

22nd Annual

Awards for Youth in Foster Care



represent
THE VOICE OF YOUTH IN CARE

ABOUT THE CONTEST: New York City youth in foster care were invited to answer questions about their chosen family and a time they helped someone else. The 10 winners were selected by the judges listed on the back cover. Their essays have edited for length. Congratulations to the winners.

Winner

HELPING OTHERS

Togba Aboubacar

Age: 16

JCCA

I HELPED BECAUSE HE NEEDED IT

I came from a shelter in Chicago to New York in September of 2019. Because I was in a shelter, where we did not interact with anyone outside and I am from Guinea, I knew nothing about the culture in the United States.

One day, I was walking on Fordham Road, and I saw a man in a wheelchair. He was at the top of a small hill and was looking to go down. He looked scared. There were a lot of people walking, and he seemed hesitant about how to go down the hill. He didn't want to bump into others and hit them with the wheelchair. He was asking people to help push him down the hill and offered to pay them. People kept walking really fast and pretended not to hear him.

When he called me over, he asked me to help him get down. He told me to help him and explained that his wife and son were waiting for him at the end of the hill. I was sad to see him in this situation, because I thought that this could be me or those I care for.

I decided to help him. Once I began pushing him, he said "I will pay you." These words made me upset. I stopped pushing him, and

I started walking home. I wasn't helping him for money, I was helping him because this could have been my situation. I was helping because he is human like me.

Everything I do for people I want only God to pay me for. I help others because I enjoy doing it, not because of the rewards that I can receive. This is how we are raised in Guinea and what I believe is right.

When I left him, though, I saw nobody else wanted to help him and I came back for him. I told him I did not need money. I explained that I wanted to help him because we both are humans and are the same.

When we arrived at the bottom of the hill, he told me what store he was going to, and I went with him. His wife and son saw him from inside the store and ran to hug him. They all were happy and thanked me. The man told me he had never met a person like me, who helped for free.

This made me question if he always has to pay for such simple assistance. I also asked myself if this is normal in the United States.

N.A.

Age: 17

JCCA

ACCEPTANCE FROM A NEW FAMILY

This past Thanksgiving I was surrounded by people I cherish, my chosen family.

The small kitchen fills with the smell of spices and sweetness. The family crowds into the living room as we await the food. Elena's dark brown hair is braided in cornrows, tied with a rubber band at the back, showing the scar on her neck. Her marks and struggles make me believe I can be as strong and definite as she is.

Short, plump, with evenly tanned skin, Elena is the mother to my boyfriend, the love of my life. Born and raised in Santo Domingo in the Republica Dominicana, Elena speaks in a charming tone, gentle and soft, but refreshing. Words spill out of her mouth rapidly, as if she's being timed on how much she can say in a minute.

Elena hands me the turkey, and I place it on the table. Slowly, the dining table piles up with food, ready to feed a family of 10. Elena sits down and prays; we all respond, "Amen." The night cools down and goodbyes arise in the midst of the air. I hug Elena and everyone else goodnight, leaving with a belly stuffed like Santa Claus.

My boyfriend's family is my chosen family. His mom has acted like a mother of my own. We are separated by language but are close in distance. She listens to me and aids me in any way possible. She's given me food, clothes, a place to stay, a prayer; there's no limit to what she will do for me.

We are close even though we're separated by our native tongues. We communicate in broken English and broken Spanish, Spanglish. She stops and contemplates what to say next, while I scurry through my phone to google translate for the right phrase: "Ay que lindo," "Qué pasó?" or "Feliz día de acción de gracias."

In one of her early attempts to converse with me she asked, "You wanna eat?"

I replied, "No gracias, no tengo hambre."

Elena and I have grown closer teaching the fundamentals of our language to one another. Our conversations are simple and brief, but our attempts show the love we share for one another. A kiss on the cheek and a warm loving hug says it all.

When I look at Elena, I see the woman I aspire to be. I share her pride in her culture. My boyfriend gave me a red, white, and blue bracelet, with the phrase "R.Dominicana." Though I am not Latina, this bracelet represents my acceptance into my chosen family's culture.

