

## RIISING TO THE CHALLENGE: RENAISSANCE SCHOLARS ALUMNUS

# CHANTEL JOHNSON



Chantel Johnson is not your typical college graduate. Growing up in foster care, Johnson bounced from one home to another with very little ongoing support or attention given to her educational needs. As a high school student, Johnson says that the only people she knew with college degrees were the social workers who guided her through the system. After graduating from high school, Johnson began her undergraduate studies at California State University, East Bay. Johnson was determined to fulfill a lifelong dream to be the first member of her family to earn a college degree.

At CSUEB, Johnson participated in the Renaissance Scholars Program. This program provides comprehensive wraparound support to former foster youth as they work toward a four-year college degree. Johnson also began to pursue leadership opportunities on campus, successfully running for the Associated Student Body President. Also while at CSUEB, Johnson served as a policy intern in the offices of Lt. Governor John Garamendi and Senator Mark Ridley-Thomas. In 2007, Johnson earned her Bachelor's degree in Sociology with a minor in Political Science. She was then selected for a prestigious Senate fellowship through the Center for California Studies in Sacramento.

Guided by this passion for making a difference, Johnson now works as the statewide legislative and policy coordinator for the California Youth Connection (CYC). CYC is a non-profit foster-youth leadership and advocacy organization with 28 chapters throughout California.

Johnson monitors foster care and related legislation and works with foster youth to share their insights and advocate for change. For her part, Johnson says that without the loving support of program staff and University President Mohammad Qayoumi, she would not be where she is today. Johnson asserts that the Renaissance Scholars Program enabled her to complete her degree and position herself to develop the career that she thrives in today. Johnson is currently pursuing a graduate degree in Public Administration at the University of Southern California.

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Lemley said the project hopes to achieve its goal of expanding campus support programs by: disseminating information about available campus support programs in California; providing technical assistance and training; and building a well-organized coalition of students, campus administrators, nonprofit professionals and public officials to advocate for policy changes that will promote academic achievement among former foster youth.

The first statewide training is a web seminar on December 2, which will discuss specialized approaches to meeting the mental health needs of former foster youth on campus. The project's website provides information about campus support programs statewide and archives past trainings. Please visit [www.cacollegepathways.org](http://www.cacollegepathways.org).



## CALIFORNIA COLLEGE PATHWAYS PROJECT LAUNCHED

In June 2008, the John Burton Foundation and the California State University Office of the Chancellor launched the California College Pathways Project to help former foster youth succeed in college. The two-year project is funded by the Stuart Foundation and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation.

According to Program Officer Amy Freeman of the Stuart Foundation, the idea behind the California College Pathways Project is to increase the number of foster youth in California who enter higher education and help them achieve successful academic outcomes. The project will do this by expanding access to campus support programs, such as the Guardian Scholars Program, the Renaissance Scholars Program and other successful approaches to supporting former foster youth on campus.

"Private philanthropy has played an important role in seeding, nurturing and spreading programs that create opportunities for foster youth to become successful adults," said Freeman. "The College Pathways Project is an important part of the evolution of taking promising programs to scale by working in partnership with public agencies to ensure that resources are available to sustain programs that have proven to reverse the downward trajectory experienced by many youth aging out of foster care."

Heading up the project are Jenny Vinopal, assistant director of Foster Youth Programs at the CSU Office of the Chancellor, and Amy Lemley, policy director at the John Burton Foundation. Vinopal has over 10 years of experience in the field of campus support programs, including leading the Cal State Fullerton Guardian Scholars and Cal Poly Pomona Renaissance Scholars Programs.

"Creating access to higher education for foster youth is something that we are passionately committed to," said Vinopal. "We want to provide foster youth with a safety net of support services they need in order to succeed."

Lemley's experience is drawn from her work in expanding THP-Plus, California's state-funded housing program for former foster youth, as well as her years as the executive director of a nonprofit providing housing for former foster youth.

The California College Pathways Project is dedicated to increasing the number of former foster youth in California who enter higher education and achieve an academic outcome.

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# LANDMARK FEDERAL LEGISLATION PROMOTES ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AMONG FOSTER YOUTH

On October 7, President George W. Bush signed the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act* (House Resolution 6893). Hailed as the most significant federal child-welfare legislation in over a decade, HR 6893 includes a range of provisions intended to improve outcomes among children and youth in foster care, including the creation of a federally subsidized guardianship program for kinship providers. Of the bill's numerous provisions, two directly address the educational needs of children and youth in foster care.

## 1. Increased educational coordination

The first provision improves the quality of education children and youth receive while in foster care by stabilizing their educational experience. The new bill requires state child-welfare agencies work with local education agencies to ensure that children remain in the school they are enrolled in at the time of placement into foster care, unless that would not be in the child's best interests. If it is not in the child's best interest, the state must ensure immediate enrollment in a new school and complete transference of the child's educational records.

The bill also increases the amount of federal funding that may be used to cover education-related transportation costs for these children. In addition, it requires states to provide assurances in their Title IV-E state plans that every school-age child in foster care receiving adoption assistance or subsidized guardianship payments is enrolled as a full-time elementary or secondary school student, or has completed secondary school.

