

Fostering Success

SB123: Not knowing you have rights is like having no rights at all.



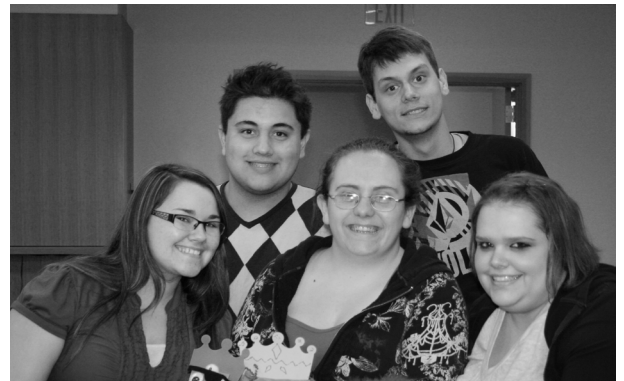
My name is Nico Marquez. I was taken from my mother after I was born 20 years ago and raised in the Oregon foster care system. I have lived in 16 or 17 homes—too many to keep track. Over the years I attended many different schools, which made it difficult for me to build lasting friendships, interrupted the continuity in my education, and made it hard to truly concentrate on my studies.

Still, I want you to know that I had an easier time than many foster kids I know. In fact, I feel privileged to be able to share my experience. Today, what matters is that my message to you can bring about change for other kids living in similar conditions.

While in care, I was sent to live with a series of foster parents I didn't know. Some were nicer than others. Some didn't seem to spend the money the state gave them for my care appropriately: when I went through a growth spurt in middle school, for example, I never had clothes that fit. Shoes were the worst. My feet always grew too fast for the shoes I had.

There were also times when I felt as though my foster parents were making me do things they didn't expect of their biological children. I became adept at laundry, cleaning bathrooms, and yard work—normal chores, but given in excess. I sometimes felt that I carried an extra load because I didn't really “belong” to the family. At times I was prevented from calling my state caseworker. Other times, I was only allowed to talk to her with my foster parent listening in. This made it impossible for me to tell her the truth about troublesome issues in certain placements and prolonged hurtful situations.

Despite this, I have come to know many other foster youth who've had it much worse. One youth told me she was forced to eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at every meal because they were cheap. She didn't feel she had any grounds to complain. Another youth was forced to wear underwear for several days without changing them because his foster family told him that doing his laundry was too “tedious” and buying clothes too expensive.



Nico Marquez (2nd from left) is the Chair of the Tri-County Chapter of the Oregon Foster Youth Connection. He is a junior majoring in Organizational Communications at the University of Portland.

Today, I am asking for your help in assuring that youth in the Oregon foster care system are given a voice—a voice that will be heard. We are asking for a resource, a hotline, or a position to be created within the State Department that would become the center for addressing foster care issues, hardships, and our right to live free and safe under state care. We are asking the state to adopt a “Bill of Rights” for foster youth that would be distributed to both kids and their foster parents, and protect our rights to clothes that fit, proper nutrition, and the right to make private phone calls. These specifics are important, of course, but the main point is to provide every youth in state care with his or her basic needs, the comforts of youth, and chance to live normally.

Today, I am a junior at the University of Portland. I am no longer dependent on the state, and I am fortunate to have a chance to provide for my future. But I also got lucky with my final foster family, who encouraged me to finish high school and apply to college. My story has a happy ending. Other kids in Oregon foster care deserve a happy ending, too.

—Nico Marquez