Spending time together at Thanksgiving, having fun, conversing, and dancing is what a family does together. The concept of family is based on actions, not words. My biological family broke me down with hateful comments, but I was brought back up through the actions of my boyfriend, and his family.

Growing up in foster care is hard, but finding people who actually care about you is even harder. When I first came into care, I felt rejected by my own brothers, sisters, mom, dad, and even my aunts. I felt alone and less of myself.

When I met my boyfriend, he assured me that I was going to be OK, and he introduced me to his family. Through them, I understood what it meant to be accepted and loved. The people who were supposed to be there for me failed me, but my chosen family uplifted me. I will continue to stand by them as they will stand by me.

Winner

HELPING OTHERS

Meyah Anderson

Age: 18

Good Shepherd Services

THE LIVES WE TOUCH

Middle school is when everyone is trying to find themselves. It's not that stressful for many kids, but it was for a girl in my class named Shannon. The other kids made fun of her constantly because there was a video going around of her and another student. Long story short, she and that student got into a bad disagreement and he posted the video online.

Within a few hours, the video went viral and had lots of shares, comments, and likes. After that, Shannon missed school for weeks.

Most of the time, at lunch, I chose to sit alone and listen to my music in my headphones. One day, Shannon walked in and sat at the end of the table from me. Kids started laughing, calling her names, and throwing things.

I thought about what would happen if I intervened. The negative outweighed the positive, so I kept listening to my music until I saw her eyes water. I asked her if she would like to walk in the hallway.

In the hallway, I said, "Now you can cry. I just did not want you to cry in front of them."

After that we would get our lunch from the café and sit in a classroom with a teacher. Shannon was always quiet and to get her more comfortable I would ask her questions.

I asked her, "Why do you never smile?"

She cleared her throat and said, "I haven't been happy for a while and after that video was posted, I just haven't been myself."

I looked at Shannon and asked, "What exactly is yourself?"

She told me she used to smile all the time and was very social. She wanted to go to college and be a doctor to help people in need. After hearing that, I told Shannon that she could not let that video define her.

Shannon and I would have sleepovers at her house. We played games, danced, sang, and ate. One night we had gone to sleep, and I woke up to get a glass of water. I walked into the kitchen, and Shannon's mom was already there.

I asked her if she was OK, and she said, "Now I am."

She thanked me for being a friend to Shannon. She told me that she could finally sleep without worrying about her daughter's suicidal thoughts.

Years later, I look back and think about the bad that might have happened if I did not help Shannon. She could have committed suicide, but Shannon is a very strong person.

We have power when we lend an ear, a hand, or act out of kindness because it reminds the person that people are good. People do care. That is what life means, the people who touch our lives and the people whose lives we touch.

Winner

CHOSEN FAMILY

Jahnay Butler

Age: 17

*Administration for
Children's Services*

THE PEOPLE I HAVE AND THE PEOPLE I'LL MEET

My definition of chosen family is those who are there for you no matter the complication and remain by your side through the good times and bad. Although we may not have blood in common, the loyalty, respect, and love we have for each other unites us.

After being removed from my home along with my siblings, I felt lost, angry, unwanted and invisible. I felt like an object that could just be relocated at any minute. I felt as if I no longer had my voice. I didn't feel like Jahnay.

During this transition, my hope completely faded away. Then I met the executive director of the Children's Center at ACS, Dr. Katia Pierre and youth advocate Ashley Smith.

The way I met these two is a little shaky, but here goes. One day I was frustrated, and I needed someone to talk to. I ran into Dr. Pierre and began to vent. I noticed how engaged she was and the way she replied. She didn't disregard my complaints. She spoke to Jahnay the individual, not just another ACS kid.

Next, I met Ashley Smith. When I met Ashley, she was a staff member for pre-teen girls and worked with my little sister. When she met me, she playfully complained to me about my sister's "sour patch" attitude. I originally liked her because my sister liked her. But eventually I became fond of her personality.

Later, Ashley became a programming specialist and youth advocate (major upgrade). Instead of disappearing, she continued to come see me and my siblings. This made me feel normal and seen.

Ashley and Dr. Pierre checked on me every day. No matter how upset I was they ensured

my needs were met as best they could. They lifted several bags off my shoulders, making me feel relieved, wanted, and not just a random case number. These women soon became my chosen family.

