unfinished stories.
youth making transitions to adulthood
Casey Family Programs seeks to provide a voice for children and youth who otherwise would be forgotten by society.

Casey Family Programs is a national operating foundation supporting families, youth and children through local and national service programs and advocacy initiatives.

Established in 1966 by Jim Casey, the founder of United Parcel Service, Casey focused for many years on offering services to youth and families, with foster care at its core. Today, with 29 offices in 14 states, we’ve expanded that focus to be a force for change in child welfare nationwide. Through collaborative efforts with other agencies, we help support stable, enduring families by encouraging permanent relationships, offering prevention and early detection to keep families together and helping foster teens transition to adulthood successfully.

By sharing resources and providing innovative services, Casey is working to make a difference in the lives of children, youth, and families involved in the child welfare system.
Transitioning from childhood to adulthood is difficult for anyone. But for most young adults, it is made easier with the support of family and friends. Imagine for a moment what your own life would have been like if at the age of 18 you were forced to make it on your own, with no money and no family support.

If you are a youth in the foster care system, this is exactly what happens. When you reach the age of 18 -- and nearly 20,000 youth in foster care do each year -- ready or not, you must live on your own. A recent study found that 12 to 18 months after leaving foster care, 50 percent of former foster youth were unemployed, 33 percent were on public assistance, and almost a third of the males were incarcerated. Under our present foster care system, few programs exist to help ease youth into adulthood.

Recently the federal government took a step toward addressing the needs of these young people by adopting the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. This program is intended to assist foster youth as they make the transition to adulthood. The Chafee Act provides funding for the most basic needs of youth in transition, including housing, education, job training, and health care.

The individuals profiled here are the very youth the Chafee Act is supposed to help. They often are haunted by shadows and bear scars from traumatic childhoods. Many of the youth profiled are involved in transition programs that help them as they struggle to find their way in an adult world, a world for which they have had little preparation.
Ronee

She is 19 and says with weariness beyond her years that she is comfortable where she is now.
Ronee bought a lemon. She spent all of her savings and bought a car that broke down and would probably need a new engine. With no savings and no way to get to class, Ronee was stuck. But she has learned to be resourceful. She asked a friend who lives close to school whether she could stay with her so she could walk to class. Ronee stayed with her friend and completed her first semester at community college in December 1999.

Ronee was just 9 when her teacher recognized signs of abuse. Her stepfather was abusing her, so Ronee became part of the state foster care system. She then moved among various foster homes and attended a number of different schools, including three during her first year of high school.

At age 12 she ended up at a crisis center in Silverdale, Washington. It was there that Ronee learned about Casey Family Programs. About the only thing she knew about Casey was that she could get a college education if she became part of their program. Casey's program was a safe haven to the frightened youngster.

She made up her mind then to become a Casey foster youth. It took three years, but she was determined to make it happen. First, though, Ronee had to be officially declared a ward of the state; therefore, her mother's rights had to be terminated. At age 15 Ronee finally came into foster care with Casey.

Casey connected Ronee with her first job. Casey's Community and Job Internship Network (CAJIN) partners with local businesses to give youth in foster care an opportunity to gain work experience. It was through CAJIN that Ronee got a job in the advertising department of the local newspaper. Ronee did so well that she now sells advertising for her community college's newspaper.

Ronee's goals today are to get a car and make it through college. She is 19 and says with weariness beyond her years that she is comfortable where she is now. Ronee works hard to understand her past, but for many years she was missing a major link -- her father. Ronee recently located him via the Internet using only a name and address. She now is carefully trying to build a relationship with him.

In 1999, Ronee participated in a signing ceremony at the White House for the Chafee Act, the program that will provide services to youth making the transition from foster care to independence. Ronee admits, "Too many kids give up hope," but she believes this program will provide that hope to youth as they face living on their own for the first time.
“The best books are those that tell you what you know already.”

– George Orwell
Nakeya

Nakeya, whose favorite book is George Orwell's Animal Farm, knows already that life is filled with inequities. She thinks she was 7 when she last lived in a real home.

With her mother addicted to drugs, Nakeya lived for years in motels in southern California, missing the sixth and seventh grades. When she was only 11, Nakeya was forced to sell drugs to help support herself and her mother.

At the age of 14, with no family support and few friends, Nakeya was placed in foster care and lived in three different state-operated group homes. When she turned 18, with nothing but a small savings account, Nakeya left the group home and was on her own.

Nakeya landed in transitional housing in Pasadena, California. Because of problems at the transitional residence, she did not remain long. Since she moved, Nakeya has been struggling to find a stable living situation. She realizes how difficult it is to live independently and says, "I'm just going to be out there trying to survive."

Nakeya had worked with the Transition Partners program in Pasadena, which seeks to provide youth like Nakeya with services they need to help them make the transition to adulthood. Casey Family Programs is one of the leading partners in this unique program that former foster youth helped to plan and design. That design included an alumni center -- a place that provides a comfortable environment, youth advocates and mentors, job placement information and related services, educational and vocational information including tutoring and financial assistance, and referrals for transitional housing. The Center has a kitchen, a computer center, and a headquarters for an alumni group. It is a place for these young people to connect with each other and with services they need.

