



Good morning and thank you for giving us this chance to tell you about Elevate. My name is Jackie Hammers-Crowell and I am an alumni of foster care. I have been a part of numerous initiatives to improve the system since I aged out in 1999 and it is my pleasure to be here today to tell you about one of the most effective initiatives I know.

I recently had the honor of sitting in a room full of foster care experts, basking in their knowledge and learning from their wisdom. The conversation ranged from topics such as sibling relationships, annual clothing allowances, adoptions and better training of foster parents. The discussions were positive, enlightened and got to the very core of the issues within the foster care system. The solutions that were proposed were as good as any I had ever heard from any other child welfare expert. The most unexpected thing about this group is not their expertise, however, but their age. The average member of this organization is between 13 and 20 years old.

The meeting I attended took place in Cedar Rapids, but there are similar meetings happening in other parts of the state as well. The youth of Elevate come together twice per month for support group meetings, where they share their highs and lows and provide support to each other. Also at these meetings, adults are brought in to teach the youth skills such as writing, public speaking and art. The youth then take their skills and training to educate adults affiliated with the system so that they may become more effective in their work with young people in care.

One might wonder how effective a group of teenagers can really be at effecting change in such a large system as foster care. The answer is very effective. Two judges in Polk County have changed their policies as a result of hearing Elevate youth speak. As a result, their courtrooms are now more accessible to youth who wish to have a voice in their own cases. Members of Elevate were also among the numerous constituents last year who contacted their legislators to voice support for legislation that would provide more support to youth aging out of care. The legislation that was passed is now known as the PAL Bill and it is an amazing resource to the young people of our state who age out of foster care. In addition,

Elevate members have given dozens of presentations and written or been featured in numerous articles about foster care for organizations including The Des Moines Register, Time Magazine, The Pew Commission on the Status of Children in Foster Care, Drake's Middleton Center for Children's Rights, The Court Appointed Special Advocate Program, The Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, The National Foster Parents Association, The North American Council on Adoptable Children, The National Center for Adoption Law and Policy, The United States Senate Finance Committee, Casey Family Programs and a host of other well-respected entities. That's pretty good for an organization that is completely grassroots in nature.

What is possibly most special about Elevate is that it does not select its members. All interested current and former foster youth are welcome to join once they reach the age of 13. Their level of involvement is then dictated by their interests, talents and willingness to make time commitments to specific projects. Some members choose only to attend support group meetings and prefer not to take part in speaking engagements, writing or art. Other members take part in speaking engagements or writing, but are unable to attend meetings on a regular basis. No matter what their level of involvement might be, all young people are welcomed with open arms whenever they choose to participate in an Elevate activity.

While there is a lot of work done by this organization, it is fully understood that the youth involved in Elevate, like anyone else who works hard, need to be rewarded for their efforts. Activities geared toward having fun have included a pool party, celebration of members' birthdays and adoption anniversaries at meetings, a holiday party with a DJ at a dance club, movie passes for winners of a letter writing contest, and a tour of the Seattle Aquarium (while in town to present at the It's My Life Conference). Youth are also provided gift cards in denominations of \$10 for their hard work or \$20 for activities that are particularly time consuming or take a lot of advance preparation.

Each chapter has an adult who has aged out of care as its facilitator and a foster or adoptive parent and a social worker as supports but the real leaders are the members of the ECC or Elevate Central Council. The ECC makes a number of the large decisions for Elevate and provides a connection between chapters so that ideas can freely flow from one chapter to the next. The ECC has taken a large role in planning Elevate's annual conference, in brainstorming fundraiser ideas, in planning a scholarship for graduating seniors and in advising adult facilitators about the general direction in which they would like to see the organization moving.

While there are many organizations across the country that function as advisory boards and there are also many groups that offer support to foster youth, Elevate is an unusual hybrid of both that also welcomes supportive adults such as social workers, attorneys and birth and foster parents to sit in on the teen meetings.

A final oddity of the organization is that at the same time as the teens of a chapter are meeting, Elevate is striving to find a complimenting foster parent support group and seeks to provide child care for children under six and art therapy for children between 7 and 12 years of age. In this way, it is hoped that everyone in the household will have a positive place to be at the same time and that they will be allowed to improve their social skills, skills of self-expression or parenting skills. The result is a unique entity that is unlike anything else currently in existence in the country.

That is not to say that Elevate is without its problems. One of the greatest struggles Elevate has encountered has been funding. We started out as a support group for foster youth, meeting twice a month in Polk County. There was funding to create our first DVD and for the youth to meet and little more was expected. The unforeseeable growth that has turned Elevate into a statewide entity, expanding its advocacy far beyond speaking and widening its audience to include other youth, foster and adoptive parents, social workers, attorneys, CASAs, judges, educators and more has been fantastic, but this success has also required money to pursue all of those endeavors and we are finding that our youth are increasingly being invited to talk in places outside of Iowa and those invitations may not include the cost of getting youth to the event, housing them and providing proper adult support while they present. As an example, one of our members was invited to present at an international foster care conference in New Zealand and the opportunity had to be turned down because the inviting organization did not have funding to offer scholarships, the youth could not afford to pay for it and Elevate could not come up with enough money for her to attend.

We were recently blessed to acquire a grant from DHS to cover four chapters of Elevate, but we have interest from all over the state to have chapters close enough for every Iowa foster youth to participate easily. The dilemma with which Elevate is faced is to spread out the money designated for four chapters to cover more bare bones chapters or to tell interested young people and the adults who are eagerly volunteering to support them that they need to wait until we can get funding or find their own funding to support their chapters. At this time, in order to not deny youth the opportunity to participate, we are using the grant money we have received for four chapters to cover all of the state chapters that have been able to

find an interested foster parent, a social worker, a foster care alumni and some youth. It is our hope that we will be able to find more funding to take these chapters from mere existence to thriving, fully-functional advocacy programs. We have most of the necessary components and as I already stated, the main challenge continues to be affording to do all that we are willing and eager to do.

In conclusion, the ultimate goal of Elevate is to help youth who are or have been in foster care to find their voice and to amplify it so that adults working with them will listen to what young people have to say and at the very least, take it into consideration as they make decisions that can effect the very direction of a young person's life. Also, it is hoped that foster youth and alumni will find hope, inspiration and support that will lead them to better outcomes than the current, rather bleak statistics would predict are in store for them. I have complete confidence that among the young people I have the honor of knowing through Elevate, there is a future Pulitzer Prize winner, a Nobel laureate, an Angel in Adoption, a Fields Medalist and an Academy Award Winner. While Elevate will not be able to take credit for their talent and hard work, I do believe we are giving them the confidence and opportunity to pursue dreams they might have otherwise thought impossible. For that alone, I am honored to be able to work with Elevate. Thank you for so graciously giving us the opportunity to speak to you today. We value your time.

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