In my chosen family, we care for each other by checking in with each other, not judging each other, and making each other feel heard and respected. We also balance caring for ourselves and one another. We managed to maintain a safe space to embrace positive aspects of each other rather than focusing on the negatives. Also, we ask, "How was your day?" Or stop by just to say hello.

In the future I would like my chosen family to be the friends I meet in college. In college I will be on campus for four years or more with hundreds of students. Some of these people could become lifelong friends while I transition into adulthood.

I hope my roommates and other college friends will come from all walks of life and different cultures and have varied skills. Having friends from different cultures will help me learn about different ethnicities and their challenges. That will help me appreciate the world around me and open my eyes and expand my mindset beyond ACS and New York.

In high school, I don't really have a choice in my friends. I see my peers every day in my prearranged classes, but in college I can bond with others over our majors, hobbies, and things we feel passionate about. We will be able to talk realistically about life and obstacles we will face.

As I transition through life, I will encounter different personalities that will change the way I see other people and myself. I'm thankful for those people I have now and the people I will meet.

Winner

HELPING OTHERS

Sukayna Dieng

Age: 18

*Cardinal McCloskey
Community Services*

THERE WHEN ERIC NEEDED ME

About five years ago, my sister Meosha introduced me to her boyfriend, Eric, who became her fiancé. As years went by, Eric and I formed a brother-and-sister-like connection. It was almost like he was my mother's child.

Soon after Meosha and Eric started dating, an incident with my mother occurred. I had to go live with Meosha, who's 13 years older than me. Although the change did affect me, I was truly grateful to live with my sister. We shared many trips and holidays together where Eric joined us.

Meosha is now my legal guardian. Because she had to step up and play the motherly role, we do not have the typical sisterly relationship. She has always been there when I needed her, whether it was deciding what to wear, my hair, my academics, and social life in school.

In August 2015, Eric was driving a bus and was involved in a tragic accident. He was rushed to the hospital and almost lost his life. After months of recovering, he found out that he was paralyzed from the chest down and unable to walk or to care for himself.

Eric was moved to a physical rehabilitation center close to his home. My sister and I spent long nights with him in the home to make sure he knew that he had people who truly loved and cared about him.

After being in the rehab center for two years, Eric was able to leave and receive care from home. Since my sister was his primary caretaker, I assisted her with the

responsibilities of his day to day care. I fed him, washed his hair, and some nights I slept next to him to watch over him. I also helped get him in and out his wheelchair and dressed him. Most importantly, we helped keep him happy and stay calm and positive by going on trips and creating lifelong memories.

Sometimes I would have to sacrifice things I wanted to do, like hanging out with friends, to take care of him. I did not really mind because I knew he would do the same for me. He was much more important to me than just a night out with friends. Not only was Eric someone I could depend on but also someone I could grow from. Eric taught me the differences of liability and assets. He said a liability is something that you are responsible or accountable for and an asset is something that is valuable to you. He also taught me to never be afraid to speak up for something I want because if I don't then I will not get it. His life teachings have helped me overcome difficult situations which I am grateful for.

Unfortunately, Eric passed away on July 20, 2019. As a family, we are still coping with his death and getting life back on track. I know that Eric was grateful that I was there to help take care of him.

Throughout his recovery, I never thought about the good things that would come to me from helping him. That was not why I did it. I made a positive impact on his life and that was what was most important to me.

Winner

CHOSEN FAMILY

Brandon Lawrence

Age: 17

Seamen's Society for Children and Families

SAFETY AND SELF-EXPRESSION

I was born into a loving family consisting of my mom Traci, my brothers Jayden and Amir, and my sister Aniyah. Now I'm not saying that my life was one of luxury. But the nights with no dinner and the petty fights were always trumped by our underlying, unshakable love for each other. Being in my family gave me a strong sense of belonging.

But in November of 2017, we lost our mother, the glue that held our family together. After her passing, my little brother Jayden and I were sent to live with a family friend who we barely knew.

In this new environment, I became more closed off, less talkative. I found it hard to express anything about me personally. This story probably sounds like a tragedy, but that all changed when I started to build my own "chosen family."

