

Succeeding Against The Foster Care Odds

By Chadwick Sapenter



My journey almost ended before it began. As an infant, I nearly became the victim of murder by a convicted serial killer. As a teenager, I escaped murder once again while being held at gunpoint.

Today, I am 27 years old. It defies the odds not only that I am still alive, but also that I am thriving as an entrepreneur in today's unforgiving business climate. My latest ventures are aimed at improving the foster care system in the United States and ending illiteracy throughout the world. In deciding which directions to take my work, I have been guided by my past.

I once was a frightened child in desperate need of stability and support. Now, I am determined to give children who grew up in foster care, as I did, every opportunity to succeed in life. I've had to come a long way in order to give back. As a 7-year-old boy, I stood beside my father's death bed as he passed away from complications that stemmed from the AIDS virus, which he contracted through sharing needles as a heroin addict. By the age of 15, I had spent years homeless.

When not living on the streets, my siblings and I lived in communities infested with drugs, gangs and violence. Raised by a widowed mother who spent the majority of her adult life suffering from a bipolar and schizophrenia disorder, I credit her for nurturing my entrepreneurial spirit. After spending two consecutive years sleeping in cars, on park benches and on street corners, my two younger brothers and I entered the Texas foster care system. Living in foster care was scary. Fortunately, I had two younger brothers who held me accountable for my actions, and volunteers who believed in me.

Last October, I offered to help as Casey Family Programs, a national foundation, came to my town to launch an advertising campaign about foster care called "Raise Me Up." The ads featured bold images and messages designed to show that children in foster care struggle unless caring individuals and communities intervene. The National Urban League is partnering with Casey Family Programs to improve the well-being of children by increasing the understanding of the challenges children face in foster care.

From experience, I know that children in foster care do not fare as well as other children. And I subsequently have

learned that the percentage of African-American children in foster care is more than double their share of the U.S. child population.

Our goal should be to keep all of our children safe from abuse and neglect, the two factors that result in them being removed from home and placed into foster care. For children already in foster care, our goal must be to find them more stable home environments with loving families that will keep them safe and support them for all time. Achieving these goals is important for us all because healthy children lead to healthy communities.

The lesson behind "Raise Me Up" inspired me to step away from my successful real estate development and marketing firm and redirect my business priorities. My newest venture is Myfoco.org, an online platform to connect youth who have "aged out" of the foster care system to real-world resources such as housing, education, employment and social relationships. I also have founded Little Book of Words™ Publishing Co., which has released its first title: "Little Book of Words Every Foster Kid Should Know," a 12-step guide to lift up youth from foster kids to awesome leaders.

This new direction isn't escaping my past. It's embracing it.

The way I see it, you can let a difficult life be your excuse, or you can be strong and recognize that your struggle is God's gift and a necessary part of identifying your purpose. **UIM**

Chadwick Sapenter lives in Austin, TX.

For more information, visit:
Casey.org, Raisemeup.org, Chadsapenter.com,
Myfoco.org and Littlebookofwords.com.

Don't miss "Foster Care In America: A Call To Action For Our Children," a special Town Hall Meeting at the 2009 National Urban League Conference in Chicago.

The session on **Thursday, July 30** from 3:30 p.m. - 5:00 p.m. at the **McCormick Place Convention Center** will address how we can raise a hand for our children in foster care; raise awareness with friends and family; and raise our voices with policymakers. Conference badge required for admission.