

Children's Rights

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<https://www.childrensrights.org/building-my-own-sense-of-family/>

Campaign and Advocacy

By Dameon Caldwell

I was born in Ohio 26 years ago. There were happy moments with my mother. But there were bad times too. I was abused by my uncles when I was very young. At the age of 7, I accidentally set the house on fire. That led to a Child Services report. I wound up in a family home for three years. It was a good home, and the family wanted to adopt me. But I wanted to hold out and get back home. I acted out and that was that.

That started a series of placements in group homes from the age of about 10 to when I graduated from high school. My story is pretty typical. To be in an institution without family or kin I call it a world rocking experience. You rush to grow up. And you grow up poorly equipped for anything but just survival.

You learn no social skills. You are heavily watched, but you get no guidance. In fact the opposite. We were told that we were destined for prison. That put me in that institutional mindset. They were telling me Youve had a life of failure so far, so youre just leading up to failure.

Institutions are not good places for people who are different. When I came out about my identity, a social worker was dismissive. But the kids knew. I had no way to express myself, no experience of friend-making, or how to build relationships, or even how to flirt. I look back and realize I was probably an annoying person I learned my stuff from movies instead modeling caring adults.

My mom died while I was in care. They waited two days to tell me, and literally said these words to me: We arent going to have an incident to report here are we? I was escorted to the funeral by four or five people. Ive blocked out a lot of it. I dont remember getting there, hugging my sister. They tapped me on the shoulder and took me out before it was over.

The mental health effects in particular were so hard to deal with depression, anxiety, trauma. I had multiple part time people caseworkers, GAL, CASA, recruited people. I had I bet 30 counselors. I just eventually knew what answers to give them.

I am on medical leave from College but once I can get back to my studies I am planning on a career in psychology. I am fascinated by the mind as a way to understand my own mind.

I am active in my community and run my own nonprofit, hosting food banks, acting as a community resource to rebuild hope for low-income families. I have made a family for myself with close friends many of whom who spent time in the system. They are all big activists and they are my inspiration.

I never got the parental push I needed. So I mentor foster kids and act as an adult voice for them. Youth in care need to be treated like people, not a number or a piece of paper or a paycheck. They need better mental health services especially LGBTQ resources and education about how to understand identity and orientation.

There is so much my friends and I missed out on because we were isolated and had no real adult caring what happened to us. No sense of completion of being part of something. I think thats what motivates us to push so hard to change the system and make it better.

Visit our [Tales of Strength & Love](#) page for more stories like Dameons.

Thousands of children are trapped in systems they do not understand. These systems fail to understand that children need time and space to be children and develop the foundations that allow them to be who they truly are.

Help us build a better childhood for kids everywhere and [donate to our Childhood is Our First Right](#) campaign today.

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First Name	Last Name
Email Address	