Fostering Writers

by Peggy Farber
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Alene Taylor sat hunched over a large calendar in the corner of a cavernous office on West 29th Street, fretting over impending deadlines, like any professional journalist, and that is what, suddenly, she had become. For as long as she could remember, she loved to write, filling black and white notebooks with poems and stories when she was seven, submitting articles for consideration to Seventeen Magazine when she entered her teens. Now, at 16, Taylor was being given a chance at a magazine that has been a success for almost a decade, writing an article about working conditions inside foster care agencies. This was not the first story she had written about the brutalities of the foster care system, though it was the first that required reporting. For the others, she wrote about her own experiences. Taylor writes for Foster Care Youth United , a bimonthly magazine that contains some of the most honest writing about foster care anywhere -- and it is written entirely by adolescents.

New York City's foster care officials often complain that the city's journalists fail to give an accurate picture of the foster care system. But two publications - Foster Care Youth United, and a new book by New York Times reporter Nina Bernstein - give about as careful and candid a view of foster care as any reader could ask for.

Foster Care Youth United was begun in 1992 by Keith Hefner, the publisher of New Youth Connections, a newspaper written by and for New York City high school students. Hefner discovered that the writing process could do more than just give foster kids a voice, that it could actually help traumatized young adults overcome some of what they had endured - provided the editors guided the young writers to structure their stories to help readers in the audience. "That little bit of distance gives them a big space to look at things they wouldn't otherwise because they1re too painful," Hefner said.

Certainly, Taylor's life has given her plenty to write about. She has lived in foster families and in group homes. For a brief period, at 12, she lived at home where her mother's boyfriend went after her.

Eighteen months ago, she began writing for Foster Care Youth United with a piercing poem about the attack by her mother's boyfriend. Since then, she has written about teenagers

hanging out on the corner near her group home, about sexual harassment. She has begun a novel. "There's a lot of things I want to say," Taylor said "Everything may be hard right now but later on it won't be that way."

Kendra Hurley, one of the magazine's editors, said she has seen teenagers like Taylor transformed by writing. "So often in foster care decisions are being made for you," Hurley said. "Just the knowledge that what they have been through is useful to someone else can be empowering."

Hurley recalled a young woman who had been sexually abused. "She had written a lot before she wrote about that," Hurley said. "Then she wrote a pretty straightforward story about it, and then she wrote about it again, and then it was something she was obsessed with as a writer. I think the whole impulse for writing for any writer is to try to make sense of what1s happened, especially if you've had lots of trauma."

There are between ten and twenty young writers at work on Foster Care Youth United at any given point during the publishing year. Each issue, distributed at group homes and through child welfare agencies, reaches about 15,000 adolescent readers.

Foster Care Youth United is not the only place to find truthful writing about foster care. This month, Nina Bernstein, a reporter for the New York Times, publishes The Lost Children of Wilder: The Epic Struggle to Change Foster Care
, a book about a court battle to fix New York's foster care system that lasted longer than the childhood of two generations of foster children.

Bernstein was a reporter at New York Newsday in 1990 when she decided to track down Shirley Wilder, the lead plaintiff in Wilder, a class action lawsuit that had promised in its early stages to improve the level of care given to children in city custody. Shirley was 13 when the suit was filed in 1973. By the time Bernstein found her, Shirley was a 33 year old crack addict infected with the AIDS virus, and the suit was still not entirely over. Shirley had lived through the worst the foster system had to offer. She had also, at 14, given birth to a son, Lamont, and placed him in foster care.

Learning of Lamont's existence, Bernstein set herself the task of finding him, of unearthing what

had happened to him, and of writing about these two and the court battle fought in their name. The story of Shirley's and then Lamont1s journey through foster homes, psychiatric hospitals, juvenile lock-ups, homeless shelters, and the streets forms the backbone of Bernstein1s book. The sorrow that had defined Shirley1s girlhood, Bernstein soon discovered, was repeated in Lamont's boyhood, even as the battle advanced through the courts and the city bureaucracy. Like the writers of Foster Care Youth United, Bernstein struggled to make sense of what happened. "Children in the foster care system are about as powerless as people can be. They're children, they don't have their natural advocates, their parents, and they don't vote."

Peggy J. Farber is freelance journalist specializing in children's issues. Her reporting on conditions of NYC children has appeared in City Limits Magazine as well as on National Public Radio.