

Voices of Care Leavers

Stories of young adult care leavers' experiences
of care and the impact upon their learning



"If you have goals go for it, don't let anyone stand in the way of the dreams you have. Because you're a care leaver doesn't mean you can't achieve."

Left: © shutterstock.com; middle: © Minal Photographers;
right: © shutterstock.com

Contents

Foreword	2
1. About this publication	4
2. Background	5
3. Context	8
4. Care leavers' stories	10
Lisa	10
Rachel	13
Sherrie	16
Danielle	18
Hayley	22
Leticia	24
Dawud	26
Ruby	30
Kat	33
Carrie	35
Chelsea	40
5. Conclusion	42

Foreword

Care leavers are young people who have been looked after by the state, some for all of their childhood, and have subsequently left care. While some young people have excellent experiences of the care system and receive consistent and effective support, far too many do not and, as a result, face difficulties and disadvantages throughout their lives.

Can you imagine contemplating further or higher education or looking for an apprenticeship or a job when you have lived in 12 different homes during your childhood? Can you imagine how you feel about education when you have attended seven different schools before the age of 15? Can you imagine thinking about what you want to do as an adult with no parent to support you, help you make decisions or give you somewhere to go home to in the holidays or at weekends?

Research shows that young people who have been in care do not have the same life chances as other young people. They are far more likely to leave school

with no qualifications, far more likely to become a parent at a young age and far more likely to experience the criminal justice system. They are also far less likely to enter further and higher education, gain an apprenticeship or secure stable employment.

NIACE believes that the learning and skills sector has a social and moral responsibility to enable these young people, many of whom have had very bad experiences as children, to have excellent opportunities as adults, even if it means going the extra mile. This means, above all, joining up at a local level so that these young people are supported with their housing,

benefits, childcare and other needs in order that they can access suitable opportunities and achieve and progress. We need to challenge and overcome the negative stereotypes, insensitivity and lack of compassion shown by many. We need to celebrate the diversity, determination and resilience of care leavers and support them to have – and achieve – high aspirations.

We also need to remember that these could easily be our children, if circumstances were just a bit different.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carol Taylor'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'C' and 'T'.

Carol Taylor OBE
Director of Development and
Research, NIACE

1. About this publication

The stories featured in this publication are written by young adult care leavers (aged 16 and over) who are currently engaged in learning and/or work.¹ They describe their experiences in care and the impact of care on their lives, particularly their engagement in learning.

NIACE believes that the most powerful advocates for effective learning and support for young adult care leavers are young adult care leavers themselves. We hope that these stories will

encourage and inspire other young adult care leavers and, in addition, enable practitioners and policy-makers to gain a deeper understanding of young care leavers' experiences and needs.

¹ Some of the names of care leavers used in this publication have been changed.

2. Background

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is an independent charity which promotes adult learning across England and Wales. Through its research, development, publications, events, outreach and advocacy activity, NIACE works to improve the quality and breadth of opportunities available for all adults so they can benefit from learning throughout their lives.

We have produced this book to highlight the voices of young adults leaving care – their aspirations, issues, thoughts and feelings.

During the last five years, new legislation has put in place a number of initiatives to strengthen education, training and work opportunities for young adults who have been in care. This has included:

- a £2,000 bursary for care leavers entering higher education;
- the support of a social worker or personal adviser to create a ‘pathway plan’ that includes plans for learning and work;

- a 16–19 bursary fund of at least £1,200 per year for care leavers in full-time education; and
- development of the From Care2Work quality mark and the Buttle UK quality mark for care leavers in further and higher education.

Overall, despite the government’s commitment to narrowing the gap between the educational achievement of young adult care leavers and their peers, the outcomes for this group of young people continue to be poor. Current statistics from the Department for Education² reveal the following:

² DFE, Care Leavers in England Data Pack, Department for Education, October 2012 www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/childrenincare/education

- In 2012, only 14.6% of children who have been looked after for at least a year achieved five good GCSES, including English and maths, compared with 58.1% for non-looked-after children.
- The older young people are when they leave care, the more likely they are to remain in education. Forty per cent of young people who left care aged 18 and over are in education, compared with 26% of those who left care aged 16.
- The number of children now aged 19 who were looked after when aged 16 is 6,610. Of these, 36% are not in employment, education or training (NEET). There are just 430 young people now aged 19 who are in higher education. This figure represents 7% of all former care leavers.
- The number of former care leavers who are NEET varies

widely across local authorities. The figure ranges from 16% to 62%.

NIACE's work with care leavers reinforces these findings. Care leavers have consistently told us that poor experiences before the age of 16, compounded by a lack of support and a complex system, result in many young care leavers becoming disengaged and feeling disillusioned about their future and the opportunities available to them. We have undertaken a range of work to support care leavers' access to education, training and work. This has included:

- convening a national forum for the education of care leavers;
- the publication of the *Really Useful Book of Learning and Earning* for care leavers working as apprentices and guidance for their mentors: <http://shop.niace.org.uk/ruble-apprentices-2011-staff.html>;

- the publication of a leaflet explaining care leavers' rights: <http://shop.niace.org.uk/care-leavers-leaflet.html>;
- delivery of training sessions for staff around improved support for care leavers; and
- the organisation of two high-profile national conferences, supported by our patron, HRH The Princess Royal.

NIACE is committed to securing improved support for care leavers to achieve in education, training and work. This publication ensures that care leavers' voices are at the heart of our work.

