



# 24TH ANNUAL AWARDS FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE



# Winner

## THE MEANING OF HOME

### **Oswaldo Omar Chum Domingo**

**Age: 17**

*Hillside Children's  
Center*

### **MY TWO HOMES**

I come to talk to you about what home means to me. When I was in Guatemala my home was full of people that cared about me. It was a place where I was welcomed. I was loved. It was a place where I could rest after going to school, playing soccer, or working all day to provide food and money for my mother and brothers. Even though there is much corruption and violence in Guatemala, my home provided a sense of safety. That was my home. Home was a feeling and a sense of belonging. Home was bigger than our house. Home was being a Guatemalan.

When I came to the United States, I left my home. I left my family, my village, my country. As I crossed the desert the miles between me and my home grew larger. I carried the sense of my home with me. It provided me comfort during some very frightening times when I didn't know what to do or expect.

When I arrived in the United States, I did not know what home would be like. I was placed in a detention camp in Phoenix, then sent to my father in New York. Life with my father ended when he left me alone at the farm. I was then placed in a foster home in Auburn, New York. It was just an American woman and me. She did not speak Spanish and I did not speak English.

I was enrolled in high school and BOCES. I had not been in school for five years. It was a very nervous time. I received care from doctors and a dentist. In Guatemala there is no opportunity to receive such things. I had my own room and bed in my foster home. My foster mother helped to make this room feel comfortable for me.

There were many days when I wondered if I should go back home. Over time, though, I realized I now have two homes, one in Guatemala and one in Auburn, New York. While they are very different, they are both my homes.

I am Guatemalan by birth and American by choice.

When I get off the school bus now, I am thankful most for this opportunity to be in the United States. Home is now a place where I can relax. Where I have food to eat, my own bed, good comforts, and a better life. Home is now a place where I am safe and have time to study, play soccer, write music, sing, and enjoy friends. I have people who love and support me. I can take time to prepare for my future.

I look forward to visiting my hometown in Guatemala again when I can receive a visa, but until then I know I am already home.

### R.E.

**Age: 16**

*SCO Family of Services*

### TRYING TO FORGIVE MY MOTHER

After 18 months in foster care, I returned home to live with my mother. The transition back was easy enough. I was brimming with excitement about returning to normalcy and starting high school while at my mom's house. My future seemed bright. As the weeks went by, though, I started to regret my decision to come back home.

At first, I was anxious about being separated from my older sister. She had been my anchor throughout the tumultuous times. She acted as my mother figure and caretaker, which I was grateful for. I felt a sense of loss in the first few weeks back at home and could not figure out why. I missed something so deeply and intensely, but I could not pinpoint the root cause.

I missed my sister's astounding capacity to be domineering and gentle at the same time. Her patience and tranquility. Her tendency to always quench my curiosities and answer my dumb questions. She was the epitome of wonder to me. And losing that was the hardest blow.

What's more, I did not know how to deal with my mother's mental turmoil.

I told myself that she would get better as time went on. That she would develop a semblance of decency. So during those first few months, I denied that my mother was deteriorating mentally. Her projections, aggressions, and verbal and emotional abuse would not deter me from my effort to be optimistic in the slightest.

I kept looking forward to the light at the end of the tunnel, that one day she would get professional help and heal. But her narcissism, selfishness, and bitterness worsened as time passed.

We did not have the money to get her therapy or a doctor to deal with her unhealed trauma. Money would have made things easier for her and, in turn, would have made things easier for me.

Countless times, I considered going back into foster care, and every time, I decided not to because I did not want to leave my mom alone. I have learned that there is something beyond the surface. My mom would not even allow me to consider going back into foster care because she has a fear of being alone.

After reading books about trauma and healing, I started to have more empathy towards her. While hard at first, I started to see the oppressor as a victim. I learned through my sister about my mother's past and why she is the way she is. I learned more about my father back in Uzbekistan and more about my own roots. I started reflecting on my own experiences as an immigrant—and how much harder it must have been for my mother.

This has led to a change in perspective. I have learned that I need to forgive my mother if I want to be free myself. I have learned that I need to meet her in my mind and no longer sizzle. I know that I must forgive so I can heal. And I will. One day, I will fully forgive her and end this generational cycle.

