

### **Former foster youth struggle with year of instability**

When Fabian Tolan was 12 years old, his neighbor gave him an old guitar with just two strings, sparking a passion for music that helped him survive life in the foster care system.

Now at 24, Tolan strums his guitar in the rented-out garage that he sleeps in, wondering where he'll find a bed tomorrow.

After reaching the age of 18, 20 percent of children who were in foster care will become instantly homeless, according to the National Foster Youth Institute. Former foster youth have a less than 3 percent chance of earning a college degree at any point in their life.

Tolan was on the fast track to defying those odds. Enrolled at Bakersfield College in California, he was exceling in his classes and planning to enroll in Job Corps, a residential career training program, in order to evade the foster care to poverty pipeline he's seen so many of his peers fall victim to.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic struck. He could no longer live on campus, employment opportunities were sparse and when he turned 24, the extended foster care resources he had relied on to get by suddenly dwindled.

“When you're in foster care, you are conditioned to depend on the system,” Tolan said. “When those resources are stripped away, you're left with no kind of direction.”

While other students left campus and temporarily moved back into their family homes, foster youth who couldn't afford to stay on campus were left without that safety net.

For the past year, Tolan has found shelter by renting out garages and housesitting for coworkers. Falling back into the instability he was no stranger to during his childhood has left him struggling with his mental health and addiction.

## A On the Spot

Tolan has hope for the future, emphasizing that his priority is getting his feet back on the ground and reenrolling in college. He's determined to not just become another statistic, but if the odds stacked against him prevail, he said he hopes to move out to Venice Beach, live in a tent and play music fulltime.

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Tolan's experience is not unique. Minna Castillo Cohen, director of the Colorado Department of Human Services' Office of Children, Youth and Families, said young people who leave the foster care system have higher rates of incarceration, homelessness and unplanned pregnancy.

"For our young people, they get out in the world and when they make mistakes, they don't have a place to fall back to," Cohen said.

The effect of the pandemic on former foster youth has been profound, as Cohen said many work in retail positions to make ends meet and have been left without a source of income due to the state shutdowns.

On top of that, those who finally found secure housing in their college dorms were displaced by university closures, leaving some homeless and unable to continue their education.

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As he sits in his college apartment, paid for by the monthly stipends he receives as part of the Voluntary Extended Foster Care System, Spencer Llewelyn calls himself "one of the lucky few who made it."

Llewelyn entered the foster care system at 12. He was first placed with his grandmother but coming out as gay in her Mormon household put a strain on their relationship, so he was moved to a group home designated for LGBTQ youth.

## A On the Spot

At 18, after years of volatility, Llewelyn's life was on the incline. He was working a steady job, growing close with his group of friends and most importantly, preparing to graduate high school — a feat that many young people in foster care struggle to achieve.

Then the coronavirus upended the state of the world, and with it, Llewelyn's life. His long-awaited vision of walking across the stage to his diploma dissipated, replaced by the reality of a drive-thru ceremony he attended in his foster parents' car.

Instead of going to his dream school, Arizona State University, Llewelyn enrolled at Phoenix Community College and struggled to find employment for eight months.

His grades suffered. His mental health followed.

Aging out of foster care can signify the opportunity for foster youth to take control over their life, something the system doesn't allow for. But due to the barriers they're often faced with, the reality could be less liberating.

Filing taxes. Changing a tire. Cooking a well-balanced meal.

While the world around Llewelyn was in shambles due to the pandemic, he was focused on learning the ropes of becoming an adult. Unlike many of his college counterparts, he had no one to guide him when confronted by difficult decisions.

“It's weird knowing that I didn't have what a lot of people had, meaning a parent or parental figure in their lives to just assist them and show them how to navigate the world of being an adult,” he said.

While money is a struggle — Llewelyn recently interviewed for a second job to make ends meet — he emphasized that life is shaping up since the beginning of the pandemic. He plans on transferring to Arizona State University once he completes his associate degree in paralegal studies and one day, would like to run for public office.

## A On the Spot

For the past year and a half, Llewelyn has volunteered with the Arizona Department of Child Safety, meeting with current and former foster care youth to share his story and listen to theirs.

He overhears kids discussing their future plans and aspirations, and hopes that like him, they'll be lucky enough to have a bed to sleep in and a postsecondary education. With the odds stacked so heavily against them, he knows many will not.

“I see them struggling with the same questions I did, ‘Where am I going to live?’ ‘Who’s going to take care of me?’ ‘Where am I going to school?’” Llewelyn said. “My heart breaks knowing what many of them will go through.”