

At **IMPACT**, we believe that understanding the viewpoint of the youth we hope to help is critical to informing policies and service provision directed toward improving the lives of urban youth. Therefore, each issue includes their views on the topic focus.

Youth Spotlight: From the Voices of Transition Aged Youth

By Mitch Findley and Joleen Rodgers

Below, youths, Mitch Findley and Joleen Rodgers, discuss their experiences, hardships, and personal triumphs as foster care youth in California, as well as their opinions of the current support programs in place for youth transitioning out of the system.

1. What do you want policy makers to know about your experience? What do you think people working at non-profit organizations and government agencies should do to make the transition to adulthood easier?

Joleen: I want people to know that it is not easy being a foster youth and trying to get help with emancipating out of foster youth! I think those people should partner with CYC (California Youth Connection), which is a non-profit organization run by current and former foster youth, which makes and implements the laws and rights of foster youth with the help of California's Government. The more help CYC has, the more the transition will be faster and easier for foster youth.

Mitch: If I had the chance to tell other people about my experience in the Foster Care system, there would be a few things that I would tell them. The first thing I would let people know is that when involved in any kind of system, you feel like you are being pulled a million different ways. You have your parents, caseworkers, family members, CASA workers, maybe a probation officer, your

employer, your teachers, your coaches, etc. all asking for different things from you. One of the hardest things for me was to get clear with everyone about what was going on in my life and to tell them what my priorities were.

In order to make this transition easier, I think that people working at non-profits and government agencies should really involve the youth in all decision-making processes. Nobody wants to be told what to do or how to do anything, especially youth who are going through things like this. Even if the youth does not have a choice in something, be sure to involve them in a conversation around why certain things happen.

2. What you wish you had known about housing and education before you actually started emancipating out of the foster care system?

Joleen: I wish I had known about: apartment or house leases; interest rates on credit cards/ banking/ loans/ houses; the different options in transitional housing; Section 8; what to look for in an apartment/house; how to file income taxes; how to get financial aid; what/ which/ how many education grants I am eligible for; and the difference between having no-credit/ credit.

Mitch: I wish that I would have known that housing is such a hard thing to get a grasp on. Here in Napa

Joleen Rodgers is currently a freshman at Fresno City College. She is the President of the Fresno chapter of California Youth Connection (CYC), a foster youth advocate organization. At college, Joleen has been involved in numerous programs, including being named a Senator in the Associated Student Government. She has also been on the Dean's List. Joleen's major is Political Science and she wants to be a United Nations Ambassador or a CIA Agent.

Mitchell Findley is from Napa, CA and in June 2005, he became one of ten founding members of the nation's first youth-led emancipation center for foster youth: V.O.I.C.E.S. (Voice Our Independent Choices for Emancipation Support). Since its opening in November 2005, Mitch has served as Assistant Director. Currently, Mitch attends Napa Valley College and is considering a major in Political Science.

County, the market value for any living space is pretty high. We live in a town where a lot of other people want to live, and it doesn't make things cheap. Housing is one of the biggest obstacles when emancipating.

3. Did anyone you were living with help you? Did people encourage you? How did you know what to do? Did your high school guidance counselor help you? Did CYC help you?

Joleen: I have to say I wouldn't be where I am today if I didn't take full responsibility of my future by not depending on anyone but me. That's exactly how it is in the foster care system. I can't depend on my social worker because that changes every week or month. I can't depend on my attorney because she's too busy in court dealing with her other cases everyday. And I really can't depend on a random foster parent because most of them don't care, so the only person that can take full responsibility for me is me!

I had a couple people I was living with that gave me advice that helped and influenced me, but not that many people encouraged me because I was labeled a foster youth. My senior year in high school, I got a new guidance counselor and I told her that I wanted to succeed in life and asked her not to judge me for being a foster youth. She had a lot of respect for me and ever since that day she made sure I was going to college with financial aid and a couple of grants. Some foster parents motivated and encouraged me also, which made me feel really lucky because there aren't a lot of foster parents out there like that!

I ended up knowing about college because I talked to the right people and had some help from another guidance counselor at college, but mostly I set a plan, I said I want to be a U.N. Ambassador, so I'm going to this college to get this degree and then I'll go to that college and get that degree, and everything else in between, I can deal with because I know what my goal is. So I knew what to do from making a plan and sticking with it!

While CYC didn't help me in personal ways, it did help me by informing me about my rights as a foster youth and what help I can get from the state about my education, housing, and health.