3. Context

Latest government figures report that more than 67,000 children are living in care. This figure has been rising in recent years and is 13% higher than in 2008. The number of young people aged 16 and over leaving care has also been rising. This figure was 10,000 in 2012, with more than half leaving care after their 18th birthday.

Like all young people, care leavers are individuals with different personalities, aspirations and circumstances. However, it is well known that a significant proportion of care leavers face serious disadvantages growing up which can have severe negative implications, resulting in them being unable to realise their full potential or experiencing long-term social exclusion.

Some challenges and difficulties that young care leavers commonly face include:

- a lack of support;
- low self-esteem and low confidence;
- difficulty building trusting relationships;
- disrupted schooling;

- practical difficulties relating to suitable housing and finance; and
- emotional instability.

Some may also have had drug or alcohol abuse issues or issues linked to offending.

Overall, children in care underachieve in education compared with their peers. Narrowing this gap remains a high priority for the government.

In September 2012, an All-Party Parliamentary Group published the findings of its Inquiry into the barriers to learning and educational attainment for young people from a care background.

The report³ set out the key factors that have an impact on the education of looked-after children, as follows:

- instability of care and school placements;
- inadequate levels of targeted support;
- low expectations and aspirations;
- relatively lower starting levels;
- poorly informed teachers and social workers; and
- carers not being sufficiently engaged in the child's education.

It highlighted that '*despite tough backgrounds, young people in care can achieve when properly supported and encouraged*' (p. 3), but concluded that excellent work in education and care '*continues to be patchy and inconsistent*' (p. 10) and '*much more needs to be done to increase aspiration not only of the young people themselves, but those around them*' (p. 3). It put forward a wide range of recommendations to help drive the educational progress of children and young people in care and build on existing good practice.

³ The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers (2012) Education Matters in Care, www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/data/files/Education_Matters_in_Care_September_2012.pdf

4. Care leavers' stories



Lisa

When I was seven years old I was taken into foster care. Now as an 18-year-old, looking back, that seems such a long time ago. My biological family were caught up in dealing and taking drugs. My mother and uncle were addicts. My mother also battled with mental health issues and depression. My siblings had already been taken into care. It was fair to say I wasn't in a safe and loving environment.

As a young child and even now, as a young adult, I have never been shy or found it difficult to make and maintain friendships so when I first went into foster care the move of school didn't affect me friendship-wise. I was in year three at my first school after being taken into foster care. The teachers and schools are always made aware of the fact you are a looked-after child from day one so they know to look out for anything that may affect you. I was very behind as I had missed the majority of my schooling from reception year right up to the end of year three. However

I caught up quickly and put this down to the support of my foster carers and my love for school and learning.

As I got older I didn't like people knowing I was fostered as looked-after children tend to have a bad name and I didn't want to be tarred with the same brush. I was aware of how other looked-after children had lots of issues that caused them to misbehave and as I grew older I noticed that the parents of some of the children I attended primary school with weren't very pleased about their children mixing with me at school. However, most of the time,

once they got to know me they understood that I wasn't what they expected a typical foster child to be.

I kept my home life separate from my school life and didn't talk to my peers about my biological family. The older I got, the more I started to distance myself from my biological family. They were

“At every school I have attended I have been made aware of who to speak to if I ever need help, advice, guidance or support. Social workers have always been there as well and I have always had friends, but most of all my family.”

a bad influence and caused me much grief and many ongoing issues. Through my own choice and in my own best interests I eventually decided to stop seeing them altogether.

Less than six months after being taken into care, I moved in with a family. There was the couple and their two sons, one just nine months younger than me and one three years older. I have lived with them for over ten years now and they are my family. They always treated me no differently and I put my success story down to them. They encourage me in everything I do and they are the reason I have far exceeded what anyone ever thought I would accomplish. I joked with my foster father after sitting my first GCSE exam that just by walking into the exam room and sitting down at my desk, I had already accomplished more than any of my biological family.

“If I had not been taken into foster care I would not be where I am today. The loving and stable home I have been in for over a decade now has helped me achieve most things I am today.”

At every school I have attended I have been made aware of who to speak to if I ever need help, advice, guidance or support. Social workers have always been there as well and I have always had friends, but most of all my family.

I am currently sitting my A-levels and will be attending university in September to obtain a degree in journalism. It is safe to say that if I had not been taken into foster care I would not be where I am today. The loving and stable home I have been in for over a decade now has helped me achieve most things I am today.

I feel that my story is a lot more fortunate than that of many other foster children, but have always been far too aware that it is not the children already in foster placements and homes that people need to be worried about, but those who still haven't received any help.



Rachel

I was 12 years old when I went into care. I was already a miniature adult, with aspirations and a personality. I had grown up in a certain environment that gave me certain beliefs, and had gone through certain experiences that gave me a certain level of maturity. My parents raised me to believe that education was important, and in dying they cemented certain aims in me; I wanted to do well for them, and wanted them to be proud of me. A lot of young people in care didn't have the stable background that I had when I entered the system, and stability is really significant when you want someone to do well in education.

I didn't really like school at the beginning. When it was just me and my dad, he'd let me have a lot of time off; he had other things to deal with I suppose (such as the loss of my mother). Being 12, I was just happy to not have to go and face another day. Things changed after he died, though. Suddenly I had everyone supporting me, wanting to be there for me, people who wanted to protect me. It felt better and it gave me a lot more confidence in classes. I was smart but had never really liked speaking up much

before. I suppose care helped me in that respect; it forced me to be stronger and bolder than I had been before.

