

Far from "at risk," former Foster Youth at UCSC

Normally an elementary school student would be proud to wave around a straight-A report card in the air. Instead Bill Dickinson remembers bringing home these report cards as another incident, a moment illustrating his parents were not around to sign the Parent/Guardian signature line. "It was a moment as if the world was telling me there was something not quite right with me and family," says Dickinson, a former foster youth who became a UCSC (Cowell '68) and Harvard graduate.

In foster care, or "bewildering exile" as Dickinson describes it, children can never refer to the same house as a home or the same set of people as family. No one genuinely keeps track of them except for themselves. Caseworkers, who are meant to ensure that the minor's home is nurturing, are unfortunately able to spend only about an hour with a foster child per month.

As if floating around from home to home were not confusing enough, labels like "at risk youth" are tagged onto them. The automatic label demeans them and sets roadblocks in their path. These perpetual reminders of isolation breed a deeper sense of misplacement and a seemingly uninvited existence. Due to these cumulating obstacles the graduation rate for former foster care children is a shockingly low six percent. To prove that no student is meant for the path of delinquency but has the ability to be a strong survivor, Dickinson founded the Smith Renaissance Society (SRS). The scholarship and mentor community program is available for current or former foster youths, runaways, juvenile offenders, orphans, or homeless youths.

La Toya Mae Brown, a current UCSC student and Smith collegiate scholar, lamented, "I wish the general public was aware that foster youth are not all troubled kids. We are not, we just happened to receive the wrong end of the stick."

The experiences many foster youth undergo are anything but natural. "My biological mother couldn't care for me and my biological father was in prison," explains Callin Curry. He was then adopted as a baby, but his adopted mother died when he was sixteen, therefore pushing Curry back into the foster care system.

Dickinson's first genuine encounter of voluntarily nurture occurred when the first provost of Cowell College and his wife, Page and Eloise Smith, invited

Dickinson to spend a holiday at their home. Otherwise Dickinson would have had no home to return to over holiday breaks. This genuine practice of Cowell college's mission, "Pursuit of Truth in the company of friends," would surface again three decades later. The SRS has however, grown to serve as a community and family for prospective and current UCSC students.

The SRS is structured as a cross-generational community between Smith Collegiate Fellows (current students) and Senior Fellows (adult volunteers). The SRS is intended to mirror the relationship of a home and family for students. "Joining the Smith Society marked the first time I ever felt my identity as a foster youth was understood and appreciated. The SRS helped me celebrate this piece of my past," says Danny Ambrose a UCSC graduate and who went on to the University of Indiana for his M.A.

Once minors in foster care turn eighteen, they are legally emancipated from their home, but for many this does not mean freedom, but what many Smith scholars critiqued as "I have no one now." "I have to realize every morning that I wake up that I am pretty much my own parents in a sense I cannot run home to my mother and father," says Brown. "Sometimes this is a great feeling of being very independent."

The stigma of being an "at risk" youth resurfaces within the home which causes a strong sense of distrust among those in foster care and those giving foster care. For example in group homes where teenagers sometimes stay, care givers rotate by shift. Dickinson tells, "People treat you as if you're guilty of something. It's a damn hard way to feel proud of yourself."

Even after emancipation Curry had to overcome the presumption of being untrustworthy. "I enjoyed having a place to live and learn what it is like to have roommates, but the level of distrust was shocking. Their only justification for an early 10 PM curfew was 'we want to keep you out of trouble,'" says Curry about staying at CSU East Bay in the Beyond Emancipation program.

In order to break boundaries of mistrust, the SRS outreaches to prospective students and shows them that they deserving of success and a caring community. With multiple venues of outreach the SRS alters the defensive mode of communication that foster youths are approached with. On May 22 in the Stevenson Event Center, Music Day, the SRS's largest annual outreach event will take place. Prospective students, who may not have internalized the concept of going to a university attend the music, and open-mic and outreach festival. It is an opportunity to welcome students with open arms and show that family does not need to be a genetic bond.

Curry comes full circle to finding the meaning of family. "It is the people who love you unconditionally that become your family. It is this unconditional love, which

makes your relationship sacred. Not the blood you share.” The typical family is not the only stereotype Curry has learned to define differently. “If I have learned anything as a foster youth it is to question things. If there is one thing that people should know it is that they should spend more time questioning the images, stigmas within society today. Foster youths are real people, not these images and stigmas.”