Nakeya, a strong advocate for Transition Partners, says, "Foster youth have to have somewhere to go for help."

Nakeya's mother died last year. Now, like many youth in foster care, Nakeya is very much alone in the world and says, "It's scary on your own."
Sherman’s mother is a drug addict.

His father is dead.

He has not seen his 16-year-old sister in four years.
### Sherman

Eighteen years ago Sherman was born in the small town of Donaldsonville, Louisiana, about 30 miles south of Baton Rouge. Proudly known as the first capital of Louisiana, Donaldsonville has since fallen on hard times. With its population ravaged by drug abuse and AIDS, Donaldsonville is a place from which to escape.

Sherman's mother, a drug addict, remains in Donaldsonville. He does not have any contact with her. His father is dead.

He has not seen his 16-year-old sister in four years.

Sherman has been shuttled from one home to another in foster care since the age of two.

Sherman can be physically imposing. He is a tall young man, reserved around strangers. His emotions are kept tightly controlled behind a young face with a depth of sadness in his eyes. The scars of Sherman's youth weigh heavily on him even though they are not physical. The emotional scars are deeper and harder to erase.

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Today, Sherman lives in a home operated by the Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Alliance for Transitional Living (BRATL). BRATL's main goal is to help youth achieve self-sufficiency. The BRATL house is run by a coalition of governmental, nonprofit, and business groups, including Casey Family Programs, which provides resources and expertise to the Alliance.

The Alliance offers stability, safety, and structure to homeless young people. To prepare for living on their own, BRATL residents must plan meals and work within a budget. They also must get a job and go to school. BRATL residents have the option of staying at the house for 18 months while they learn basic living skills.

When Sherman connected with BRATL he had dropped out of high school and served time in a juvenile detention center. But he recently took a job as a cook at Church's, a local fast-food restaurant. He also takes welding classes at Louisiana Technical College. BRATL is helping Sherman find a way to connect to the world.
Michael’s grandmother always told him he would make it.

He wishes she could be here to see that she was right.
At a house in a project called Mirasol, Michael was raped and beaten by his father. Mirasol means "look at the sun." Now there's nothing to look at but piles of rubble. All of the houses have been torn down.

Michael hadn't been to Mirasol in years. Memories rushed at him as he walked across the now-empty lot. There was the tree marking his cat's grave; there was the house across the street where a young man he'd admired was killed in a drive-by shooting just a few days before he was supposed to leave for college. Michael found two marbles, one sunny yellow and one sky blue, in the mound of dirt where his family's home once stood. Later, rolling the marbles between his fingers, Michael talked about his memories of Mirasol. He coped with his father's constant rage by telling himself that by bearing the brunt of the abuse, he was sparing his younger sisters.

Michael was 12 when police raided the Perez home and arrested his father on drug charges. When his father was sent to prison for five years, Michael and his siblings were separated and sent to foster homes. His mother had disappeared years earlier. No one ever told Michael why she left or what became of her. His grandmother had promised him that someday she'd tell him the whole story, but she died before she had the chance.

Permanent connections are important to Michael: connections to his city, his family, his friends, and his faith. One of his strongest supporters, Pastor Agripina Hauschild, is, in some ways, all of these: San Antonio legend, surrogate mother, treasured friend, and spiritual guide. Pina, as she is known, is the mother of one of Michael's childhood friends (pictured here with Michael). She often took him in when the going got rough at home. Michael eventually landed in a stable home in Seguin, a small town east of San Antonio. There he became the first person in his extended family ever to earn a high school diploma.

Just before Michael left foster care with the state, he was referred to South Texas Transitional Services. Now, at 18, he is living in his first apartment. With assistance from the program he lives alone, but he's not alone. Casey Family Programs is one of the key partners in this community effort to provide services and support for youth making the transition from foster care to adulthood. Housing assistance -- key to the program -- ranges from group living to supported apartment living. Participants learn about food shopping and cooking, budgeting, getting and maintaining a job, career and educational planning, and building connections in their community.

Michael works as a night guard at the Bexar County Parole Violators Facility, a privately managed prison in downtown San Antonio. His goal is to study graphic design at San Antonio College in the fall.

Many years have passed since Mirasol, and Michael says he has forgiven his father. He sees him often and stays in touch with his brothers and sisters as well. It makes him sad that his grandmother can't be with them. She was the one, Michael said, who always told him he would make it, and he wishes she could be here to see that she was right.
Karen longs to go to college and is beginning to do what she needs to do to get there.
Karen says she's landed in Santa Rosa Hospital's emergency room many times with injuries from street fighting.

She's been fighting for survival from the first days of her life, when her mother left her in the maternity ward and disappeared forever. Karen and her older sister wound up with an aunt and uncle, who beat her so often, she says, that she couldn't wait to go to school and hated coming home. Also, her uncle sexually abused her until he was finally caught, convicted, and sent to prison. Karen and her sister went into foster care.