Mitch: When emancipating, if I would have had to rely on myself, I don't know where I would be today. I got lucky, and have been a part of VOICES since the beginning. They have helped me tremendously over the past year and a half that I have been involved. Thanks to them I am still in college, have my own apartment, and have my car.

4. When did you start thinking about going to college? How did you figure the process of applying to college out? Were you just figuring it out as you went along?

Joleen: I started thinking about going to college when I was a junior in high school. My guidance counselor helped me with mostly everything she could, but some things I had to do on my own. I was just figuring it out as I went along. That's how I learned about the process, each step I would figure out and then I would go on to the next step.

Mitch: I always knew I was going on to college. There was never a question of "if" I go on to college. In high school, I realized that I would be attending a Junior College (JC) because of financial reasons. VOICES, a non-profit organization that supports foster care youth who have aged out of the system when they turn 18, helped me to apply for college and financial aid and all of those kinds of things. Other than that, there was a lot of learning that happened along the way for me personally.

5. What do you wish you had known about higher education/financial aid before you actually started emancipating out of the foster care system?

Joleen: Higher education- How many units do I need for a bachelors/ masters/ PhD degree, the difference between a junior/ CSU/ UC/ private college, what tests are needed for what university(SAT, ACT), how much does it cost for a Junior/CSU/UC/Private college?, What grants are available?, How much financial aid am I eligible for?

Mitch: I wish I would have known how much money there really is out there for youth, especially youth who are considered "Independent" by the government.

6. How did you apply for transitional housing? What do you think needs to be different about the process?

Joleen: I applied by filling out the section 8 application and giving it to the Aftercare worker from the Independent Living Program.

I would love to see more vouchers given out or changing the rules for section 8 so you can fill the application out when you're seventeen. Now, you have to be eighteen to fill it out and it takes about a year for someone to even get their voucher for Section 8. I think that is a ridiculous rule because where are foster youth suppose to go when we turn eighteen and still have a year before someone helps us with our housing situation?

Mitch: I am currently on Section 8, through a Family Unification Plan voucher. I was lucky and received one of these vouchers through a program here in Napa. For other youth, the process is not an easy one. In a lot of situations, the waiting list is over two years. I just find this ridiculous. There needs to be more housing, and more accessible housing for those who need it. Working with youth, a lot of youth need housing NOW. They can't afford to be placed on a waiting list of some sort, and I imagine that this is the same with other youth everywhere.

7. What are the housing options for transitioning foster youth? Do you think these are good places for transitioning foster youth to live? Why do you think these are the options available?

Joleen: There are not a lot of options, only section 8 and TLC, which is a complex with about fifty studios in the projects (worst side of town)! I don't even consider TLC an option. I think TLC is a horrible place to live. It's surrounded by drug addicts, criminals, gangsters, and whoever lives in the "Projects."

It's like the system is setting us up for failure. I think these are the only options available because they're the cheapest and it's easy for the city to stick us somewhere where no one else wants to live and we aren't hurting their pockets.

Mitch: Here in Napa, there are only a few options for transitioning foster youth. Catholic Charities provides transitional housing for about a year and a half, to help get people on their feet. PLACES is a program that is run through VOICES and takes advantage of the state's THP+ funding. Those in the PLACES program have their rent subsidized for up to two years, and over these two years, their portion of the rent gradually increases. After these two years, the youth can choose to take over the apartment. To me, this seems like a better option because it is not temporary like many other programs. Temporary housing programs do a great job of solving some crisis situations, but permanency can prove to be a huge problem.

8. Who helps you figure out what to do now that you are in college and have a place to live? How do you know how to pay your bills or budget, get health care?

Joleen: No one but myself. I have no one to really be there for me. Sure, if I have a question about school, I can call and talk to the school officials about it, but it's not like I have my parents guiding me in life like other people my age! I still don't know how to budget. Yes, I pay my own bills, but sometimes that means skipping a meal or not being

able to go out with my friends to the movies or something. I'm getting there, but I'm not there yet. I get Medi-Cal health insurance until my 21st birthday, but when that time comes I guess I'll have to figure out what to do after that.

Mitch: I get health care through the state until I turn 22. I get all of my support around pretty much everything from VOICES. They help me budget and plan for many financial things. Another way I learn how to do things is just by doing them. Sometimes there really is no better way to learn how to do something than to have to do them yourself.

9. Do you work while you are in school? If you do, is it hard to balance working while going to school?

Joleen: I was voted by the youth of the Fresno chapter of CYC (California Youth Connection) to be the Chair (President) of the chapter, so I spend a lot of my free time doing things for CYC like going to meetings or talking to youth about CYC.