I met my friend Rafael in 6th grade. We bonded over our love of all things nerdy. Meanwhile, my foster parent kicked Jayden out and wanted me to leave too. I didn't have many options of places to live.

In this time of utter uncertainty, I gained the first of many chosen family members. While I was texting Rafael about my situation, he was simultaneously talking to his family about my situation. After a few talks with my caseworker, Rafael's parents, Rafael and Natalie, decided to take me into their home.

Now I can call Rafael my brother, and his family my family. Living in a more secure and loving environment allowed me to address some of the negative feelings and habits I'd gained through my experience. My grades and school attendance slowly improved under the stern eye of Rafael's

parents. I was able to see Jayden and my sister Aniyah more often by inviting them over to my house.

I try to return the favor in any way that I can. I try to be a model son and student to make Rafael Sr. and Natalie's lives easier. I try to share advice and spend extra time with Rafael Jr. But I still found it hard to communicate. Not until I added another member to my chosen family did I find a new way to express myself.

Anthony and I were only school acquaintances until the summer of junior year. He had an interest in rapping. While most made fun of him, I was intrigued due to my passion for writing. The more we hung out, the more I got to see the thought process and skill behind his creations.

One day I got tired of watching from the sidelines and decided to write my own song. Compared to what I can produce now, the song isn't anything special, but it'll always be one of my favorites because it was my first time creating art.

We spent that summer developing our craft. Most of our songs were rhymes with no reason, no real narrative, but then I began to put stories into my songs.

Putting my thoughts and feelings into my art allowed me to express myself in a way I didn't think possible. Anthony taught me a new way of looking at literature and self-expression, and I'm forever thankful for that. We challenge each other, always improving each other's art, and that makes him part of my family.

I am grateful to Anthony and to Rafael and his family. Rafael's family have asked to adopt me as their son, and I have accepted.

Winner

CHOSEN FAMILY

Joanna Maestre

Age: 19

*Catholic Guardian
Services*

THE WAYS WE SUPPORT EACH OTHER

A family is defined as a group consisting of parents and children living together in a household. But youth in or out of foster care can choose who makes up their family.

For years I tried to reconnect with my mother, stepdad, and siblings, but they never gave me the time of day. I cried for hours after visits when they finally decided to show up or let me into their home. It took me about three years to realize that the time and positive energy I was giving them wasn't being returned to me and that I was mentally harming myself by visiting them.

During that time I spent crying, I looked for the meaning of family. What does a family do? How do they support each other? Are all families as broken as mine? Am I the only one that sees them as a family? What is a family?

Then I decided to create a chosen family. My chosen family now consists of my partner, my son, a high school teacher, my cousin who I consider a brother, an aunt from my stepdad's side, my cousin and uncle from my mother's side, along with one male friend.

My chosen family are people who are trustworthy, dependable, respectful, caring, and supportive. We give each other emotional support, financial support, physical support, educational support, and even childcare support if necessary.

We emotionally support each other by listening to the person with the issue and giving advice. We financially support each other by helping pay bills if the other

person doesn't have the funds to pay it. We physically support each other by being at family events and spending quality time with one another. We educationally support one another by helping each other achieve our goals in school whether through tutoring or getting each other to class. We also provide childcare support when someone needs a day to herself or when the child's parent is at school.

My chosen family is supportive and we motivate each other to achieve our dreams. We give back the same energy that is given to us.

I want to include more relatives in my chosen family. I have been trying to reach out and connect with relatives who were not able to be in my life when I was younger. I still have my traditional family as well but I don't talk to them as much because of the mental strain they put on me. You can still view your traditional family as a family, but sometimes it's best to love them from a distance. Loving them from a distance allows you to be open to finding a chosen family and discovering what you want your chosen family to be.

I wanted a chosen family made up of dependable and caring people, and I found it. Now I have a small group of people who have been through a lot with me and know how to deal with me when I'm having a difficult day. They are aware of how much I depend on them and how much their words mean to me. They know about and some even have experienced trauma like what I have been through. I know that I'm not alone.

