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Winter 2010

Embracing the Gifts in Our Lives

By Misty Stenslie, FCAA Alumni Member and Deputy Director

As I write this, the holiday season is in full-swing...our chapters hosted Thanksgiving dinners in Idaho, Ohio, Texas, and Arizona, we've ordered cards (which for many members will be the only family-type holiday greeting they receive), and there's a flurry of activity. Underneath it all is the knowledge of our alumni brothers and sisters who will be alone through the season, those we don't know, and who didn't go to Thanksgiving dinner or receive our card. Our brothers and sisters who will spend the holidays in institutions, jail, on the streets, or deployed through the military with no care packages on the way. Our younger brothers and sisters currently in care and feeling confused, afraid, angry, or sad.

Holidays, anniversaries and other significant times in our lives are when so many of us struggle the most. Old fears come to haunt us. Grief for what we've missed out on or lost seems amplified. Even when in the midst of the crowd of in-laws, our own children, or friends, it's easy to feel alone.

I used to dream that someday if I put in *enough* effort, found *enough* strength and healing, had a life that was healthy and stable *enough*, then I wouldn't be subject anymore to feeling like maybe I'll never be *enough*. I imagined that as I built my own family of choice, then the hole in my heart where a family belongs would disappear.

Over the last several months, FCAA has surveyed and interviewed many alumni leaders. We've asked what it means to be part of our social movement—what is gained and what is sacrificed when they raise their voices, where they find the motivation and energy, how to navigate the difficult emotions that come up when

tapping into their placement experiences. What we've heard is that getting involved is a way to *do something* to take away loneliness, powerlessness, voicelessness. We've heard that alumni remember the times they've felt those things, and they want to make sure that these memories don't have to become the life stories of the generations of young people following us in the system. We've heard that alumni use their leadership roles to rewrite their own histories by recognizing that, though they didn't always know it, they were never actually alone. There have always been others with similar experiences—and they were feeling invisible, too. We've also heard that the longing, the grief, and the questions about being enough linger.

If I could share a gift with our alumni community, it would be the ability to take all of these pieces of ourselves—the beautiful and altruistic, the difficult and complicated, the struggling and the victorious—and love it all. Hold the holes in ourselves and the whole of ourselves and love it all the way good parents love their children—fiercely, gratefully, and unconditionally.

Want to discuss the challenges and gifts of leadership in the alumni movement?

How about other topics like: FLUX: Life after Foster Care, alumni in the military, your connections to others who share the foster care experience? Please visit the blogs and forums section of our website under the Community tab and be part of the conversations!



New resource available:



Healthy Foster Care America

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) (working in partnership with FCAA, the National Medical Association, the National Foster Parent Association, the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and the Child Welfare League of America) has recently made available the new **Healthy Foster Care America website!**

The website www.aap.org/fostercare is a place where professionals, providers, and advocates can find the latest tools, resources, facts, and figures on the health and well-being of children and teens in foster care, the site also features postcards from FCAA's alumni community art project, as well as:

- Expert information on the health issues and needs of children and teens in care
- Subscription to the Healthy Foster Care America listserv to receive the latest information
- Customizable forms for professionals
- Practical PowerPoint presentations on the latest facts and figures related to the health issues and needs of children and teens in foster care
- Direct links to www.HealthyChildren.org
- A *Special Place for Children and Families* portal of resources for children and teens in care, parents (foster and birth) or kin.



Opportunity for young alumni: CCAI Foster Youth Internship

The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute's (CCAI) Foster Youth Internship (FYI) Program is a competitive, highly esteemed Congressional Internship for young adults who were in US foster care at the time of their eighteenth birthday or who were adopted after their fourteenth birthday from the US foster care system. The internship is in Washington DC offices of Members of Congress from late May-late July 2010.

To learn more about the internship, eligibility criteria, and to download the application, visit the Get Involved section of FCAA's website for member opportunities postings. Hurry, applications are due January 4th.

