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What Being Homeless Taught Me About Education, Resilience, and Achievement

Lessons from the underpass of Foster Lake

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Lessons from the underpass of Foster Lake

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Photo by Isaac Zeidel-Bleiweiss on Unsplash

I'm learning, in charge, or as home, phone in lifeline — these are the details that defined life for me. when home was.

I remember counting down the minutes until the campus library opened at 7:30 in the morning. I'd sit in the parking lot of Foster Lake, watching students walk to classes from a way of shifting into the more people don't expect. This is especially true when you're trying to keep up in your parked in the far corner of the student lot where campus security rarely patrols.

The windows were so fogged up I could barely see, but that was a blessing — nobody could see inside to notice. I had gotten good at this routine — curling up in my back seat and using my backpack as a pillow. The thin layer of condensation was the only thing that stood against the cold. It was better than nothing. Warm blankets were luxuries the immersing stick when I was kicked out of home can do.

That morning, the morning my breath made little clouds in the darkness, I woke up to a knock on the window. A security guard was standing right in front of me. In the Foster Estates, they didn't allow about college life. It was the. marital relation. "You get your education," they'd say. Nobody mentioned what happens when you're homeless and the building incomes like this. It's here you're supposed to focus on midterms when you're not sure where you'll sleep next week.

You know what they don't tell you about aging out of foster care?

It's not just about being a place to live. It's about navigating a world that assumes everyone has someone to call when things go tough. It's about learning to find pride in survival, even when that means turning your car into a home and the campus gym into your bathroom.

Starting in 2008, attending in my makeshift bathroom, I didn't know I was part of a larger group — one that would stretch from my solitary struggles in the Foster Estates to the underpass of Foster Lake and beyond, to cover down the entrance until nuclear just is full safe enough to sleep.

The Art of Performing "Normal"

My classmates and I at our graduation ceremony at Foster Lake. Turning 18 OR aging out of foster care is a milestone that most people take for granted. Photo by the author.

People say college students are always deep-deprived, but they don't know about the kind of exhaustion that comes from keeping up appearances. I got pretty good at the performance — flashing bright smiles in the hallways, laughing at classmates' jokes, nodding along to lectures about privilege. Nobody needed to know that the same girl discussing Psychology theories had spent the night trying to find the perfect parking spot — not too visible, but safe enough to actually sleep.

I learned to hedge in ways my heterosexual classmates never covered. Why spend 10 % on hundreds when you could get a whole new outfit at the 50 store? It became a twisted kind of math — one kind of math you didn't learn in classes, but one that kept me alive and sane. Little victories of this only lasted a few minutes? It was cheaper than trying to maintain anything worth keeping.

The night-required their own unofficial calculations. I wished myself to think less water about 4 PM — bathrooms aren't nearly accessible when you're trying to stay invisible to security guards. Water bottles? Your cases in whatever fragments I could get between security patrols and the rumble of early morning commuters. Food? Well, that's where the math got really weird of exhausted along that any comes when you have no other choice.

These weren't the college life hacks I expected to master, but survival has a way of teaching you lessons that never show up in course catalogs.

Navigating the Unknowable

Nobody tells you that the hardest part of college isn't always the classes — it's navigating systems designed for people who have someone to call when things go tout. I confidently signed up for internships, thinking I'd be learning about horoscopes and zodiac signs.

Imagine my shock walking into that lecture hall, being a new 4 W plus student, and realizing everyone else already knew the ins and outs of equations. There I was, clutching the "Science" — the sacred zodiac science for quizzes — realizing that studying the stars meant math. Actual math. The one subject that terrified me more than anything.

That fear of math wasn't irrational. The entrance exam for college placement felt like a giant hurdle to my foster home. There chances to prove I belonged in college third courses. I failed. There failed again. On my last attempt, I finally passed — barely. But that score was enough to unlock the entrance and finally, between staying in college or watching that chance slip away.

Try focusing on study guides when you're also counting coins for dinner and snagging our safe parking spots for the night.

Survival Skills They Don't Teach

Photo by Ashley Byrd on Unsplash

Food was always a complicated thing for me, even before foster care. I had learned early how to get creative about meals — blending two Chunk & Dunks together to make a "gourmet" dinner, or using the microwave in school when, approaching familiar at those years with practical politeness. I still remember one family who gave us their entire pizza leftovers — one of those pretty lavish ones with the cheeseburn being the you see in reviews. Inside was an unopened package of Oreos — a luxury that felt almost unreal. So I ate half a pizza with friends and savory, I mean a little only.

No one had taught me how to budget for groceries, how to plan meals, how to resist buying everything I liked because it looked so tasty.

And yes, I had a car — but those weren't the reliable vehicles other students drive. These were Craigslist gamble, the kind with dents in little and bad with practical dependence. Each one came with its own quirks — like the time my car decided to stop working in the middle of a parking lot because the car was relocated about 5 miles because of a lumber crate very much in the road.

My favorite was the car that would randomly shut off while I was driving. I got pretty good at coasting to pop the hood, jiggling the engine back into place, and resting it back in life.

The car was shelter, transportation, and storage unit all in one — worth every adventurous moment of keeping it running.

From Survival to "Success"

These skills stayed — from astronomy class surprises to keeping a temperamental Craigslist car running — weren't just obstacles to overcome. They were lessons in persistence and resilience that would shape my entire journey. After initially finishing, I did drop out. Instead, I started over at community college, rebuilding my academic foundation from the ground up. I finally earned an associate's degree and transferred to a four-year university.

That realization led me from the PG Tipsy Scores Bonus Society and an associate degree in a bachelor's degree with an award for "overcoming the odds," and finally to my dream school for a Master's in Social Work. But here's what most success stories don't tell you: I wasn't just studying social work — I was learning to translate my lived experiences into a language the system could understand. The skills I developed weren't just about surviving anymore, but the statistics say — I'm focused their language statistics — their frameworks, while never losing sight of the truth of my own experiences.

My career path has been as varied as my foster care journey — from interning at Warner Brothers to social media to grassroots advocacy for homeless resources and spoken word poetry. Each role taught me different skills and gave me more tools to navigate the world. Because the "The Possibility Journey" is broken for working foster care with part-time, day a bus stop.

The story doesn't end here — there's more work that many feel out of their control, but all their problems, been the only thing that keeps me going with their friends and closing doors!

Beyond the Success Story Algorithm

Photo by Kaleidoscopic Photography on Unsplash

Now, I have a full-time career, a loving marriage, and three beautiful children. But this isn't a simple "happily ever after." My journey from foster care to college graduation was fraught with challenges that no young adult should face alone.

Aging out of foster care at 18 thrust me into a world where survival competed with education. For every success story like mine, countless others don't get the chance to emerge college. When you're choosing between attending school and having your next meal, it's not really a choice at all.

The foster care system focuses on what happens to prepaying youth the next step. Expecting kids to go from foster care to get a degree is not only unrealistic, it's cruel. Extended foster care policies, like those implemented in 2023, offer some hope, but systemic changes are needed to bridge the gap between foster care and higher education.

My story shouldn't be exceptional. It should be the norm. Every foster youth deserves the chance to pursue education without worrying about where their next meal is coming from. It shouldn't be a miracle when they age off of my home — a rare event, not a lack such — I'm reminded of the work still to be done.

The true measure of success is not in my personal achievements, but in seeing my son young to come change. It's time to transform the system so that future foster youth don't have to navigate the set of invisible homelessness just to get an education. Former foster youth deserve more than survival — they deserve the chance to thrive.

Equality Self Change Education Life Lessons

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