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Youth Etc.

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Youth caring 'It's the little things...'

Jean Kennedy

Jean is one of the founding members of 'Youth Etc.' a group for youth who care and who grow up in care; this group offers, support and friendship as well as training and education workshops to social workers, care workers and foster carers.

Okay so, here I go! ... My friend, Fergus Hogan, the editor of this journal, asked me to write a piece on my experiences as a youth carer. So here I sit, trying to put my life on paper...

Hi! My name is Jean Kennedy. I am a child, (although I'm nearly 18), in a fostering family. Our family has been fostering for nearly seven years now. I am the second eldest of a fluctuating number, but at the moment, we are a very rounded eight! In my house at the moment, two of my brothers and one of my sisters are fostered, all younger than me. The only difference you will find is that they have another family and a different surname.

We, as a family, have experienced every type of fostering placement, long-term, short-term, emergency, respite and day-care. The brilliant thing is that I know what each of those terms mean! They were never explained to me, I just based my understanding of them on my experiences.

I am a youth carer. What this means to me is that I get the chance to do great things, share my happy home and watch young children grow up, content. It's been a joy but a struggle, and yes, it's all worthwhile.

I love being a youth who fosters. I have shared my parents, my family, my bedroom, my life, my love, and my last Rolo. Everything! I can't put into words the feelings shared with a hug, a kiss or just a smile. No words are needed to show love...

It's the little things...

In my eyes, fostering is a brilliant revelation. Y'know, I don't think anyone can pinpoint the moment when a child actually becomes part of your family, rather than being a child

who happens to live with you. I love that.

I'm gonna talk about the brill things now, and hopefully make you laugh and smile, then I'm gonna talk bout the sad things, and maybe make you cry, here I go...

The brill things...

-I love watching kids grow up.

-I love having two younger brothers, which I never had before.

-I love when the younger ones ask me to help them with homework, ask me about what they should wear to parties, ask me to put their hair up like mine.

-I love when my younger sisters all come and say goodnight before they go to sleep.

-I love having a brother who's the same age as me, with whom I can hang around with and introduce to all my friends.

-I love playing hide-and-seek, 'cos they're so easy to catch, 'cos they keep squealing when I come close!

-I love the fact that you can't ever be alone with so many people here.

-I love being able to say something to my family and there's always someone who has felt the same, or been in the same sort of situation and is there to talk to.

-I love the photos we take, trying to get all the smiling faces in!

-I love family parties! 'Cos there's so many of 'em!!

-I love when we stop at the traffic lights and people start using their fingers to try and count how many of us there are!

-I love having to think twice when people ask how many brothers and sisters I actually have!

-I love Christmas! It's the best holidays for foster families!

I love it all! Except...

-When one of my siblings has to leave our home for whatever reason.

-When a child comes back from a stressing access and is hurtful and angry for a while afterwards.

-When I know a child is hurting from past abuses of any and every kind.

-When a child's eyes fills up with tears 'cos they're far from their parents and natural brothers and sisters.

-When my friend, my brother or sister, feel they're excluded and 'different', 'cos they're in care.

-When I have to pick up the pieces of a broken heart and try and stick it back together.

It's always the little things...

I'm going to change the world! Do you think I'm crazy?! I'm gonna change the world for all my brothers and sisters that I haven't met yet...

I have been actively involved in the Irish Fostercare Association, the International Fostercare Organisation, the National Fostercare Organisations in England and Scotland and many more organisations, on a local, national and international level for about five years now. I have listened to workshops, given workshops, listened to lectures, given lectures, read speeches, written speeches, read research reports and set up research projects, debated and argued, laughed and cried, shared experiences, and made experiences.

Fostering is a community in itself. I have formed strong friendships with others from the fostering world, internationally as well as locally. It's almost a theory of mine that the issues within fostering, both good and bad, can be found worldwide. Could there be a lot to say about that?

I'm going to change the world, not only for fostered children and fostered youth, but also for youth carers. In my experience, a lot of youth carers feel excluded in the decision-making that affects their family home. Would it be too much for a social worker to sit down and explain to us why they're moving our brother or sister?! Would it be too much to expect?!

Social workers! Your job is (mainly) a basic 9 to 5, mine is 24-hr/7 days! 'Listen to me! Recognise the good and vital job I'm doing!'

Social workers! I wish I could get all the social workers in the world into one room and shout in my loudest voice, 'Listen to me! I make a difference!!' Some link workers have never really talked to the children of fostering families! A certain number of youth I have met, didn't even know what a link worker was!!

'Youth carers are the central role in maintaining the wholesome balance in foster families.' Remember, we are part of the care system too!

In my experience, some social workers and other professionals have yet to realise that children and youth in fostering families probably spend more time with foster children in their family than the actual fosterparents do! I know I do! I'd like to think that it's a different relationship, not better, but maybe more 'evolved'. I go to the same school as my foster brothers and sisters, I go out with friends with them, I have shared bedrooms with my sisters and shared a whole lot more as well.

I think youth carers should be somewhat included and definitely consulted, when it comes to decisions that others are making about our families and our homes. I think that

the fostering system has yet to highlight the importance of youth carers and yet to include and honour the vital role of youth carers. I think that I should have more of an input into what happens in my home!

If I'm big enough and bold enough to speak in front of thousands of people, and debate the ethics of the fostering world, then shouldn't I be able to verbalise my opinion on the fostering situation in my own home?! And don't I deserve to be listened to?! All you social workers and professionals have to remember that every decision you make has a trickle effect on my family and me.

I'm going to try and change the world a little bit more. I'm going to make a little difference.

It's the little things...

One of the brilliant things about being me, and being involved in fostering, is that I'm a loved member of my fostering family. I have yet to count how many people are in my fostering family! I would guess at, hundreds! Y'see, all the children that have lived in my home, all of my relations who support us, everyone I have met through conferences, the many acquaintances I have made, every government minister and official, whose ear I have plucked, and all my beloved friends (you know who you are) and every person who reads my words and understands, I include in my fostering family.

It's always the little things...

And it's the little things that have to be changed. I'm going to change the world, but I wouldn't have made that dream an aim, if I hadn't been one of the "Youth Etc." We are a joint peer support group between youth who care and those who live in care.

Basically, we are mostly youth, who met through friendship and at fostering conferences, and found that all of us had the same key issues with the fostercare system. When we realised that all felt this, we made our group an official support group and set out for our voice to be heard. Our meetings helped us all to define the language and labels we now use to describe ourselves. It opened my eyes. This group developed and formed another group, called 'The Circle Of Friends'.

'The Circle Of Friends' is a group, which connects all the parties involved in practice and policy-making of the fostercare system. This group includes youth carers, those in care, fosterparents, practicing social workers, lecturing social workers, students studying social work and adults who were in the care system. It works really well, because everyone has a voice and everyone else listens. I love that.

Youth Cares...

This is my life we're talking about, shouldn't I have a voice? I can make a difference. I think that we all have to remember that the youth carers of today are the fosterparents of tomorrow. All I'm asking is that you offer your guidance. You can make a difference too. I'm going to change the world. So can you. You have made that little bit of a difference already, just by taking the time to read my story. Thanks.

'Everyone listens'... that's not so hard, is it? 'It's always the little things...'