DARING TO DREAM

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**Dreams for our kids**

*Do you keep a journal? I do, but it’s not a typical daily diary of activities, thoughts, ideas, etc. My journal is all about my dreams—specifically my dreams and intentions for the children we serve at Child Saving Institute.*

...safety, love, learning and hope

My dream is that all children are safe, loved, learning and have a sense of hope and excitement about their futures.

...the importance of good parenting

I dream that parents come to understand what an important role parenting is for their children, and they are fully engaged in our programs and can identify how Child Saving Institute has helped them be great parents for their kids. I dream their children are safe, loved, learning and advancing developmentally. Intergenerational cycles of abuse stop with this generation of parents.

...loving and nurturing homes

I dream we have helped recruit, train, license and support 100 foster families who welcome children and teens into their safe and loving homes. I dream these foster parents feel supported and can truly identify the valuable gift they are providing youth. I dream that, as a community, we have reduced the number of children in need of foster homes.

...pride and enthusiasm for our work

I dream our employees believe in the very best futures for our children and families—they are proud of the work they do and can identify the difference they are making in the lives of children.

...joy in transforming lives

I dream our community volunteers, Board, Guild, and supporters experience the joy of making a meaningful difference in the lives of children and come to fully know how their contribution of time, talent and treasure has transformed children’s lives.

With your help, I dream...

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**The Dream Catchers:**

**ANGIE**

Angie, 17, has been through a lot in her young life.

When she was six, she and her two siblings were removed from their home and placed in the foster care system. While in foster care, Angie lived in “seven or eight or nine homes” (she doesn’t remember the exact number) until she was 11.

At first she remained with her siblings, but her sister, then a young teen, was quickly separated, and, over time, she was separated from her brother who is just a year older than Angie. She was eventually reunited with her mother, but another family crisis resulted in Angie re-entering the child welfare system during her freshman year in high school.

Now a junior at Northwest High School, Angie has been working with Independent Living Skills (ILS) Specialist Dinyal McCray for six months. Angie originally questioned whether she could fit ILS into her busy schedule of honors AP classes, ROTC, helping to watch her little sisters, and working long shifts at Taco Bell, but at her mother’s urging she signed up. She says she’s glad she did.

“It’s kind of hard to find the time to sit down with Dinyal, but it really helps to have her there as a support system,” Angie explains. “She talks to me about school and work and what I want for the future—and then how I can achieve those goals. Dinyal helps us SO much! Even if I don’t have a question about the program, she’s there for me. I think every teenager should have someone like that to help them.”

Angie’s dreams include taking advantage of the two-year full scholarship she’s already received from Metro Community College with the goal of eventually becoming a registered nurse. After Metro, she plans to finish her bachelor’s degree at a local university—but that doesn’t mean she’s given up on her dream of serving as a combat medic in the army. “In ROTC my Staff Sergeant says he had so many opportunities placed in front of him in the army...I want those opportunities, too.”

Though her days are long, Angie says she draws inspiration from her mother. “I saw my mom’s drive and how hard she worked to get us back and how hard she works now to take care of me and my little sisters...She’s in nursing school now, too, but she comes home and makes dinner, helps the little ones with their homework, and checks to see if I’ve finished mine. I am so proud of her.”

Not everyone who has been in the child welfare system is so motivated to succeed, but Angie is determined to accomplish her dreams. “I see teenagers in my life and they don’t have any goals and don’t know what they want to do with their lives. I DO, and I want to push myself to make something of myself. Sure, I have had some bad stuff happen in my life, but I truly believe the past is what makes our futures brighter.”

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Read more about our Independent Living Program on Page 4 >>
The Dream Catchers: MIKE

Is it possible to recreate yourself? Is it really possible to make your dreams come true when you’ve been a gang member, served time, and been a foster kid?

Yes, Mike will tell you. YES! With the support of family, friends, and faith—and additional guidance and encouragement from Child Saving Institute’s Independent Living Skills program—you can.

Mike left his mother’s home in Iowa and came to live with his dad, Mike A., when he was almost 13. Things were going well in their south Omaha home when young Mike began hanging around with a rough crowd—notably a confirmed gang member, “Ty,” then 19, who lived just two houses away. By the time Mike entered high school he was entrenched in gang life and heavily into drugs. That went on until second semester his sophomore year, when he was arrested on New Year’s Eve for possession and shoplifting.

Dinyal McCray, one of Child Saving Institute’s team of three Independent Living Specialists, explains, “This is a proactive program where the clients must engage. We meet with the client and formulate a plan based on their current and future needs. We do not provide a fast track to a new job or housing; however, we put the clients in contact with available community resources and provide them with the tools they will need—but it is up to the client to use them. This, in itself, is an important life skill.”