However, the good I'd found in that school inevitably ended when I switched to a different school that had already been doing their GCSEs for a year. It's very common to move schools when you're in care, which is a very bad thing. A disrupted school life is not a productive school life, and you have a whole new set of friends to try and find, new

bullies to get around, and new teachers who don't know what to do with you because you're capable of good work but are a year behind the other students. Having to take time out of lessons to go to meetings doesn't seem very productive either: 'Hey, this is social services, we know how important your education is, so we need to take you out of lessons for a few hours to talk about its importance'. Genius.

Nevertheless, I got 10 A–C GCSEs (which I got a bursary award for, very nice) and went on to sixth form. I did a lot better in sixth form; I'd mostly attribute this to feeling a lot more settled and engaged, but equally I should raise the point that social services was throwing a LOT of money at me for going. They gave me money for trips, books, transport, music lessons, laptops, even coffee (my personal adviser and I would have meetings in our local coffee shop). It was nice, but I wondered,

what is the cost of this? Is this why social services doesn't seem to have much money to spend on reimbursing carers? Do they believe that money is a suitable substitute for personal support?

Either way, I became a successful case for them. Another young person in further education with no arrest record. Yet still I seemed to be fighting them at every corner; it was about this time I started to get involved with campaigning for young people in care, and for change in the system. I still try to get involved, but it's a bit more geographically impractical these days.

I am now in my second year of Law at Bournemouth University, so I guess this story has a happy ending. I love my course and am involved with a number of activities.

I think being in care has helped me a lot; I've been offered a lot

of opportunities that I wouldn't have dreamed of otherwise. I was nominated to be an Olympic Torchbearer, and now hope for this story to be published. I'm a smart girl; I've taken the negatives about the system and tried to turn them to my advantage. I would state that being in care is a much better experience when you are in education. However, I can't say whether this will affect my employment prospects. The amount of money that was thrown at me might have killed my work ethic; if I had worked in sixth form, I would have lost my weekly maintenance sum. If I had got a job when I was 18 before I started university, I wouldn't have been able to live with my carer (whom I love very much and consider my family after eight years of being with them). I hope that my experiences and strength will put me in good stead now, as I am on the hunt for a year-long legal placement (which is very

difficult to find). I got my paid job over the previous summer very easily, and have had some great work experience with a fantastic London charity.

Care doesn't have to be a bad thing; I want anyone who thinks that the system is limiting to understand this. Yes, it is limiting, but you can break limits. Being in care doesn't put you on a path that you are unhappy with; your actions and attitudes do, and employers and providers anticipate that.

“I was smart but never really liked speaking up much before. I suppose care helped me in that respect; it forced me to be stronger and bolder...”

Sherrie

I was 14 when I went into care. I got kicked out of school around the time I went into care. My social worker never even did anything.

I went to a secure unit. There was education there but I only did a bit of it. They did the basics like English and maths but when you are at school you do stuff like art and music. There were small groups which was good.

I moved back to my home town after my foster placement broke down. I enrolled at college. My behaviour was erratic. I used to do my work and then screw it up and put it in the bin. I did this because at school I wasn't good enough. This got worse as the course went on. I went to do Health and Social Care at another college.

When you are in care or have left care you get treated differently. People say stuff to you like 'I've got parents and you haven't'.

Tutors treated me differently too. It's like they keep a really close eye on you but you just feel like they are on your back.

I had loads of friends when I went to respite. I met new people when

“I enrolled at college. My behaviour was erratic. I used to do my work and then screw it up and put it in the bin. I did this because at school I wasn't good enough. This got worse as the course went on.”

I was there, as the respite carers had their own children, another person in care living with them and a boy they were adopting.

I was in respite for eight weeks, but I quit, because I thought it would look better on me if I left rather than being kicked off.

This present learning provider has given me support. I had a learner support assistant. They gave me

“My message to learning providers is that they should always listen to the young person to hear their story.”

any support if I needed help. I got a lot of support from the Leaving Care Team in the form of advice. Support workers took me out for chats.

I intend to further my education after my current study. My future plans are to get a decent job. I have never applied for a job.

My message to learning providers is that they should always listen to the young person to hear their story. My message for young people is that they should not be expecting everything to be done for them, because life is hard when you leave care. My behaviour led to me being kicked out of learning. Young people should not mess up their education because education is very important.



Danielle

I was 15 years old when I went into care. At the time I was glad to be away from home because of all the bad things that had happened, but when I started to unpack it hit me and I was scared. I felt like in my first placement I had no support and no one to talk to about my worries and problems and the people I lived with weren't very nice so I wasn't happy at all. It wasn't until I spoke to my taxi driver who brought me to and from school every day that I opened up and told her how unhappy I was. I didn't even want to return that day. It was my taxi driver who helped me to move to a new placement that day by getting in touch with social services and my new placement was much better.

During this time I had a lot of support from my social worker who made sure everything was going okay at home and at school, although I didn't get a lot of support from my foster carer. They never asked how I was doing at school and I had a later curfew of 10pm which influenced me to stay out every night rather than spending time revising for my GCSEs and getting homework done.

At 16 years old I decided I wanted to leave and become independent. I had had enough of the strict rules of the foster carers I had. I had been referred to the Leaving Care service and I had a worker who helped me to find new accommodation. I was referred to a block of flats where there were workers who helped young people begin their independence and improve on their living skills. The Leaving Care service helped to finance

“I had begun sixth form, but this didn’t last very long as my independence took its toll on my motivation to get up in the mornings and go to school.”

everything I needed to begin with, such as paying for pots, pans and a sofa. This was a huge help, as was the budget I was given by them to spend each week on shopping and rent. During this time I had begun sixth form, but this didn’t last very long as my independence took its toll on my motivation to get up in the mornings and go to school.