Winner

CHOSEN FAMILY

Eyhdi Osorio

Age: 18

Little Flower

MY FAMILY TREE

My idea of a true family is contained in a quote from an unknown source: "Family isn't always blood, it's the people in your life who want you in theirs; the ones who accept you for who you are. The ones who would do anything to see you smile, and who love you no matter what."

When I was small I imagined growing old with my sisters and my parents, but instead I came into care about five years ago. I was afraid because I didn't know what the future had in store for me, but I got an amazing foster mother who cares for me and my sisters.

My foster mother made me feel comfortable and valued. My sisters were discharged from foster care and got to go home. I, on the other hand, made the difficult choice to remain in care and stay with my foster mother. I miss my sisters dearly.

Until I turned 16, I wasn't able to really define what family meant. Now, I understand that family goes beyond blood. My family is made up of my close friends, supportive teachers, my foster mother, and her family.

Growing up in foster care, I felt lonely and like I didn't belong. I desperately wanted to fit in and have my own family. Due to an unhealthy relationship with an adult, I ended up pregnant. At the age of 15, I gave birth to my son.

I didn't believe that I was fit to be a mother. 2017 was a really hard year for me, but my foster mother ("grandma") was there to support me. She gave me advice about how to stay safe and how to build good and appropriate relationships with others. I was able to get my life together.

I entered 9th grade that year. School was rough, and I had late nights where my son cried and cried. I got frustrated because I was tired, but my grandma was there to support me. She showed me she was part of my family.

At first I didn't have a good relationship with my grandma's daughters, but with time things improved. I began to hang out with them more often. We went to the movies, out to eat, shopping. Then I felt part of the family as a whole. Now I come to my grandma's daughters (my aunts) whenever I need advice and support.

My teachers support me academically and share life lessons. And my two closest friends are a part of my family because they create a safe and fun environment where I can be myself. When I feel self-conscious my friends reassure me that I am just ordinary in the best way possible.

My close friends, teachers, and my foster mother and her family, have become the family that I always wanted. They love and support me. I care for them and make sure they are safe and well.

It is nice to know that I can create a family through the relationships I form. My family is like a tree. The leaves are my friends and teachers, they come and go but are there for me. I am always able to form new friends as the seasons come. The branches of the tree are my close friends and mentors. They stick with me because they are connected to the trunk. My foster mother and her family are the roots of my tree. Without them, the tree would have never been able to form and expand.

In the future, I hope to plant my own tree and create a family of my own.

Winner

CHOSEN FAMILY

Santhana Pierre

Age: 15

Forestdale Inc.

LEARNING FROM EACH ONE

My chosen family is my former foster parent, Ms. Louisime; my therapist, Ms. Gabriel; and my current foster parent, Ms. Jones. These three have inspired me to become a better person and helped me blossom into the beautiful girl that I am today.

After being placed in many foster homes with my older sister, I was placed with Ms. Louisime. I was young, shy, and broken. It always took time for me to get adjusted to a new home, and I was devastated every time we moved with little-to-no notice.

I became emotionless, because getting close to any foster mom brought back memories of being separated from my mother. After getting to Ms. Louisime, I started to feel more comfortable and became happier. I ended up being there for seven years.

Together we had ups and downs, but we made it work. There were plenty of times I considered her to be an adoptive parent but I was afraid of the consequences—that she would leave me. So I chose to remain in care and stay with her until I was ready to be on my own.

When I misbehaved, Ms. Louisime stuck with me. She taught me the meaning of unconditional love. When my sister and I got separated, Ms. Louisime and I built a stronger bond.

I was shocked when I was forced to leave her home due to an investigation involving another foster youth. I promised myself I'd never forget her. She will always be a part of my life.

The only person I felt comfortable enough to confide in was my therapist, Ms. Gabriel. She has been like a second mother to me since I was 6. She has loved, cared, protected, and guided me. Whatever I was

going through, in home after home, she was there.

Ms. Gabriel helped me cope and taught me that my past doesn't define me. She encouraged me to open up more and said that not everyone will hurt me. She helped me find myself.