Youth aging out of foster care without guardianship or permanency face joblessness, homelessness, persistent mental health issues, unintended pregnancy and a host of other challenges. But with the help of people like Dinyal—and caring community partners like you—we help to remove barriers that keep them from achieving personal success.

The arrest scared him and he tried to straighten out for a couple weeks, but just five weeks later he was arrested, along with Ty and other gang members, on far more serious charges involving the use of a weapon. Mike, then 15, was sentenced to serve time in the Douglas County Youth Center.

When he learned of the second arrest, Mike A. was heartbroken and warned his son, “Michael, you’re going to get in trouble. You’re going to get in big trouble and you’re going to be sent away.”

Despite his anguish, Mike A. didn’t give up on his son and showed up on visitation day twice a week for five months. He credits Juvenile Court Judge Elizabeth Crnkovich with helping his boy turn his life around. “Thank God for Judge Crnkovich. She gave Michael a chance.” At the Judge’s directive, Mike was placed in Boys Town, where he played football, wrestled, was in various clubs, and excelled. His sister, Tiaja, six years older, visited him every Sunday for 11 months while he was at Boys Town, often bringing lunch for Mike and the other kids in his home.

While at Boys Town, he was also baptized and confirmed in the Catholic Church, “by the Archbishop himself,” Mike A. adds proudly.

Now a senior at Benson High School (he opted to leave the South Omaha neighborhood and its potential negative influence for a large part of the day), Mike just completed wrestling season and is active in ROTC. He also works an astonishing 42 hours a week on top of his school load, splitting his time between the American G.I. Forum, a vet center and restaurant just blocks from his home where he serves food and clears tables, and at The MSR Group, a consumer research call center. In his limited free time, he enjoys working on his pride and joy—a ‘92 Dodge Dakota—and helping his dad maintain the three rental properties the family owns.

Despite his hectic schedule, he still makes time to visit with Dinyal, his CSI Independent Living Specialist—or rather she makes time for him—often stopping by the G.I. Forum to check in and see how he’s doing. “It’s an awesome program and Dinyal has helped quite a lot,” Mike A. says. “That program teaches the stuff every person needs to know—how to buy a car, how to rent a place, banking, insurance, taxes... Who doesn’t pay taxes? Who doesn’t need insurance? But no one else teaches these practical things.”

In a few weeks, Mike will graduate, but his dreams are just beginning. In the next three to six months he will go to boot camp (he’s leaning toward the Navy), and in the meantime he’s lined up a construction job for the summer.

“I’d love to be a plumber some day,” Mike says, nodding at his dad, who is the Chief Engineer at Omaha Marriott, or maybe a teacher. ♥
Welcome Home

Terry and Lillias Freeman-Hogan and their four children were living an already-full life in Kansas City 16 years ago when they were confronted with a life-changing decision: whether or not to help a frightened teenager who was living in a homeless shelter.

Jason, 17, was a friend of the family’s two oldest children, and was scheduled to “age out” of the system within a few weeks when he turned 18. The girls saw their friend was suffering and wanted to provide him a safe place to “crash” for a bit.

“We were not surprised they would think this way,” Terry explains. “We had always raised our kids to give back and help where you can. We’d told them, ‘You are part of a larger group.’ Well, they took us up on it.”

But in their wisdom, Terry and Lillias knew that Jason needed much more than a temporary place to crash. He needed a home—a home that provided nurturing and support to help him get set up and prepared to enter the world and perhaps attend college. The family decided to move forward and became Jason’s legal guardians.

Fast forward 16 years. Jason is now 33 and he’s still part of the family. “He will be all of his life,” Terry says. “He is our son.”

Ready to foster-to-adopt

As the years passed, the house emptied as the children grew up and left home for college and job opportunities. In 2010, Lillias and Terry took the six-week class through Child Saving Institute to become licensed foster parents with the idea they might provide respite emergency care for other foster parents. They were also considering fostering with the goal of adoption—foster-to-adopt.

They met Katie, then 14, who was living at Boys Town at the time. When they came home from their first meeting, Lillias wrote down two pages of questions she wanted to ask Katie at their next visit. At the next get-together, Katie came bearing three pages of questions—color coded. One of her questions was whether she could get a dog, but she was quickly informed, they were “only adopting one thing at a time.”

Nine months later, blond-haired, backpacking hiker and nature enthusiast Katie was officially adopted—as was Mandy, a portly beagle mix.

