



Community Leadership Forum (“CLF”)
2008 Summit – Aging Out of the Foster Care System
March 4, 2008

The mission of the Junior League of Los Angeles’ Community Leadership Forum (CLF) is to bring together community, non-profit organizations, and foundation leaders, along with our members to share knowledge, enhance awareness and advance the cause of an emerging issue impacting Los Angeles. The 2008 Summit sought to provide a forum to exchange information about the current foster care system, specifically children “aging out” of the system, including gaps in the current system, current resources available and proposed solutions from state and local leaders.

The Summit took place the morning of March 4, 2008, at the California Endowment’s Center for Healthy Communities in downtown Los Angeles. About 150 attendees, including, non-profit organization employees and volunteers, social workers and other government service providers, foundation members, educators, and Junior League members gathered to hear eight speakers share firsthand knowledge on this topic.

**THE PROBLEM: DIRE STATISTICS,
INADEQUATE PROGRAMS**

Unbeknownst to the general public, aging out is a growing crisis; every year, the State of California “emancipates” 4,000 youth from its foster care system, 1/5 of the approximately 20,000 youth that age out nationally. These youth are ill-prepared to support themselves since they have no support system in place and few life skills. A recent study by the California Advocacy Institute quantifies the current outcomes for California’s foster children:

- 65% emancipate without a place to live.

8:00am-8:30am	<i>Client Registration & Breakfast</i>
8:30am-9:45am	<i>Welcome & Keynote Address by Two Former L.A. County Foster Youth and Current Advocates</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Venus Manuel, California Youth Connection</i> • <i>Andrew Bridge, Author of Hope’s Boy</i>
9:45am-10:00am	<i>Break & Resource Fair</i>
10:00am-12:00pm	<i>Panel Presentation- Short and Long-Term</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Panel Moderator, Judge M. Nash, Presiding Judge, L.A. Juvenile Court</i> • <i>Mentors and Lifelong Connections – Martine Singer of Hollygrove</i> • <i>Legislative Environment – Ed Howard, Lobbyist, Children’s Advocacy Institute</i> • <i>Life Skills & Transition Preparation including Education – Sam Cobbs, Executive Director of First Place for Youth</i> • <i>Mental Health/HealthCare Issues – Dr. Margot Kushel of UCSF</i> • <i>Transitional Housing – Ingrid Hines, Executive Director of Penny Lane</i>
12:00pm-12:30pm	<i>Closing: Judge M. Nash, Presiding Judge, L.A. Juvenile Court</i>

- Less than 3% go to college.
- 51% are unemployed.
- Emancipated females are 4 times more likely to receive public assistance than the general population.
- 40% of persons living in homeless shelters are former foster children.

SPEAKERS AND PANELISTS

The Summit started with a welcome and introductions by the 2007-2008 JLLA president Terrie Weeden, and the 2008 CLF Chairperson Joy Burkhard who emphasized the importance of building new partnerships to share new ideas necessary to solve this very significant problem, “so exchange phone numbers,” Ms. Burkhard encouraged the audience. She then introduced the two keynote speakers, Venus Manuel and Andrew Bridge.

Venus Manuel, Keynote Speaker

“Through the odyssey of nine foster homes in 2½ years, I became who I am,” began keynote speaker Venus Manuel, who, at the age of 17½ was deemed by the state of California to be mature enough to support herself because she had stopped selling drugs and earned her high school diploma.

Manuel’s message to the audience was “don’t give our youth excuses. Don’t encourage victim behavior, because they will only become prey. Put their situation in front of them in a care giving way.” She credits much of her success to the Santa Monica YWCA and the California Youth Connection.



Much of Manuel’s drive to outgrow her circumstances stemmed from her sincere desire to look after her younger sister. In spite of the system, not because of it, Manuel went on to build a successful résumé that includes a stint as US Air Force photographer, a Miss America finalist (with foster care as her platform), a college degree, and professional speaking engagements to audiences who overwhelmingly have not heard of the aging-out problem “even though it affects all segments of our population: black and white, male and female.” Manuel indicated on a positive note, that in the 10 years she has been advocating for foster care youth, there has been a 2% increase in the number of foster children attending college.

