



## *Perspectives from the Field*

### **Foster Club**

*This is the latest in a series of interviews SPARC is conducting with our advisory board members and with other child welfare leaders.*

### **Notable Quotes**

When I hear only 50% are given the opportunity to become successful, I hear a rate of failure.

There are some amazing kids on the Advisory Board, and most of us have been together since the start... They push me to be a better advocate.

As an advocate, I know I have a responsibility and image to uphold and as I've aged, my voice has become less that of a consumer and more of a person who should and could empower the next generation.

If we reimagine how we fund child welfare, we could provide services to families and we could do better. I got the help I needed, but my mother was left with my siblings who did not enter care. My mother was a good person and, frankly, a good mom who was trapped in a situation that no person could handle, and I was left to prepare myself for independence. The system did not help her like it could have, and we're still dealing with that years later.

Whatever the deep issues are, we need to provide parents with proper resources and a safety net first so that those problems cannot recur and children feel safe returning home or not take them out at all. We need to give families a chance to stay together.

Youth engagement shouldn't just be about sharing youth stories – youth engagement should be integrated into the design and delivery of all child welfare services. The policy agenda is then set by the youth and led by their experiences.

Opportunities like advocacy give youth the ability to recover and heal from those traumatic experiences in life. Just being around other people who have undergone it, and to have someone to relate to, is so valuable. I want more youth in the country to have that same opportunity that I had.

### **Transcript**

**SPARC:** Today we are honored to talk to four individuals who are involved with FosterClub, a national network of young people who are currently in or have lived experience with the foster care system. Their advocacy efforts to date are impressive and inspirational, and we will talk to them about the difference these efforts are making in their lives as well as the lives of other young people in foster care.

First, we have Ashley Kuber. Ashley is 22 years old, she lives in Idaho and is a Level 2 All Star – this means she trains new All Stars at FosterClub to become effective advocates for child welfare reform.

Ryan Cummings, from Seattle, is 21 years old and is a 2014 FosterClub All Star.

Alex McFarland is from Ohio and currently lives in Oregon. He worked for the state of Ohio as a transitional living coordinator and now works with FosterClub.

Finally, Tim Bell is 27 years old and from Washington State. As the director of Policy and Systems Change for FosterClub, he is an adult supporter for the All Stars.

Tim, could you tell our listeners a little bit about FosterClub and the All Star Program?

**Tim:** FosterClub’s mission is to lead the efforts of young people in and from foster care to become connected, educated, inspired, and represented, so they can realize their personal potential and contribute to a better life for their peers. At FosterClub, we believe that youth in care are the experts on many aspects of foster care. Acknowledging their expertise, our staff, our board, and our outreach members include young people from all across America who have experienced foster care in the decision making process. The shining jewel of our program is the Foster Club All Star Internship, which is a summer internship program where young people all across the county work at our national headquarters in Seaside, Oregon. We work on leadership skills and having young people turn their personal stories into stories of power to better the system – not only for themselves, but for their peers. This program is where we derive a lot of our thoughts about foster care – through these intensive, sort of pressure-cooker interactions that take place with our interns.

**SPARC:** All of you have had some experience advocating on behalf of youth transitioning from foster care. What difference do you think it’s made for your lives, and what difference do you think you’ve been able to make for youth transitioning from foster care by becoming an advocate?

**Ryan:** My advocacy work began when I was fourteen, when my mentor introduced me to a statewide youth advisory board, called Passion to Action, that changed my life forever and has shaped me into the young leader I am today. The board works internally within Washington’s Children’s Administration along with policymakers, health care officials, and the community at large to make positive changes to the foster care system, and provides input on policy, practices and procedures with the Children’s Administration and the Department of Social Services. Another statewide youth advocacy board is called Mockingbird. Mockingbird works externally from Children’s Administration, advocating for policy reform and promoting new legislation to improve services for youth in care.