# Winner

## HOW I HELPED SOMEONE

### S.A. Masih Ghazanfari

**Age: 18**

*Toomey Residential and Community Services*

### PAYING IT FORWARD IN MY NEW COMMUNITY

I moved to the United States after leaving Ukraine as an Afghan refugee when I was about 14 years old. I have been living in Aurora, New York for the past three years. Aurora is a beautiful village that is far away from the population and noise of the city. There are trees, a variety of crops, a lot of flowers, and beautiful Cayuga Lake. From the day I arrived I felt like I belonged to this beautiful community of Aurora.

What made me feel welcomed in Aurora was going to school. School in the United States was very different from my experience in Afghanistan. I think my teachers and counselor understood this and, during my first few weeks at school, they walked me to my classes. They made sure that I was comfortable in the cafeteria and gym.

In these past years I've gained so much from my community that I wanted to give back. When opportunities arose where I could help others, I jumped at the chance.

In November of 2021, my National Honor Society adviser mentioned that a teacher needed help painting a room at the high school. I spoke to the teacher. We have been working about a half an hour each day after school painting the room black and white. Together we made wooden bulletin boards for the walls. It is a great feeling when teachers tell me how pleased they are with the room. They are looking forward to using it soon.

I've also given back to my classmates. Being a new student in the US was difficult for me in the beginning. I had to learn English, which was not my native language. I worked hard and now I am able to help other students who struggle academically like I once did.

Presently, there are a few students from Guatemala at my school who are learning English. When I finish my school assignments I tutor them in economics, English, and personal finance. I'm proud to announce that the students are passing all three classes. I feel honored to help my fellow students in an area in which I also needed help in the past. It's my way of "paying it forward"!

I also volunteered at the Wells College food pantry. I went to a local church in Aurora to collect food for the College. I helped set up the room to make the food easily accessible to students in need. I believe this service helped to limit the spread of COVID, because students were able to remain on campus to eat. Also, students were able to have a nutritious meal through this food delivery.

Aurora is a place I have learned to call home, even though I am not originally from this small little town. It has supported and nurtured my growth through high school. It has given me kindness and respect and I am honored to "pay it forward"!

# Winner

## ON ENTERING FOSTER CARE

### Steven Jones

**Age: 17**

*Seamen's Society for  
Children and Families*

### SUPERFICIAL LOVE

"You can tell me. I am your grandma." My hands were sweaty, and my heart raced intensely as my body sank into her leather couch.

I finally said, "I am gay."

"You're joking right," she said with confusion.

"No, I'm not," I replied.

"Don't be silly.... This gotta be a prank," she continued.

There was an awkward silence as tears fell out of my eyes and onto my clothes. I could feel her gazing at me with disappointment.

"That's an abomination in the eyes of the Lord," she murmured.

She jumped up from the couch, rushed into her bedroom, and slammed her door shut with a loud bang.

"It is a choice. It's not normal! He was brainwashed into thinking it's okay because he has been around women all his life. He wasn't born a fa\*\*ot! No one is!"

My jaw clenched, and my leg started to tremble. Apparently, she was talking to my uncle and exposing all my information to the family. Feeling so disrespected and misunderstood, I stormed into my room, crying.

My grandmother treated me as if I had a disease after that day. As tensions in the house became prominent, my confidence in my sexuality grew even more. This angered my grandmother and she would often confuse my demand for respect with disrespect.

I excelled in my schoolwork, worked in retail, and participated in an academic program (SEO Scholars) every week. It wasn't easy to manage these responsibilities and then come home to face my grandmother. It got so bad that I had to call 911 when I came home from work one evening to see all my clothes hanging out of ripped trash bags. My clothes and shoes were just thrown on the ground. I couldn't believe my eyes, and I started to ring the doorbell. After five minutes of nonstop ringing, my grandmother moved toward the front door and said, "You're not allowed in this house anymore." She then slammed the door.

It was dark, exposing, and alienating. Vulnerably, I sat on the concrete and wept. All I could think about was my future and my little sister's wellbeing. I called many family members and they told me they couldn't help me. The police were my last resort.

Ultimately, I concluded that I would be put into foster care and learn to adapt to a new environment. I refuse to let my grandmother's toxic household hinder me and make me neglect my academics and responsibilities. If anything, it has caused me to value my independence.

Even though one door has shut, there's always another open with opportunity.

Being in foster care may not be considered an opportunity by others, but it has changed my definition of family: Blood doesn't make family — genuine support does. Friends who show acceptance and empathy are my real family. My best supporters are people who encourage me to become the best version of myself and hold me accountable for my dreams and goals.

