



An ordeal ends; an ordeal begins

Damien Smith, 18, was in foster care in South Florida for several years. He aged out of foster care this fall and moved into his own apartment in Fort Myers.

He rides the public bus to school as he works toward his high school diploma. This is his story in his own words.

This interview was condensed.

I don't know if I was a crack baby or if it was pot. I was a 3-pound baby.

I entered foster care at age 12. My mom passed away. When she was alive, it was a struggle. We went through times lights had been turned off for weeks and we had nothing to eat.

I was everywhere: Glades, Hendry, Lee, Collier, Pasco and Hillsborough. When you get settled into a home, they just take you away. They don't even care. That pisses you off. People want to know why foster kids are kind of disrespectful. They feel like nobody don't love them. That's how I be feeling.

It's just like bad things always happen when you're living with strangers. I was in foster care at 7 and a 1/2 years old, too, when my mama was in prison. They treated the other kids better than us in that home.

We were starving. They'd wait until me and my brother was asleep and they'd go out to eat. Me and my brother just cried. We were little kids.

At other foster homes, I'm like, 'You're not going to tell me what to do just because I'm young.' They hate that and they send me back to the group home.

Foster kids get marked like with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) or ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). I was marked with ADD or some kind of bad disorder. I'm like, 'I'm not bad. Hell, I'm in foster care. Y'all keep placing me in homes where people don't want me.'

I also do have a son, a 1 year-old, Kji'jirious. It's a hard one, I know. He's in Tampa. He's in foster care. I have a case plan working to get him back.

When he was born, I was 16. His mother and I were both placed in a foster home in Port Charlotte. Teenage hormones.

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I spoil him over the phone. He calls me Daddy. I don't feel miserable, but I feel like a part of me is missing. It's him. I miss him so much.

On Sept. 9, I aged out. It was a relief. I cried. I didn't go to school that day. My friends threw me a party.

I do think foster care made me a better person. It makes you realize how people go through struggle.

I don't pass judgment on people no more because I don't know what you're going through at your house right now.

People don't know what I'm going through. They think I'm all a happy person, but at home I don't have no food but I don't let that get me down.

I don't miss the system. I miss the people I encountered. The kids. I listened to their stories. They make you cry. They're getting beaten, molested by their fathers and all kinds of crazy stuff.

They prepared me to leave. They got a bank account for me. They tried to help me find a place to stay. I found a place, but I got denied from the first one because I didn't have credit.

Ms. Lori with SIYA (Supporting Independent Young Adults) she's like an auntie to me. She bought me food, a housewarming gift. She helped me budget my money. I had food up in here, but somehow it walked out but we'll catch it and bring it back.

The good thing is I have my own freedom. The bad thing is that I when I need to get somewhere, I have to ride LeeTran. Sometimes I'm like dang, I wish I could call up the group home to come and get me.

My alarm goes off each morning at 8 o'clock.

I sit and listen to music, text and go back to sleep until 9 a.m. and take the bus to school. I have only 3 and a 1/2 high school credits.

I could have way more credits right now. I was a slacker in school. I ain't going to lie. You're looking at the other kids like you have a home to go to.

I have to go back home to strangers.

If I had money, I would build a group home with a pool. Things I wanted in foster care.

I'm like on the verge of wanting to be a CNA (certified nursing assistant) or in criminal justice.

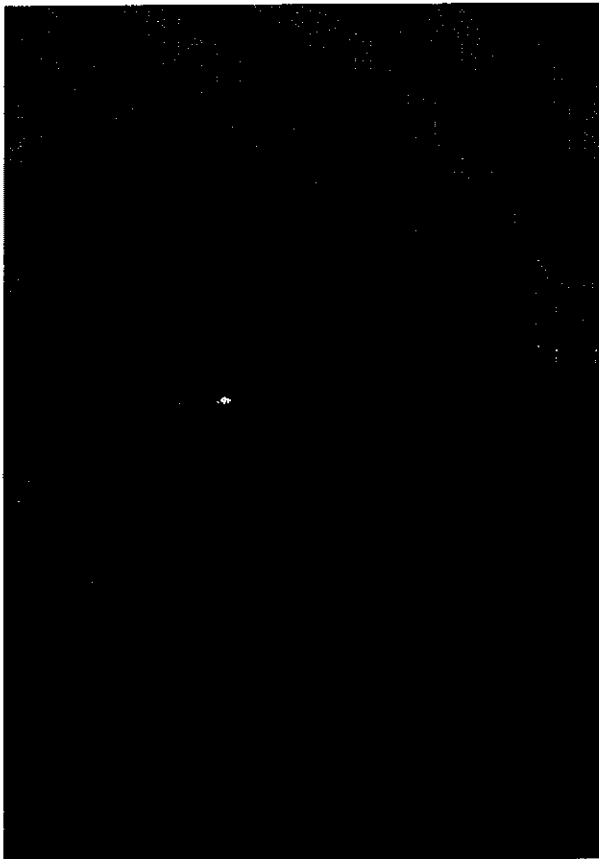
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I try to stay positive. People are like, 'Why are you smiling?' Life is too short. You can't take life too serious. Every 60 seconds of life you spend unhappy are 60 seconds that you lost.



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