Andrew Bridge, Keynote Speaker

The second keynote speaker of the Summit, Andrew Bridge, author of the New York Times Best Seller, “Hope’s Boy,” and a former foster youth called the half million foster children in the U.S. “our nation’s most vulnerable youth.” Bridge said that these children enter the system because they are poor, not abused, and in fact, are more likely to be abused under state care than in the homes they left behind, especially in “public

orphanages” like MacLaren Hall, which before it closed in 2003, featured perimeter fencing, armed guards, and warehouse-style dorms, where Bridge spent time before going into a foster home. Because of his experience, Bridge grew up thinking that the role of social workers was to remove children and take them to what they didn’t know then disappear.

Bridge had a two-fold message for the audience: First, refrain from passing judgment on parents of foster children. “I was regularly reminded that my mother had failed me, and they universally condemned her in front of me. If a child loves a parent, allow him that love. It will always be their beginning and their end. Failure and love can exist side by side.”

Second, we must reform the system so that it no longer rewards the wrong kinds of behavior. “The vast amount of funding goes to tearing families apart.” The system offers the greatest financial incentives to programs that take children from families and make promises to those children that are subsequently broken. Those who label a child smart and able, and work to get him involved in sports, get nothing, he said. Bridge ended by reading his college admissions essay. “The future always remains a promise that can be kept,” he said.

Margot Kushel, MD –Medical and Mental Health Issues Facing Those Who Age-Out

Dr. Kushel, who is an associate professor of medicine at UCSF, San Francisco General Hospital, offered the point of view of an experienced clinician. She said that she can easily identify patients on her hospital rounds who are newly emancipated from foster care: They are usually homeless; they suffer from diseases not typically seen in young people; there are no balloons hanging about their beds; and they list no emergency contact on their forms. Yet these patients have “incredible verve—they are struggling to get by but are doing it with such passion.”

Dr. Kushel was a rich source of statistics on former foster youth:

- 12% of all homeless adults were in foster care as youth
- 80,000 of 550,000 foster children live in California, and 20,000 age out each year
- At least 50% of emancipated youths are unstably housed, and 75% have no health insurance. "Medicaid is good for those who need it, but it doesn't keep kids healthy. A home is critical toward making people healthy," she said.
- Young women in foster care are six times more likely to give birth before age 21 than the general population, and their children are more likely to end up in foster care too

Yet, there have been some improvements in the system in the recent past, Dr. Kushel reports, citing a 1999 law passed in San Francisco that keeps young people in the system until they are aged 21–24 years. “But can we as their parents do any better?” she asked.

Ed Howard –Political Environment

Ed Howard, senior counsel for the Children's Advocacy Institute at the University of San Diego Law School and a former lobbyist before the California state legislature, started by telling the audience, "I cry all the time." Howard said that while no one wants to hurt these children, and this issue is met uniformly with good intentions on both sides of the aisle in Sacramento, "transitional age foster kids don't vote and don't bring in large donations back home" so policy continues unchanged in Sacramento. "There is always money," Howard said, "but we don't get money even when the money's there."



Howard did offer two pieces of good news, however. Two leading state legislators—Assemblywoman Karen Bass, (a democrat from Los Angeles' 47th district and speaker-elect of the California Assembly), and Senator Darrell Steinberg (6th district, Sacramento) are both strong proponents on this issue. [Sen. Steinberg is sponsoring SB 785 (Mental health care for foster children), and Assemblywoman Bass heads a group of legislators who are undertaking widespread reform of the state's foster care system (see their web site: http://democrats.assembly.ca.gov/members/a47/comm_fostercare.htm).]

Secondly, Howard said, "The Junior League's involvement [by holding today's event] is potentially pivotal" on this issue. "I don't have the power to fix this, you do," he told the audience. "You can change this dynamic by demanding answers back home." Attendees can urge their state representatives to do something.