Additionally, I am the Washington State Youth Representative on the Supreme Court Commission for Youth in Foster Care. The Commission is made up of a really passionate group of professionals, all coming together to discuss what is going on in the child welfare system, and we have the unique opportunity to impact system change at a larger level. For example, two years ago, the Commission participated in a leadership conference hosted by Mockingbird in Seattle, and we heard some of

the stories of Washington foster youth and reforms that they felt would make foster care better for future generations. One of their reforms revolved around prudent parenting standards: Foster youth felt that they had missed out on some of the normal childhood experiences young people undergo simply because they were in foster care, and they wanted foster parents to have more freedom to make decisions about the youth in their care.

A couple of examples they gave really resonated with me. A major issue was the inability to play contact sports in school and on local teams without social worker approval and biological parents' consent. This was often challenging because social workers would not respond or get approval from the biological parents to meet the deadlines for team tryouts, and sometimes they simply denied the request for fear of liability issues. I can also remember a youth speaking about not having the opportunity to go on a two-week sailing expedition to Costa Rica because the youth's social worker never heard back from the biological parents to get permission to go. The youth had actually won a grant from an essay contest, which would have paid for the trip, but because they couldn't get the permission signed by their biological parents they were not allowed to go. Sleepovers were also a really hot issue at the conference, because in order for youth in foster care to spend the weekend at a friend's house, background checks had to be done on everyone in the household beforehand. The youth explained how uncomfortable it was to have to tell their friends that background checks had to be performed because they were in foster care, and that they would often make up excuses for why they couldn't hang out with their peers.

These issues prompted the Commission to take action to give foster parents the ability to make these decisions without fear of liability or repercussions in Washington State. I'm happy to report that the "prudent parenting standard" was passed earlier this year and will be implemented soon.

**SPARC:** Ashley, what kind of efforts have you been involved with? How has it made a difference do you think?

**Ashley:** I started out advocating for children when I traveled across the country with a youth ministry team – that was really my first leadership experience. Later, my independent living worker realized that I had leadership potential, and she tricked me into going to a meeting to launch the Idaho Youth Advisory Board by saying that I would be able to see my brother. I really fell in love with it, and that's what made me go back to college. I now go to Boise State University for social work and political science, and we have a program there called Impact Scholars that tries to help more foster youth graduate – only 2% of foster kids graduate out of the 50% that actually go to college. Being the Board Chair of the Idaho Foster Youth Advisory Board led me to apply to the FosterClub internship, and that program kind of jettisoned and furthered my interest in helping kids from foster care.

After the FosterClub internship last summer, I was able to be a part of the YATTA (the Young Adult Technical and Training Assistance), which allowed me to work with the Center for the Study of Social Policy in their work to identify best practices. This really sparked my interest in policy. One of my goals is to help change policy for the foster care system, in Idaho and nationally. I also just joined the Idaho State Juvenile Justice Commission, which I think is really important because juvenile justice kids and foster kids have a lot of the same issues in common. Idaho is really trying

to bring those two programs together and communicate with each other better to address these issues.

The Youth Advisory Board has been working on a Foster Care Bill of Rights and Sibling Bill of Rights. We're also trying to put together a mentorship group, as well as tuition programs to make it easier for foster kids to graduate. There are some amazing kids on the Advisory Board, and most of us have been together since the start. One thing that I really admire about them is that I get to be an example to them, and they push me to be a better advocate. I'm really lucky to have them in my life, and they really inspire me and I'm going to try my best to really inspire them and help them become advocates too.

**SPARC:** Alex, you've been involved with local youth boards as well, right? Can you tell us a little bit about what you've accomplished in those?

