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RESPONSE TO SUSAN VIVIAN MANGOLD'S *EXTENDING NON-EXCLUSIVE PARENTING AND THE RIGHT TO PROTECTION FOR OLDER FOSTER CHILDREN: CREATING THIRD OPTIONS IN PERMANENCY PLANNING*

LISHONE BOWSKY†

In the years that I've been in foster care, I've managed to meet numerous people, some adults, some my age, who have helped and supported me. Some of them I still keep in contact with. Others, whom I call human guardian angels, were there when I needed them, be it just for that moment. While I don't see them anymore, I know they pray for me from a distance. Then there were plenty of others who got on my nerves and I won't miss them when I age out.

Next September I'll be twenty-one years of age, hopefully in my last year of college, and finally out of the foster care system. I feel as if I'm on the right road to independence. I attend New York Institute of Technology, where my major is Communication Arts. I have a full-time job working for a publishing company, and I live in an apartment program with one roommate (talk about independence!).

I also have folks around me who offer me emotional support. Most of those people are my age—like my best friend Tanya, who I consider my older sister and who I've known for years and years. We were both pretty much on our own at an early age, and we learned how to raise ourselves together. She's always been there and has never on any occasion turned her back on me.

There's also my friend Nickeyia. I speak to her about once a week because she lives down South. And I have Tawana and Mike, who I speak to almost every day. They all keep me grounded. When times get tough and I need to rant and rave, scream, cry, and kick, they are all there for me making sure I keep my head up and that I never give up.

I have been fortunate enough to meet people like my friends. Unfortunately, not every teen in care is so lucky.

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There are some teenagers who have no one to turn to, both while they're in care and after they age out. They feel they can't trust anyone. Maybe those who they have trusted have betrayed or left them.

The question many of these young people face is, who do I turn to when I need support or a question answered? Even with my good friends, I also feel like I need an adult to talk to once in a while. All of my friends are in their early twenties, and while we have been through a lot, there are some things that we don't know or understand. Sometimes we need advice or we just need someone outside of our friends to talk to. Sometimes it's that older person who can listen, is open, and won't judge.

At the same time, I don't really want a mentor, at least not someone who's got that title officially—someone who's paid to be my mentor. A mentor's too much like a parent, and I'm not looking for a parent figure. I've been on my own too long to want someone who's going to be in any way controlling. I'm grown, and I feel like it's too late for someone to try and control me.

Besides, I don't want to have to rely on any one adult. The few adults who I've been attached to in the past, both in and out of the system, have come and gone. I still appreciate them because they guided me when I've needed guidance. But after a while, they moved on in their careers, or they moved out of the state. The one adult I became terribly close to changed careers, and I couldn't keep in contact with her for reasons I won't discuss. That hurt, and all those experiences made me not want to have any one adult who I rely on to always be there. I don't want the disappointment.

Even if there was an adult who I was close to, I wouldn't want that person to be paid to be my mentor after I leave care. Money changes things as well as people. And even if it didn't change that person, it would change the relationship in my mind.

I've had too many adults who were paid to care for me already—like foster parents, caseworkers, social workers, and group home staff. If I knew that someone was getting paid to mentor me, I'd have a much harder time getting close to them, trusting them, or talking to them because I'd wonder if it was really about me, or if they were only doing it just because it was their job.

The adults who I have gotten close to in as well as out

of foster care weren't paid to be there for me. Not directly, anyway. They were getting paid to do other jobs, such as to be my teachers, directors of corporations where I worked, or coordinators of programs that I attended. So they were getting paid to teach me, help me, or be my boss. But I didn't really feel that they were getting paid to care about me. That just happened. And that made it feel special.

What I would rather have instead of a mentor is a club for teens who have aged out of the system or who were ever in the system at any point in their lives. I think it would also be good for kids who were still in the system but were getting ready to age out. That way they could get comfortable coming to the club and would be more likely to continue coming after they left care. The ages would probably range from sixteen to thirty.

I would like to have many such clubs in different cities throughout this country, and in many different neighborhoods. The staff would consist mainly of men and women who had aged out of the system and had the experience, the patience, and the training to talk and give advice to teens and young people who need it. The club would have counselors to talk to about emotional issues, a twenty-four-hour hot-line to call in case of an emergency, access to job help, financial aid help for school, and apartment help. It could hold support group meetings so former foster kids could help each other. There could also be recreation facilities. It would just be a place to go when I was lonely.

There would be two huge club meetings a month where young people would meet to discuss how they were doing, and discuss if there was anything more that the club could do to support them. The club would be open seven days a week and for a few hours on Christmas Day and Thanksgiving Day. (The staff might have families to go home to, but holidays are a time when many former foster kids really need a place to feel like they belong, even if just for a few hours.)

Having clubs like that would let us know we always had a place to turn to. But it would be our choice to attend, and we would choose who we wanted to be close to, or if we wanted to be close to anyone.

I also think that in addition to the clubs, during the first eighteen months after we age out, there should be some financial support available, maybe \$500, as a cushion

to use when needed. The money would be held by the agency, not by the young person. (After all, the young person might be independent, but that doesn't mean she's not a fool with money.)

The agency would give the young person that money only if there was an emergency, and not all at once, either—only what was required in each situation. Then, the young person could receive whatever was left over once the eighteen months had expired. Aging out can be hard—not just emotionally but financially too—and this would just ease that transition a little.

Everyone, young and old, needs support. Unfortunately not all people have the support they need. For those of us in foster care, the goal is to become young stabilized adults who can take care of ourselves. We need to be able to handle our financial responsibilities. We also need to be emotionally and mentally capable of taking care of ourselves. Sometimes that means having someone to talk to. Even for a few hours, or a couple of minutes, the time that it takes for someone to be there for us, and not judge us or try to control us, is enough.

They shouldn't be people who we will have to worry about whether they'll come through for us or who will bug us or get on our nerves. They should just be people we can find when we feel the need to talk, or just need a little help in being stable adults ready to go out and face the world. It's the support that we get that will make us smile when the times get tough, and laugh when we want to cry. It's the support that we get that will keep us sane and able to complete each day.