Ingrid Hines –Transitional Housing

Ingrid Hines, Director of Penny Lane's Transitional Housing Program, has been working the issue of youth homelessness for more than 30 years. She spoke of Penny Lane's formation in 1969 as a home for girls started by a former probation officer. One of the highlights of her own career was to take a public apartment building that Penny Lane bought and "turn it around." Hines describes some of their early mistakes; for instance, they wanted to "de-institutionalize" the facility by letting the teenage girls come and go as they like, and "believe me," she said, "there were lots of comings and goings." Eventually, Penny Lane restructured and now includes therapy and job placement services, and the organization provides services such as making life plans, teaching them about leases, bus routes, and enrolling homeless youth in food stamp programs, both for them and their children.



The organization had a major milestone in 2006: they opened their first permanent care home, including 14 beds for those who will always require support.

Sam Cobbs –Transition Preparation: Life Skills

Cobbs described keynote speakers like Andy Bridge and Venus Manuel as his “booster shot.” “Their stories motivate me to trade emails at 5 am and to continue to knock on doors,” he said. Cobbs, the Executive Director of First Place for Youth, a grass roots effort started by two young grad students at UC Berkeley who among other things raised funds by hosting parties which were then used to fund microloans for things such as first and last month’s rent.



Cobbs main point is that a “system” should turn out a consistent, reliable product, but our current foster care system turns out no uniform product at all. It turns out high achievers like Bridge and Manuel as well as plenty of others with greater problems. Cobbs went on to describe a typical foster child’s education. They often attend the worst, most crowded public schools, and are often told “college and trade school is not for everyone. Do you tell your kids that?”

He sees the adults in the system as the main problem since “the permanent adults” in these kids’ lives fail to communicate with each other; someone from the child’s church may tell the child one thing, while another tells him something else. These kids need consistency and permanency. “Permanency means having your picture on someone else’s wall and having your side of the church full on your wedding day,” he said.

Cobbs ended with a quote from Maya Angelou, whom he heard speak at a recent event: “Whatever has been done before can be done again, good or bad. You can do or be anything.”

Martine Singer –Lifelong Connections

Martine Singer described Hollygrove’s early mission as a residential treatment center that once housed Marilyn Monroe as a foster youth and its current mission as a family search and engagement service. “We try to find relatives who will form a safe, enduring family relationship that will last a lifetime,” she said. She went on to say, that foster care should be avoided all together when possible “We should keep them out of foster care so they don’t have to experience the trauma of the system.”



She described several wonderful case studies of foster children who had no known family members, yet the staff at Hollygrove was able to locate family members. In one case, 60 family members living locally, were located, some of whom were willing to adopt the foster youth. In another case, the Hollygrove staff was able to find relatives who worked as beauticians or horse trainers, which, coincidentally, were both professions of interest to the foster youth. One foster youth learned he was descended from Jeronimo. These connections, Singer said, are vitally important to foster youth because “it helps dissipate symptoms of disconnectedness and

depression, which are two of the biggest problems foster kids face. Children need a family's love."

Closing Remarks by Judge Nash –Panel Moderator

Judge Michael Nash spoke pragmatically about the failure of our current system, saying that those who are “emancipated” succeed in spite of the system, not because of it. He went on to say, "Foster care isn't a place for kids to grow up. When a youngster ages out the system, the system has failed them." He also explained that emancipation shouldn't be used when describing the process of aging-out of foster care. “Emancipation has a positive connotation. There is nothing positive about what we are doing to these kids." He ended by telling the audience he encourages others at the Court, and encourages the audience to do the same, to find meaning in the work they do by reviewing their calendars at the day's end to recognize the good they have done during that day, even in the midst of a challenged foster care system.

PANEL QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Question Are any funds set aside for foster kids' use when they age out of the system?

Response by Ed Howard: We hired an economist to see how much typical parents set aside for their own kids and then put the same amount in a court-managed fund, “but state legislators cannot see beyond the next budget cycle. If you cannot pay for it right now, you better have several thousand letters [from constituents] backing you up. The same applies for any issue related to kids, by the way.”