2009 Board of Directors Volunteers of the Year

connecting



Ryan Dollinger
Alumni Member from TX



Eshawn Peterson
Alumni Member from AZ

transforming



Judge Stephen Rideout
(Retired)
Ally Member from VA



Lisa Dickson
Alumni Member from OH

To learn more about our Volunteers of the Year and their incredible contributions, visit the Community tab on our website.

Member Spotlight: Sharon Stone

FCAA Alumni Member and Volunteer Chapter Manager from NC

FCAA operates with a very small staff and a very large mission. The alumni movement depends on the time, talents, and passions of our community to accomplish our goals of ensuring all alumni have a permanent place of belonging and that foster care practice and policy is the best it can be for the next generations.

Among FCAA's more than 1400 volunteers is Sharon Stone, our new **Volunteer Chapter Manager**. Sharon has accepted a one year term to provide support and supervision to our chapters around the country, and to help us develop the resources our chapters need to continue and expand their impressive work.

Sharon comes to this position with a great deal of both personal and professional expertise. She has a long and distinguished career as a social worker, she is a foster and adoptive parent, and she is an alumna of care. Thank you to Sharon—and to all of our member volunteers—for your dedication!



"If you were to title a book about my life, I guess it would be called The Split Life of Sharon Stone. My life has always been a secret dyad of the personal and public. When my brother and I were initially placed with my grandparents, we lived in an adult only community. Adult only meant that no one under 21 years of age could permanently live there. So after living the typical secretive life of a severely abused child, my brother and I lived the lives of secret children altogether. We could not play inside because the neighbors would be upset by the noise and we could not play outside for fear that anyone would see us. Our friends were the few elderly neighbors that grandma and grandpa trusted with our existence. So I have always felt very different and separate from my peers.

I think it was this perpetual feeling of separateness that made me apprehensive about initially joining FCAA. I confess that despite 17 years of professional involvement with the foster care system and, a soon to be earned doctorate in counseling, I had never admitted to myself that I was actually a foster care child. I never thought I was better or worse; just separate and different. Because of my involvement with FCAA, I am learning that I do not need to live the dyadic life of my childhood. For the first time in my life, I am among people that share my physical reactions to conflict, my sorrow during the holidays, and the joy of my achievements. They say, "Familiarity breeds content." FCAA members have become my family; FCAA has become a forever home for my heart. And I am finally content."

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008

What are your priorities?

As our members are well aware, the most sweeping federal child welfare legislation of the last decade was passed by Congress last fall. Our members testified in front of Congress, called and wrote letters to their representatives, and made congressional office visits. We've heard consistently from law makers, legislative staff, and seasoned advocates that the voices of young people and alumni were the most compelling toward this victory.

Now it's time for states to implement the new law. Through FCAA, we will continue to influence how this happens and we need **YOUR** voice!



Please visit our website at www.FosterCareAlumni.org/surveys and take the **FOSTERING CONNECTIONS SURVEY** to tell us about what you think our highest priority areas should be.

Happy 5th Birthday FCAA!



We can hardly believe it ourselves! Building FCAA over the last five years has been a true team effort, and we want to say thank you for being a part of our winning team. Whether you have been one of the players or a loyal fan, whether you attended every practice or cheered from the sidelines, whether you helped us score a homerun or patted our backs when we struck out, we are grateful to count you among our FCAA family.

But as we dream of FCAA's next five years, we need you. Our growing, vibrant, connected alumni community is speaking out proudly on behalf of our younger brothers and sisters in care. We are bringing our voices before those who can help us make a difference for the next generation. We need your voice. We need your ideas. We need your experiences. We need your support.

Whether you can make a gift that begins or ends in a "5" to honor our 5th birthday, or pledge to recruit 5 new members, or sponsor 5 alumni memberships, we want and need your support.

Visit www.FosterCareAlumni.org/donatenow.htm and make your secure gift today.

Our recent examination of our membership activities brought incredible news:

1. We're just about to hit 3000 FCAA members, representing all 50 states and Washington DC, as well as Canada and a number of other countries.
2. Of those members, **more than 1450 FCAA members have contributed to our organization as volunteers.**

Any volunteer membership organization will report that a nearly 50% member engagement rate is absolutely unheard of. Members of FCAA (alumni and allies) are among the most dedicated and passionate people anywhere.