Six months after moving in, my Leaving Care worker decided I was ready for more independent accommodation and referred me to a housing association,

where I was allocated a support worker who came to see me on regular visits. These visits helped me to discuss any issues I had. At this time I had my Leaving Care worker who would also visit me on regular occasions and, as I was unemployed, they tried to persuade me into further education, but at this time I was unhappy with the amount of money I had to budget and decided I would rather work; and, after having my daughter, I was interested in working with children. In the end the Connexions worker who works with the Leaving Care team helped me to find an apprenticeship at a nursery and I gained a placement. I was very excited as it was my first placement although this did not last long either as there was insufficient funding available to pay for the course. I told my Leaving Care worker what had happened and she continued

to help me to find a course in childcare. This was when I was introduced to the Vol.Success programme.

I happily accepted a place on the course as I was willing to do the work and gain the experience that I needed to further my career in childcare. During my time on this course I had a lot of support from both of my tutors. They helped me with a lot of issues, both personal and work related. You could say they were like mentors as well as tutors to me. They both encouraged me to do well and gave me recognition for all of my hard work. I was given so many different opportunities and I gained many new experiences on this course. I also felt worthy of myself, my confidence increased a lot, I was happier in myself and my social life improved. My tutors kept telling me that they believed in me and said I was more than capable of going to

“Like me, a lot of people in care or care leavers sometimes just need someone who can help them out with anything and who believe in them to do the best for themselves in life.”

university and this encouraged me to think about further education opportunities. After completing a Business Enterprise Skills Project with them I decided I was very interested in a career in business. With support I eventually applied for the Access to HE course which I am currently studying.

I have now applied for university and I have been accepted by three of my choices so far. I am currently getting a lot of

financial support from college which makes studying possible for me as they pay for my travel expenses and child care. Natalie is also continuing her great support to help me along the way to university. I don't know what I would have done without her. If she hadn't have believed in me so much I don't think I would have pushed myself this far. If social workers, foster carers and Leaving Care workers were as helpful and kind as Natalie, we would all have the same great chances of success in life. People in care need extra support, especially with independent living as it is so expensive and people find it hard, especially on benefits. They also need a lot of help with education and employment; they don't always know how to strive for the best in life. Like me, a lot of people in care or care leavers sometimes just need someone who can help them out with anything and who believe in them

to do the best for themselves in life.

If I was to advise other young people in care or care leavers I would say take advantage of all the help and support there is for as long as you possibly can. Don't be afraid to ask for help and don't be afraid to let people know you are in care or are a care leaver. Sometimes letting people know can make a huge difference.

Being in care has made my life better than I thought it would. A lot of people judge people in care and expect them to fail in life because they have had a different life and upbringing. I have met a lot of people who have changed my life from being in care and a lot of them have helped me to achieve better things. If I had not have been in care my life would have been completely different and I probably would not be the person that I am today.

Hayley

I am 18 years old. I was around five or six when I went into care with my two younger sisters and brother. When I went into care I stayed at the school I had been at from reception age, until around year 3. I then went to another primary school, due to a change in foster placement; I then left this school and all my friends a few months later as I was adopted. I attended a private boarding school; however, the adoption fell apart and again I had to leave that school and those friends there.

I moved to a foster placement that I was in for 11 years. There I attended the same primary school, then secondary school, achieving good GCSEs. I had plenty of friends at school and have never really had a problem making them. I didn't like to tell anyone I was in care, maybe if I did tell people then I might have found making friends harder.

From secondary school I attended college to do A-levels. After two years of college I was accepted into university! I didn't have the full entry requirements for my course (social work studies);

however, due to my experience in care, I was accepted and I am very grateful!

My personal adviser helped me with my accommodation at university. As I had been living in my placement for 11 years, I wanted to stay; however, there were no policies providing any guidance around this (as many children in care don't go to university or stay in their placement for so long). In the end it was agreed that I would move into my own accommodation, which is fully paid for by the local council, which I got to

choose, and I get a £500 bursary off them as well as some of my travel expenses paid for. They also help with paying for university equipment. I still have regular contact with my foster carer and I am welcome there anytime, which is great! There are many people at university that are willing to help me with my university work if I find it difficult, which at times I do.

I know that many other care leavers haven't had the same experience and opportunities as me; however, there are many people, such as tutors or personal advisers, there to help make more opportunities available. I am now fully independent, living in my own apartment and I have my foster family around me and a few close friends that are there for me when I need them.

My plans for the future are to succeed in my degree and become a social worker in children, young people and families. I want to help other children that are now in the position I used to be in and make life better for them. I then wish to move abroad to pursue my career!

“I had plenty of friends at school and have never really had a problem making them. I didn't like to tell anyone I was in care, maybe if I did tell people then I might have found making friends harder.”

Leticia

I first came into care at the age of seven and have been with my four brothers and sisters the whole time and with the same foster family.

Being in care did affect my education because there were some things I wasn't allowed to do like contact sports and I was not allowed to have my photo taken. We had a lot of meetings in school time so we missed out on some lessons and other kids would ask, 'why you are getting called out of class?' There were mentors in school just for looked after kids. We always had to get permission off social services when we had a school trip and sometimes they didn't get the form back to us in time so we would miss it.

