Social Workers Inspire Youths In Foster Care To Give Back To Future Generations

The Department celebrated National Social Work Month this week by honoring social workers from across the state who exemplify the Department's very best at a ceremony at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School. Quite a few eyes grew moist as five young women in foster care who are attending college told the crowd how their social workers inspired them to pursue social work careers so they could help children from similar backgrounds. Pictures and news coverage of the proceeding tell the story.

THE HERALD

Former foster child now fostering hope

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Since March is National Professional Social Work Month, it’s probably no surprise that Connecticut’s Department of Children and Families held an awards ceremony Tuesday to honor some of its workers. What is surprising, perhaps, is that the five college students from across the state who also received awards — five young women, all pursuing degrees in social work — spent most of their childhoods as wards of the DCF.

Christina Garcia is one of them. The 22-year-old college junior lives in Bristol and commutes to her classes at Central Connecticut State University.

She took a day out of her spring break to meet her social worker, Cynthia Caro, at the Connecticut Juvenile Training Facility in Middletown, where she accepted her award.

The CJTF is a lockdown facility for juvenile offenders, not the sort of place you'd ordinarily associate with celebrations. "It's the budget cuts," Caro explained. "Sometimes they'll contract out to a nice facility, but with the budget crisis they've cut back ... DCF owns this facility and the multi-purpose room was available."

Garcia hopes to work for DCF after graduating from college next year. "My goal is to advocate for children's rights, especially in today's economy," she said. "I've been in the system for 14 years, since

I was 8. We were taken away for — I think it was neglect?" Caro nodded in confirmation. Garcia is the oldest of four children. "I went to, altogether, three [foster] homes, until I was about 17. One of my brothers went to four or five homes, my sister went to two, and my youngest brother got adopted."

Her siblings are now 21, 20 and 17; thus far, Garcia is the only one to go to college. "They all have good jobs," Garcia said. "As a social work major, I'm applying my skills to help them — CCSU requires that we volunteer so we have experience when we graduate." Her sister recently had a baby, so Garcia has been helping her sign up for food stamps and other services. She also volunteers at New Britain's Spanish Speaking Center, a community organization that helps low-income Latinos. (Garcia herself is half Spanish and half French.) Does Garcia keep in contact with her parents? "Oh, yes, they're very good parents ... they're very proud [of her accomplishments]." As soon as Garcia graduated from Wolcott High School, at age 17, she moved out of her last foster home and into her Bristol apartment. "I chose [to live in Bristol] because that's the place I was in the longest." It's also where she last lived with her parents.

It's hard for a 17-year-old to afford her own apartment, but Caro said DCF helped. "It's a DCF program. If they graduate from high school, they qualify for an apartment and get a subsidy for their utilities." Another program covers most of Garcia's college costs; she pays $500 per year and applied for all grants for which she is eligible, and DCF covers the rest.

Garcia seems to prefer discussing her future to dwelling on her past. On Tuesday, when she accepted her award certificate from DCF commissioner Susan Hamilton, she said, "I chose this profession because of my unique life experience ... as a youth in foster care I'll be able to better relate to and help children in these cases." Later that afternoon, when asked if she had any advice for kids still in the foster system, she said, "Don't give up. Life gets tough at times, but DCF has great resources available, if you'll use them."

Photo from the Hartford Courant

Their Eyes On Social Work

(PATRICK RAYCRAFT / HARTFORD COURANT / March 24, 2009)

"It was expected of us to fail," said 21-year-old Chelsea Moody, left, of Hartford, who entered DCF foster care when she was 6 and bounced from one foster home to another. She and 20-year-old Tericsha Diaz, right, of Hartford, who entered the foster system when she was 8, are now both full-time college students and plan to become social workers after graduation. They were in Middletown on Tuesday for a recognition ceremony for DCF social workers at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School. The two will remain in DCF care until they are 23, and the agency will pay most of their school expenses as long as they maintain high academic standards. "I want to make an impact in children's lives," Moody said. "Just because you were brought up bad, you don't have to be bad