

Keep the Future in Mind: Save Now-or Pay When You Age Out!

By Ralph

This goes out to all you kids who don't have the option of going home after placement- and who haven't been saving money.

What do you plan to do after you get discharged from your group home? Age out and go on welfare? Join the Armed Forces? Get a job panhandling on the subway?

In the foster care system, everyone ages out at 21, whether she likes it or not. No more nursing from the system, no more free room and board, and no more depending on others to make your life easier! It's time to spread your wings and leave the nest. Time to go out and earn yourself a decent living.

Wasting Money

Unfortunately, when many residents hit 21, they suddenly realize they have acted irresponsibly and haven't prepared for the future. And after they leave the system, they continue acting irresponsibly. They squander their money and end up leeching off friends or family members without any remorse.

I personally know several people who fit that description, but it's not my business to expose the course of their daily lives to the reading public...well, maybe just a little.

Now, this is not true for everyone in the system, but some foster care residents smoke and drink their lives away. Yes, that's exactly what some of you are doing-exhaling and urinating your lives away! Back in the days, I knew a bunch of residents who used to spend every cent they received on marijuana.

Some of you waste every bit of money you get. You don't save, you don't buy sufficient clothing, and you don't even have a proper outfit to wear to a job interview.

When I say sufficient clothing, I mean that you'll go out and buy a spring jacket when it's 20 below outside. Or you'll buy jewelry when you barely have enough outfits to last you the week. You know who you are!

No Responsibility

A few of the individuals who recently aged out of my group home have moved in with friends around the neighborhood. One "new jack" who used to be my roommate even ended up in jail. There are more examples of kids not taking responsibility, but I'll just leave them out of this because I don't want to get on irresponsible friends.

Learning to Save

Here's the rundown on me. I've been in the system for four years now, and it took me three of those four years to finally get my head on straight. Why did it take me that long, you ask? Well, like most residents I know, I thought I was only going to be in placement a short while. Boy, was I wrong!

I came into the system in February '94, went home in August '94, came back in September '94, and have been in a group home ever since. Over time it just hit me that there was the possibility that I'd never live with my family again. This was because during my time in the system, my mother and I haven't always been on the best of terms. Anyway, I age out of the system in 2001, but I plan to be out at least a year and a half before that.

So it wasn't until I hit 18 that I started saving. I realized that if I didn't get my act together, I'd probably find myself riding the A train more often than usual. I also got tired of owing people money and always having to ask people for stuff.

Now I save up my money for sneakers and "leisure time." I need the sneakers because I play basketball and usually run through a pair every three to four months. They also have to be hot off the presses! But other than that, I save as much money as I can. I have a bank account that I opened at the beginning of '97, and I put money in every chance I get. Let's say I get \$20-\$10 to \$15 of that is going into my account!

I know I may sound kind of preachy, but I'm telling the truth. Believe me, I've been there. Well, sort of. Back in the days, I never saved money. I used to spend every little bit of money I got. All my money went to sneakers, video games, and comic book paraphernalia. The way I saw it, if you always saved your money, you'd never have anything.

Having to repay the people who loaned me money is what made me see the light. Have any of you ever bought something, had it for a couple of days, then saw something else that made you wish you hadn't already spent your money?

Rainy Days Will Come

Well, that's what happened to me. I got tired of wasting my money. Why, summer before last I actually bought five pairs of sneakers-not because I needed them but just because I wanted to have every new pair that came out!

Nowadays, I try not to let styles affect me as much as they used to. I mean they still do somewhat, but not to the extent of me not having any money in my pockets. Instead of buying five pairs of sneakers, I buy two or three and save the rest of my money. I manage my own bank account now, and I work. Overall I'd say I have my priorities in order.

I'm not telling you to put all your money in the bank for a rainy day, but at least make sure you'll be able to rest comfortably when those rainy days do come.

I'm also not going to lie and tell you that saving is easy, because it's not! It's the hardest thing to do in the world....well, in our age bracket anyway! But I can't go out of my house with empty pockets.

Find a Job!

Although I know many of you won't take kindly to this, try to find ways to earn money. Go out into your neighborhood and walk dogs, mow lawns, shovel snow, pack bags. If none of my solutions appeals to any of you out there...improvise! For all it's worth, do whatever it takes to make some money!

And please don't take me literally on that! When I say, "Do whatever it takes," I don't mean to go out and rob and steal or sell drugs! Use your head, and make sure whatever you do is legal. Do the smart thing by looking out for "your" future.

Believe me, it'll benefit you later on. Like suppose you spent all your money and your coat gets ruined or stolen and it's the dead of winter. Wouldn't you consider that a rainy day? Wouldn't you like to have the money to go out and buy a new coat?

For those of you who have no choice but to rely on your agency's allowance, I recommend you make a budget. Budgeting means planning out exactly what expenses you have that are necessities and which ones aren't. Figure out how much money you have and separate what you really have to spend money on from what you don't.

When spending, always think of whether or not you "really" need what you are buying and whether it "really" pains you not to have something just because everyone else has it.

For example, carfare to and from school is a necessity, while buying junk food on the way to school would be a non-necessity. Just because you collect your allowance every Friday doesn't mean that you have to spend it all on that day, too! No matter how much it is, try putting half of it away.

Buy Only What You Really Need

One thing that's very important-on those occasions when you do receive a lump sum of money (like money from your family, a stipend from your agency, or even pay for running an errand for someone), don't go out and buy everything you see just because everyone else is. Again, buy your necessities, the things you really need.

And yes, you can buy a non-necessity, but just don't overdo it. If you don't budget, you'll end up with a lot of nice stuff and empty pockets. When your aging-out date comes, you will need that extra money to pay rent and utilities and college tuition.

Plan Ahead

Think logically-if you don't have a place to live after you get out of the system, think about what will happen when it's time for you to age out. You're 21 now, there's no one there to depend on but yourself! Do you plan to get on welfare and hope they give you enough money to support yourself?

Are the Armed Services an option? Will you be working, or will you have a full scholarship to go to college? If you don't plan now, you'll have to inherit a fortune or win the lottery to support yourself.

Every little bit of money you put away will always come in handy later on. But don't think of "later on" as being only a day or week ahead. Try to think of it in terms of months, years, even decades!

Some of you out there might be saying, "Aww, he's a chump, he don't wanna make no real money. I'm a keep on hustlin'!"

Well, I've already been there and done that! All I can say is fear of death and losing my freedom kept me away from it, and you should let the same fears keep you away, too!

So to my fellow residents, act as if you're on your own already and as if your future depends upon everything you do now...because it does!