I didn't really get help off my social worker because they are

only meant to see you twice a year and that's all mine did so if I wanted something I would have

“I have had the same foster family since I was brought into care which helped me a lot because I had a stable place to study and, if I was stuck, I knew I could ask for help. I never moved schools so I kept the same friends growing up.”

to find it myself or with my foster carer.

I have had the same foster family since I was brought into care which helped me a lot because I had a stable place to study and, if I was stuck, I knew I could ask for help. I never moved schools so I kept the same friends growing up.

I left school at 15 after passing all my GCSEs with good grades. I wanted to go to college to study childcare so me and my foster mum sorted out a college. Social work was no help really.

I am 23 now. I have a son of two and I got married last year. I have a good job and good money too. I still study and take different

courses to better my life because I like learning new things.

I would say to anyone in care, people think you can't achieve anything because of being in care but you certainly can and I have proved that. If you want something you go and get it and just be the best you can be. Don't let anyone put you down.

“We had a lot of meetings in school time so we missed out on some lessons and other kids would ask, ‘why you are getting called out of class?’”

Dawud

I was seven years old when I was taken into care. My personal issues growing up affected my education quite badly but the support from social services effectively got me to where I am now. The social services in Somerset were excellent. Being in care in and of itself was a positive thing for me and helped me no end, but the issues

that led me into care caused me no end of problems. I was a very self-conscious person and always had trouble fitting in and gaining acceptance from people, due to the impact of my struggles on my personality and the way I behave and think.

Very few people understand that I am the way I am due to having drug addict parents and many other issues; so people, including teachers, will treat me like any other child when in fact I have far more obstacles and difficulties than another child who is raised by two parents in a stable environment.

When I left school I ended up in prison, doing drugs, all kinds of problems. I wanted nothing to do with the care system. Eventually I had some motivation to move away from my hometown at

the age of 19, get some A-levels and go to university and make a decent life for myself. Social services paid my living expenses, rent, college fees, etc. for four years as I performed extremely poorly in A-levels so took four years to scrape through college. I got to uni and was finally independent and social services no longer had to support me other than some money they sent up which totalled around £2,000.

At uni I performed far better than in school and have really enjoyed my studies as an engineer. I have

found work very easily, getting a summer job after my first year of study, working on control systems for power generators, and now I have been offered a placement with a company working on the control systems for jet engines. My grades have been very good so far and I am hoping for a first class degree at the end of my studies.

Learning providers have been insensitive many times. I was sent to a boarding school by social services and was the only poor child there. Teachers left

“My personal issues growing up affected my education quite badly but the support from social services effectively got me to where I am now.”

letters lying around stating that social services pay my fees and these letters were found by other students. I was also socially awkward and outcast most of my life because I was seen as ‘strange’ by everyone else, most likely due to the trauma I faced growing up. I have always tried to be good to people, be polite and respectful. The teachers knew my situation yet many of them would joke about me to other students and constantly shout at me for getting into trouble and didn’t seem to grasp the fact that I may need more moral support than other students.

There was of course the odd person who has been very good to me. The Head of A-levels at college did absolutely everything possible to get me to uni and was always very kind and supportive. You would occasionally find someone very supportive.

“The teachers knew my situation yet many of them would joke about me to other students and constantly shout at me for getting into trouble and didn’t seem to grasp the fact that I may need more moral support than other students.”

I went to one college at 16 and dropped out. I went to another college at 17 and dropped out. At 18 I was in prison. At 19 I came out of prison and went back to college and continued a few courses I had been doing in prison. At 20 I moved to a different college and social services got me through with massive financial support.

At university I still find some teachers harsh, but most have been nice. But no one knows my situation at university. I have always preferred to keep it that way.

At school was when I struggled the most. It would have been helpful to have a teacher assigned to look out for me and just be a compassionate person who listened to my troubles and supported me but I was pretty much ‘on my own’ at a boarding school full of rich kids who did not take kindly to having a poor kid in their midst and teachers who just got very frustrated with me and weren’t particularly nice towards me. These experiences probably added even more to the psychological damage done when I was younger.

I have self-awareness and have built up ‘defence mechanisms’ on how to deal with various situations and how to conduct

myself to get by, so to speak. So I've learned to deal with the challenges by myself. I don't particularly want to explain to every boss and teacher why I'm a bit spaced out sometimes, etc. I just try to deal with it. I gave up on people being understanding a long time ago.

I am married now with two kids, a good future ahead of me, a good career and lots of plans, so I just focus on those things. Jobs have come pretty easily as I have found I have a talent for engineering and I am learning how to fit in. I tend to analyse my own behaviour a lot.

My advice on how to help care leavers and children in care is to isolate them from the sources of trouble, prevent them from falling into a bad crowd, ensure they have good friends with good morals and inspire them with a

vision for their future that they can work towards. I was not inspired until uni and it made all the difference to my studies. Children in care need people to understand them and go easy on them as it's very easy to end up with a chip on your shoulder and lose any desire to care about the world.

The financial support I have received in uni has been fairly minimal. I've found myself in financial struggles many times and with no place to fall back on now that leaving care no longer supports me, but I don't think I can ask for any more really. I just try to make do. More help would have been good as, unlike other students, I have no home to return to in the holidays. I have to be 100% self-supportive but it's not realistic.

Ruby

I have been in care since I was 11. I came out as being gay which was hard because not everyone agreed with it. I think my foster carers already knew and they were ok with it.

I have been in several different care placements. My mum and nana died in the same year and that was really hard. It was near Christmas too. Everything I got for Christmas I threw down the stairs. I wasn't happy at all. Because I was throwing everything down the stairs my carer restrained me. I did some damage to some things and the police were called. I went to the police station. I wasn't there for long, about six or seven hours in a holding cell. I went back to the same care placement.