A few examples of how our members have contributed their time, talents, and expertise to FCAA include:

- Being part of our Alumni Leadership Institute and/or our Alumni Speaker's Bureau
- Making state and/or federal advocacy visits, sending emails and letters or making calls to advocate for laws to support people in and from foster care
- Participation in FCAA's chapters and events
- Recruiting new members, donors and supporters
- Representing FCAA at workshops, conferences, and training sessions
- Submitting art to our Postcard Project
- Writing for FCAA's own publications, or articles authored by FCAA for other publications
- Donating time and skills for administrative support or helping us find needed equipment or resources

FCAA's success depends on our community coming together and investing in each other and the young people who come after us in the system. Thank you so much for your contribution!

Recognizing our Volunteers

What kind of volunteer work with FCAA have you been part of? How would you like your work recognized? Are you interested in a members-nominating-members award program?



Please visit our website at www.FosterCareAlumni.org/surveys and take our **VOLUNTEER RECOGNITION SURVEY** to help us shape FCAA's direction in celebrating our members' contributions.



Alumni members (left to right) Murry Aliberti (CA), Sam Broderick (NJ), Leigh Ecke (CO), Angie Cross (TX), Delilah Bruskas (WA), Adam Robe (MO), and Jelani Freeman (NY) gather last Fall to develop the topic areas and format of FCAA's new book, FLUX: Life After Foster Care.



Alumni members (left to right) Mia Behrens (CA), Misty Stenslie (VA), Shawn Huff (CO), and Theresa Ng (MA) prepare for presenting on the health needs of people in and from foster care for the annual membership conference of the American Academy of Pediatrics.



Alumni members (left to right) Denee Foster (OH), Leo Aguilar (CA), Chereese Phillips (PA), Krista Penrod (IA), and Nikki Grey (NV) prepare for congressional advocacy visits with Casey Family Programs to support public policy that prevents the need for children to enter foster care.



The VA Chapter enjoying the Alumni Family Reunion



The MD Chapter holding alumni leadership training in Baltimore for 30 members

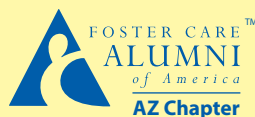


TX Chapter officers Ashley Gallardo and Vivian Dorsett host an exhibit table at the state Juvenile Justice Conference in Austin

Our growing, vibrant, diverse network of chapters continues to provide extended-family privilege for members as we use our experiences to improve foster care. A few highlights of recent chapter activity:



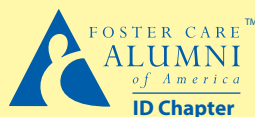
In November, FCAA established our 10th state-based chapter. Welcome Massachusetts Chapter of FCAA—we're so glad you're here!



Finding alumni brothers and sisters, particularly those most in need of support and connections, has been a priority for the AZ Chapter. The chapter is involved in community service activities such as working to bring food and toiletries to people who are homeless and they regularly invite group home residents to participate in FCAA's events like the Alumni Family Reunion and Thanksgiving dinner. An extremely warm and fun-loving group, the chapter also makes sure that the membership community has plenty of opportunities to play together like an extended family.



After a time of relative quiet in our FL Chapter, we're gearing up for a series of events and efforts in the state in early 2010. This includes reconnecting with members from across the state, continuing and deepening the connection between the chapter and Florida Youth SHINE, and broadening chapter leadership.



This fall found members of the ID Chapter having a tailgate party with burgers and hot dogs and friends at a big Boise State game. A member donated 20 tickets to the game, which for many members, was a first experience with college football. The chapter also hosted a big Thanksgiving dinner for members at the Casey Family Programs office in Boise.



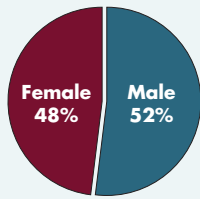
As chapter membership grows, leaders (both alumni and allies) are stepping forward to organize chapter efforts in communities across the state—which is necessary because everywhere members of the OH Chapter go, they are invited to participate more deeply as trainers, collaborators, and advisors. Recent accomplishments include the development of resources for alumni in college, legislative advocacy work on adoption and foster care issues, and hosting the youth track during the National Council on Adoptable Children conference.

