

October 17th, 2014

University of Calgary

MSW Leadership - Distance Education

Dear MSW Leadership Committee:

Through my work with your MSW Leadership program, I hope to gain the opportunity to support greater inclusion of Foster Alumni voices in child welfare research, policy and practice. My intention is to conduct qualitative case study research to examine the experiences of foster alumni – a group that has been rendered invisible in most literature. My expectation is that this study will result in numerous insights, which will support improvements to child welfare program development. I also hope to focus my practicum on building a Foster Alumni Alliance for Alberta. This is an especially important step since my understanding is that the lack of a means to connect with adult foster alumni is the main barrier preventing inclusion of their voices. Through these efforts, I hope to contribute to improved long term outcomes for myself and other foster alumni across Alberta and Canada.

I am a foster alumnus and a social worker. Foster alumni is what we graduates of foster care systems often call ourselves. My lack of a healthy family and community of origin to look to for support has caused me to seek belonging and assistance through other means. As part of this journey, I have been searching for other foster alumni, especially in the social services field. I wrote to the Alberta College of Social Workers asking if they know of any foster alumni social workers and asking if I could put an ad in their newsletter seeking contact with foster alumni social workers. Sadly, they advised me that they did not know of any Foster Alumni Social Workers and did not respond to my request to advertise in their newsletter. In 2011, I wrote to the minister, deputy minister and other managers for Alberta Government Children's Services seeking contact with any foster alumni on staff. I was advised that while there may be foster alumni in Human Services, tracking staff who are foster alumni and/or providing that information to me would be unethical. Through the ACSW Newsletter, I learned about Dr. Micheal Ungar's book, "The Social Worker" which tells the story of a Foster Alumni Social Worker. I wrote to Dr. Ungar to ask if he had met any foster alumni social workers. He advised me that he had not and that the book was entirely fictional. I asked him if he wanted to meet a foster alumni social worker, (i.e., -me), however, he declined the offer. I now work for Alberta Government Children's Services in Edson. As part of my position, I regularly attend educational forums with presentations by learned experts in the Children's Services field. At every one of these events, I have introduced myself to these experts as a foster alumni social worker and asked if they have ever met anyone like me before. All of them have advised that they have not. I have continuously reached out to community groups and leaders in the field, yet have been met with silence and unresponsiveness regarding this topic. This experience has fuelled my ambition to pursue graduate work in this area: How do social services address foster alumni? While we remain a marginalized group, we also have the potential to build a strong

network, and narrative, about the foster alumni experience. How have our successes and experiences been rendered invisible by socially constructed ideologies of foster children? I intend to explore these questions through my graduate studies at the University of Calgary.

I have long been interested in research related to foster alumni and others who are non-family privileged but have found that there is almost no information available that has been developed from a foster alumni perspective. The majority of research seems focused on finding ways to improve the foster care system without recognizing the existence of successful and/or adult foster alumni. Manning and Marietta Zandstra (2003) recommends the development of common terms of reference for use in Child Welfare research, but still do not include the terms "foster alumni" and "foster alumnus" in the attached glossary. Deborah Padgett (2008) advises that social workers' qualitative research take an "insider rather than an outsider perspective; is person centered rather than variable centered; holistic rather than particularistic; contextual rather than decontextual and seeks depth rather than breadth" (p. 2). However, even though Foster Alumni Alliances have existed in the United States for decades, almost all research in this field fails to recognize or include the voices of adult foster alumni. In Canada the results are further nil. To me this is the equivalent of trying to study aboriginal people without asking us our opinions. Jacobs and Everall (2003) offer one of the few publications that seek to discover foster alumni views regarding the aspects of their lives that have led to their success. Jacobs and Everall have taken a major step in the right direction but their work still fails to include the voices of anyone over 25 years of age.

While there seems to be very little written or official awareness of adult foster alumni, I have confirmed numerous anecdotal reports of foster alumni who are professionals in the social work field and other areas. Also, whenever I have encountered other foster alumni, they are very excited to meet me and willing to support my efforts to develop a means for us to communicate with each other and share our views with the world. There seems to be a bit of an odd paradox in the Social Work field. Those of us foster alumni who are most successful tend to be least likely to be open about our personal histories, while those of us who are least successful, often due to biological impairments that are beyond our control, tend to be the most accessible and most studied and documented. This may lead to views regarding expected outcomes and capacity of all foster alumni being negatively skewed by the sad realities of those of us who have suffered physiological damage. Sadly, there seems to be a commonly held view that trauma during childhood leads to permanent impairment of our social, emotional, psychological and intellectual capacities. I have recently attended meetings in which other social workers and mental health providers seemed to be expressing this belief.

This is extremely unfortunate since I believe that the opposite is actually true. I believe that many of us who do not enjoy the privilege of a typical family have unique social, emotional, psychological and intellectual strengths. Many of us have been required to be creative and cultivate our own lives with little direction from others from a very young age and this can result in the development of a greater than average capacity to consider, plan and implement our own strategies and beliefs. We are often able to see the world from a different perspective and are able to bring unique insights to many situations. However, many of us require more time than average to stabilize our personalities, perceptions and attitudes due to a lack of accessible models and the impact of trauma. Therefore,

focusing solely on foster alumni children and youth can provide a very inaccurate picture of our capacities. In fact, further study on adults will provide even greater insight into the experiences and implications of the foster system. No mechanism for tracking outcomes for adult foster alumni currently exists to my knowledge other than the survey by the Foster Alumni of America which found that over 50% of their membership have graduate degrees and only 3-4 % have failed to graduate from high school. (Foster Care Alumni Alliance Newsletter, 2009-2010). Jacobs and Everall (2003) found that all of the successful participants had separated themselves from their background and avoided contact with their community of origin as part of their path to success. Perhaps, these alumni took these steps to protect themselves from damaging and inaccurate negative perceptions of them. Therefore, this is an area that is of significant importance to social work research and I am looking forward to the opportunity to begin the work of improving the inclusion of foster alumni voices in social worker research, policy and practice.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Westergaard, BSW, RSW

#### References

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