



## Her Sister's Foster Parent, Brittney Barros Finally Brings Her Family Home

LANSING, MI - At 21, Brittney Barros is a rare college student – more dorm mother than co-ed. When the strong-minded senior isn't attending classes in social work at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, working her internship, or studying, she's assuming household duties and making sure teenage sister Serenity is safe and completing her school work. As Serenity's sole foster parent, Brittney is just where she wants to be, even if it means her days are as exhausting as her heart is full. How old do I feel?" she replies with a hearty laugh late one evening. "Like 70!"



Brittney and her five siblings were separated in Michigan's foster care system for six years – a period of time she describes as the most agonizing in her life. "My siblings are literally my soulmates. They inspire me every day to work toward fixing a broken system that once traumatized us," she said. As one of the family's oldest, she marshalled the emotional pain of their separation into advocacy work for homeless youth and children in care in a role that's made her one of the most celebrated young adults from foster care in the country. She's been a peer outreach worker for homeless youth, an intern for U.S. Sen. Gary Peters where she worked on child welfare issues and briefed Congress on sibling separation, and serves with the [Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative](#) helping youths from foster care transition to adulthood. This year, she received two national awards – the [Casey Excellence for Children Award](#) and the [Disney Hero for Change Award](#).

Since Serenity, 15, came to live with her in July, Brittney has added caregiver experience to her insider's knowledge of Michigan's child welfare system. She recently discussed system shortcomings with Michigan's Children, along with emerging legislation that could improve outcomes for kids, in advance of the first [Annual Relative Caregiver Day at the Capitol](#) in Lansing. The event is being coordinated by Michigan's Children and the [Kinship Care Resource Center](#), located in the School of Social Work at Michigan State University.

**Three bills sponsored** by Reps. Kathy Crawford, R-Novi, and Frank Liberati, D-Allen Park, aim to improve support for relative caregivers including the state's child welfare system for kids in foster care. The bills would build on the Assurance of Quality Foster Care Act passed last year. Among the proposed legislation's intentions are a required task force and "landscape study" of the child welfare system, support for the state's Kinship Care Resource Center, and access to legal assistance for relative care givers.

"What I'm learning as a caregiver, that needs to be understood, is that there needs to be more financial and emotional support for kinship caregivers. Serenity comes with a lot of turmoil and trauma. She struggles with behavioral issues," she said. Because of problems in the classroom, Serenity is now studying online at home and thriving, earning A's and B's. "Sometimes this all takes a toll on me. A support group, maybe free therapy, extra emotional support would be a

benefit. This is a hard task.” Brittney said. Changes in the Affordable Care Act ensures that Medicaid recipients such as Serenity receive mental health support, but not necessarily for her caregiver. “Support groups build a sense of community and parents don’t have to feel alone in what they’re going through. It’s a pretty unique situation. People often feel alienated.” Later this fall, Brittney is going to Japan on behalf of the International Foster Care Alliance and will tap into a respite care network so that her sister is cared for. “Respite care would be helpful for kinship care providers, too.”

Another system shortcoming is delayed financial support – foster care payments that take up to two months to process, she said. “What doesn’t work well is how long it takes. I’m struggling to keep up with bills. I’ve had to buy her new clothes, furniture. She’s been here since July 11 but I haven’t received anything yet.” Brittney is currently an unlicensed foster parent but is moving toward licensure. Under legislative changes, kinship caregivers are assured payments during their waiting period to become a licensed foster parent, she said. On the plus side, a supportive case worker, who frequently texts her and checks in, has been a big help, she added.

**Brittney’s desire** to become a social worker is driven by her personal mission to help improve the foster care system that she and her siblings endured for years after they were removed from their mother, who battled unsuccessfully with substance use disorder. When Brittney interned for Sen. Peters, she worked with another senator to draft a national bill, which has yet to be adopted, that would guarantee that siblings are kept together in foster care.

“Foster care is supposed to be a safe network for youth in care and that’s not what it is right now,” Brittney said. “Only one in four youths get to be with their siblings in care. For us, that’s left huge, paramount turmoil and baggage. Siblings in care should have the right to live together and have frequent contact.”

As children, Brittney and her siblings were homeless, living in cars, crack houses, dirty hotels, sleeping in tents and ditches. She’s publicly discussed her mother’s substance use disorder that led to a destabilized home life. “We huddled in freezing cold just to stay alive. We’d feed each other. We supported one another. Foster care definitely taught me to cherish the memories I have with my siblings and replenish the bond we once lost because of foster care,” Brittney said.

For now, Brittney is building new memories with Serenity. “I want to be the best big sister I can be,” she said. Outside of school and work, they spend time together in the community, visiting a local farmers market, bowling, going to the park. They have taken a financial literacy class together and participate in family therapy. “It feels really good to be together. Serenity is really funny, caring, and does cute things for me. She surprises me by cleaning my apartment. She is just very loving.”

Being reunited with her sister has given her a new hope for the future. “Hope has played an important role in my life. Without hope I wouldn’t be in college with 4.0 grade point average. Hope is what’s kept me alive. It’s what keeps the dream going of ending the cycle of abuse, trauma and neglect.”

*View a video of Brittney’s story created for the Casey Excellence for Children Family and Alumni Awards [here](#).*