FCAA Alumni Membership Demographic Snapshot

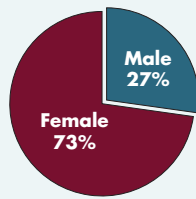
The following data is self-reported information from our alumni members drawn from two data points—Member Survey responses and completed Member Profiles through our website. These numbers cannot be integrated because some members have completed surveys, some have completed profiles, and some have done both. The range in percentages reflects the lowest to the highest from either data source. FCAA will complete a random sample test in the next few months to get more accurate membership demographic data. Our hypothesis is that the self-reported data skews younger, whiter, holding higher educational attainment and more female than the random sample testing will show.

Gender:

Percent in Foster Care



Percent in FCAA's Membership



Clearly, men are underrepresented in the FCAA membership community.

What would make our organization more appealing to men?

Where will we find male alumni who would like to get involved?

Research shows only 2-5% of alumni earn college degrees. But look at the statistics of FCAA members!

Why do you think FCAA member educational achievement is so high?

How do we reach our brothers and sisters who don't have high levels of formal education?

Education:

Member responses to "what is the highest level of education you've completed?"

Answer Options	Response Percent
less than 9th grade	0.0%
9-12th grade no diploma	3.4%
high school graduate or GED	9.4%
some college no degree	29.6%
vocational/trade school	5.2%
Associate degree	6.4%
Bachelor degree	18.9%
Graduate or professional degree	27.0%

Race and Ethnicity:

As a percentage, there are more children of color in the foster care system than in the general U.S. population. However, child abuse and neglect occur at about the same rate in all racial/ethnic groups.

Note: FCAA member percentages may total more than 100% because members may check all that apply.

Race/Ethnicity	Out-of-home care population	General population	FCAA Membership
Black (non-Hispanic)	32%	15%	24-27%
White (non-Hispanic)	41%	61%	52-67%
Hispanic	18%	17%	10-17%
American Indian/Alaska Native (non-Hispanic)	2%	1%	5-6%
Asian/Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic)	1%	3%	1-3%
Unknown	2%	Not reported	0-1%
2 or more Races (non-Hispanic)	3%	4%	1-4%

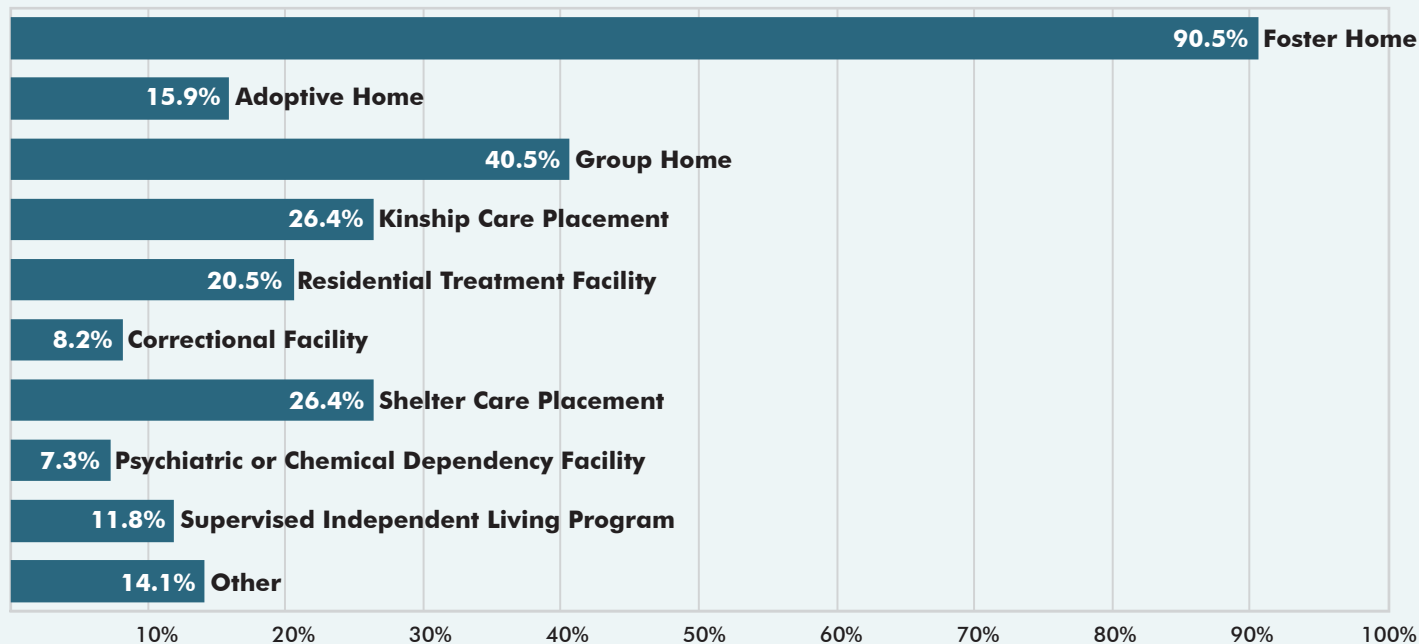
Were you aware of the disproportional representation of children of color in foster care?

