

FORUM

Excelling through foster care



Kadia Edwards
Guest Columnist

At the heart of every story about our nation's foster care system is a child in need of care and love. That fact easily can be lost, particularly when so many news stories about children in need focus on celebrity adoptions of children from foreign countries. It can make the issue of abused and neglected children seem very far away. But it's not. Right now, in the United States, there are hundreds of thousands of children who hope every night to be freed from an uncertain future and delivered into a secure and supportive environment.

I should know. For nearly nine years, I was one of those children.

I was originally born in Jamaica. When I was 12, my brother and I came to the United States to live with our mother, who was both verbally and physically abusive. So many times my brother and I were forced to leave our home and either walk the streets or find temporary lodging with friends. He ultimately ended up going back to live with our mother, however, I did not. And, at the age of 14, I entered the state of Connecticut's foster care system.

It was a transient existence. I was moved from home to home, which meant I changed schools often. I attended three different high schools in as many years. By the time I began to settle in, it seemed as if it was time to move

again. I never had an opportunity to make any real friends or establish real relationships.

That was until I met Carmen. Carmen Effron is my Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), or volunteer Guardian ad Litem (GAL), as they're called in Connecticut. Naturally, I was a bit wary of her. She didn't look like me, she didn't speak like me and none of her experiences were similar to mine. I did everything I could to push her away. But, Carmen is strong, and over the course of a few short months, she became to me everything that a mother should be for her child. I am convinced that had it not been for Carmen's concern and care for me, my life would have taken a completely different and maybe tragic path.

Last year, more than 50,000 CASA and GAL volunteers advocated for 225,000 children — about half of the children in the child welfare system at any given time. They are trained community volunteers who speak for the best interests of abused and neglected children in court.

When I first met Carmen, I was about 15 years old and living in a foster care home. Because of my circumstances, I had grown up fast. Carmen recognized my maturity level and fought in court for me to be granted the right to enter into an independent living program. She was also one of only a few people who talked to me about "next steps" in my life. Carmen encouraged me to go to college — even assisting me with filling out my applications. She helped me learn how to pay my bills, and generally taught me what it meant to prepare for my new adult life.

The effect that Carmen has had on my life — although amaz-

ing — isn't atypical of CASA volunteers. In fact, the benefits that CASA volunteers provide foster children throughout this country have been well documented. A recent audit conducted by the US Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General demonstrates that once a CASA volunteer is assigned, approximately 95 percent of children do not languish in long-term foster care and 90 percent of children do not reenter the child welfare system.

In 2001, I entered my freshman year at Howard University where I threw myself into a number of activities: student government and a variety of Christian organizations and programs on campus. After graduating with a degree in Journalism, I applied to Duke University, where I am currently enrolled in the Divinity School. I expect to receive my Master's degree in 2008. Although I have some wonderfully supportive people in my life, there isn't a day that goes by that I don't struggle. I wasn't prepared for the difficulties I would face once I "aged out" of the foster care system. That uncertainty led to a string of bad choices, starting with a marriage at age 22 that in hindsight was doomed before it even began. Like most other little girls, I dreamed of getting married, settling down and raising a family. It didn't quite work out that way for me.

Today, the marriage is over, but the consequences of my decisions continue to linger. Every day, I am reminded of how one bad decision has impacted my life. But, I still consider myself one of the lucky ones. Thanks to my Guardian ad Litem program, I got some much-needed support and guidance from someone who cared about my future, and made

me care about my future.

It's still my dream to get married and become a mother someday. But, it isn't my only dream. As I focus on life after graduation next year, I plan on completing a year-long residency to help me prepare for a career in pastoral counseling. My ultimate desire is to work with children growing up in the foster care system. I am a firm believer that everything happens for a reason and by sharing my experiences, perhaps I can help a young person just like me avoid some of the missteps that I have taken.


Through it all, Carmen was and is still there for me. Without her, I don't know what I would have done. She didn't always agree with the choices I made, but like any good confidante, she picked me up when I fell down. There was never any judgment; only love and guidance.

Because of Carmen, I know now that one person can make a difference. Because I have someone in my life who cares, I now have a future filled with possibilities and I look forward to what the future holds for me after graduation.

To help other young people like me identify their possibilities, become a CASA or Guardian ad Litem volunteer. Learn more about becoming a volunteer by visiting www.nationalcasa.org or calling 1-888-805-8457.

Kadia Edwards is currently pursuing her master's degree from Duke University's Divinity School in Durham and will be graduating this May. After graduation, she plans to pursue a career in Pastoral Counseling and hopes to work with children currently in the foster care system.

