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## Young and homeless: George escapes the foster system, but many don't

By MEGAN COTTRELL



George Anthony Dixon Lopez was a foster kid until he adopted at 13. Photo by Sarah Jane Rhee

You don't have to live on the streets to be homeless.

You could, for example, live in a concrete cell in a cold, wet basement with only a toilet. No bed, and only occasional meals, with the only rule being that you can't make a sound.

That's where George lived for awhile as a foster kid.

In his first home, he slept on a mattress on the pantry floor, huddled together with his brother and sister. That's where he was when police raided their house, taking him and his siblings away from their cocaine-addicted mother.

The next two years are a blur of places he stayed, none of which he ever stayed at long enough to call home. Every month, it was a new house, a new neighborhood, a new school. Four weeks in a place, and when it was over, he didn't even have to pack because he didn't own a thing anyway.

Two years with a different bed every month meant George's kindergarten records got lost, and he was forced to repeat the grade.

"It became routine to always be moving," says George. "After awhile, I was waiting for it."

At six, they were placed in a foster home, which should have been a relief after moving around so much. But it was there that years of abuse began.

"They beat us because we weren't theirs," he says. "The only reason why we were there was to get money from the government."

Beatings weren't the worst of it. After falling asleep in a long church service, they held his fingers to the hot stove as punishment. They withheld medical care after a nail pierced his hands. He and his siblings were made to kneel on uncooked rice or cheese graters for an hour at a time with their hands in the air. Move your hand or make a sound, and the punishment only got worse.

That's how George thinks he ended up in the cold concrete cellar. At the time, he knew the punishments hurt him, but he had never known a life without them.

“That’s all I knew,” he says. “I thought everyone went through those things.”

Those two years of abuse came to a violent end when a burglar broke into their house and shot their foster father. The man bled to death while sirens blazed and his own children cried. George says he was too stunned to cry, but they did cry when the incident caused them to be taken away from the family. It was a horrible place to live, he says, but it was their home.

After that, it was a few more foster families, but eventually, he and his siblings were separated when he moved into a group home. For four years, he lived on his own there, learning to prefer being independent to a life of adults who were abusive.



Jeanette Dixon-Lopez smiles at the first pictures she saw of her adopted son, George. Photo by Sarah Jane Rhee.

And then, Jeanette Dixon-Lopez saw George’s picture. She was a teacher and mother of a grown daughter who had been looking for a foster child to adopt for nearly two years. The first day they met, George and Jeanette went out for lunch.

Afterwards, Jeanette leaned over and asked him, “Have you seen the Matrix?”

George nodded.

“You know when they say, ‘You’re the one,?’” she continued. “I have that feeling. You’re the one.”

When she adopted him, George was in a special education school, years behind grade level. Jeanette made sure he went to the library every day after school, finishing his homework and getting ahead. She moved him to a regular school and then out of special education all together.

“I wanted for him to feel that there wasn’t something wrong with him,” Jeanette says about her son.

Today, George is a senior at Morgan Park High School with dreams of attending IIT to study architecture. He’s in honors classes and is involved in numerous after school activities. Jeanette says George is her dream come true.

“When I read about him, all of the abuses that he had been through – I had a vision,” she says. “I wanted it to be like this. I’m so proud of what he’s done.”

George says he wouldn’t change what he’s been through, and he’s very aware that many kids like him don’t ever find a home like he had with his adoptive mom.

In fact, [half of youth leaving foster care become homeless within 18 months.](#) They’ve never had a real home, and finding one outside the system is even harder.

Around 27 percent of homeless people have roots in the foster care system. Many, like George, have deep emotional scars that lead to destructive choices and strong feelings of failure. Foster care and the homelessness are like a revolving door. Parents who spent time in foster care are twice as likely to see their own kids end up in foster care or homeless themselves.



George and his mom, Jeanette Dixon-Lopez stand outside their house in Beverly. Photo by Sarah Jane Rhee

I asked George: how did you end up okay? How did you avoid the tragedies that so many foster kids can't escape?

“My mother,” he says, with no hesitation. “My mother caused me to open my eyes. She taught me how to look at the world.”





But so many youth, he knows, never get that chance.

When we think of youth homelessness, we often forget those 500,000 kids in foster care, many of whom may not be on the streets, but don't have any real place to call home.

The clock is ticking for many of them. 200,000 will “age-out” of the foster care system this year, many with no place to go. For these kids, their 18th birthday isn't a time for celebration – it's about fear and anticipation of what's to come.

And the rest are waiting too – waiting for you and me to care about them, to take them into our homes and help them create a life for themselves.

They shouldn't have to wait forever.

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[Bill Bowen](#)

**Great article and thank you for takin gthe time to both show a case where a child and an adoptive parent both won and for bringing the enlightenment that so vitally needed to other people who have no idea what kind of perile these children are in everyday. I applaude your effort.**

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Tom Tuohy

**Thank you for featuring George, a young man we all are so very proud of at Dreams for Kids <http://www.dreamsforkids.org> George is one of our Dream Leaders and a role model for what is possible in life. Far from a victim, George has become the solution. As a facilitator in our youth conferences, George had this to share with his peers: “For me, a leader goes out of their way to help someone in need, to look at the world with open hands and open eyes. To inspire millions of people who are pushed aside, because of their race, social class or disabilities.” George is a leader. He is paying it forward, leading others to their dreams, while realizing his own. To every kid out there looking for hope, know that you can live the life you imagine. And you can change the world.**

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## About Me

I'm a journalist living in Chicago writing about poverty and public housing. I don't come from the streets - I grew up on a farm. But I'm passionate about urban issues and getting to know people who are completely different from me. I'm quirky, funny and friendly.

I have this idea about journalism - that it should be approachable and less "newsy." I want my stories to make you laugh, cry and draw you in to neighborhoods and situations you don't deal with every day. I hate the broadcaster voice. I hate TV news. I hate the inverted pyramid. I love surprise. I love humor. I love people and telling their stories.

In addition to being a journalist, I also teach dance for the Chicago Public Schools. I don't just do it for the money. I love children and love arts education. I'm also on the board of a new nonprofit dedicated to helping the underserved find jobs called Employing Hope. I write fiction, keep house, and am generally a renaissance woman.

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