

Beware of Lowering Expectations for Foster Youth

 chronicleofsocialchange.org/opinion/beware-lowering-expectations-foster-youth/24203

1/27/2017

Too many veteran social workers, caregivers, and mental health professionals lower their expectations of the young people within their influence. Of course, it's important to start where the young person is, but too often the brokenness of the young person is so great that the expectations are drastically reduced in a well-meaning effort to set obtainable goals for small improvements.

From the perspective of a former foster kid, I've seen too many young people like I used to be, who had the potential for success, but who languished in their brokenness because no one expected them to do any better.

I'm sure we all agree that the goal is to encourage victims of trauma to thrive, to be the best they can be, and to fulfill their destiny by fully self actualizing. The reality is, however, that this is very unlikely to happen if everyone in authority around that young person expects him or her to lead a mediocre or dismal life.

Despite the discouraging perceptions, the truth is that every encouraging word, every bit of advice, and every bit of "tough love" that you pour into the young people within your influence is absorbed. They may not be aware of having received and absorbed what you've contributed to them, or be able to express how they feel about it. It may take years before the wisdom that you planted into their hearts and minds takes root.

But rest assured, it does take root. I think of one sentence that a foster parent said to me when I was about 7 years old. It didn't seem important at the time, but it ultimately changed my life.

After a particularly painful incident of abuse, I was placed with a foster family that made me feel welcome and safe for the very first time in my life. In the abusive home where I had been living before, expressing disappointment or anger was simply not an option. So in the home of those very nice foster parents, I was finally able to express the anger and hurt that was boiling inside me.

I vividly remember sitting in the middle of their white linoleum kitchen floor, throwing a full-blown temper tantrum. The woman just stood there looking at me, with no idea of what to do.

Then her husband walked into the room and sternly said, "Young lady, you were put here for a reason, and you better be finding out what it is."

I had no idea what he was talking about. His existential statement was like something spoken in a foreign language that I quickly disregarded with a screamed response of, "I hate you!"

That is my only memory with those people because I was removed shortly thereafter. I was only with those people for a week or two, and I never heard their names again. As the years went by, my brief experience in their home became a faded memory that seemed more like an imagined daydream.

Fast forward 20 years, when I was opening the mail at my desk at the insurance agency, where I worked. I had recently found an insurance company that would cover Hillview Acres Children's Home in Chino, Calif., saving the residential treatment center more than \$20,000 that year.

In the mail was a large envelope filled with colorful drawings from the children at Hillview, along with a note from the CEO that thanked me for, "keeping the doors of the Children's Home open." As I sat at my desk holding that note, I suddenly thought of that foster father for the first time in about twenty years.

I clearly recalled the only words I had ever heard from him, and I knew then that he had been right. I *had* been put

on this earth for a reason, and the CEO of Hillview Acres Children's Home had just "flipped on the light switch" that helped me see it.

It wasn't long afterwards that I quit my job and started my own company that was founded to protect the good people and organizations that care for kids and families.

Every successful survivor of childhood abuse can point to at least one person who saw potential in her before she saw it in herself — one person who refused to lower their expectations. I've interviewed countless successful survivors of trauma, and learned that there are common threads that run through our lives, not the least of which is this truth that one single conversation can plant the seeds that result in our personal and professional success, significance and self actualization.

People who were traumatized when they were too vulnerable to prevent it have the potential to be some of the strongest, most resilient and most resourceful people in the world. When we mine the lessons out of our painful experiences, rather than wallowing in the victimization we have experienced, we are capable of success, not just despite what we've been through, but specifically because of it.

What I mean is that the abandonment of my parents taught me self-reliance. Poverty taught me how to manage money and to be resourceful. Being mistreated developed in me an empathy and a burning desire for justice. All my childhood experiences are the foundation for my personal and professional success .

I'm so grateful to the foster father who refused to show pity, but rather planted in my soul his belief that there was a purpose for my life, and that it was up to me to discover it. His refusal to lower his expectations of the dirty, foul-mouthed foster child in his home led to the growth of a resilient, resourceful business woman who has created and built successful businesses, provided employment and opportunities for many and planted innumerable seeds of success in others.

Rhonda Sciortino is the author of [Successful Survivors: The 8 Character Traits of Survivors and How You Can Attain Them](#). Rhonda is the chairperson of the [Successful Survivors Foundation](#) and serves as the National Child Welfare Specialist for [Markel Services](#). She lives in southern California with her husband of 26 years.