

## **A local youth in foster care has a lot to celebrate!**

On May 14<sup>th</sup>, youth in foster care will be celebrated across the province of Ontario for their strength and resilience in the face of adversity as well as their contributions for positive change to the system that protects and cares for them.

One such local youth is 21 year-old Alicia.



"Don't underestimate us. We are more capable than we look. We are more resilient than we seem. We have a lot of fight in us and we never cease to amaze."

In foster care since the age of 13, Alicia describes her experience "like a rollercoaster" of emotions. On most days she is thankful for being in care because she views it as a second chance at life, but there are also days when she wishes that things could be better with her biological family. Alicia acknowledges that she didn't have a good start in life, but she doesn't let that hold her back. She knows that she can move forward and make a good life for herself.

How can this young woman be so positive about her future when her early years were quite difficult? Alicia credits her foster parents with helping to put her past into perspective. One of Alicia's favorite quotes is "sometimes we just need someone else to believe in us first before we can believe in ourselves", because this was true for her. Alicia's foster parents show that they care about what had happened to her but don't dwell on the past. They treat her like their own child and have taught her that she has control over what she does with her life. She is accepted for who she is by her foster parents.

Outside of her foster home, others were not always understanding or accepting. The stigma of being in foster care is one that Alicia knows well. She chose not to tell peers at school that she was in care because she didn't want to be treated differently. Alicia wishes people knew that "kids in care aren't bad kids - they just haven't been given a fair shot. They never had control over what happened to them."

For Alicia, part of taking control of her own life is figuring out who she really is. She has discovered a deep desire for helping others and is looking for ways to put this into action in her life. She says “so many people have helped me along the way and I want to give others the same opportunities that I was given”.

Alicia is currently assisting with the Financial Literacy group for other youth in the care of Family & Children’s Services (FACS) Waterloo. Along with the bursary and scholarship options available, Alicia shares her wisdom with other youth in care. Among her most important lessons learned, Alicia says that all kids need to understand that they can take control of their lives and have a fresh start in foster care. Alicia sees Financial Literacy as the key to a new start. Without her scholarship from FACS Foundation, Alicia doesn’t see how she would have been able to pursue her dreams. “It’s so much more than just money” she says of her scholarship, “it gives me a chance to make something of myself”.

Thanks to scholarship donations from generous members of the community, the next phase of Alicia’s life will soon start to take shape. She is pursuing a Bachelor’s degree in Social Development Studies at the University of Waterloo and has plans for a Bachelor of Social Work after that. Her ultimate goal is to practice social work in the school system or work with children who have special needs.

Alicia has some powerful words to share with us all on this day that commemorates the important contributions of youth in foster care –

**“Don’t underestimate us. We are more capable than we look. We are more resilient than we seem. We have a lot of fight in us and we never cease to amaze.”**

There are many youth like Alicia with a determination to overcome obstacles and make a new path in life. To celebrate youth successes, Family & Children’s Services staff and youth in care will share a pizza dinner and go bowling on May 14<sup>th</sup>.

May 14<sup>th</sup> was declared **Children and Youth in Care Day** in 2012 after unanimous support by all political parties. It is important to note that this day would not be possible without the voice of many local youth in care who advocated in the Ontario Legislature for the needs of kids in care.

A report called "My Real Life Book" was created by youth to highlight the needs of many kids in care across the Province. This report resulted in a number of changes including: allowing youth between the ages of 16 and 17 years old who were previously in care to return to care; Continued Care Youth Supports for youth to age 21; support to youth up to age 24 who are attending post-secondary education to receive health benefits and \$500 during the months they attend school as a Living Learning Grant; all Universities and many Colleges including Conestoga College, Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Waterloo now offer free tuition to Crown Wards; 50 youth workers were hired across Ontario to help youth between the ages of 16 and 24 years old to work on life skills, job searches and other independent living skills.

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