Since I moved to Ms. Jones' home two years ago, I have become strong, more mature, and well-rounded. Ms. Jones always advocates for me and has my back. My social worker asked if I wanted to be adopted. I had assumed I was too old, but I began imagining what it would be like to be adopted. What would happen afterwards? How long might the process take? I saw myself being happy with Ms. Jones and her family.

But then I thought about my real family and how they might feel if, legally, I'm not their daughter anymore. Wrestling with the decision about adoption stressed me out and I became indecisive.

Finally, I decided not to be adopted because being in care offers a lot of benefits. Ms. Jones taught me to appreciate what I have and to take my time when making decisions. I started to put this into practice.

In return, I gave Ms. Jones a new perspective about youth in care. I helped her see that not every child in foster care is damaged—some just need time and a lot of love.

Ms. Louisime, Ms. Gabriel, and Ms. Jones are my chosen family because they encouraged me, taught me life lessons, and helped me overcome everything I've been through. They helped the broken, traumatized, and lonely girl I was to flourish and become mature and happy.

Winner

CHOSEN FAMILY

Amber Saleh

Age: 16

SCO Family of Services

MY TEACHERS WERE THERE FOR ME

One day when I was 6, I sat in the daycare room in my first foster home, watching enviously as the parents picking up their children happily discussed what they were going to eat for dinner that night. My heart burned to a crisp then, and whenever I witnessed any happy parent child relationship, because I didn't have one anymore.

I had just recently been taken away from my mother due to educational neglect, and I hadn't seen her in months. Even now, there's emotional distance between us, probably because of the limited time I was able to spend with her over the years.

However, as my childhood progressed, I learned that I had to adapt to my surroundings and focus less on what other people had, and more on myself and my own dreams and goals. I tried to get various foster parents to adopt me, but it never worked out, and I had to go from home to home. I wondered if being adopted would fill up the hole I had inside my heart or whether that could only be filled with a biological family.

In 2018, I finally got connected with my uncles and aunts. Sounds great, right? Nope. Although they had legitimate reasons why they could not take me in when I was put in the foster care system, I still could not connect with them when we met again. They were busy or not interested. I realized then that I couldn't depend on my relatives.

But teachers came through for me.

"I don't have enough money for my senior pictures. Can you please spare \$20?" I asked my 6th grade teacher, Ms. Smartt, blushing in embarrassment. She gave me the money and told me to hurry downstairs so that I would not miss the photographer.

It wasn't the only time that she had helped me. On a class trip to Boston, I was in the gift shop with no money, and I really wanted a book about Paul Revere. Ms. Smartt bought me the book so I would not go home to New York empty-handed. She knew about my situation in foster care, and even said that if she could, she would adopt me, but unfortunately she had too little space in her house to properly take care of me.

During high school, I got close to my Japanese teacher, Ms. Gollin, because I was able to talk to her and get things off my chest. My foster parent was homophobic, and I did not have an adult to talk to without having what I said go back to my foster parent. I came out Ms. Gollin, and I was accepted. Ms. Gollin's support helped me dramatically.

The teachers who went out of their way for me—not my foster parents or my own biological family—were there for me throughout my childhood. Thinking about their kindness made me resolve to hang in there and keep pushing to become the best version of myself.

I aim one day to do the same for children in situations like mine. I want to repay my teachers and their kindness by showing that having faith in me was not a waste of time—by becoming a successful animator.

My teachers' kind actions made me realize that even though I had an unfortunate start in life, I could continue to chase my dreams.

My teachers made me feel complete.

My hunger for a family has finally been extinguished. Who needs a biological family when I can choose a family?

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).

Youth Communication

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

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New York Foundling

Caitlin Knipper
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Jacqueline Martin
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Cristina Romero
The Legal Aid Society

Sr. Jeanne Shary
Cardinal McCloskey Community Services

Tanya Sutton
Forestdale Inc.

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Catholic Guardian Services
Joanna Maestre

Cardinal McCloskey Community Services
Sukayna Dieng

Forestdale Inc.
Santhana Pierre

Good Shepherd Services
Meyah Anderson

JCCA
Togba Aboubacar, N.A.

Little Flower
Eyhdi Osorio

SCO Family of Services
Amber Saleh

Seamen's Society for Children and Families
Brandon Lawrence

THE JUDGES

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