# Winner

## THE MEANING OF HOME

### Shafaath Khan

**Age: 20**

*Little Flower Children  
and Family Services*

### HOME IS SOMEWHERE I'M GOING

Home, according to Webster's Dictionary, is defined as "the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household." When I returned to this country after 11 years in my mother's homeland of Bangladesh, I was promised a "home." What I got upon my arrival was a house with a woman and other foster children. There was no privacy, although I did have my own room. There was no loving and warm environment, and there certainly was never a feeling of "family" or belonging.

After four long years, I am still a stranger to these people I cohabitate with. I left behind a mother who loved me but could not provide a roof over my head or an opportunity for education. What I have endured the past four years are strict rules, cruel intentions, and restrictions preventing me from freely practicing my religion and its dietary guidelines (an "eat what's in front of you or starve" type of household).

What I look forward to are the opportunities that I know lie ahead. Before my time in foster care, I survived

homelessness, hunger, and abuse. Today, I understand that a college education will afford me the chance to make a home for myself, whether it be in the temporary dorms for four years or through the housing programs for youth in foster care as they "age out."

My definition of home comes from what I have learned from my teachers and friends who know and love me. They accept me for who I am. I know that when a person, stranger or friend, enters my living space, they will feel the comfort and peace that I will put forth, as a person who practices positivity. There will be an aura about my home that will hopefully put others at ease.

Another definition of home is "a place where one rests or lives." I have merely existed before now. As the British writer and poet Warsan Shire said, "At the end of the day, it isn't where I came from. Maybe home is somewhere I'm going and never have been before."

Wherever that is, I will live my best life and finally be home.

# Winner

## HOW I HELPED SOMEONE

### Reannon Matulewich

**Age: 17**

*KidsPeace*

## BECOMING AN ADVOCATE FOR FOSTER CHILDREN

At the age of 15, I created two films through ENGN, a community-based civic creative center, to raise awareness of the issues that exist in foster care. This was the start of my advocacy work. Eight years in foster care aided me in developing my perspective on the flaws of the system.

In the summer of 2020, I had the privilege of joining a filmmaking program that ENGN held for teens. In this program, I created a collaborative film with seven other teens that were featured in a documentary filmed by ADOBE Inc.

As a result, I was featured on the ADOBE website. In the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was invited to speak about my film and my perspectives on foster care at a symposium full of social workers and foster parents. The symposium was canceled and never rescheduled due to the pandemic. However, this didn't stop my drive to share my story about foster care and be a voice to help my community.

At the end of 2020, I started to work on substance abuse prevention through Sullivan Allies Leading Together (SALT). I designed stickers that were posted all over Sullivan County on pizza boxes and alcohol packages during Thanksgiving and Super Bowl time. The goal of these stickers was to hopefully deter the youth from alcohol use during these pressuring times. Because of this project, SALT made me a youth ambassador for the organization.

The stigma around substance abuse and foster children is what motivated me to work on substance abuse prevention. Society tends to assume that foster children will fall into addiction because of the adversity we face. My parents were both addicted to narcotic substances and alcohol. I grew up in an environment that normalized drug and alcohol use. I continue to see my older brothers use drugs and alcohol as a form of self-medication for their mental health struggles.

These experiences have driven me away from the path of addiction that my parents and older brothers have paved. They've opened my eyes to the negative effects addiction has on the individual and the people surrounding them.

Addiction is the reason some families are broken. I've witnessed too many children, including myself, become traumatized because of addiction to drugs and alcohol. I want to use my voice and passion to prevent this from happening to families and children in the future.

Due to my work with SALT, I was chosen to speak with the two senators of New York State, Kristen Gillibrand and Chuck Schumer, in early 2021 to present the advocacy projects I've designed and developed.

I wish to continue serving my community through advocacy work on behalf of foster children and people in need overall.

### Carneicia M.

**Age: 18**

JCCA

### GRATEFUL FOR MY TEACHER

I've always been a person that solves my problems on my own. I never liked to ask for help. Besides, it was rarely ever offered to me. I believed that if I relied on people too much, I wouldn't be able to take care of myself. I thought that if I tried to ask for help, it would blow up in my face.

I used to get great grades in school. I never had a reason to worry about them slipping until this year. I'm in my last year of high school. For certain personal reasons, I lost the motivation to get through school. Although I'm not yet comfortable with sharing these reasons, I can say that they tampered with my moods and made me feel depressed or melancholy. Sometimes, I would just stay in bed and sleep rather than go to school. When I realized that I would end up failing, I wanted to do better, but I didn't know how. I wasn't sure that I could do it alone. It turns out that I didn't have to because Ms. C, one of my teachers, had a plan to help me.

