

The army behind every foster child (Guest opinion)

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Brooke Gray shares her own experiences as a foster mom in hopes of alerting Oregonians that May is Foster Care Awareness month (*Three Sisters Photography.*)

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BY **GUEST COLUMNIST**

By Brooke Gray

Dear Child,

You came to our home with a label, "foster child." This label both follows you and often precedes you wherever you go. It has some ugly stereotypes, stigmas and statistical outcomes.

You're more likely to suffer from diabetes and obesity. You're more likely to be homeless. You're less likely to attend college. You're more likely to have a child involved with child welfare.

But, this label does NOT define you, child. Together, we're writing a different story.

This world may have expectations of you. In fact, it may even lower its expectations for you. But this world doesn't get to write your story. As you grow up, you won't remember every person who loved you or advocated for you. But your army is massive.

Pop, Nana, Grandpa, Grandma. Aunts. Uncles. Teachers. Friends. These are "our people" who we introduced to you. They swept you up with intentionality and love. In our weekly rhythms, the time you spent with them made you stronger, braver and more self-assured.

But, you came to my house, your foster home, with an entire team of people who were already fighting for you, child: a caseworker, a court-appointed special advocate, a therapist, a doctor, a dentist, a lawyer.

We are the army who loves you and who is fighting for you. While you play at the park, we're fighting for you. While you're at school, we're working with your mom and dad to get them safe and healthy for you.

What amazes me about your army -- your community -- is that it extends beyond the people whose names and faces we know. When you came to my house, you had a 'welcome box' in your hand, a collection of items from a community member we will never meet. When you had a growth spurt, shoes and clothes were given by someone you'll never know. Each week when you visit with your mom, you sit in a visitation room that's been beautified by volunteers. There are heroes all around us, child.

Share your opinion

Submit your essay of 500 words or less to commentary@oregonlive.com. Please include your email and phone number for verification.

Despite what any statistics may say or labels may insinuate, your community is fighting for you so that you can do great things. The irony is that while we've linked arms on your behalf, you've transformed us and made us better. You've made your community stronger. And that is quite the legacy to leave, dear child.

With Love,

Your Foster Mom Brooke

Brooke Gray is executive director of government partnerships at Portland Leadership Foundation, which sponsors the Every Child Oregon initiative designed to encourage Oregonians to say "Yes!" to foster care.