



Oregon Foster Youth CONNECTION

Improving the Oregon foster care system through advocacy, activism, and leadership.

Testimony in support of HB 2216
Human Services and Housing Committee
February 9, 2017

Dear Honorable Chair Keny-Guyer, Vice-Chair Sanchez, Vice-Chair Stark, and members of the committee,

My name is Danno Mannino. I'm a 23-year-old former foster youth from Jackson County, and a member of OFYC. I was in foster care and temporary guardianship between the ages of 8-14, separated from my older sibling.

Prior to my placement, my sister was my greatest companion and support through a time of abuse and neglect from our biological parents. Amidst the turmoil of poverty, repeated lice infestations, and witnessing domestic violence and my parent's severe mental illness, my sister helped me feel like life was worth living and that something positive could come out of our situation. She would spend hours distracting me from our parents yelling by playing monopoly with me and letting me make up my own rules. We had a collection of stuffed animals, each of which we had imagined distinct personalities for, enjoying the ongoing story we created together for them. She would set a timer so she'd be able to start her homework after, and we'd play until the timer went off. She'd then set the timer for another 15, 20, sometimes 45 minutes, after my begging.

After my parents divorce, around the time my sister was 13, she had stayed with a church friend and his parents temporarily while my mother was in hospital and respite for a psychotic break. They didn't have room for me, and as I bounced around from various friend's parents around the neighborhood while we waited for my mother to be discharged, I was placed in the system. My sister's friend's parents became foster parents to continue her care and I was placed an hour away by DHS. My sister was told she could move in where I was living, however she would have to leave her teachers and friends at the school she had finally gotten settled into, and her church youth group which was one of her most important support systems. She felt her life was being completely torn apart and that the adults who were in her life were pressuring her into a certain direction.

The family I was placed with was upper-class and their property felt much more isolated than where I had lived before. I cried myself to sleep every night for weeks.

In the two years that followed, my foster parents frequently spoke about my sister's religion as well as her weight in a derogatory manner. I didn't like that they were trying to pit me against my sister and make me look down on her.

When my mother had finished her parenting classes, after many supervised visits, I was placed with her again. My sister remained with her foster family as she was old enough to age out with them with a parental signature. Less than a year into living with my mother, I called up my former foster parents and begged them to take me back. Surprisingly, they did, under temporary guardianship.

During the time I was 10 through 14, visits with my sister were not made a priority. When my sister was 16 years old I remember her driving to see me on a weekend, even though she was petrified of getting onto the freeway, to spend time playing cards with me.

I struggled in middle school, being bullied for being bisexual and gender nonconforming and struggling to keep up with the course work when I had changed schools so often and had troubles at home. I was struggling with my own mental health, without therapy or medication. Without my sister regularly available, I was further at risk for developing addiction, self-harm and suicidal behaviors, and in retrospect realize a lot of the coping skills I did acquire in my avoidance of those were still not positive.

When my temporary guardians chose not to adopt me in my early teens after all, they returned me to my birth mother, who I lived with until I turned 17. My sister was more accessible to me again, and in addition to emotional support and companionship, helped me get ready to test for my GED and get independent housing. Being able to reconnect as adults with my sibling and making up for lost time as best we could, was an opportunity most siblings who get separated in care are not afforded.

Had a bill like HB 2216 existed back then, I believe DHS could have been encouraged to help find my sister and I get a placement together that worked for us both, or at least placements in closer proximity to each other.. Had it been decided our respective, separate placements were still the best choice for us, a bill like HB 2216 would have encouraged our caseworkers and respective foster parents to coordinate more frequent and better quality visitations for us both. In addition, transportation assistance could have been provided so my sister wouldn't have to drive as a new driver on the freeway. Had a Sibling Bill of Rights been posted in my foster home, I would have known I could speak out about how I felt I was not being given the support in seeing my sibling that I really wanted and needed. Lastly, I would have been able to understand more clearly why my sister and I were in separate homes, and whether she was being adopted by her long-term foster parents instead of returning with me to our biological home.

I hope that with your support in the passing of HB 2216, foster youth in Jackson and other counties throughout Oregon will be able to have a better experience in care in relation to their sibling relationships than I had.

Thank you for your time,

Danno Mannino