

*Engaging Youth. Building Supports. Strengthening Opportunities.*



My parents moved to the United States from Mexico chasing after the “American Dream.” Life wasn’t what we expected, though. Both of them worked multiple jobs to make ends meet, we were constantly moving to various trailer parks, and I attended several elementary schools. I have never had consistency in my life. My parents didn’t know how to discipline us kids in a healthy way, which resulted in abuse. My family’s challenges stemmed from poverty; my parents both worked two jobs at minimum wage trying to fulfill their dream of giving us a better life.

By middle school, I started acting out. I was so angry at the world because of everything I was experiencing at home. My home wasn’t safe, so I took every opportunity to not be there. When I was 14 years old, I ran away from home and the Department of Human Services got involved. I ended up in the foster care system, first temporarily and then permanently after I told my caseworker the truth about my home life.

As I navigated the foster care system, I learned that my parents and siblings had all moved back to Mexico without telling me goodbye or letting me know of their plans. This

left me in a unique situation because I was not a U.S. citizen and didn’t have any family to reunite with, and I didn’t have any desire to go back to Mexico because I was convinced that I would continue to endure further abuse.

Since being placed in foster care in 2008, I have been in four different foster or kinship homes where I continued to face and overcome multiple challenges, including an eating disorder, broken relationships, changes in schools, seeking citizenship, and more. In my second foster care home, I made deep connections and had hoped that I would be adopted. However, I was unexpectedly required to move to another placement after 7 months, which left me with yet another deep sense of loss. Finally, in 2010, I was placed in a kinship home where I was able to work through a majority of the trauma I had experienced. I was also able to manage my health issues, overcome my eating disorder, and complete the process necessary to gain my legal permanent resident status in the United States.

Resilience has been a recurring theme in my life, and during challenging times, I draw strength from a combination of inner determination and external support. In foster care, having a support circle that listened and a judge who valued my opinion were key contributors to my resilience. Knowing that my voice mattered made a significant difference and fueled my determination to overcome obstacles.

During my time in the child welfare system, I received support through programs like the Chafee program, which played a crucial role in providing resources for education and independent living skills.

Additionally, the Matthews House, a nonprofit that helps system-involved youth, connected me with a supportive community that understood the unique challenges faced by individuals transitioning from foster care. My transition facilitator, Nicole, seemed to care about me. We would go on coffee dates, and she asked how I was actually doing, helped me fill out various forms, and showed me how to build my résumé.

Child welfare professionals can better prepare young people for independent living by focusing on comprehensive life-skills training. This could include financial literacy, job readiness programs, and mentorship opportunities. Tailoring support to the individual needs and aspirations of each youth can make a significant impact on their transition to adulthood. Looking back, I wish I had received more support in learning practical life skills, such as budgeting, saving money, and job hunting. These skills are vital for navigating the complexities of independent living and building a stable foundation for the future.

To caseworkers and other professionals working with youth in foster care, my advice is to prioritize building genuine connections. Listen actively, validate experiences, and involve youth in decision-making processes that directly impact their lives. Recognize and celebrate their strengths, fostering a sense of agency and self-worth. Remember that every young person in foster care has unique strengths and aspirations, and by acknowledging and nurturing these, you can make a lasting positive impact on their journey to adulthood.

*The Matthews House is headquartered in Ft. Collins, CO. To learn more about its programs visit its [website](#).*



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau

