

Beyond Emancipation News

Focus On Permanency: Foster Youth Supporting Each Other

In this issue:

Focus On Permanency: Clareesha & Donnisha	1
Fresh Start Café	1
Connect With B:E	3
Thank You To Our Supporters	3
Executive Director's Corner	4



Clareesha Slay and Donnisha Udo-Onkon

Clareesha Slay and Donnisha Udo-Onkon share a bond that their rhyming names accentuate. They are two women of color who have benefitted from Beyond Emancipation's services, but also from one another. Their sympatico relationship is clear: as they engage in spontaneous bursts of synchronized laughter and complete each other's sentences, talking with this pair is more like

witnessing a conversation than a formal interview. Clareesha and Donnisha are a living example of the notion of permanency, or belonging.

For foster and emancipated youth, developing and nurturing permanent, supportive relationships – or “permanency” – is important, and especially critical as one prepares to leave care. According to one youth, “It’s really important to make sure before emancipating a youth that they have one person. If I have somebody that I know I can depend on, that loves me and cares that I wake up tomorrow and am still breathing, I can get through it. I can walk through it.” (California Permanency For Youth Project, 2004)

Children who are raised by their own families often have built-in permanent connections – most often their parents - that offer them this kind of love, stability and commitment. Many foster youth, especially those who experience numerous placement changes, do not. But, says B:E Executive Director Rick McCracken, “permanency is much more than a parent situation. It’s about developing long term healthy relationships with people in your life who will celebrate your victories with you.” Secure relationships may be found in mentors, adoptive parents, or distant relatives. But, as McCracken emphasizes, fellow foster youth often fill this role for each other.

Donnisha and Clareesha are former foster youth enrolled at Cal State East Bay. They both overcame serious challenges to beat the odds and pursue higher education. ... **continued p. 3**

Beyond Emancipation's mission is *to help Alameda County's current and former foster youth make successful transitions to adulthood and living independently.*

Fresh Start Café Serves Up Opportunities For Success

Washetta Wiley, 21, has been working since she was 14 years old, but it was only after landing an internship at the Fresh Start Café at the Alameda County Recorder's Office, that she started thinking about becoming an entrepreneur. Learning to work with food inspired the single mom to craft the perfect potato salad. "I'm trying to figure out how I can start selling my potato salad. Every holiday and birthday I make it and everyone just eats it up," said Wiley.

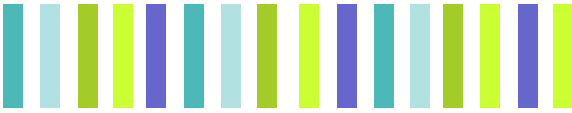
Inspiring success and encouraging initiative are exactly what the Fresh Start Café is about. Through collaborative effort and community engagement, the Café is able to

achieve its mission of giving former foster youth the opportunity to rise above the statistics that put them at-risk.

The Fresh Start Café itself is a mixed bowl of sorts, a public-private partnership combining the efforts of a non-profit, Beyond Emancipation; a corporation, Aramark; and a public entity, Alameda County's New Beginnings program. This partnership, the recipe of Alameda County Administrator Susan S. Muranishi, is a carefully tossed concoction that blends the savvy of each organization to support youth, furnish food, and facilitate communication in turn.

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Recipe For A Fresh Start

...continued from p. 1

New Beginnings leverages public-private partnerships to provide at-risk youth with paid employment, vocational training and job skills development. The Fresh Start Cafés – one at the Recorder’s office, one at Juvenile Hall, and one at the Castro Valley Library – rest at the heart of New Beginnings. Says Muranishi, “The Fresh Start Café is an important part of Alameda County’s New Beginnings Program. Our programs work closely with at-risk and foster care youth to provide varied work experiences. In developing new and enhanced work skills, the youth has more opportunities to become a responsible adult and a role model for others. Alameda County recognizes Beyond Emancipation for its support and strong commitment to foster youth to facilitate their transition from youth to adulthood.”

Betty Jo Reuben, Beyond Emancipation Employment Specialist, recruits, coaches and provides support to the Fresh Start interns. “Once we find a candidate, [we] find out why they’re interested in the café,” said Reuben. “If they’re a good fit, we provide orientation and wrap around services to support them. A lot of the interns have never had a job.” Learning soft skills, practicing responsibility, taking advantage of resources: these are all things that make Fresh Start Café so valuable to foster youth.

Wiley can testify that customer service is not always easy and working with people can sometimes be a “hassle.” However, her internship helped her learn some skills that allow her to cope with uncomfortable situations appropriately. Tricks of the trade, she says, include reading people and demonstrating confidence. “I

learned that with everybody, you have to match their mood, sometimes people are down and you can’t be *too* happy,” Wiley said, and when it comes to difficult situations, “just be more assertive telling people what you’re comfortable with.”

The 16-week, 3 day/week internship program not only exposes interns to new situations, but to networking opportunities as well. The Café’s location in the Alameda County Recorder’s Office allows youth to interact with a wide range of visitors. Regulars at the café include judges, lawyers, county staff, and the general public. New Beginnings’ Ben Paviour surveyed Café customers and learned that the interns were a hit. “We found overwhelmingly that people were thrilled with the youth,” he said.

As Wiley continues to serve potato salad on holidays and birthdays, she feels more equipped to handle the challenges that lie ahead. She notes that it takes initiative and spunk, and knowing where to go for help. Wiley admits her persistence paid off: “I... basically hounded Betty Jo until she found me something... I knew [B:E] could help me figure out what to do to make myself more employable.”

Perhaps the most important thing, Reuben says, is that the youth often graduate the program with a more enhanced sense of self-esteem. She notes that many youth seem less self-assured at first, but over the course of the internship, “Their whole personality changes. They become more outgoing, reliable.”

Stop by the Fresh Start Café at 1106 Madison Street in Oakland! It’s open Monday-Friday, 8:30 am – 3:30 pm.

Connect With Beyond Emancipation

Logged on? There are many ways you can connect with B:E online.



twitter.com/beyondemanciptn



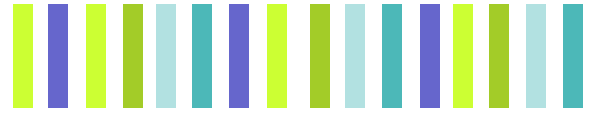
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Find all these links and more at www.beyondemancipation.org





THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS!

Beyond Emancipation's work is only possible because of our generous donors. We'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed to B:E so far in 2011. We are grateful for each of you. Thank you!

(Donations received after September 30, 2011 will be acknowledged in our next newsletter.)

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Clareesha and Donnisha: From Friendship To Permanency

...continued from p. 1

Donnisha's mother died when she was eight years old. Her father, who was battling a drug addiction, could not take care of her; other relatives were unreliable. She ended up living with an aunt and uncle, but never felt particularly close to them.

Born while her mother was in jail, Clareesha never knew either of her birth parents. She was raised by her great and uncle in Oakland, while the rest of her family were in Sacramento. She never knew most of her relatives. "I don't really have a bond, like a family bond, with any of them," she said.

However, Clareesha does find that family-like bond with Donnisha. The two women met in an intensive summer bridge program that helped them prepare for college. By the time they started classes in the fall, they were fast friends and roommates. Their B:E Case Manager, Erica Bell, notes the connection. "They seem

more like sisters than friends."

Although Clareesha and Donnisha have both struggled with school, they've been there to support and keep each other focused. They both say that finding the right resources and people to help has been critical. Persistence doesn't hurt, either. Donnisha said, "Former foster youth...are always saying no one wants to help us, but there are people out there that want to help. Youth need to take advantage of the different resources, gotta make them calls, write those essays. It [does] help, trust me. I know."

And even though self-advocacy is important, both of these young women know you can't do it alone.

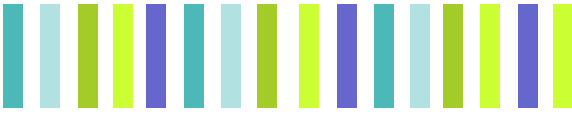
"If you find a little support, you can make it," Donnisha said, "All it takes is,"

"One," Donnisha and Clareesha chorused in unison.



Clareesha and Donnisha share a laugh. They arrived at their photo shoot wearing the same shoes!





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Executive Director's Corner

On January 1, 2012, the California Fostering Connections to Success Act, also known as AB 12, will become law. AB 12 will allow young adults to remain in foster care up to age 21, providing them an additional three years to prepare for independent adulthood.

It will take a full three years to fully implement AB 12, and that's very likely a good thing: there's a lot still to be worked out. Despite the remaining unknowns, one thing is clear: AB 12 is an unprecedented opportunity for California's foster youth to increase their employment skills, pursue education, and develop positive permanent relationships while supported by housing and services.

AB 12 is also an opportunity for B:E to evolve our programs. Underpinning the

law is the value that each young adult remain at the center of the decision-making process about his or her own future. Although we have long worked from this place, we are exploring ways to be even better, to create true partnerships with youth as we help them plan their paths to success. This will mean getting creative about our programming, and also opens up doors for new collaborative partnerships. I'm looking forward to it all.

We've been helping former foster youth for the last 16 years, and have been fortunate to have many community partners supporting our efforts. Will you join us as we embrace the change that the coming months will bring? Visit our website to learn more about B:E's work, or call us to find out how you can get involved. We look forward to hearing from you.

Rick McCracken
Executive Director

