

Brina Williams: 'Being very open and accepting is the biggest thing we need from foster parents. . .'



Brina Williams has an insider's knowledge of the child welfare system. When individuals train to become foster parents in Michigan, she is one of the volunteer experts they hear from to better understand their role in a child's life. "When I talk to foster parents, the biggest thing I tell them is the need to be understanding. I was in three different homes – all of varying degrees of good and bad – and we all have our own stories. We all have different personalities and have had different types of trauma. Being very open and accepting is the biggest thing we need from foster parents – and that must come from a place of compassion in a way that doesn't overstep boundaries."

Just shy of her 15th birthday, Brina went into the child welfare system after suffering abuse at the hands of her mother's boyfriend. Her father was in prison and unavailable. A caring teacher she confided in reported the crime, and Brina initially went to live with an older cousin and her husband, until the couple discovered they were pregnant and needed Brina's room for a nursery. She was crushed. While Brina said foster care was initially one of the best things that happened to her, she also found herself reverting to a dark place while in care. Her mental health suffered when she was moved to a second home with foster parents that were unfit; the experience left her exhibiting severe anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts. "I started to get headaches all the time, insomnia, and super bad stomach aches," Brina said.

Now 18, Brina, who grew up in the Lansing area, is a student at Lansing Community College (LCC) with plans to earn a degree in social work. She hopes to open her own practice as a therapist one day – a major turn-around for a teen who once balked at seeking mental health support. According to Brina, children and youth who enter foster care are not given the emotional tools they need to understand and process the trauma-induced feelings they're experiencing. The system could be improved, however, if children were educated on how to read the signs of instability in their mental health, and then how to ask for help. "To know when we need help and when to ask for it is super important. No one ever did that for me," she said. For these youths, having the flexibility to find "the right fit" with a therapist they're comfortable with is also key. "That just doesn't happen today. A lot of foster kids don't feel listened to or connected. We usually go into foster care and get assigned a therapist and they wipe their

hands of us unless we need medication or are seriously acting out. There are so many of us. We're just another case."

Brina has had time to reflect on her experiences since leaving foster care last year and believes the child welfare system would be improved by the addition of court-appointed special advocates (CASA) volunteers across Michigan. For most youths in child welfare, CASA volunteers, also known as Guardian Ad Litem, are the only constants in a child's life in the system. Brina's CASA volunteer stood by her during court proceedings against her abuser and witnessed her struggles in the foster care system. "My Guardian Ad Litem was a friend when I didn't have anyone else. I could relate to her. She was the constant throughout all the homes I was in and when I was in a bad home she could see me as I got sadder and sadder. She saw how mentally unwell I was becoming and that had an effect on me being removed." Medicaid coverage allows her to continue to see a therapist regularly today and wishes the coverage would extend to family therapy visits with her mom.

Brina's advocacy for youth in foster care has earned her national recognition as a recipient of the FosterClub Outstanding Young Leader Award. Her involvement with the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI) helped her get her foot in the door with a variety of advocacy efforts, she said. She's also a member of the Statewide Youth Advisory Committee for the Association for Children's Mental Health in Michigan where she passionately works to "stop the stigma" of mental illness. On campus at LCC, she participates with the Fostering Stars program and is enrolled in the school's Honor Society. As a selected participant in the Job Shadow Day at the Capitol, Brina is excited to meet with a lawmaker and advocate for children in the foster system. "I really do like being involved. I love advocating and getting my story out in the hopes someone else can relate to it."