

Be the One...

An Interview with Meaghan Martin a former youth in care with the Kawartha-Haliburton Children's Aid Society

1. Without getting into specific details, can you tell us a bit about how you came to be in the care of the Kawartha-Haliburton Children's Aid Society (KHCAS)?

I came into the care of KHCAS a day before my 15th birthday. I had spent most of my childhood living in an unstable environment. My mother is an alcoholic and so growing up was quite difficult. It meant dealing with a difficult parent most of the time and never knowing what sort of environment it would be at home. Home changed often too. Sometimes we lived in hotels, cars, trailers, etc. After many physical and verbal altercations with my mother that only increased in intensity as I got older, I started to reach out for help. At age 13 I called KHCAS to find someone to talk to about what was happening at home. Through their support, I found the courage to leave home and on my 15th birthday I entered my first foster home.

2. What were some of the challenges you faced while in care?

I moved around a couple of times which made it hard to feel accepted and loved and stability was again hard to achieve. I also found school quite difficult because when I entered foster care, I was also entering high school. So while I was deciding what courses to take and what dress to wear at prom, I was also going to court, having family visits and making the decision to become a Crown ward. So I found I had to grow up quite quickly and had no real understanding of the impact that all had on me.

3. What were some of the benefits or opportunities that you received as a result of being in care?

I was grateful to have received scholarships to assist in my post-secondary education. I also received financial support that assisted me to participate in extra-curricular activities. I was also able to find the family that I have now. A family that accepted me wholeheartedly and taught me how to receive unconditional love. A family that has been an enormous support in my life and still is to this day.

4. The title of this article is "Be the One". Is there a person in your life who was that for you?

The person, or persons, I can think of would be my (foster) parents...more specifically my dad. I put brackets around foster because he has truly become my dad in every way. He has been there for me since the first day I moved in. He made sure I was aware that if I fell, he would help pick me back up again. They both showed me what unconditional love was and that they were going to be my family even beyond the time I aged out of the system. My dad has become someone who I have leaned on and confided in. Someone who has helped shape me into the person I am today because he taught me to believe in myself and to take back my self-worth. He has been my cheerleader and has encouraged me to follow my dreams and passions. When I have stumbled, he has been there to help me get back on my feet. My life could have been so

different without them both in it. I am incredibly grateful for their love and support and how they completely opened up their home and their hearts to me.

5. You seem to be a very resilient person. Did being in care have anything to do with that and if so how?

I would say it had a big part to play in it. I went through so much growing up that once I entered care, though it was difficult in its own way, I felt I had survived so much already that I could survive whatever else would come my way. I didn't let it break me because I wanted more for myself and I was going to fight to make a better future for myself.

6. You went on to post-secondary education. Where did you study and what did you study? How did being in care help/hinder attaining further education?

I did go into post-secondary education. But at the time I was in care, if I hadn't chosen to attend college, I would have lost my supports from being in care. So to be honest, I went into it not fully ready to embark on that journey. I ended up dropping out a year later. I don't regret that decision because it gave me the time to really discover what it was I wanted to do. So I spent time working in different careers and volunteering in many areas which lead me to then go back to school for event management. This is a passion I discovered in high school and it only continued to grow. I'm grateful for the support I did receive when attending college the first time because it really helped me to grow and learn more about myself and the areas of study I actually wanted to get into. It also helped to lengthen my supports so that I could take that time without the financial stresses.

7. Do you have any advice for children or youth who are in care in terms of thinking about their future?

When I am talking to youth I always like to remind them of my own journey. It wasn't perfect. If I could go back in time I would put way less pressure on myself. My advice to them would be to choose what they want to pursue for a career wisely and to not let the financial pressures or uncertainty be a deciding factor or make them do something they are not ready to do. Remember there are people out there to help you, to guide you. Reach out for it! There is no shame in asking for support and remember to follow your dreams and aspirations...no matter how big or small they may be! Be you!

8. Do you have any advice for CASs in terms of how to make things better for children or youth who are currently in care or who were in care but have now left care?

Remind youth of the supports that are in place for them. Just saying it in passing in a meeting or through handouts are not enough. Reminders are key. Just as they are when it comes to them knowing they are loved, though of, and cared about. It can be extremely lonely at times for these youth, with many feeling isolated and alone with the feeling no one understands. Engage with these youth. Connect them with former youth in care who have come out the other side of it and can share in their own experiences. These kids need hope and it is up to us to show it to them.

9. What is your hope for children or youth who are currently in care and facing similar situations that you did?

My hope for youth in care today is that they don't let their current circumstances be a negative in their lives. That they don't give up on their futures and continue to dream big because there are so many of us out there who want to come alongside and support them and lead them towards a bright future. I would also hope that they could take their experiences and use them for something good. Whether it's volunteering in their community with groups that supported them or being a peer mentor to younger youth in care. Taking our experiences and using them as a positive can be truly healing!

10. Can you tell us what you are doing now in terms of your work for your local MPP, how you came to work there and what aspects of your job you most enjoy?

I am currently working with the office of Michael Harris, MPP Kitchener-Conestoga. This job came after previously working with an MP for the Federal Government. My job entails assisting the Member with work in his constituency. This includes me being very involved with the goings on in our local riding such as different events, fundraisers and issues that our constituents are talking about. My role includes keeping up-to-date on a variety of issues locally and provincially and ensuring that the Member is also kept up-to-date as his own role keeps him extremely busy. Being in my role allows me to grow my extensive network in the community and beyond. It lets me offer help and be a voice for those who need one. It keeps me engaged with community members and I am constantly learning in my role from important issues to the variety of organizations and groups we have in our region.

11. You are also involved in other community activities such as Rotary and you volunteer at Family and Children's Services of Waterloo Region. Can you tell me what it is about volunteering that you enjoy and why you wanted to get involved in your community and also with the CAS?

I found it important for me to give back to those who gave to me, in other words **"Be the One"** for someone else who may need a helping hand in their life.

I started volunteering even before I entered the foster care system. I have just always had a passion to help others. It fulfills me to use my hands and now my own experiences and voice to assist those in need. I chose to volunteer with Family and Children's Services of Waterloo Region because it was a way for me to use my own experiences to help those who are currently in care. I am able to use my voice for the youth who don't have one. I greatly enjoy meeting with youth and hearing their own stories and being someone for them to turn to for a listening ear...because I remember what it was like for me and I didn't always have that opportunity so I want to be able to give it to them.

I have also used my experiences and story to start my own initiative called Sleep Tight. This is a campaign I started back in 2014 to provide comfort & hope through a pair of donated pjs to those affected by human trafficking. This campaign has continued to grow and works to raise much needed awareness on the issue of trafficking and how youth in care are targeted.

I greatly enjoy volunteering and giving back because it has let me turn what may have been looked at as negatives in my life into something positive. I have had amazing opportunities to meet and speak to incredible groups of people. It has allowed me to shed light on important issues affecting youth in care and it has helped give them a voice. It has also taught me so much about myself and allowed me the opportunity to heal. It is also so rewarding knowing that even one small act can make one incredible difference in someone's life.