Judge Nash adds: You cannot just give kids money and expect them to survive and be healthy, productive adults, just as you would not do that for your own kids.

Question: It seems that the money that is spent to support these children who don't succeed, and spend time in prison for example, could be invested on the front end to prevent these problems in the first place, has this been considered?

Response by Ed Howard:

The Children's Advocacy Instituted conducted such a study which found exactly, that. [The report can be viewed by visiting: <http://cachildlaw.org/TransitionalServices.htm>]

Question: What are one or two things the audience can do to support this cause?

Answers:

- To live healthy lives, these children need homes, not just roofs over their heads; education; and healthy habits; not just health insurance.
- **Find out who your assembly members are and contact them**, preferably asking for a face-to-face meeting here in L.A. (available Fridays), or as an alternative speaking to them via phone in Sacramento. Explain that the problem our children who are aging out of the system face is "morally disgraceful," and outrage to you and your friends and family back home. Ask the assembly member what his/her plan is to fix it, or if s/he isn't proposing legislation what assembly member's proposal s/he he will support.

[To find your assembly member or senator, go to <http://www.assembly.ca.gov/defaulttext.asp> and click on "Find My District" on the left side of the page.]

- **Contact the L.A. County board of supervisors.** This board of 5 supports the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS). At least one panelist expressed the opinion that the Board hasn't taken a stand in support of this issue.

Again, explain that the problem our children who are aging out of the system face is "morally disgraceful," and outrage to you and your friends and family. Ask the board what they are going to do to fix this problem.

- **Tell somebody else about this problem.** The public is largely unaware and would be outraged as we are to know of the problems these teens face.
- **Volunteer 1-2 hours.** Consider contacting one of the panelist organizations. Opportunities include meeting with kids, serving on a board of directors.
- **Make a financial donation.** A small \$25 donation goes a long way to support organizations whose programs help foster youth.
- **Establish a relationship with a Foster Child.** You can do this by contacting one of the panelist's organizations or consider serving as a court appointed special advocate (CASA). [To learn more about becoming a CASA visit <http://www.nationalcasa.org/>] You might also help a child apply to college, re-enroll in Medicaid or just take him or her to lunch.

Question 3: What were your most critical needs during the first 1-2 years after emancipation?

Response by Manuel: The Summit ended with an emotional response by Venus Manuel, who said, her most critical need was a place to go, "someplace to stay where I would be welcome." "I have no one to go home to at Christmas, and no one to come get me when I had to be admitted to the hospital.."

OTHER SUMMIT HIGHLIGHTS



The Community Leadership Forum Resource Fair was a lively success.



Andy Bridge signs copies of his best-selling book, "Hope's Boy." All 80 copies of the books, supplied by Vroman's, sold out during the event.

The Junior League of Los Angeles Presents
Community Leadership Forum 2008:

Aging Out of the Foster Care System

Tuesday, March 4
8 am - 12:30 pm

Every year, 4,000 youths are released from California's foster care system with inadequate resources to transition to self-sufficient adults. Join the Junior League of Los Angeles as we convene community leaders and experts to find a solution.

Featuring Keynote Speaker:
Andrew Bridge, New York Times best-selling author of "Hope's Boy"

Event Location:
The California Endowment Center
for Healthy Communities
1000 North Alameda Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012
866-833-3533



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For information & registration, please visit: www.jlla.org

The CLF Summit garnered major public attention with this ad in the Los Angeles Times.

About the Junior League of Los Angeles:

The Junior League of Los Angeles is an organization of women committed to promoting volunteerism, developing the potential of women and to improving the community through the effective action and leadership of trained volunteers. Its purpose is exclusively educational and charitable.

The Junior League of Los Angeles reaches out to women of all races, religions and national origins who demonstrate an interest in and a commitment to volunteerism and to the community.

The Junior League of Los Angeles provides training opportunities to develop its volunteers through seminars, community service, leadership roles and mentoring in order to achieve its mission.

The focus areas of the Junior League of Los Angeles include:

- Health and education of women and children
- Violence prevention
- Women in leadership

For more information visit: www.jlla.org