I was happy for a while until two other girls moved in. The older girl started messing about with me and we had a relationship for a few weeks. Because she was messing about with my feelings it

made me really vulnerable. One day she went out to the local park with her mates and I was upset. I went to the railway tracks which were next to the park. I didn't stand on the tracks but the train stopped and the driver came out. The police had been called and the train driver helped me to the police car. I got taken to a holding cell again and they said something about putting me in

“If you talk to someone about your feelings you feel like a weight has lifted off your shoulders.”

the hospital to help me. I was there for four days to a week.

Then social services sent me to a placement in another town. I stayed there for six months and I wasn't going to school as I was too far away. I then decided I wanted to go to school so I had to get up at 6am to be ready for 7am and I had to get a taxi to school. My carer at the time went on holiday so I went on a respite placement. They tried to enrol me in a school in their town. I went for a day and I hated it. They got me the uniform and everything. I wore it and I hated it. I was moved again to another area. I stayed there for nearly three years.

The school sent a letter home as I had been smoking on the field. I am still a smoker now.

I finished school and I did nothing for a year. Technically I was at a training provider. I saw my

“Make friends with people who understand you and who can support you.”

Personal Adviser every week. I moved placement again. I did a tenancy ready course for when I am ready to move out. I am currently studying on a Level 2 course. I have got more confidence and I am now a bit cheeky.

I don't bottle things up anymore. I show every emotion I can. For me, I could have hurt myself or others around me but if you talk to someone about your feelings you feel like a weight has lifted off your shoulders.

My advice would be to ignore bullies and get on with your life. It is your choice and your life; you

can do what you want with it. You don't need people telling you what to do. Make friends with people who understand you and who can support you. I am what I am.

Ruby is 18 and lives with her foster family. This story was written by Ruby's support worker, with her consent.

She was referred to the college as part of the Year 11 Looked After Children Transition programme. The college's educational champion for looked-after children supported her by liaising with her social worker regarding the application and enrolment process as Ruby was feeling quite nervous. She was offered a place at the college but felt it was too difficult to start. Despite

attempts to support and reassure her, Ruby was not able to attend. Her personal adviser supported her on a weekly basis to build her confidence and to prepare her for college, and the educational champion for looked-after children helped her when she was ready to apply to the college again.

Ruby's foster carer has been in regular contact to ensure that she is happy and settled at college. Ruby accesses the drop-in support and is due to join a participation arts group for care leavers.

“It is your choice and your life; you can do what you want with it.”



Kat

I am 22 years old. I was on the child protection register from birth but went into involuntary care on the basis of a care order when I was seven years old. I feel that the first few years of being in care disrupted my schooling as, due to protection reasons, I was kept away from school for a short period of time. I feel this isolated me from friends and in many ways hindered my intellectual development. Having said this, the support I received from the primary school's designated looked-after children (LAC) teacher was very beneficial as it helped me to read and write, something I was failing in due to poor attendance when I was in the care of my mother. The amount of placements that I had also had an effect on my education as moving schools a lot meant that I repeated many topics or missed out on some things; however this helped me to be resilient towards changes and helped me to manage them well. It also gave me the opportunity to increase my social network and gain different experiences.

Throughout my education I have always felt supported by different professionals such as LAC teachers, support workers, teachers, social workers and my foster parents. The biggest impact on encouraging me with my education was when the secondary school I attended provided me with a mentor at the time when things were

really bad at the unregulated placement I was in. This helped me to stay on course with what I wanted to achieve and helped me to stay on the right track. From this I did well within my GCSEs, achieving 5 A–Ds. I wanted to do my A-levels but due to me not gaining enough grades I couldn't do as many I wanted. The Connexions worker I had

been working with for a long time helped and supported me through this. I completed the A-level course, gaining good grades with the excellent support from my personal tutor. After leaving school I got myself a part-time job and have worked since the age of 16.

I then went on to university where I have completed an FdA Working with Children, Young People and Families. I then decided to go on to the BA Social Work degree where I am progressing well. I am currently in the second year. I have received great support with regards to financial issues that I had, helping me get through the times when I just felt like giving up. I have done this holding down two part-time jobs and running my own home. I have since passed my driving test and have my own car which has given me the independence I have always strived for.

There is one area of support that I feel I have lacked from the university and that is pastoral support. I don't have access to anyone to talk to when I find things a little difficult. I have been trying to get a learning agreement with the college for when I slip into depression so that I don't get overwhelmed by things, but this has been continuously unsuccessful as they demand a diagnosis. I feel one thing universities fail to understand is the emotional wellbeing of care leavers and how the past can sometimes affect the present.

The message I would send out to other care leavers is that there are plenty of opportunities out there and great support networks to be accessed. If you have goals go for it, don't let anyone stand in the way of the dreams you have. Just because you're a care leaver, it doesn't mean you can't achieve.



Carrie

I went into foster care at the age of 11 because of neglect and the unsafe environment my mother was living in due to her drug addiction. I initially went into a private foster placement, as it was planned to be temporary leave from my birth mother. This placement was then converted into a local authority foster placement once it was established that I would not be returning to my mother. I stayed at the same placement until I was 18.

I stayed at the same high school I had attended before I went into care. I lived in a small town and my peers knew of my mother and had seen me as the unwashed, strange, badly clothed young girl. I was bullied throughout my time at school and I struggled to make friends as I was seen as an outcast because of how I looked/smelled before I went into care and also how I acted.

