

FRESH



# 33 Days that Changed Everything

—by Katherine Gordon

START



Thirty-three days is all it took to revoke the opportunities I was promised for so many years. I was in foster care from the age of 11 until 33 days before my 18th birthday when my caseworker reunified me with my family.

I had always worried I would fall through the cracks but never thought this would be the way it happened. If even one person had explained to me what I would be losing by reunifying so close to my 18th birthday, I wouldn't be struggling like I am today. If I had waited 33 more days, I would have had Medicaid until age 26 and financial support for higher education.

I remember the day I received the call from my state explaining that I did not qualify for the Department of Children and Families Education and Training Voucher (ETV) that

was promised to me and that I was relying on. I spent 45 minutes explaining how I had been told for 7 years that I would get "free college." What hurt the most was to find out I did not qualify solely because of 33 days and the fact that I did not "age out" of the foster care system.

The 7 years I spent in care were filled with heartbreak, letdown, anger, frustration, and confusion. I felt like the least the system could do for me was to help me create a better life for myself by getting me on my feet. With the support of ETV funds, I would be able to go to college and pursue my dream of giving back to the child welfare system as the kind of social worker I wish I had.

Because I am a strong, independent, and passionate person, I picked myself up and moved on despite not having financial or familial support.

Because I agreed to exit care 33 days prior to my 18th birthday, I would not be eligible for health care unless I qualified by being low income or unemployed. I felt I had to choose between working as a full-time student or not working so my income would be low enough to qualify for health care. It was truly a lose-lose situation.

Had I known that those 33 days mattered so much, I would have declined reunification and stayed in foster care. I believe all youth need to know about the benefit of having Medicaid to age 26 through a provision of the Affordable Care Act. Outreach and education about health care and my other options would have informed my decision—and perhaps led to a different decision.

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My story shows how broken the system really is. Reunification may be the goal, but that should not mean stripping youth of resources and opportunities that so many of us rely on, such as health care and funds for school. Those 7 years of broken promises are the exact reason I choose to use my voice and give back.

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## Resources

- Check out FosterClub’s Resource Hub for youth in care at [fosterclub.org](http://fosterclub.org).
- FosterClub has joined First Focus: SPARC and the Juvenile Law Center in promoting access to health care for foster youth at [healthcareffy.org](http://healthcareffy.org).
- For more information about FosterClub and resources for youth in foster care, contact Shannon at 503-717-1552 or [shannon@fosterclub.com](mailto:shannon@fosterclub.com).
- Former Foster Youth & FREE Medicaid until Age 26!: [http://healthcareffy.org/sites/default/files/page-cb\\_attachments/%23HealthCareFFY%20FAQ%20Sheet%20for%20youth%20%281%29.pdf](http://healthcareffy.org/sites/default/files/page-cb_attachments/%23HealthCareFFY%20FAQ%20Sheet%20for%20youth%20%281%29.pdf)
- Foster Youth Trauma Informed Patient Bill of Rights: <https://www.fosterclub.com/sites/default/files/Foster%20Youth%20Trauma%20Informed%20Patient%20Bill%20of%20Rights%20-%20%23HealthCareFFY%20FC%20Workshop.pdf>
- Foster Care Youth Transition Planning Timeline: <https://www.fosterclub.com/sites/default/files/Foster%20Care%20Youth%20Transition%20Planning%20Timeline%20-%20%23HealthCareFFY%20FC%20Workshop%20.pdf>
- In Your State—Resources by state (rights in foster care and more): <https://www.fosterclub.com/your-state>
- FREE Transition Toolkit Download: <http://store.fosterclub.com/transition-toolkit-download/>
- FYI Binder: <http://store.fosterclub.com/fyi-binder/>