

Amanda Metivier has walked the walk. As program coordinator of Facing Foster Care in Alaska (FFCA), she knows from experience how the foster care system works. A foster care "alumni" and recent graduate of UAA's School of Social Work, Amanda has dedicated her career to improving the foster care system in Alaska.



Amanda moved to Alaska when she was 11 years old, but didn't enter the foster care system until she was 17 – after she dropped out of high school.

As a teen, Amanda had little motivation or desire to do much of anything. She was introduced to FFCA but ditched the first meeting. After much resistance, Amanda attended a statewide retreat where she met several other youth in a similar situation as hers. This time it was different. "I felt like I belonged," she said. "I connected with people in a way that I had never connected with anyone."

Her experience in foster care ended up being a best-case scenario. Oftentimes, siblings are split among different households, but Amanda and her sister were able to stay together. Her sister's friend's parents agreed to foster the pair. "I had a great experience in foster care, but then I started hearing about all these horror stories from different youth," said Amanda. "That keeps me going; I need to work to change those stories." She was in foster care until she "aged out" of the system at 20.

Dropping out of high school put Amanda very far behind, but with the encouragement of her social worker, Tom McRoberts, she worked hard to catch up and earned her GED in '02. She was able to find funding for college, and enrolled in courses at UAA's School of Social Work. She did her practicum work with Casey Family Programs, where she helped develop programs for FFCA. Amanda earned a Bachelor of Social Work from UAA in 2008, and her practicum turned into her first professional job.

In her role as coordinator for FFCA, Amanda helps link youth and foster care alumni to resources and teaches them how to advocate for themselves on an individual level as well as a system-wide level. FFCA is supported by Casey Family Programs and Covenant House of Alaska, and works to improve the system through sharing experiences, supporting and educating youth and social services, and implementing positive change in society as a whole.

After several years, Amanda and Tom have reconnected and are now working together professionally. Tom now works with UAA's Family & Youth Services Training Academy. They work hand-in-hand to co-train social workers on youth development. "Amanda has helped me grow as a trainer," Tom said. "I really learn a lot from her; she's an expert at working with foster care youth and alumni. She knows their issues, their point of view and their concerns."

At 25, Amanda is now a foster parent to a 19-year-old young woman whose initial foster care placement fell through around Christmastime. This is her 24th placement. "There's a serious lack of

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foster homes in Alaska," Amanda said. "Some of these youth have had 50 plus placements; they're so used to being bounced around."

Amanda explained that there's a 12 percent graduation rate among youth in foster care in Anchorage. "It's hard for them to focus on education. As children and youth move from home to home and school to school, the value of education gets lost in the mix."

In a Compass Piece she wrote for the Anchorage Daily News, Amanda stated: "As a former foster child, I know too well about the limited options surrounding education as a child becomes an adult and ages out of the system. ... For many of Alaska's foster children, education or vocational school beyond high school is not really an option."

"I think some foster youth fail because they're not set up for school," Amanda said. She explained how one foster care alumna started taking classes at UAA but soon after dropped out because she didn't know how to manage her time, and she didn't have basic things like an alarm clock and deodorant. "Students have to be willing to seek out the resources available to them and discover their own learning style." Amanda admitted to being very overwhelmed when first starting her classes at UAA. It took her three times to pass a math class. "I finally took it online, and that worked for me."

According to the Alaska Foster Care Alumni Study, 73 percent of foster children wind up on public assistance after leaving foster care. Forty percent are homeless within a year of leaving foster care, 43 percent wind up in the criminal justice system, and 78 percent receive no help in planning their future beyond foster care. The study was a collaborative effort between the UAA School of Social Work, Casey Family Programs, Tribal State Collaboration Group and the State of Alaska Office of Children's Services.

To help combat these trends, Amanda is actively involved with the "Mentoring Spirit" pilot program, organized by Alaska Community Services. Spirit is an acronym: "S" for success, "P" for prosperity, "I" for independence, "R" for respect, "I" for integrity and "T" for tolerance. The program connects youth in the system with mentors that have been through the system themselves.

Besides simply listening and caring, mentors can help youth in foster care learn new life skills, apply for scholarships and plan for a future career. Amanda's hope for the program is to see young people leaving foster care with a permanent connection to a mentor.

Amanda has a passion for child welfare administration and policy. "I see first-hand how policies affect people and I know what needs to be changed." As chair of the Education and Foster Care Committee, Amanda is currently advocating to increase school stability among foster care students. She's also working to make it easier for fostered youth to receive the orthodontia care they need and increase the "age out" to 21.

Though Amanda has done much in her 25 years, she still has ample work ahead of her. "I feel like I have a lot more to learn." She applied to UAA's Master of Social Work program and will begin taking classes this fall.