**Alex:** I started doing advocacy when I was 17 with the local advisory board in my county. I later joined our state youth advisory board and was elected president. One of the biggest things I focused on was fighting for the board to get funding, and I was successful in obtaining a line item in our state's budget that allowed funding for all existing county advisory boards, as well as any new ones that were created. This was a shift for the state, because up until that point, many people thought hearing from youth was important, but they hadn't done anything to invest in the youth voice. In 2012, I was appointed to a new national policy council directly working with the state Department of Human and Health Services, and I've loved my participation in shaping national policies and how they relate to Ohio's child welfare system.

Being a national advocate has helped shape me into the person I am today. I spent 5 years on the advisory board and then got a job working for the state, and then advocated to create two jobs for former foster youth at the agency to work with transition age foster youth. I also revised a youth rights handbook, which now exists as an official document that is given to all foster youth in Ohio ages 12 and older. I also helped write our five-year state plan for child welfare, for transitional and independent living services. I moved beyond just sharing my story and I was really crafting the direction of Ohio's independent living and transitional services for the next 5 years.

Advocacy has forced me to mature. It has provided me an avenue through which I learn many pro-social skills, and provided me with opportunities for peer mentoring. I've had very few positive role models in my life, particularly male ones, and this was something that plagued my teenage years. I tell people the Alex you see today is not the Alex that you saw before. On the core, I'm the same person, but I had many behavioral issues and health issues, and being a part of the youth advisory board really helped me overcome that. As an advocate I know I have a responsibility and image to uphold and as I've aged, my voice has become less that of a consumer and more of a person who should and could empower the next generation.

Admittedly, this has been a difficult transition – it's easy to let your story and your advocacy consume you, and in doing so, neglect your own dreams. Being a young leader became my identity, and it's what people know me for, and in reality that can't be a lifelong goal for me. I think it's crucial to provide these opportunities for advocacy, but to make sure that youth are still working towards their dreams. I can always make a difference no matter my job, and that is what

I intend to do. But, I still need to look out for my own well-being before I help others and that can be different for many foster youth I think, when you care so much.

**SPARC:** One thing we hear from state advocates all the time is that child welfare is so big, there are so many issues to pursue – you can talk about prevention, early intervention, permanency, the list goes on and on. From your perspectives, and given your experience, what are the issues within child welfare that you're most passionate about? What would you most like to advocate for in your life so you can make a difference for youth in foster care?

**Alex:** Overhauling how we prepare teenage foster youth for success is one of the biggest issues right now. Many states just don't invest in programs that prepare youth for independence. In Ohio, for example, they invest the least in the nation for child welfare out of 50 states – this is despite the fact that they have some of the highest rates of youth who age out, 1,200 per year. Yet I know many of the staff there well, and they are wonderful, passionate people who are shackled by a government that doesn't believe in investing in child welfare. It's egregious. The onus is placed on the youth to become successful at 18, when most youth in normal households aren't independent until they're 25 or 26.

Another example is right here in Oregon, a state that has only about 300 youth who age out annually, yet they only serve 50% of them with independent living services. When I hear only 50% are given the opportunity to become successful, I hear a rate of failure. We spend about 8 billion annually on 26,000 children who age out of the foster care system in incarceration, loss of wages, and investment in social programs. But what if we invested in child welfare instead? Overall, the funding streams for child welfare are antiquated and leave this imprint on families years later. If we reimagine how we fund child welfare, we could provide services to families and we could do better. I got the help I needed, but my mother was left with my siblings who did not enter care. My mother was a good person and, frankly, a good mom who was trapped in a situation that no person could handle, and I was left to prepare myself for independence. The system did not help her like it could have, and we're still dealing with that years later.

