

Grant Proposal

The National Foster Child Writer Award & Writing Mentorship Program

Organization: Librarian Mentors Program

Location: 480 Lilypond Lane, Lincoln, CA 95648

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Introduction

There are many hard, bleak numbers that anonymously represent the problems of orphaned and foster care children caught in the welfare system. From the 4,000 orphans qualified under the Twin Towers Orphan Fund (www.ttof.org) to the 545,097 in foster care documented by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (www.acf.dhhs.gov/Programs.html) the facts representing the needs of these children can be overwhelming.

There is no end to requirements in this country for the care of these abandoned or unwanted children, nor is relief in site for the millions of homeless and orphaned children worldwide. Every human involved in any type of non-profit or public service is painfully aware of these numbers so they will not be repeated here. However, in all the alarm spread by countless services and advocates for these children, one aspect lays strangely and quietly dormant:

It is the voice of the youth themselves.

Project Description and Mission

This Project will team mentor librarians with foster children between ages 15 to 21 in a fiction writing program where the end goal is a competition for a \$20,000 cash prize to be shared between the adult mentor and the young author. The end product of this partnership is the professional publishing of the author's story in their own words and by their own hand.

Once this book or series of short stories is published it will be promoted internally by foster care organizations and externally to the public through a publishing house who will in turn manage and donate the proceeds of the book back into the Program as it deems appropriate. In this way the measure of success of this Program will become the popularity of the series of books among the book-buying public as well as the individual success of the author in terms of self-esteem and financial freedom to pursue their dreams for themselves, whatever they may be.

Our mission will be to develop and administer a national one-to-one mentoring Program with an emphasis on fiction writing for at-risk youth. There are already many youth mentoring programs available to base this Program on and rather than re-invent the wheel we will draw on the

*BILLY: What then must we do?
Tolstoy asked the same question.
He wrote a book with that title. He
got so upset about the poverty in
Moscow that he went one night
into the poorest section and just
gave away all his money. You
could do that now. Five American
dollars would be a fortune to one
of these people.
GUY: Wouldn't do any good, just
be a drop in the ocean.
BILLY: Ahh, that's the same
conclusion Tolstoy came to, I
disagree.
GUY: Oh, what's your solution?
BILLY: Well, I support the view
that you just don't think about the
major issues. You do whatever you
can about the misery that's in front
of you.*

*Excerpted from
A Year of Living Dangerously*

experience of organizations like the "Mentors in Writing Program" (at <http://www.merlynspen.com/mentor1.html>) and the Mentor Resources Library provided by the Take Stock in Children Network, Inc. (www.takestockinchildren.com). Our Program will require involvement of local libraries and human resources/youth services agencies to goal set and coordinate mentorships and provide the physical spaces where meetings may occur.

Part of our directive will also be to manage and promote the participating writer’s prize awarded yearly to a student writer and their mentor by a three-judge panel of popular children’s authors (such as Judy Blume and Roland Dahl) or well-known children’s advocates such as those recognized by Oprah Winfrey in her “Angel Network.” There is hope we may also be able to enlist the fund matching ability of RJ Rawling who created her own hero out of Harry Potter, a foster child who triumphed with the love and support of his community and his mentors. In addition to participating as panel judges, the public visibility of these luminaries will help promote the project in the public sector and bring legitimacy to the fledgling Program.

There are also already programs online that have attempted to draw on the experiences of foster children like those stories at the Foster Survivor Network (fostersurvivor.netfirms.com) but these stories are non-fiction writing. Our Program will not supplant those efforts already in place. Instead it will seek to help these children find a new voice with tools for the future rather than working as a one-time vehicle to exploit the painful, personal and often private memories of children in foster care.

It will demand media relations and the private interest campaigns of our partners in order to bring public awareness to the newly celebrated young authors and the people who support them embodied by librarians, social workers, foster parents, published authors and the publishing community.

Statement of Need

Children in foster families have been removed from their birth families for reasons of neglect, abuse, abandonment or safety. Many of these children are filled with fear, anger, confusion, or a sense of powerlessness. Many are older children or young teens with no direction, no heroes to look up to, no mentors to guide them toward achieving their dreams and no economic means of achieving success.

This is one Program that would fill all these needs:

- It will establish a stable, trusting environment and supportive relationship between adult mentor and foster child by creating a shared goal.
- It will create exposure to new experiences and disciplines that enhance the foster youth's ability to become a responsible citizen.
- It will empower youth in foster care with economic and/or academic assistance towards a goal in which they have enthusiasm and aptitude.

JAMAL: They're making us enter some kinda writing contest at school. You ever enter one of those?
WILLIAM: Yeah, once.
JAMAL: Did you win?
WILLIAM: Of course
JAMAL: What? Money or something?
WILLIAM: The Pulitzer
JAMAL: They make all the students get up and read in front of the class.
WILLIAM: What the hell does that got to do with writing? Writers write so that readers can read. Let someone else read it.

*Excerpted from
Finding Forrester*

- It will advance arts learning in young literary artists who demonstrate artistic excellence and merit in content and use of the medium.
- It will enhance the voice of the foster care community through the words of its own members.
- It will increase the visibility of particular librarians and services offered by community libraries while rewarding them for their personal time and dedication to the advancement of another.

