Fostering Success:

Demery Ward, 18, a sophomore and former foster youth studying art, (left); Brenna Meade, 19, a sophomore studying economics, (center); and Cassie Wilkerson, 18, a former foster youth and sophomore studying agricultural education, (right) prepare for final exams at Newsom Residence Hall on the CSU campus.
Most college students leave the security of their families when they head to campus. Demery Ward arrived at Colorado State University and found a new family.

The 17-year-old freshman is a former foster youth who is finding support through Fostering Success, an innovative new program at Colorado State that is addressing the needs and helping ensure the success of this invisible population of the University community.

“I underestimated how difficult it would be for me to go to college with no support,” Ward says. “This program has become like a family and support system to me. I’m excited to have an extended family, and I want to reach back and help other foster kids see that they can go to college too.”

The Fostering Success program was created through the CSU Division of Student Affairs to assist the estimated 80 students on campus who have aged out of the foster care system and no longer have families to support them or homes to return to during University breaks. Without financial, emotional, and physical family support, these students face significant obstacles as they attempt to live as average students on or off campus, succeed academically, and earn a degree. Nationally, only 2 percent of former foster youth earn college degrees.

“Foster care alumni at CSU have beaten the odds when you look at the national statistics on education and foster care,” says Siri Newman, collegiate success coordinator for the Center for Advising and Student Achievement at Colorado State. “Only 10 percent of foster youth attend college. To make it to college is an incredible achievement, and our goal with the creation of the Fostering Success program is...
Many former foster youth have faced difficult realities that have led to being removed from their families. These students are on their own from very young ages, sometimes moving many times to new schools and families. They generally lack role models and mentors and have had little help developing career or college aspirations.

But the students at CSU have already beaten great odds by applying and meeting the strict academic criteria to be accepted. Nationally:

- 65 percent of foster youth change high schools seven or more times.
- Less than half graduate from high school.
- 15 percent go on to any type of higher education.
- 10 percent go to college.
- 2 percent earn a college degree.
- Between 40 percent and 50 percent of emancipated foster youth are homeless within 18 months of emancipation.

CSU alumnus Greg King (M.S. ’08) knows firsthand the challenges faced by former foster youth who have beaten the odds by making it into college. He knows how exhausting it is to work all night and take classes all day.

As an undergraduate student, King rarely bought any of the books required for his classes; he didn’t have the money.

While his friends enjoyed trips to Denver to attend music concerts or hit the mountains for ski weekends, King often stayed home alone, unable to afford extracurricular activities.

“Having this support on campus makes me feel connected and like I have someplace to go.”

– CASSIE WILKERNON
Feeling left out when his residence hall roommates received care packages from home, King filled and mailed boxes to himself and proudly showed his friends what he said his family had sent to him.

“The most uncomfortable thing to do is to go to school and have to ask other people to borrow their things,” says King, who earned his master’s in Student Affairs in Higher Education from CSU in 2008. “I once had to borrow a friend’s jeans because I owned only one pair of pants and couldn’t afford to do laundry.”

Brittany Janes, a current CSU student, is using her experiences in foster care to reach out to other former foster youth on campus to create a community of support. Janes is working with CSU administrators through Fostering Success to bring the students together.

“I hope it’s just a place for former foster youth to feel safe,” says Janes, a graduate student in the Student Affairs in Higher Education master’s program. “Foster care is a pretty unique experience. Most students don’t understand what it’s like to not have a family. I wish they would have had a program like this when I was an undergraduate student. It would have given me the extra support I needed.”

Beginning last fall, care packages are periodically assembled and delivered to former foster youth on campus and include encouraging notes from volunteers and CSU administrators. Janes’ support group for former foster youth is growing every week as she hears from students who want to be involved with the program. The University has created two funds to accept private donations to help former foster youth. One supports scholarships, and the other helps pay for care packages, workshops, retreats, social events, residence hall necessities, bedding, and other expenses.

“These students have worked hard and beaten the odds so many times, including being accepted to CSU,” says Brett Anderson (’87), vice president for Advancement. “Through a gift to Fostering Success, individuals can play a role in giving these young people some of the opportunities enjoyed by students who have the support of their families.”

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