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## Foster youths advised at event

### Sessions instruct, encourage 300

by [Jordan Gass-Pooré](#) | August 4, 2015 at 4:19 a.m.

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At 2 months old, Nautica Finney's mother left her with a friend in Forrest City. Finney remained there for about 14 years, until she was placed into foster care in 2009.

It was more of a shove than a placement, Finney recalled.

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There was no discussion between Finney and the woman who had raised her until that point, she said.

Now, she was the responsibility of the state.

"Growing up in the foster care system is pretty hard," Finney, now 19, said with a smile that exposed braces with blue bands.

That's why Finney joined the Arkansas Youth Advisory Board three years ago -- to serve as an advocate for the more than 4,400 youths in the state's child welfare system, an all-time high for the state.

The number of youths in foster care has increased, said Cecile Blucker, director of the state's Division of Children and Family Services, partly due to a shortage of foster parents and longer stays in the system.

And the longer a child is in the system, the less likely it is that the child will be adopted, Human Services Department spokesman Amy Webb said.

Webb said many youths have been placed in foster care because of parental substance abuse and neglect.

As the Youth Advisory Board's treasurer, Finney helped other members plan a two-day conference for 300 youths in foster care from across the state, ranging in age from 14-21.

Workshops and other activities at the event that started Monday are meant to help prepare participants for life on their own.

Caseworkers chose participants based on good behavior, Blucker said.

"This is your conference; we do this for you," she told participants during the conference's opening session Monday. "Only you can determine your future."

Finney said she never thought she would be a positive role model.

With a rebellious streak and hatred toward the world, being a foster kid pushed Finney over the edge, she said.

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That changed in 2013, when Finney -- who had spent time in the Arkansas Juvenile Assessment and Treatment Center in Alexander -- said she finally found a positive support system within the state's child welfare system.

She credited Blucker for saving her "so many times."

"I did a complete 180 turnaround," she said.

Since May 4, the day before Finney's birthday, she said she's been attending Pulaski Technical College and working as an administrative assistant for the Division of Children and Family Services.

The past, however, remains etched on Finney's skin, in thin black lines on her arms and chest.

Finney is planning to remove these tattoos so she can enlist in the Marines, she said.

Eventually, Finney said, she wants to work in military intelligence or law enforcement and return to school to get a bachelor's degree in criminal justice.

Just a few years ago, this would not have been possible, she said.

"I was always the kid anyone ran away from," Finney said of the numerous foster parents who kicked her out and caseworkers who would not return her phone calls, adding that she still sees some of these people through her job with the state.

But Finney's decision to remain in the system until she is 21 -- 27 states allow youth to remain in foster care until then -- stems from her continued desire to be adopted.

"When you have something missing in your life for so long -- unconditional love -- that never goes away," she said.

Some of the conference's workshops addressed the issues Finney has and is going through.

One of Monday's workshops, Independence City, had participants simulate various life trajectories on a budget, such as job preparedness, education, housing and banking to find out if they are ready to leave the foster care system before turning 21.

A few participants commented on how expensive it was to "buy" a tattoo -- \$100 in fake money for a temporary tattoo. Others were not deterred by the cost.

Military, business and college recruiters were also present at the conference.

"It often takes, for any teenager, more than one conversation to sink in," Webb said of what it takes for someone to become independent. "They're not different than other kids."

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