Methods and Goals

There are a wealth of publications on youth communication directly related to the foster care system. "*Orphans of the Living: Stories of America's Children in Foster Care*," by Jennifer Toth; "*The Heart Knows Something Different: Teenage Voices from the Foster Care System*," by Al Desetta and "*No Matter How Loud I Shout*" by Edward Humes. But there are extremely few publications in the children's own voice or by their own hand.

There is a ready-made template-style book for sale in bookstores called a *LifeBook* suitable for any child who has spent time in foster care. As reviewed by Amazon: "With space for personal information this *LifeBook* reads like a child's story...[by] capturing essential information while helping the child to make sense of their life."

This book, called "*My Foster Care Journey*" by Beth O'Malley, is a tool for helping foster/adopted children connect with their past which frees them for future relationships and many of the readers on Amazon.com seem to agree it is a marvelous idea. The long-term goal for our organization is to take this core of an idea and make it an inspiration through creativity and imagination. Make it profound. Take the hunger a young person feels to prove themselves and use it to propel them to express themselves as well by providing them with someone who will take their writing seriously.

The deeper issue is how to turn a younger person's voice from being a diary entry (like blogs which are enormously popular) to "art" enjoyable by a wide audience. The answer is to involve caring mentors with a wide range of backgrounds and exposure to a broad range of tastes capable of helping develop writing skills. To involve a librarian as the career choice of mentor supports the initial step in the development of any good writer: first, be a reader.

Project Benefits

This Foster Child Writer Award and Mentorship Program could be a highly visible, educational and entertaining way to encourage outside participation and create enthusiasm within the overburdened foster care system. It will unite a variety of organizations serving this same subculture with a shared celebration of success. It will encourage involvement from those unaware of the plight of these children and shed light on communities with foster care and outside-of-home placement need.

This project will enhance community understanding by providing a foster child's point of view and honoring their strength and creativity rather than focusing on the perils of fostering or experiences of social workers or the legal system.

The Foster Child Writing Award is a proactive statement of nurturing and advocacy. Because the organization will depend on existing facilities and local talents the financial demands on the community will be small but the impact on individual lives will be immeasurable since it will encourage teens to use public library resources and professionals and it will boost the individual child's self esteem and professional career prospects by providing a tangible reward for hard work.

Schedule and Funds Needed

The National Foster Child Writer Award and Writing Mentorship Program will be divided into three phases of development, deployment and maintenance. The funds required for the initial phase of development will drop off after the successful launch of the Program in its first year, culminating with the first of what is hoped to be annual awards. Once the Program is successfully deployed and the results from the number of entries as well as the income generated by the published books is calculated, the Program should start to become self-sustaining. It is hoped that the success of the books will grow incrementally with the gaining popularity of the series. If no further interest is generated then the Program is expected to be terminated after the first year.

"Amsden's first novel, "Important Things That Don't Matter," is the story of a 20-year-old recounting his tumultuous relationship with his cokehead father in Maryland suburbia. "I was reading stories from the '70s and '80s about couples [that are having problems]," Amsden says. "There are children in the stories, but the child is just a wooden literary device." "Important Things That Don't Matter," he explains, reverses the traditional model and tells the story from the child's point of view. "

<http://www.salon.com/books/int/2003/05/12/amsden/index.html>

Phase I (Initial Program Development):

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| One or two person team dedicated to developing the Program and application, study and mentor guide, award guidelines and website | \$ 60,000 |
| Create Print Advertising (copywriter, graphic artist and printing costs for flyers, brochures, application and mentor packets) | \$ 40,000 |
| Other media Advertising (public access tv/radio, news) | \$ 20,000 |
| Efforts to create alliances and partnerships through marketing efforts (Acquiring Book Agent or Publishing Representative) | \$ 40,000 |
| SUB TOTAL | \$160,000 |

Phase II (Deployment):

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| Deploy Program by notifying libraries, synchronizing partnership efforts, distributing mentor information packets and award information through mail | \$ 60,000 |
| Printing Costs for Advertising and Promotional materials | \$ 60,000* |
| Fund Cash Award & Ceremony (incl. Author Fees) | \$ 80,000 |
| SUB TOTAL | \$200,000 |

TOTAL FOR FIRST YEAR: \$360,000

Child SHARE: A Christian foster-care Program dedicated to help helping parents rescue abused and abandoned children from the overburdened social services. Contact them via their Web site or (818) 957-4452.

Hope and Home: An organization devoted to helping parents interested in mentoring or adopting children in the Colorado Front Range area; contact Dr. George Cresswell at (719) 575-9887.

CONCLUSION

Casey Family Programs conducted a survey of foster care alumni showing fully 15 percent reported being arrested since leaving foster care (usually after running away or being emancipated from the system). (Case Family Programs, *“Assessing Foster Care Alumni Outcomes: A Short-Term Follow Up Study.”*). In a television special on ABC News last December, 2001 titled *“Why Don’t Kids Have a Voice?”* Child Advocate George Russ states, “Children are deemed by law — without a hearing, without counsel, without evidence—to be incompetent. They’re not.” And certainly no one will deny that despite their hardships these children are very creative, imaginative and sensitive even without the benefit of a traditional family. It is up to us to assert that yes indeed these children are destined for something better than the criminal justice system. Even if we use this chance to hear the voice of just the one in front of us.