I also have a work study job at my college, Fresno City College. My supervisor understands my school commitments and is really flexible. It is not that hard to go to school and work at the same time. It is just very tiring!

Mitch: Yes, I both work at VOICES and attend school full time. It is hard to balance all of my time and find the desire to do both all the time. I work during the day, and go to school full time at night. It is very hard and gets to be very tiring, but it is just one of those things that I know I have to do for myself.

10. Do you have friends that are not foster youth? Do you find it hard to be friends with them sometimes b/c they don't understand what you have to deal with?

Joleen: Most of my friends aren't in foster care and don't really know anything about foster care. I have never told any of my friends that I used to be in foster care. It's embarrassing, so I never bring it up.

Mitch: Of course I have friends that are not foster youth. Sometimes it is hard for them to relate to some of the things that I am going through or have been through. The way I really look at it though, is that we have more in common than not. I am a youth first, and just happen to be a foster youth second. I do not label myself as a foster youth because all youth are the same to me, no matter what their background is.

11. What challenges do you still face now because you were in the foster care system?

Joleen: I still have a record that shows I was a foster youth and to the world, that's a really bad thing because we are frowned upon in a big way. It's hard working at the Department of Children Protective Services (DCFS) and have my co-workers (social workers) look down upon me.

Mitch: People seems to feel like they need to show me pity or say things like "poor you" because I was in the system. I don't need that. I don't need pity. What I do need is support and some guidance through the rough times.

12. Do you know other foster youth that are having similar problems?

Joleen: With education, housing, and health care benefits, I would say we all go through those problems.

Mitch: I work with foster youth on a daily basis through my work. Many foster youth that I have spoken with feel the same way. Being a foster youth does not make us handicapped. All it means is that we have been through some tough times in our lives, just like many other people. We just had the experience of being placed in the system.

13. What do you think are the biggest issues with getting information to foster youth about transitioning out? Whose responsibility do you think it is? (social worker, guidance counselor, group home counselor/foster parent, someone else?) What is the best way for foster youth who will transition out soon to get information?

Joleen: The biggest issue is that there isn't any information given to us besides four options; become homeless, get a job and try to make it on your own, TLC or Section 8. I think the responsibility should be put on the shoulders of the government, the social workers and the attorneys. The best way for foster youth to get information right now would be to contact their social worker and take it from there.

Mitch: One of the biggest problems with getting information to foster youth is the fact that only certain people know who is and who isn't a foster youth. I think that foster parents need to be more involved in the process of disseminating information. Lost of times social workers or counselors have a lot of good information to share, but the problem is the delivery. It seems to me that a lot of youth are tired of being told what to do by all the different people they work with, and can sometimes see very important information as

just one more thing that they have to be lectured on.

14. Do you think it would be helpful to have some type of program from age 18-21 or 18-25 that helps foster youth, while giving them more independence than when they were in the system?

Joleen: Oh yeah. If there was a program like that, I would love to go. I think the percentage of foster youth succeeding in life would increase.

Mitch: Yes. There should be a program that helps out all of us youth. The age limit should be higher, and probably close to 25. Between the ages of 18-21, youth are not going to have everything under control. These are some very important years in a youth's life. A program like VOICES would be a great thing to offer to all youth. I wish that we could help out all youth that need it.

15. What would you change about the way that the system works for foster kids who are about to turn 18? How could the system be structured better so that it's easier for kids to transition instead of it being in the system one day and out on their own on their 18th birthday?

Mitch: I believe that planning for emancipation cannot start 3 months before the youth turns 18. Planning, or at least conversation or thought about what the plan could look like needs to happen much earlier in a youth's life. There really does need to be some kind of support service or program that can help youth bridge the gap between youth and adult. This transition cannot happen overnight, as is expected a lot of times.

16. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Joleen: I would make more housing options available in a comfortable, safe environment and make sure that the youth join a program or take some classes educating them about college, health care, living expenses, housing, getting a job, building credit, and stuff important in life that you need to know.

I think the system would be structured better if each county had a support system in place for all youth transitioning out of care, so they would be set to succeed instead of kicking them out at eighteen without having any knowledge of anything.

Mitch: I am a huge supporter of youth involvement and youth empowerment. Anything that you can do with these youth to help them feel more in control of where

their life is taking them can make all the difference.
Youth need to be given the chance to speak up or be
heard. Nobody knows better than the youth themselves.