

Most people view the foster care system as a foreign topic that does not impact their area; yet, contrary to this popular belief, according to KIDS COUNT Data Center, in 2015 there were 14,853 children in the foster system in Pennsylvania alone (Dawson, 2011). Sadly, while the world may be familiar with foster care horror stories or freighting dramatic representations in film, they lack the hunger for knowledge and the drive to help make a change. It was reported in Knaperek's article *Governor's Policies Put State's Kids at Risk* that children in foster homes are three times more likely to be physically abused. This rate is 10 times more likely in group homes where children are also 28% more likely to experience sexual abuse (Knaperek, 2005). The foster care system continues to negatively impact the physical and mental health of foster children, while leaving their futures up to their own devices. American citizens ignore the realities of this broken system and pretend that they are powerless to make a difference. Consistent with this, *Child Maltreatment 2015* reports that there were 683,000 confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect in the U.S. in 2015 (Choi, 2017). The foster system is failing foster kids by putting them in danger and abandoning them in their time of need as they age out of the system, often as young as age 18, while society remains blind to the truth of the struggle. Foster kids have gone through so much pain, abuse, and uncertainty from their unstable families, and yet their hurt does not end when they go into the system. Children in the foster care system need to be better protected and provided for in regard to their mental health and their future.

It is truly upsetting that a system focused on bettering the lives of children and saving them from homes that can psychologically devastate them is doing just that. Being tossed from one home to another, over and over again, has taught these children that they cannot depend on

anyone, and that everyone's love and care for them is a lie. According to *The Effects of Foster Care Placement on Young Children's Mental Health* the foster care system creates numerous disruptions in a foster child's attachment relationships (Troutman, 2000). Constantly grieving the non-death losses of their family, friends, community, and even normalcy itself; these children are not given the proper care and support they need. Furthermore, Troutman explains that young children are more likely to spend a large portion of their life in the foster care system. This, in turn, has a large negative impact on infants, toddlers and elementary school children, who fail to create a secure attachment relationship to their primary caregiver during their developing years (Troutman, 2000). Instead, such children will develop attachment disorders, which can limit a child's ability to manage their emotions, communicate successfully, or form meaningful and satisfying relationships (Follan, 2014). While a seemingly simple solution to this would be to continue parental visits while in foster care, Troutman reports that visiting with parents does more bad than good. This is because it is very upsetting to young children to see their parents, when they cannot be with them, and it is very disrupting to other aspects of their development. For example, in Troutman's study, children that visited their biological parents exhibited serious symptoms of emotional distress such as aggressive behavior, sleep disturbance, toiletry problems, clinging and crying before during and/or after visits (Troutman, 2000). Additionally, a large problem with the foster care system is that while these innocent and hurt children wait the 12 months for their parents to create a safe and stable environment for them, before possibly losing parental rights, they are kept from feeling safe and truly loved, as they wait for their parents day after day. Tragically, it is common for biological parents to put on a façade at the 12-month mark, to gain custody again, after of which they fall back into their abusive and neglecting pattern, throwing the child back into the system to endure another year of torment. This pattern

can happen over and over again, until a child is often too old, broken-hearted and unstable to be adopted by a loving family; forever robbing them of their chance of believing in family, trust, and unconditional love.

The damaging effects continue even after they leave the system. In fact, when foster kids age out of the system they are sprung into adulthood and left completely to their own devices. According to The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, once a child ages out of foster care, in some states as early as age 18, they are much more likely to find themselves in prison, homeless or as a new parent within the first few years. Sadly, 71% of girls in foster care will become pregnant by age 21 (Dion, 2014). Moreover, a young woman with children is much more likely to live below the poverty level than a young woman without children. These and other negative consequences are suffered by the children of these teen mothers who often end up perpetuating the cycle of unstable families and the involvement of the child welfare system. Other concerns for youth aging out of the system are reported by the Center for Applied Research for Nonprofit Organizations at the University of Oklahoma that states, that “74% of prison inmates were once in the foster care system, 50% of youth who age out of the system will be incarcerated within two years, and 80% of inmates on death row were once in foster care” (Chancellor, 2014). In addition to this bleak pattern of unequipped and desperate foster children turning into outlaws as a means of survival, it was also reported that one in five foster children that age out of the system will become homeless. It is clear after looking at the statistics for the life of foster children after the system has done its ‘best’, that more long-term support is essential for children emancipated from the system.

More than ever these children need to be inspired and given hope in order to heal and avoid becoming just another statistic: this is where Royal Family Kids Camp (RFKC) comes in.

RFKC is an international Christian organization that facilitates over 8,500 camps around the world each year. They have been working since 1985 to pursue their mission, to “create life-changing moments for foster children, ages 6-12, who have experienced abuse through mobilizing the faith community and launching and sustaining camps, clubs, and mentors. We keep moving forward by making moments matter and treating people royally” (Royal Family Kids Camp, 2017). RFKC is a determined and growing nonprofit-organization that has the right goal in mind when it comes to giving foster kids what they need. Additionally, RFKC was evaluated by Charity Navigator and given three out of four stars (89.38%) in grading its financial transparency and accountability (Charity Navigator, 2017). RFKC’s week-long summer program temporarily removes the children from their unhappy situations to let them be kids and just have fun. With activities such as birthday parties, swimming, songs and skits, campfires and so much more; the kids are challenged to try new things and overcome their fears, with the love and support of the many equipped volunteers. According to the Center for Applied Research for Nonprofit Organizations at the University of Oklahoma’s article investigating the impact of RFKC on foster children, “the campers reported experiencing an increase in: trust of others, feeling comfortable, feeling accepted, feeling like a part of the group, as well as thinking about achieving their dreams as a result of attending the camp” (Chancellor, 2014). This directly meets a heartfelt need of these children to experience friendships with trustworthy adults, build positive relationships and dare to dream of a better future. This path to a positive sense of self is the only way to put an end to the cycle of the relational instability which characterizes their lives. Letting hurt and distrusting foster children know that they are a part of God’s royal family and about His unconditional love for them, is the best gift they could ever receive, and RFKC is the gift wrapping.

The foster care system has been failing to care for these neglected, abused, and hurting children; it is time for change. The change agents are not-for-profit-organizations, like RFKC, that do not focus on the difficult situations foster kids are in now but help them to hope and dream for what they will become with God at their side. While there are many hurdles to overcome to improve foster care, the best we can do for them now, is to not make them wait for better circumstances that may never come but help them to heal and grow up into the most stable and well-rounded adult they can be. RFKC is an organization very close to my heart as I have served as a counselor and as the director of the drama and music for the past six years with the Fairfield, Connecticut location. As a 12-year old volunteer, the camp opened my eyes to the world around me and to the untold struggles they face. I have built many great memories with campers that I will never be able to see again, but I know we will always remember each other. RFKC has impacted my life in a major way, serving as my inspiration to study film here at Messiah. When I first considered being a film major, I found more and more reasons as to why the industry was too risky and too secular to pursue. Yet, as I began to understand the power of film, in providing new perspectives and telling untold stories, I realized that at the end of the day if I can share the stories and the heartbreak of these foster kids, and others like them, then it all will have been worth it. My vocation is to use the medium of film to do God's work, as I help the world to see and consider something new and bright. As God continues to keep me off the path of pursuing fame or fortune, I plan to develop creative media to tell the story and raise support for organizations such as RFKC and champion the cause of foster children before the legislatures, particularly in states that withdraw support from foster children at age 18. It all boils down to hope. Hope is what these kids need to survive the system, such a hope is provided by

RFKC, and I pray that someday I will be able to give that same hope to the world through my vocation in film.

– 1,752 words –

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