Not long after that, Lillias and Terry asked Katie her thoughts on adopting another child. Katie said she’d like a younger sister—two years younger. “Why?” Terry asked, curious about the specificity. Katie responded that if you adopt someone the same age, they’ll argue with you all the time and “buck your authority.”

At the conclusion of the school year last May, Skye, 13, joined the family. Skye likes singing, coloring, mac & cheese, and the TV show, “The Walking Dead.” When asked how she was adjusting, she responded with a wry smile, “You have to be weird to fit in here, and I’m pretty weird.”

Both girls had been on the Nebraska Heart Gallery, an online site that features photos and brief bios of older children who are legally available for adoption. Both have been in out-of-home care for more than half their lives.

Of course, the girls’ transition has not been without its share of familial squabbles. “If they were natural-born siblings, they would have about 13 ½ years to get to know each other’s foibles, idiosyncrasies, likes, dislikes, and habits. They are cramming that in over the course of weeks,” Terry explains. “It’s no easy path.”

Focused on helping teens

So why do they do it? Specifically, why foster teenagers? Terry explained that he’d once read a statistic that set that course: 95 percent of youth who are in the foster care system at age 13 or 14 will age out of the system without permanency.

Lillias and Terry knew this was where their help was most needed. “We love seeing young people go from rebellious, confused kids to contributing members of society. We are perfectly willing to stick with them long after their 19th birthday to help them accomplish this—just as any family would,” Lillias explains.

“Love...and the privilege of sharing the life of a few of our next generation,” Terry adds. “This task, foster parenting, can seem to take all you have some days; but it gives you hope, love and happiness to see the success in the lives entrusted to you.”

Any advice for others considering fostering older children? “Is your home’s backyard always full of neighborhood kids? Do extra kids always seem to crop up at your dinner table? Do neighborhood kids always come to you when they have a scraped knee? Or a bee sting? Or a broken heart? Do teens often ask you, ‘A friend has this problem, what should I tell them?’ Then you’re a natural for foster parenting!” Lillias offers.

“Accept that you will see defeat, strife, pain, unhappiness and sorrow,” Terry concludes. “That is part of life. Be open to success, achievement, wonder, happiness and love. You will find the gains always outweigh the pain.”

We recently followed up to see how things were going with the Freeman-Hogan family.

Skye Alonzo was adopted in November (she kept her last name because she identifies with her Hispanic heritage), and both girls are doing well.

Typical of former state wards who have honed their survival skills, Skye is poignantly direct about her dreams for the future. She says she isn’t sure what she wants to do for a career, but the short list includes working with animals or being an English teacher.

“I don’t think of the future. I live in the present and try to forget the bad things that happened in the past,” Skye says matter-of-factly. “When I heard [Lillias and Terry] wanted to adopt me, it wasn’t like ‘This is my dream family! I knew they would come for me some day!’ I’m a regular teenager and I do whatever I have to do to survive.

“When they did adopt me, it was one of the best days in my life. It was ‘Cool, now I’m out of the system.’ Not ‘Good, now my dream has come true!’”

Now a sophomore in high school, we caught up with Katie, 16, on the way to her part-time job at Walmart. When asked about her dreams for the future, she says she plans to join the Air Force with the goal of becoming a Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) instructor. Because she has always loved backpacking and hiking, she hopes to use her passion to teach others woodcraft and wilderness survival skills for use in all types of climate and terrain.
Mark Your Calendars!

Don’t miss out on a moment of the fun and philanthropic opportunities we have planned for you in the coming months! Visit our website, childsaving.org, or call 504-3661 for more information about these events and how you can get involved!

**Cabaret | Saturday, May 10**
Embassy Suites Conference Center | 6 - 9:30 p.m.

You’re invited to our biggest fundraiser of the year—Cabaret 2014—featuring hilarious improv from The Second City Improv All-Stars! The fun evening will include cocktails, a steak dinner, and fabulously funny comedy. Attire is casual. Tickets are $160 per person. To purchase tickets or for more information, please visit childsaving.org or call 402-504-3661.

**Omaha Gives! | Wednesday, May 21**
Midnight to midnight | omahagives24.org

On Wednesday, May 21, for 24 hours, you can help raise money for abused and neglected kids by going online to omahagives24.org and designating your donation to Child Saving Institute. Because we know you care about kids, we are encouraging all our closest friends and supporters to donate a minimum of $20 during this 24-hour window. (We’re not shy...pick US!)

**Golf Fore Kids | Monday, June 23**
The Players Club at Deer Creek | 11 a.m. Start

Don’t miss this Multidivisional Golf Tournament and Par 3 contest featuring great prizes! For more information, contact Sara at sachelpohl@childsaving.org or register online at childsaving.org.