## 2. Extension of foster care support to age 21

The second provision to promote educational outcomes among foster youth is a state option to extend federal funding for youth in foster care to age 21. While many states (including California) have statutes that authorize the juvenile court to retain jurisdiction beyond age 18, most states rarely elect to do so, and then only for a minimum amount of time. As the primary source of federal foster-care funding (Title IV-E of the Social Security Act) is terminated when a youth reaches the age of majority (age 18 in most states), many states consider foster care for older youth cost-prohibitive and discharge them.

Under HR 6893, youth can continue to receive the support of the foster care system up to age 21. The link between extending foster care to age 21 and improved educational outcomes was demonstrated in the "Midwest Study of Adult Functioning." This study compared the experiences of foster youth in the states of Iowa, Illinois and Wisconsin who "aged out" at 18 with those who remained in foster care to 21. Of the various effects of remaining in foster care past age 18, increased participation in higher education and educational attainment were among the strongest. The young adults who stayed in until age 21 were 1.9 times more likely to have ever attended college, and 2.2 times more likely to have completed at least one year of college than their peers who exited foster care at age 18.

## NATIONAL CONFERENCE BUILDS SUPPORT FOR CAMPUS SUPPORT PROGRAMS

On October 21-23, 2008, over 200 education leaders from colleges and universities across California and the United States came together in San Jose, California to learn how to build support networks to increase the graduation success rate of students from foster care. Co-hosted by the Silicon Valley Children's Fund (SVCF) and San Jose State University's Connect Motivate Educate (CME) Society, the 2nd Annual Creating a Blueprint Conference focused on foster-youth-related legislative mandates and how to establish campus-based programs and services to support students from foster care.

The three-day training was designed to help staff at community colleges and universities, and members of the child-welfare system, create and sustain programs to support foster youth during their transition into and through college. Participants represented various campus departments and offices, including: Academic Advising, Career Counseling, Extended Opportunity Programs & Services (EOPS), Financial Aid, Housing and Student Affairs. Over 70% of attendees came from California college campuses. Speakers covered a multitude of topics, such as: utilizing strength-based advising strategies, sustaining programs through public and private funding, interview outcomes from established programs, building partnerships between public agencies and educational institutions, and helping students access housing resources.

# CITY COLLEGE OF SAN FRANCISCO GOES ABOVE AND BEYOND

Michael McPartlin is passionate about assisting former foster youth in higher education. As the coordinator for the Guardian Scholars Program at City College of San Francisco (CCSF), he played a pivotal role in its development, from planning in 2005 through implementation in the spring of 2008. The program is already helping 170 students succeed in higher education, and is currently the largest campus support program for former foster youth in California.

According to McPartlin, the program began as issues surfaced regarding implementation of the Chaffee Educational and Training Voucher, created by the US Congress in 2001. "I agreed to launch that program, which led to further questions about how we would confirm eligibility," said McPartlin. "That opened up the question: how does someone coming from foster care make it in college?"

McPartlin says there is no secret ingredient for program success. Instead, it is important to recognize the diverse experiences and backgrounds of former foster youth, and provide students with the individualized resources they need to succeed on campus.

"People characterize and make assumptions about youth in care," said McPartlin. "The reality is that young men and women come from all walks of life and have a broad set of experiences and understandings about what it means to go to college. Students should drive our program and which services to provide."

Some of the biggest challenges have not been academic. Housing presents major challenges for community college students, particularly for CCSF, located in the high-rent market of San Francisco. Like most community colleges, CCSF does not provide housing. Its Guardian Scholars Program works with four state-funded Transitional Housing Placement Program (THP-Plus) providers to offer housing and supportive services to its students. Despite recent growth in the THP-Plus program statewide and in San Francisco, the housing needs of CCSF's students are still unmet.

Housing needs have become a top priority, according to McPartlin. "We listened to what the research told us and what young men and women have said consistently about housing being the number one issue," he said. "From the beginning, we made a point of understanding the housing programs and resources in our community as best we could, and making sure our students knew about them as well."

The program has worked creatively by offering emergency housing assistance for students who are in the greatest need and waiting to enter THP-Plus. Funding for the temporary assistance was provided by the Pottruck Family Foundation.

As for the future, McPartlin emphasizes the need to address the diverse needs of students consistently. "In the first year of the program, we have gotten office space, a part-time academic counselor and continue to see growth in the number of students," said McPartlin. "From here, we want to continue to build partnerships within the college and throughout the community in order to have a more established, consistent continuum of services for students."

Recently, CCSF's Guardian Scholars Program was honored for its contributions both to the lives of former foster youth on campus and to the field of campus support programs in California at the 2008 Blueprint Conference, October 21-23. Organized by the Silicon Valley Children's Fund, the conference is a national convening of campus and community support programs assisting former foster youth. This year, CCSF's Guardian Scholars Program was recognized as a leader in the field and awarded the prestigious Blueprint Champion Award.

"It was humbling to be acknowledged, because there is so much work for us to do and so much good work that is going on," said McPartlin. "We are appreciative. It is an affirmation that community colleges can put together a meaningful set of services for young men and women formerly in the foster care system going to college."

## ANNUAL REPORT OF CAMPUS SUPPORT PROGRAMS TO BE RELEASED

The California College Pathways Project will issue an annual report of campus support programs for former foster youth in January 2009. The report will summarize the progress of the campus support program movement since its inception in 1998, with the Guardian Scholars Program at Cal State Fullerton. To get your copy, visit [www.cacollegepathways.org](http://www.cacollegepathways.org) and sign up on the project listserv.