

## Thinking Ahead

Working in fast food is a beginning, not a career.

### By Charlene

Kelly is 24 and works at a fast food restaurant. She started working in fast food when she was living in foster care. At age 15, she got her working papers, and after school and during summer break she would work at minimum wage jobs in fast food restaurants, clothing stores, local drug stores or movie theaters. Now, nine years later, she is still in this line of work.

While she was in foster care, that fast food salary seemed like a lot of money—she could buy clothes and CDs with it. But now that she has to pay her rent and transportation fees and buy food herself, that low salary is often not enough. And Kelly has no other financial support to fall back on in case of an emergency. She does not have the support of her biological family, and her old foster care agency can no longer help her financially. The money she makes helps her scrape by, but it does not give her the stability she needs.

So Kelly has to live using any means necessary. Instead of living in a decent-sized apartment, she rents a room. Instead of getting cable and a telephone hooked up, she just has a single 19-inch television and a boom box to keep her company. Kelly believes that if she had known how difficult it would be to survive on the salary she gets, she would have focused on developing skills in areas that paid better than fast food joints or movie theatres.

### Minimum Wage Blues

Many foster care kids end up in Kelly's situation. While they live in foster care, they work at minimum wage jobs for extra money. Some figure they have all the time in the world to get training for a better job. And when you don't have to pay for your rent or food, the money from a low-paying job can seem like a lot. It can be spent (sometimes foolishly) on that special pair of blue jeans that cost \$100 and the weekend at a concert. Having money makes you feel important because you can afford things.

But after foster youth leave the system, often, like Kelly, they find that it's hard to support themselves on minimum wage. And since the only work skills some teens living in foster care have involve fast food joints, that's where too many former foster kids get stuck working, even after they've left care and become adults.

Sure, minimum wage jobs can teach you a lot about being a good employee and help you develop positive work habits. And having that first job, no matter where it is, makes it easier to get the next one. So there's nothing wrong with working at a minimum wage job when you're a teen. But if those are the only skills we develop, it's not going to lead to salaries we can easily live on after we leave the system.

Kids in foster care should be encouraged to think more long term and take opportunities that will help them get higher paying jobs and have satisfying careers after they leave care. Many youth don't know that there are internships, volunteer opportunities and even paid jobs that can help them acquire the skills they need to get well-paying jobs after they leave the system.

### **Thinking Long Term**

Some don't even realize how important it is to complete high school before you leave care. Having a GED or high school degree will enable you to be ready to start college or a degree program in an area that you are interested in. This may also allow you to choose from more jobs that pay well. Also, working in a company from the bottom, where there is a possibility of being promoted to a higher level, will place you in a position where you will have the potential to grow.

I talked to some former and current foster kids who found good-paying jobs, and most of them built up their skills working at internships and going to college before they found their jobs. Lishoné Bowsky, who has worked as an administrative assistant at a public relations company, built up her skills at many unpaid or low paid internships. She worked at record labels and completed a two year degree program in communications. These experiences allowed Lishoné to learn more about fields that she might be interested in, meet people who could give her a good recommendation to potential employers, and helped her become a controlled, responsible worker.

Max Moran, who has aged out of care now, has his MSW and is working as a social worker. In high school, he had an internship where he was allowed to miss alternate weeks at school to intern in a field he was interested in—social work. That helped him start laying the foundation for a career when he left the system.

### **Making Contacts**

To find out what field you might be interested in, think about what you enjoy doing. If you like to cook, you might want to be a chef. If you like reading, writing and arguing, you might want to become a lawyer. Then talk to the adults in your life about the field you're interested in.

See if they know someone who is already working in that field who could explain how you could get experience in that line of work. See if they know of internships or other opportunities that might be open to you. There's nothing wrong starting your career at Mickey D's. The thing is not to let that be the end of the road for you. So set your hopes high and start developing the skills you need to make it on your own after you leave care.