A few of my teachers stereotyped me as a child that didn't want to learn as I rarely handed in my homework, but those who took the time with me knew and realised that I was able to do my work.

When it came to my GCSEs, I was in the top set for Maths and Science and in the top middle set in English (still taking the higher tier paper).

By the time I got to sixth form I had a good group of friends who I could trust and by then the bullying had stopped. I started out well with my A-levels, but after sporadic contact with my mother I would get depressed, fall behind with my work and lacked motivation. Each time I would pick myself up again, but it was a struggle to catch up on my work. In the lessons where the teachers gave me a little extra time with projects and work, I excelled.

An example of a lesson where I did not excel and was stereotyped as a 'bad student' was my Psychology A-level. The teacher here was the same teacher I had had for my GCSEs for English. In that lesson I was bullied many times by my peers with the teacher not doing anything about it. The teacher remembered me as a student who didn't concentrate and didn't do homework; because of this, when it came to my A-levels, she concentrated on the students she *thought* would do well. I remember quite clearly spending almost a whole lesson with my hand up to ask about the work as I didn't understand something, for her to not speak to me all lesson. I failed this AS-level and did not wish to attempt it again so dropped the subject. Looking back, I know that if I had been given the time and attention from the teacher I could have excelled in the lesson. I do not believe that I was supported

to the best of the school's ability and today I am still baffled by the attitude and lack of care that I received from some members of staff.

If I was to sum up how being in care affected my education, I would say it actually benefited me. If I had stayed with my mother I wouldn't have gone to

“Sadly my learning was hindered by the negative stereotypes of certain teachers in school and the continued bullying from my peers. It may have benefited me to go to a new school with a fresh start where the students did not know my past.”

school, or even tried to learn, as the bullying and stereotyping I received would have been a million times worse. Being in a stable environment with structure and rules provided me with the basics to achieve. Sadly my learning was hindered by the negative stereotypes of certain teachers in school and the continued bullying from my peers. It may have benefited me to go to a new school with a fresh start where the students did not know my past.

When I went to college, this was the case. Nobody knew my past or who I was and took me as the young adult that I projected myself as. I made friends easily and achieved highly. This may have been a by-product of my self-push to succeed, but I feel it definitely benefited me knowing that I could tell people what I wanted about my past and they couldn't make assumptions on things they didn't know about.

When I did need time off due to depression I was supported from all sides, from extensions on my work to the chance to speak to the mental health nurse at the college. I cannot fault the support given to me at Burnley College.

After leaving foster care a couple of months after I turned 18, I went into supported lodgings first and then went to live in private rented accommodation. I found living independently worked well for me. I was able to create my own home. I did struggle financially as it cost me £14 a week just to get to college and then I had to run a house on the rest of my money, which was around £60 per week. I ended up getting a 'part-time' job and worked all hours to have enough money to live. Having my own house was a downfall when I went to university and had to pack up my whole 'home' into a few boxes. A lot of things were thrown away, memories, trinkets,

which would be things that are stored at your parents' house in a 'normal' situation.

At university I had a 'base' that I could go back to in the form of my student houses. I hated being there on my own though, without my house mates; it was a constant reminder that I didn't have a 'family home' that was mine, that I could go to when I just didn't feel like being an adult or just needed to be with 'family'. This became evident when I graduated from university and moved in with my then boyfriend, with my younger brother, who had come into my care in the final term of university, after his dad suddenly passed away. I wasn't offered any support really from my leaving care team after I finished university, or before graduating when I needed advice in caring for my brother. I felt very abandoned in it all, when really I should have been most supported. The fact that I took

him on stopped him from going into the same Local Authority that I was from. I didn't have a full-time job, no real income and when things didn't work out in my relationship, I was stuck. It was at this point that my care background hindered me the most, I didn't know where to turn, who to go to. I was lucky enough to have the most amazing 'adoptive family' in my life. A family who I now see as 'my family'. Without hesitating they offered not just me, but my brother too, somewhere to live. This is an issue for other care leavers too – what are care leavers meant to do when things go wrong? When you need to be taken care of rather than be the adult? Or simply have somewhere to live?

When I left university I felt a great pressure to get a job straight away, as I didn't have the choice to 'go home' and relax or go travelling like so many of my

university friends. I found the whole thing very stressful as I lacked the self-confidence in my skills due to deep-rooted issues that I had from my childhood. It wasn't until I was made aware of the role at Sheffield Hallam University that I had direction. Since I started my role there I have not only grown professionally but also in self-belief and drive and my self-confidence.

The role was created for a Care Leaver to help Care Leavers; not a role suited to every care leaver but, for me, it has been a perfect starting point. It has been not only the role and the opportunity to build networks that has pushed me to achieve, but also the support and understanding of my managers and peers – the understanding that I needed a little more flexibility at times, and that I worked best when given open, honest, direct

communication about my successes and failures. Something my line manager wasn't used to, but I insisted on. Even though some things may upset me, I wouldn't be able to move forward without knowing things in a direct manner.

I am now moving onto a new role of Young Persons Project Co-ordinator at the Care Leavers' Association; another role for Care Leavers to help Care Leavers. My aim for the future is to continue in this area of work to create real positive change for the outcomes of looked after children and care leavers in the United Kingdom.

“In the lessons where the teachers gave me a little extra time with projects and work, I excelled.”

Chelsea

I was 16 when I went into care. I had already left school but if I hadn't gone into care, I don't think I would have ever come back to college after having a baby.

