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# Former foster child now on other side of system as caseworker

Former foster child now a caseworker for children



Play time

Latoya Richardson spent her teen years in foster care and now, at age 23, works as a child advocate. Here, she plays with her son, Elijah Vassell, 2. (Sun-Sentinel/Lou Toman / February 26, 2008)

By Kathleen Kernicky | South Florida Sun-Sentinel  
March 4, 2008

Latoya Richardson describes her job this way: "Part advocate, part therapist" and full-time listener.

As a child advocate for ChildNet, the private agency that manages foster care on a state contract, Richardson meets every day with kids who have been removed from their families because of abuse, abandonment or neglect.

It's her job to nudge them to open up about the turmoil in their lives.

"It is draining sometimes," she says. "I have to draw a line between my job and my life. And it's hard."

Even harder, perhaps, because Richardson has been in their shoes.

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out of the child-welfare system herself. She is one of two former foster children who have come back to work for the child-welfare agency as an advocate for kids.

"[When] I was on the other side, I didn't understand what was being done and why," Richardson said of her three years as a teenager in state care. "But now that I'm an actual caseworker, I'm starting to understand why things were done."

"I always wanted to do something with kids," she continued. "I don't want to sound like a cliché and say I thought I could make a difference, but I definitely can relate to them."

Born in Jamaica, Richardson spent her early years with her grandmother or an aunt. Her mother lived nearby. She doesn't know why she didn't live with her mother. When she was 9, the family sent her to live with her father and stepmother in South Florida so she could get a better education.

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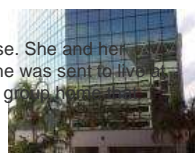
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At age 15 she was removed from that house after allegations of abuse. She and her younger sister were placed with foster families. About a year later, she was sent to live at a shelter, although she wasn't told why. Eventually she moved into a group home where she shared with four girls and a house parent.



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Throughout that time she focused on school, working part time and graduating from Nova High School in 2002. She attended [Broward Community College](#) and [Florida Atlantic University](#), finishing her degree in social work after the birth of her son, Elijah, two years ago. Like all foster teens and young adults making the transition to independent living, she received a monthly stipend from the state until she turned 18.

While still in college, Richardson landed an internship at ChildNet, and the agency hired her last year. She works at the same office in Hollywood where her own case was assigned eight years ago.

Today, Richardson manages about 11 cases involving 18 children. Not all live with foster families. Some live with relatives, or they return home if their parents complete a case plan, which could include classes, substance-abuse programs or other services set by the state. She meets with the children at least once a month.

"I enjoy that part, meeting with the kids," Richardson said. "I understand what they're going through. And I understand what the parents are going through."

When Richardson pursued a career in social work, she sought advice from one of her former ChildNet caseworkers.

"The fact that she was in foster care gives her firsthand experience, and that will help her help someone else, especially in learning how to be successful," said Bates, an independent living specialist at the agency.

When Bates met Richardson, she was about 18 and getting ready to move into her own apartment.

"She was scared, of course, knowing that she was going to be on her own. She was always very studious," Bates said. "She was serious about school. I told her to focus on her education and what she needed to do to become self-sufficient."

A year into the job, Richardson sees drug abuse and mental-health issues at the top of many family fractures. She sees parents who lose custody of their kids due to these patterns.

"With drugs, a lot of them relapse," she said.

In one case, a [Fort Lauderdale](#) mother dropped off her two sons, ages 5 and 7, at a day-care center and went on a drug binge. By the time she returned the next day, she had placed the kids with their maternal grandmother.

When Richardson met the family last spring, the older boy was failing in school. She arranged for a tutor and a therapist, and the boy now plays sports and has a "big brother," said Emma Bell, 61, of Fort Lauderdale, who adopted her two grandsons last month.

Thanks to Richardson, "His whole life is changing. And he's not so bitter anymore," Bell said. "Latoya had a lot to do with this. Other caseworkers were all business. She made it fun for them. She'd get down on the floor with them. They'd read picture books. They'd have nice talks and laugh about things."

"She made a lot of difference in my grandchildren's life," Bell said. "And I know she will make a lot of difference in other children's lives."

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- Yes. I won't buy them anymore and will spend the ones I get immediately.
- I'll be wary about gift cards from businesses I know are struggling.
- I'm not concerned. This is an unusual

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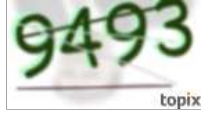
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