe all children deserve to be heard and have valuable opinions. We hone our relationship weekly, and I see the growth that has occurred because of the connection we have established.

When I reflect on my experiences, I am constantly reminded of the bold and slightly defiant nine-year-old vowing to make a name for herself. For fifteen years, I heard resounding

“no’s” and doubts that I would become anything close to a lawyer. My moment finally arrived when I received my first acceptance letter. That letter was confirmation that all the work I had put in was going to bring my dream to fruition. I am entering my finest hour and my career trajectory remains committed to serving others. My desire to practice law has become nuanced overtime, and I am constantly reminded of the needs that exist for underserved children. I aspire to use my legal degree to pursue a career advocating for children in the foster care system by serving as a juvenile defense attorney. I plan to eventually run for Congressional office and work on a committee that prioritizes both education and foster care policy. In my own home, I would like to become a foster parent, so that under my roof no child will ever have to experience what I went through. These are just a few of the ways I envision my future dedicated to serving the lives of others.

I am one of several thousand foster care children, but our stories do not always end with us achieving our dreams. This reality motivates me to prioritize service in my community. One of the many lessons I have learned during my time in foster care is that you must speak for yourself, because if you do not others will make decisions for you. My service and career are putting me into a position where I can make the decisions young children deserve. While I have grown a few inches, and maybe a little bit wiser, I am still the indignant nine-year-old with her arms crossed, but this time I have a plan. I am going to change the foster care system. I can do it. Just watch.