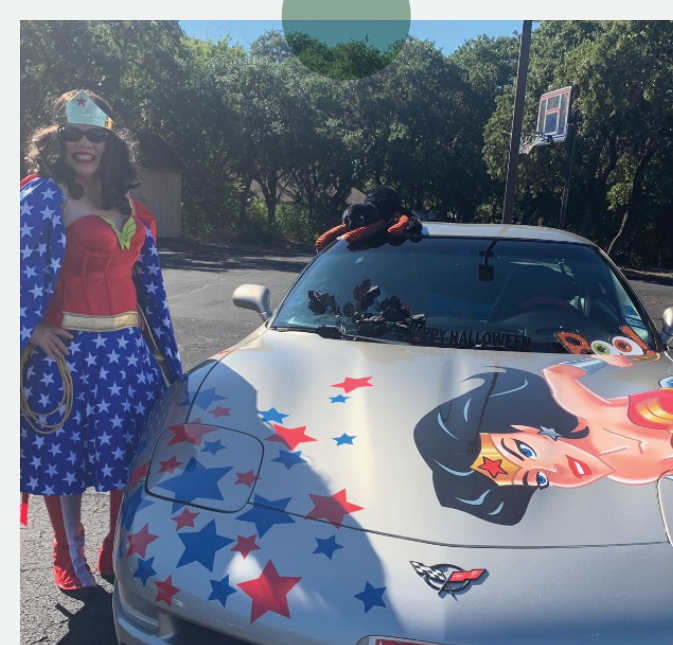


Career Experiences of Foster Care Alumni

SAM HEIMBACH, MASTER OF ARTS CANDIDATE

HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF ORGANIZATIONS | THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN



My sweet little girl - the world is going to do it's best to dim your light. There will be times you wallow in darkness, scared, alone, and afraid. No matter what, promise me you will always pick yourself back up and light your own path. You're different and you won't fit ~~in~~. That's okay because you were born to stand out. No matter what, keep shining and remember to love yourself - The world is yours to conquer.



PEOPLE WITH EXPERIENCE IN FOSTER CARE ARE OFTEN MISREPRESENTED

"I want people to know that the stigma out there [about] foster kids is so skewed and misrepresented. There are great foster families, great CPS workers, great case managers and agencies, and great biological parents out there. People make mistakes and sometimes those mistakes affect people, but it doesn't make you a bad person. I want people to have compassion for people involved in the foster care system, from the children to the biological families. We [need] to have grace for people." – Amber

All employees bring unique experiences and backgrounds with them to work. Better understanding the experiences of foster care alumni in the workplace can help us better understand the experiences of other groups as well, and create opportunities to improve the workplace for all employees.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What challenges do foster care alumni face in their careers?

METHODOLOGY

Recruiting Participants: Recruited 14 participants using snowball sampling

Narrative Interviews:

- Led 30-minute introductory call.
- Conducted 30 to 90-minute semi-structured interviews, co-guided by participants, about their career experiences.

Data Analysis:

- Identified themes within interviews and used card sorting to identify themes across interviews.
- Themes were not correlated with foster care outcome or time spent in care.

14 PARTICIPANTS

Gender:

5 - Men
9 - Women

Race/Ethnicity:

2 - African American participants
2 - Hispanic participants
2 - Multiracial participants
8 - White participants

Time in Care Varied:

Minimum: 1 year
Average: 7 years
Maximum: 18 years

Outcome:

7 - adopted ; 7 - aged out

Work in a variety of industries:

2 - Business
1 - Communications
3 - College student
1 - Finance
2 - Health care
1 - Service industry
4 - Social services

Participants were given the option to use a pseudonym; some chose to use their real name.

FINDINGS

While each participant's story was unique, themes emerged across the interviews. Participants expressed:

- The value of helping others
- The value of independence, and how it influenced participants' relationships with authority and asking for help
- The importance of relationships at work, including supervisors
- The importance of security, including financial security
- Challenges with mental health

Likewise, while each participant brings their own strengths, there were similarities in the strengths they described. The alumni that I spoke with:

- Wanted to give back, encouraged others, and were sought for their advice
- Were empathetic and tried to understand others' perspectives
- Were self-aware and had developed helpful coping skills
- Understood their values, positive, responsible, and adaptable
- Were loyal and wanted to stay with organizations long-term

IMPACT

"We all bring ourselves and our histories to our work. If I better understand the emotions and experiences that have shaped [my colleagues], I can connect with them on a personal level, which helps drive outcomes." – Victor

WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED

Courtney, M. E., & Dworsky, A. (2006). Early outcomes for young adults transitioning from out-of-home care in the USA. *Child & Family Social Work*, 11(3), 209–219.
Gonzalez, S. (2019). Aging Out and On My Own: Stories of Youth Transitions Out of Foster Care. In M. F. Diaz & B. Shepard (Eds.), *Narrating Practice with Children and Adolescents* (pp. 48–65). Columbia University Press.
Haddish, T. (2017). *The Last Black Unicorn*. Simon & Schuster Publishing.
Rhodes-Courter, A. (2008). *Three Little Words: A Memoir*. Simon & Schuster Publishing.
White, C. R. (2012). *Texas Foster Care Alumni Study Technical Report*.

LEARN MORE

FosterCareerExperience.com
sam.heimbach@austin.utexas.edu



THANK YOU

Participating foster care alumni for trusting me with your stories and your time. My husband for supporting my ambitions and taking on most of our household responsibilities. My son for helping celebrate every small win with dessert! Hannah Stavinoha, The Sanctuary Foster Care Services co-founder, for introducing me to the need for this capstone. Katie Mowery for listening and proofreading before anyone else. My capstone advisor, Dr. Pauline Strong, for listening and helping me operationalize my ideas. My second reader, Dr. Amy Ware, for championing my research topic and remaining an advisor after taking on a new role. Dr. Toni Watt and other university foster care liaisons from across the state for sharing my call for research. Jodi Batten for selecting me for the Batten-Savoie Scholarship. Hannah Fenves and Zachary Webb for their support in the next stage of this project.