Ms. C was a kind, cheerful person who always tried to brighten up someone's day. She would try to help students who were struggling in school. She had a wacky, pun-filled sense of humor, which always made me laugh. She was a great teacher with whom I had a good relationship.

I wasn't used to being offered assistance of any kind. I wasn't sure if I should accept it at first. I remembered how asking for help always went wrong for me. I felt like it was a trick, a trap for me to fall into. But I knew that I desperately needed the help. Still, I was a bit skeptical. I was already halfway through the school year anyway. My grades were so low that they didn't seem fixable.

Then, Ms. C began to share her plans with me. The plan was for me to come to school more often and on time, catch up on work, and start the new marking period fresh. She told me to ask for extra credit. She even calculated the grade that I would need to be able to pass. I began to have hope. It wasn't impossible to fix my grades. If I followed the plan and did my work, I would be able to graduate!

So, I began following the plan. I was doing my classwork, going to school on time, and doing extra credit work. I saw a lot of improvement. I felt lighter, more jubilant. I had a chance to pass! Even though the school year isn't over yet, I can see that I'm on track to graduate on time. I'll even be able to go to college.

I'm so thankful to Ms. C for everything she has done for me. I hope to make her, and myself, proud.

# Winner

## HOW I HELPED SOMEONE

### Eowyn Cosantóir

**Age: 17**

JCCA

## MY PASSION FOR RESCUING ANIMALS

Since I was little, I have absolutely adored and loved animals, from snakes and rats to cows, horses, and elephants. My love of animals started with our family dog during my childhood. Because of the difficult experiences I had growing up, our dog became my mom. Ever since then I have had a profound bond and connection with animals.

I want my life's work to be helping animals, regardless of what it takes. Over the years, I have been able to rescue and help numerous cats. It started when I was placed in a foster home in Brooklyn. I ran into three different colonies of cats. The first colony had about 10 to 15 cats, the second had about 15 to 20, and the third had about 10. I started by feeding them and giving them water.

However, I soon reached out to animal rescuers in Brooklyn that could get the friendly cats into loving homes and the feral or semi-feral cats TNR-ed (TNR stands for trap, neuter/spay, and return). This is a process by which semi-ferals and ferals are trapped, then spayed or neutered, and then released back into their colonies, since they cannot be put into homes.

I was able to start working with two very kind rescuers. Since I was not yet 18, I could not TNR myself. These women helped me TNR more than 10 cats, with seven of those cats going into loving homes. My favorite one was named Socks, a brindle

and white tabby. She is now in an extremely loving home and her dads dote on her. When I knew I had to move between foster care placements, I was able to find people to feed and take care of the cat colonies nearby. Since then, I have also done a couple of other rescues.

A student from my school called me one day knowing that I rescue animals and asked me to take a two-month-old kitten that she found in a dumpster. I reached out to my contacts, and before long she was at the vet and then into a loving "paw-ster" home!

I have so many other tales to tell, but there is not enough space in this essay. I do, however, want to mention my most recent rescue. A week ago, I rescued a black cat with a small white patch on his chest. What's funny is I hadn't seen him in weeks, and I had been trying to rescue a different cat altogether. But he showed up, so I got him into a carrier and off he went to the vet.

Helping animals is an everyday part of my life and will continue to be because it is my passion. I will do whatever it takes to help and rescue animals. They cannot stand up for themselves or help themselves, so that is what I feel I must do. I will never stop rescuing and helping animals.

# Winner

## HOW I HELPED SOMEONE

### Sadiqah Whittington

**Age: 17**

*SCO Family of Services*

### WHY I EMPATHIZE WITH THOSE IN NEED

It's been about eight years since the tables were turned.

Just about eight years since it was me sitting on the concrete ground near Port Authority asking strangers for spare change. I had never been to New York City before and I remember the lights and the noise so clearly. I remember lying on the bench with my three younger siblings under one blanket, huddled together trying to stay warm.

My mom had been talking to other homeless people to get advice on how we'd make it out of the cold and to somewhere safe. She had used her last \$50 to get us train tickets so we could get away from her abusive boyfriend.

I'm sure that all the strangers that stared at me in pure disgust would have been a little more willing to help if they had known my story. I am the oldest of four, my mom was an alcoholic, we had no place to go, and we were just so hungry. If they had known more, maybe they would have done more. But in the moment, all they saw was my 9-year-old fragile body in their way, begging for change. It's been just about eight years since I was starving in a city full of people, ignored.