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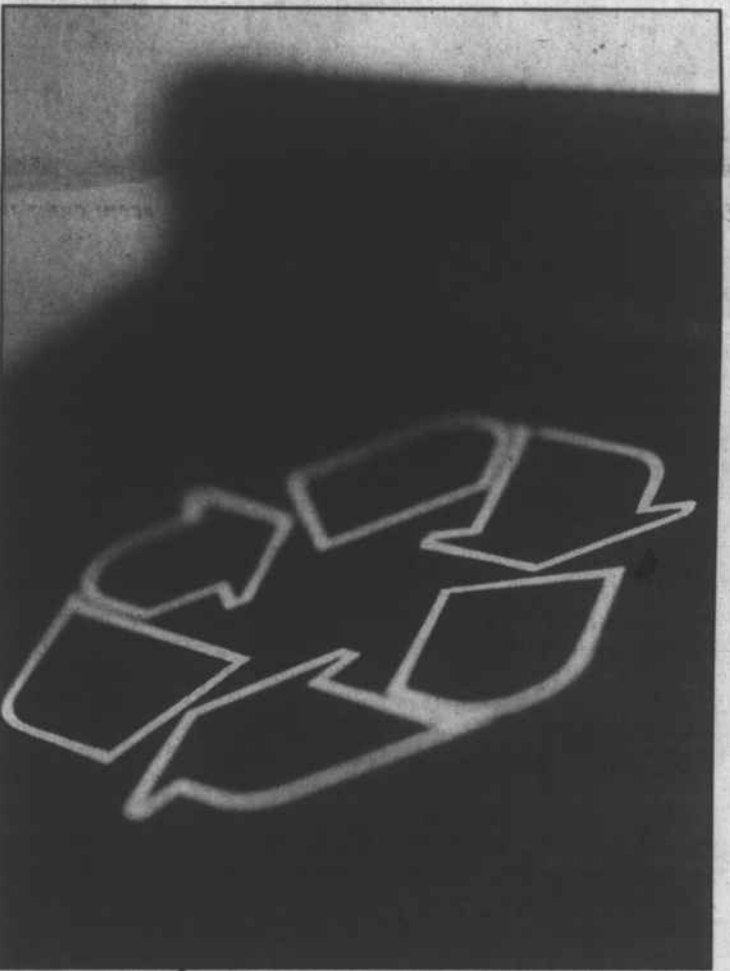


Gary Flowers
Guest Columnist

Whether Red, Yellow, Brown, Black or White, we are all precious in God's sight. God is Green. All people deserve to live in Green clean-air communities. If not, people on planet earth will die.

In 2002, The Black Leadership Forum (BLF) issued a report entitled, "Air of Injustice: African-Americans & Power Plant Pollution" which chronicled how coal-fired power plants affect Black Americans by releasing chemicals into the air and waterways. The report revealed that 68 percent of African-Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant; and 71 percent of Black people live in counties that violate federal air pollution standards. "Air of Injustice" revealed the relationship between power plant pollutants such as mercury, sulfur, dioxide and environmental health issues in the Black community, among them asthma and high infant death rates.

While the Black Leadership Forum (BLF) addresses issues impacting the Black community including first-class jails and second-class schools, unaffordable housing/predatory lending, voter disenfranchisement, and inadequate health care, environ-



mental issues facing communities of color are a priority. The race to address Green issues in urban America is critical.

The environmental injustice of toxic air, water, and soil is literally killing Black people in urban America. In short, too much pollution is affecting too many Black people, with too few alternatives.

For example, in Black communities in New York City such as Harlem, central-Brooklyn, and the South Bronx serve as tragic examples where the asthma rate among school-aged children is nearly four times the U.S. average. The dangerously high asthma rate is in part linked to the location of gas and oil fired power plants that produce harmful pollutants. We as a nation must go Green or die.

While the debate over clean energy sources such as solar, wind, nuclear continues, one fact is clear: the current process for coal-fired energy plants must change. One approach would be carbon capture and storage in advanced coal generation.

Black Leadership Forum is working with organizations like Safe Healthy Affordable and Reliable Energy (SHARE), a non-profit clean energy advocacy organization. SHARE's mission includes conducting important clean energy discussions in schools, churches, tenant associations and senior citizen centers. Together, our goal is to elevate environmental issues to the forefront of the urban agenda.

America must change its approach to exploring and developing clean energy sources. As it does, investing in clean energy would lead to the creation of jobs with livable wages, particularly in communities of color. A Green urban agenda put forth by the federal, state, and local government helps to radically reduce unemployment and underemployment for many Black and Brown people.

The math is simple: with a potential of trillions of dollars directed toward the Greening of America, such monies should help the people most affected by pollutants.

Gary L. Flowers is executive director and CEO of the Black Leadership Forum, Inc.

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