I feel that being in care and going through the things I have has given me a totally different view of my life and what I want to achieve from it. I was supported in coming to college and in moving into my own flat. I feel that I have had opportunities that other young adults would not. I am now set up in my own home which others my age would find difficult to fund. Being in care, though seen as a bad thing by a lot of people, has opened so many doors for me.

I feel that I was well prepared for living on my own as I took part in Tenancy Ready which taught me how to budget and pay bills (I haven't quite got the hang of budgeting yet).

I feel that finding education when being in care was well supported by Natalie and Angie who both encouraged me and believed that I could come back to college and do well. I feel that I have been supported 100% since day one of me coming to college. I feel that I have always got someone to talk to within college if I'm not feeling ok and I know that I won't be judged. For Christmas I received a

“Being in care, though seen as a bad thing by a lot of people, has opened so many doors for me.”

“I feel that I have always got someone to talk to within college if I’m not feeling ok and I know that I won’t be judged.”

food box from college and £30 on my gas for my flat from a scheme that had been set up within college. I don’t think they could have done much more than that! It was really appreciated.

I want to finish my volunteering course and go on to an art and design course in September and eventually go to university to get

the skills and qualifications I need to become an interior designer.

All colleges should have someone that specifically works for and represents young people in/ leaving care. All colleges should have a volunteering programme as it has benefited me so much and is making me more confident every day.

“All colleges should have someone that specifically works for and represents young people in/leaving care.”

5. Conclusion

Care leavers are not a homogenous group. As the contributions to this publication highlight, each young adult care leaver has a different story to tell. Individuals enter care at different ages and for different reasons. Their pre-care experiences vary as well as their experiences in care. They have different personalities, interests and motivations. A wide range of factors come together to influence and have an impact on a young adult care leaver's learning journey.

That said, there are a number of recurring themes in the stories which relate to both the barriers to learning and also the things that support successful engagement. These are summarised below and reflect the findings of existing research.

Barriers to learning

Many young adult care leavers experience delays and interruptions to their compulsory education. Lisa spoke of not attending school regularly before going into care. Others, like Rachel, encountered disruptions to their learning once in care, e.g. time out of lessons for meetings and changing schools

(sometimes a number of times). Rachel highlighted the significant impact these things can have: 'A disrupted school life is not a productive school life, and you have a whole new set of friends to try and find, new bullies to get around, and new teachers who don't know what to do with you because you're capable of good work but a year behind the other students'.

Challenges linked to the negative attitudes and behaviours of others (including peers, teachers and other professionals) were prevalent throughout the stories. Carrie told us that she was bullied throughout her time at school and found herself stereotyped

by some teachers 'as a child who didn't want to learn'. Not surprisingly, this affected her performance in class. Dawud also spoke of the 'insensitivities' of some learning providers and a lack of understanding and support tailored to his needs. Several said they keep their identity as a care leaver private because they fear being stigmatised or have experience of this. Comments like this one from Leticia were not uncommon: 'People think you can't achieve anything because of being in care but you certainly can'.

The issues that have brought someone in to the care system are often complex and can have a lasting impact on their lives, including their learning. Young adult care leavers can experience loneliness, mental health issues and a lack of self-confidence. In the stories, there were references to behavioural issues, voluntary drop out and exclusion from

learning and contact with drugs and the prison system.

Financial issues and difficulties linked to accommodation and independent living were also reported and can have an impact on engagement in learning.

What helps?

For many young adult care leavers – including those featured in this book – being in care can be a positive experience and one that brings opportunities and benefits. In Danielle's words: 'I have met a lot of people who have changed my life from being in care and a lot of them have helped me to achieve better things. If I had not have been in care my life would have been completely different and I probably would not be the person that I am today'. Chelsea believes her return to learning after having a baby is due to being taken into care and having access to support.

The importance of having access to holistic and tailored support was a strong theme running across all of the stories, regardless of whether or not it had been available. Lisa attributed her educational success to her foster family, who she had lived with for more than ten years: 'They encourage me in everything I do and they are the reason I have far exceeded what anyone ever thought I would accomplish'. In addition to support from her foster family, Hayley received help from her personal adviser and financial support from the local authority which covered accommodation costs, travel expenses and equipment for her studies.

There were numerous examples of supportive individuals, including tutors and other staff from learning providers. Kat was particularly appreciative of the support she received from her mentor at secondary school. Danielle was extremely

complimentary about her tutors who she said were like mentors, supporting her not only with her learning but also with personal issues. The course she was on and support she received boosted her confidence, happiness and wellbeing. She felt encouraged and inspired. In her words, 'A lot of people in care or care leavers sometimes just need someone who can help them out with anything and to believe in them to do the best for themselves in life'.

We hope that the stories presented here will encourage and inspire other young adult care leavers and will enable providers and policy-makers to gain a deeper understanding of young adult care leavers' experiences and needs.

We always welcome feedback on our work. If you would like to offer comments about this publication, please contact: nicola.aylward@niace.org.uk
lorraine.casey@niace.org.uk

© 2013 National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
(England and Wales)
21 De Montfort Street
Leicester LE1 7GE

Company registration no. 2603322
Charity registration no. 1002775

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is an independent charity which promotes adult learning across England and Wales. Through its research, development, publications, events, outreach and advocacy activity, NIACE works to improve the quality and breadth of opportunities available for all adults so they can benefit from learning throughout their lives.

www.niace.org.uk

Follow us on  @NIACEhq

To download a PDF of this publication and for a full catalogue of all NIACE's publications visit <http://shop.niace.org.uk>

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without the written permission of the publishers, save in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Acts 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.