How can we work together to change this?

Placement History:

Member responses to 'in what kind of placement setting(s) did you live?'

Note the total exceeds 100% because of members experiencing multiple placement settings.



Age:

FCAA's alumni membership shows a strong spread across the generations. However, new member growth is fastest among newly emancipated youth since they are the easiest age cohort to find in organized groups (i.e. youth conferences, Independent Living programs, college scholarship programs, etc.)

FCAA member

reported Range: 18-88

Average reported age: 33 (survey); 23 (profiles)

Our membership is truly multi-generational.

Do you think members from different age groups have different reasons for being involved, different needs, different goals?

Geographic Area:

FCAA Member distribution across 10 states with highest foster care population.

State	% Total Foster Care Population	% Total FCAA Alumni Members
California	18.2	10
New York	6.6	5
Florida	5.7	4
Texas	4.8	7
Pennsylvania	4.3	1
Michigan	4.2	2
Illinois	3.9	1
Ohio	3.6	6
Georgia	2.8	3
New Jersey	2.5	1
Cumulative Total	56.6	40

Sexual Orientation:

We only have estimates on the number of youth in care who are sexual minority youth. The studies done in the past indicate that lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/questioning (LGBTQ) youth are disproportionately represented in care. Credible sources estimate that 5-10% of teens in care identify as LGBTQ and that 20-40% of young people who become homeless each year are lesbian, gay or bisexual. FCAA is still working on strategies to track our member data reliably in this area.

Do you want to discuss these and other questions?

Please visit our Community section and participate in our blogs and forums. Our members-only interactive sections depend on YOUR participation to grow as a resource for all of our members.

New Housing Resources on FCAA Website

Many of us and those close to us are facing economic hardships. We are losing jobs, having our hours cut, losing health benefits, and confronting critical housing challenges. Are you among the thousands of people impacted by the current economic climate? If so, good news – FCAA has a new informational resource for you.

FCAA is pleased to announce that we have recently received funding from the Freddie Mac Foundation to bring new information to our community about financial and housing topics through our website. We have added a wide range of web-based tools and resources on topics related to housing, unemployment and financial management. Here you will find information related to paying your rent, mortgage, or other housing related costs such as security deposits and late utility bills. In addition, you will find other resources that address unemployment, health, and debt management.

Don't wait—visit our website today at www.FosterCareAlumni.org and click on the Resources tab.



Are you currently in danger of losing your home to eviction or foreclosure?
You may qualify for additional non-financial support and referral services through FCAA.
Take the HOUSING NEEDS SURVEY at www.FosterCareAlumni.org/surveys



FCAA was made possible by multi-year grants from Casey Family Programs, whose mission is to provide, improve—and ultimately prevent the need for—foster care. Casey Family Programs is proud to be the Founding Member of FCAA.

The mission of Foster Care Alumni of America is to connect the alumni community and to transform policy and practice, ensuring opportunity for people in and from foster care.

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