**Ashley:** I'm passionate about advocating for preventive services for families. My dad, to his core, was an outstanding person. For most of my life, he was a terrific father who loved us to the fullest, but every so often he would have outbursts of anger and depression, which got more frequent as we got older. We were removed from my father in 2007 for four months and then reunited after he completed some AA classes. Of course, he returned to drinking again and having random outbursts, and I didn't hear from the child welfare system again until I was 20 years old. This task of giving a child a better home to return to isn't so simple – you can't say, "oh you have an alcohol problem and occasional violent outbreaks go to AA and you're cured." Why isn't anyone asking, "what is the real issue that's causing them to put their children in harms way?" Some parents cannot afford a proper home for their children or enough food. Some have not emotionally healed from events in their life, which affects the way they treat their kids. Some problems are generational and, like my dad, some could be unaware of health issues that can result in having no control over their actions. I believe that if the state of Idaho had done more to find the reason behind my dad's issue, which later we found out was Huntington's Disease, he would have gotten the medical, monetary, and emotional help he needed, and my brothers and I would be able to have a better relationship with him like we deserve.

Above all, I would like to have a relationship with my parents. Most of the support I have in my life comes from my brothers. We help each other financially, we give each other bear hugs, I look up to my brothers, and they celebrate my successes with me. The times where it's hard to accept the reality of my father's disease, the four of us fall back on each other. Whatever the deep issues are, we need to provide parents with proper resources and a safety net first so that those problems cannot recur and children feel safe returning home or not take them out at all. We need to give families a chance to stay together.

**SPARC:** Ryan, what are your thoughts about what you're passionate about?

**Ryan:** For me, one of the most important conversations that should be taking place across the country is the importance of sibling connections while in foster care. The child welfare system's understanding of sibling relationships has been improving and changing over the last couple of decades, and we're coming to realize that when siblings are separated, it is damaging to their development and emotional well-being. Keeping siblings together helps foster feelings of belonging and a sense of identity while in care, and you have those relationships with your siblings for the rest of your life. So it's really important that you have the opportunity to stay with them, if possible, while you are in care or have daily or weekly visits with one another.

During my time in care, I was separated from my older sister during our fifth placement – around the time when I was 13. When that happened, I felt like I was alone in the world. She was removed from our placement because our foster parents reached out to our social worker and to ask for services like counseling, because we had behavioral issues and they didn't know how to deal with it. It was just normal teenage stuff, but they needed help. And her social worker took it upon herself to place my sister into a group home, because she believed that was what was in her best interest, even against my foster parents' wishes. This decision really tore us apart and tore me apart. I fell into a deep depression and felt like my world had stopped – I lost that one person that had helped me define who I was and motivated me to be strong and successful.

My sister and I were all that we had from our past. We had very few visitations, because her behavior continued to spiral out of control – she really struggled with her anger, with everything that had happened in her life, and she was upset with our mom and the system. Because she didn't get the help she needed when she was in the foster care placement with me, I lost that relationship with my sister, and I don't really have a strong relationship with her to this day. I say all this because I believe that having more conversations and trainings for state officials and social workers across the country about the importance of sibling connections will help keep more siblings together.

I also want to talk about a summer camp called Camp to Belong, where I worked for a week this summer, which does a lot to promote sibling connections. Camp to Belong has locations across the country – the one I went to is in Oregon – and they bring siblings who have been separated because of the foster care system together for a week. They take away all the labels – you're not "adopted," you're not "foster," you're not "kinship" – you're just children, and you're at this camp and you get to hang out with your siblings and go horseback riding and swimming and just have fun and rebuild those relationships that have been damaged because of the separation. It's

programs like this, along with other innovative ideas, that really are helping this issue, but there's still a lot more that needs to be done.

**SPARC:** What we hear a lot from state advocates is the question of not *whether*, but *how*, to engage young people in their advocacy efforts. What would you tell state advocates is most important for them to keep in mind when it comes to engaging the youth voice in advocacy, telling their story, and becoming part of the solution?

**Ashley:** The first thing I would tell them is that you cannot engage the youth voice if you do not have youth at the table. Also, it's not just about one youth telling their story but also teaching them how to empower other youth through their stories. This isn't always related to what you want to accomplish – if you want to empower the youth, it's about what they want to accomplish.

