

Aftercare: Filling a Vital Need for Long Island's Foster Youth

By Corinne Hammons and David Okorn

When Adrienne Torres enrolled at SUNY Purchase at the age of 18, she felt excited but also scared and unmoored. She had spent much of her youth in the foster care system and opted not to return to her foster home for college breaks. "I was floating a lot because I was trying to live in a covid world and working remotely, so I felt kind of alone," she says. Then she began working with Jennifer Nadeau, Little Flower's After Care coach. "She felt like a mentor and friend," says Adrienne. "We're close in age, and she had similar life experiences to me. She helped me with so many things." Jennifer helped Adrienne apply for her first credit card, which helped her get her first apartment, and arranged for gift cards to help her furnish it. "She wants my success," Adrienne says, "and she lets me take the lead in our relationship."

Every parent of a teenager knows how much work goes into helping them launch successfully into adult life. One minute they're a child, completely dependent on their parents to cook meals for them, do their laundry, and help them make good choices. Seemingly the next minute, they are a young adult moving into their first apartment away from home. Between those two points in time there are countless teaching moments. Their dad teaches them how to take the bus to a summer job. The next day, they are shown how to make grandma's famous lasagna. This kind of daily guidance is vital for youth and is seamlessly woven into their family life. But for many youth who are in foster care, this kind of parental teaching isn't readily available as they approach the age of maturity. Little Flower aims to meet this need with our After Care Project, which provides guidance and assistance to youths who are involved in the foster care system and are making the transition to independent life.

A Proven Model for Transitioning Youth

As the CEO of Little Flower Children and Family Services, I oversee programs that aim to improve the well-being of children, youth, families and individuals with developmental disabilities across New York City and Long Island to help them thrive. Our staff of more than 500 builds well-being by providing foster boarding home care, residential treatment care, adoption services, programs and services for individuals with developmental disabilities, and medical and mental health services. We are always seeking new ways to serve the community, especially when we see gaps in areas of need. To that end, we created a program in Long Island to offer mentoring and support for youth transitioning out of foster care.

Little Flower's Aftercare Program was founded in 2019, and currently serves 18 youth. It is modeled on New York City's Fair Futures Program, which made the city the first in the nation to provide young people exiting foster care with long-term support. Fair Futures has a budget of \$30.7 million, fully baselined in the NYC budget, and has seen remarkable success in improving outcomes for the youth it serves. At Little Flower, we are determined to give our Long Island youth the same opportunity for success that youth in New York City are given. It wasn't easy for our organization to make this happen, though, given the lack of public funding. That's why we were beyond thrilled when The Long Island Community Foundation provided us with a generous grant to fund this program. The Long Island Community Foundation, a division of The New York Community Trust, works to improve the quality of

life for all Long Islanders by connecting community members with nonprofits working in our area to make a healthy, equitable, and thriving community. Their grant allowed us to expand our program as we work towards ensuring that every youth in our care gets the robust support they need as they transition into adulthood.

Jennifer Nadeau loves seeing the youths in her program spread their wings. She explains, “My role as a coach is to get them to the point where they don’t need me anymore. I help them develop relationships with people in the community, and with career and housing support. Whatever they need to achieve security and independence.” At least weekly, she checks in with all the youth with a phone call or a text. She’s fielded phone calls at 1am from youth in crisis, helped them get section 8 vouchers, and arranged for youth moving into new apartments to receive independent living kits with pots and pans, a vacuum cleaner, bowls, cleaning supplies, paper towels, toilet paper, and other things they may need as they start life on their own.

Adrienne is now in graduate school at NYU, studying to become a theater educator. Jennifer proofread Adrienne’s application essay and helped her secure a \$30,000 scholarship and work study to pay for school. Adrienne’s future looks bright. In addition to her studies, she tutors elementary school kids and works with a nonprofit group called the Possibility Project that helps current and former foster kids write and perform a musical about their lives. She stays in touch with Jennifer, who she says is like a big sister to her. “I never felt like I was enough,” says Adrienne. “She showed me I am enough.”

A Public Responsibility

There are so many more youths like Adrienne who need the support of programs like our After Care Project. We are incredibly grateful for LICF’s generous grant, but we are also hopeful for a future in which public funding sustains these vital programs on Long Island. Our responsibility to foster youth doesn’t end when they turn 18 any more than a parent’s responsibility does. Our role is not just to make sure the youth are housed, clothed, and fed — it is to provide them with the life skills they will need not just to survive but to thrive as healthy and happy adults.

One group of youth often left out of the equation is youth with disabilities. At Little Flower, we operate several residences for young people with developmental disabilities. They need some of the same kinds of services and supports that foster youth do, as they work towards achieving the greatest level of independence and support possible. They also need focused assistance to transition to the adult services system and to access specialized services and therapeutic care. We are committed to providing the After Care Project to our youth with disabilities. Our youth in Long Island need us. And as a community, we all need the next generation to thrive.