Eight years later, I am grown up now. I work and have been accepted into my top choice for college. I have completely acclimated to life in New York City. That time eight years ago seems like another lifetime for me, and yet that moment never leaves me.

My friends, who have never experienced what I have, ask me all the time, "Why do you always give them money?" "Them" being those that they ignore, those that they subconsciously don't see as more than someone in their way.

I usually lie when my friends ask me this, because it is not an appealing story to tell them that, once upon a time, I was in a similar situation. I tell them it's because I feel bad or because I don't like to carry around change. In reality, I give people in need what I have because someone did it for me once.

I know personally what fifty cents from a stranger can do. Every penny adds up. It does not seem like much, but sometimes fifty cents are all that's needed. I don't need to know their story because whatever it is, it's important. They matter, just like I mattered. I know that now.

# Winner

## HOW I HELPED SOMEONE

### Hamid Williams

**Age: 16**

*Northern Rivers Family of Services*

### BECOMING AN OLDER BROTHER

Growing up, I always wanted to have an older brother. When I was eleven, I moved to a foster home that had an older brother. He kept me out of trouble and made sure I was focused on the things that I wanted. Basketball, cross country, school. I remember he would go to the park and shoot baskets with me, pushing me to be better. Pushing me to be better than our environment. Better than our past.

Flash forward, I'm now the age that my brother was at that time. We no longer live together but stay in close contact. I live in a new home. This time I am the older brother, to an amazing little boy. That little boy's name is LeBron. What a unique name, but fitting for such a unique little boy.

I can remember the first time I met him. He pulled into my driveway, screaming and crying, something I learned would be a regular occurrence with him. Once he calmed down and settled in, I found that he was a rather smart little boy. He enjoyed reading to me and asking me questions. I'll admit he had more questions than I had answers. He loved to be outside. Playing basketball, running around, even doing flips in the yard!

However, as fun as it was to be around him, it also took a lot of work. LeBron was short-tempered and would cry at every inconvenience. He couldn't sleep on his own for the first two weeks that he was here and slept with me in my room.

But LeBron is my little man. He stays near me, watching, observing, and learning. I spent last summer going into my senior year, working out and getting ready for my senior season of sports. He asked to work out with me. Doing push-ups, running sprints, lifting weights, rebounding for each other. He would complain after a while and leave to do something else.

But as time went on, he got closer with me. Some of my favorite memories are of the dance parties we've had in our room. Neither of us can dance, but we don't care.

As time goes on, LeBron cries less, and he doesn't get frustrated as easily. Or at least he is dealing with it a lot better. He is still an athletic, curious, and loving little boy. I tell him all the things that I needed to hear growing up. I tell him the color of his skin is a source of strength. How it's okay to cry. How to wash and take care of his hair and body (although he always fights me on that one).

Over the course of six or seven months, LeBron has grown and matured more than anyone would have thought. I never really intended to help him with these changes; I just wanted to give him what my brother gave me, so we have created a bond through foster care and similar situations.

**About Youth Communication:** Youth Communication helps marginalized youth strengthen the social, emotional, and literacy skills they need to succeed in school, work, and life. We do that by providing educators with uniquely compelling teen-written stories, supported by lessons and professional development. We also publish *Represent*, the only national magazine written by youth in foster care ([representmag.org](http://representmag.org)).

### Youth Communication

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#### Thank You to the Adults Who Nominated This Year's Winners

**Barb Blom**  
Foster parent, Toomey Residential and Community Services

**Tom Bosket**  
ENGN

**Eileen Bruno**  
Seamen's Society for Children and Families

**Karl Cooney**  
Little Flower Children and Family Services

**Sharon Daiello**  
Teacher, Urban Assembly School for Leadership and Empowerment

**Gisele Doucet**  
SCO Family of Services

**Paul Griffin**  
The Possibility Project

**Alison Haar**  
Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)

**Stacy Hill**  
Northern Rivers Family of Services

**Emily Latanyshyn**  
Teacher, Auburn High School

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**JCCA**  
Carneicia M., Eowyn Cosantóir

**KidsPeace**  
Reannon Matulewich

**Little Flower Children and Family Services**  
Shafaath Khan

**Northern Rivers Family of Services**  
Hamid Williams

**SCO Family of Services**  
R.E., Sadiqah Whittington

**Seamen's Society for Children and Families**  
Steven Jones

**Toomey Residential and Community Services**  
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Read *Represent* stories at [youthcomm.org/represent-stories](http://youthcomm.org/represent-stories).