Another important thing is helping young people share their story in an effective way that is not going to emotionally harm them as well. At FosterClub, we have a workshop called “Strategic Sharing,” and we go over the kind of questions that they shouldn't have to answer, the ones they can answer, and the questions that it's up to them if they feel comfortable answering. We don't want youth to get in front of an audience and have a breakdown or have some serious emotional issues afterward because they haven't healed from what has happened in their past. Also, as a state advocate, it's important to make sure that what you are advocating is youth-informed and trauma-informed.

Youth have dreams and they have goals and you can embrace that and help them get there. I have a 20-year goal of having a fund for foster kids in the Pacific Northwest. So if kids need money for a down payment for a car, if they need tuition money or there is an emergency or anything, they can write an essay to me, telling how they are going to pay it forward and I can help with them with whatever they need. I don't have all of it worked out yet, but I want to do that because somebody believed in me. All I want to do is pay it forward. And there are other kids, with other dreams, not just for helping foster youth. There are kids that want to be veterinarians, or police officers or whatever they want to do in life. You can instill that in them and help them figure out that, there is a right way to do it and a wrong way to do it.

**SPARC Alex,** what are your thoughts? What would you tell advocates?

**Alex:** I think that many times youth are not able to contextualize their story in the bigger picture in a way that lawmakers and policymakers can understand their story – who would? Youth have often normalized abuse and maltreatment because it's all they know, and the child welfare system hasn't done much to change that. To engage youth, you have to inform them of their rights from the beginning and start the conversation early, and often youth then can then begin to understand how their stories fit in to improving the whole system. Bringing youth to the partners to the table is critical. Youth engagement shouldn't be about sharing their stories – youth engagement should be integrated into the design and delivery of all child welfare services. The policy agenda is then set by the youth and led by their experiences.

The benefits of engaging youth transcend policy reform. When we prepare youth as young leaders we help them navigate their life history and their own interpersonal relationships as they age. The

most important part of engaging them is that they are prepared to share this experience, as Ashley talked about. Well-intentioned policymakers and administrators often ask very detailed questions about the youths' past, and when youth are put up in front of them unprepared, you risk oversharing, which is an unfortunate consequence.

**SPARC:** Last but certainly not least, Ryan, as one of the newer young people on the scene around this, what do you think?

**Ryan:** I would talk to them about the importance of dealing with the trauma that youth experience because of being in foster care. It's important to understand that children go through the challenging situations of being separated from their siblings and their families, and just struggling to find themselves while in care. One of my favorite suggestions for advocates and child welfare workers is to get their young people involved in youth advocacy boards. It's just so empowering to be in a room full of people who all share similar experiences. When I joined Passion to Action, and I learned that I wasn't alone in foster care, I begin to feel a sense of hope again. That was really the point in my life when I came into my own and I realized that advocacy was going to become a part of my future and was really going to help me with some of the stuff that I've been suppressing for years. I finally feel now that my future isn't doomed, I have the potential to do something great with my life and make a difference. Opportunities like advocacy give youth the ability to recover and heal from those traumatic experiences in life. Just being around other people who have undergone it, and to have someone to relate to, is so valuable. I want more youth in the country to have that same opportunity that I had.

**SPARC:** I really want to thank you all for sharing your thoughts with us and with the SPARC advocates. For us, it's hard to imagine moving forward without engaging the voices of young people, but I think what these amazing young advocates have taught us today is the responsibility we all have to ensure that it's not just a process to get our own goals met, but also to have young people grow, heal and achieve their own goals. That is more important than anything else that we do. So thank you so much to all of you, we really appreciate your time, your thoughts, and your inspiration, to say the least.

In closing, I would also like to let you all know that FosterClub has some incredible resources on their website. We will be posting many of those resources along with this podcast, as well as the website address, so if you're thinking of doing your own youth advocacy efforts, if you're thinking about joining the youth advocacy effort as a young person, if you're thinking about engaging the voices of young people in your advocacy work, you can use these resources. Thank you all for your time.