She'd been in more foster homes than she could count when she came into care with Casey Family Programs. She clicked with the family she lived with in Spring Branch, Texas, a town Karen loved. She says that when she moved with that family to San Antonio at age 12, her life took a downhill turn.

She couldn't stay put. She started running away and doing drugs -- "everything," she says -- with other teenage runaways who hung around downtown. She had a string of dangerous and abusive boyfriends and a series of jobs in strip clubs. She got further and further behind in school, which had always been her refuge. She squeaked by with a GED.

But the thirst for learning that Karen developed as a little girl hadn't stopped. Her eyes still lit up when she talked about the subjects she loved in grade school: biology, reading, writing, music. She longed to go to college and had begun to do what she needed to do to get there.

In February, she'd been off drugs for a month, had just started a job at a discount department store, and was making plans to begin a course in computer network administration at San Antonio College. She was also living with her sister, brother-in-law, and three other people in a tiny apartment where staying up all night was the norm, fights were frequent, and money for food and rent was scarce. Then Karen connected with Casey Family Programs collaborative transitional program in San Antonio. She counted the 30 days until she got into a Casey-supervised and supported apartment. In addition to housing, South Texas Transitional Services will help Karen with assistance with health care, employment, education, and learning skills for living on her own.

So much has and could still go wrong for her. Still, Karen radiates a youthful and ambitious spirit. It may surprise the world just who this fierce young woman turns out to be.
The warriors are gone now from Wounded Knee. The Ghost Dancers killed there in 1889 have long since been buried beneath the sacred ground, their Ghost Shirts pierced by the bullets of the American military. But within South Dakota’s Badlands, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, live their descendants.
Laverne peers down at the drawing in his hands -- a drawing he has made of the Badlands. Laverne is Oglala Sioux and lives on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation; he is also in foster care with Casey Family Programs. Casey has been an active member of Pine Ridge’s community since 1983. The Program, located on the Reservation, has a deep commitment to helping Native American children, youth, and families preserve their culture and provides services based on the cultural needs of Native American youth. Many of the staff and the families providing foster care are members of the Lakota tribe.
Laverne craves solitude these days, so he draws, shoots baskets, and tries to steer clear of trouble. He is no longer in school and fears being drawn back into the wrong crowd, a crowd that connected him to a world of drug use, drinking, and gangs. In his short 16-year life, Laverne has spent time in jail and in a youth detention camp. At the camp, he says, he learned to have “better coping thoughts.”

Laverne has a long way to go before he finds peace within himself. He knows he has not always done what’s right and has had significant substance abuse problems. Laverne feels a responsibility to protect his sisters and little brother. He says, “I don’t want them to do what I did. I want them to go to school so they can have a better life.”

Lorenda is Laverne’s sister. Her father died when she was 9 and she has been in foster care since kindergarten. She does not remember how many foster families she has lived with and has been in the Casey foster program since fourth or fifth grade. Lorenda is not sure where her mother is. Neither she nor her brother or sister has been in touch with their mother in years.

Lorenda is proud of her culture and is strongly connected to her heritage. She says that her father told her, “You should be proud of who you are, your culture, and your color.” She dances, although she is shy when asked about the dancing that has won her awards.

At 17, Lorenda is one year away from being on her own. When she leaves foster care at 18 and finishes high school, she will receive assistance from Casey Family Programs Continuing Education and Job Training (CEJT) to help her get an apartment and go to college. CEJT is one of Casey’s programs designed to prepare young people for living on their own. The scholarship program helps many young people with housing assistance, job training, college tuition assistance, and health care.

Laverne is taking a different route. Despite support from Casey and his foster family, he has not remained in school. He wants to get his GED and train as a carpenter. Unemployment on the reservation is between 70 and 80 percent. Knowing this, Laverne understands that he will probably have to leave the reservation to find work.

Laverne and Lorenda are filled with dreams for their futures. They imagine better lives for their families, for themselves, for their people. They will struggle to define themselves as they try to fulfill these dreams while remaining connected to their past.
The youth profiled here are just a few of the thousands of young people who leave foster care every year. Each of their tales is unique and unfinished. While their life stories are compelling, there are thousands more youth in foster care whose stories remain untold. These youth are alone and in need of attention from our government, from our social service organizations, and, most importantly, from each one of us.

Casey Family Programs is committed to assisting youth as they transition to living on their own. Programs such as BRATL, Transition Partners, and many others seek to promote self-sufficiency among youth leaving foster care. They provide programs to help youth with education and employment skills. They help these young people learn to budget and manage money, plan and prepare meals, find affordable safe housing, solve problems, and make decisions. They help these youth successfully transition to adulthood.

Casey Family Programs was founded in 1966 to address the needs of vulnerable children. Today, Casey is exploring more ways to better serve the needs of children and families. Casey works in collaboration with local, regional, and national partners to educate public policy makers and enhance services and opportunities for children, youth, and families impacted by the child welfare system.
There are thousands of youth in foster care whose stories remain untold. These youth are alone and in need of attention from our government, from our social service organizations, and, most importantly, from each one of us.

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