

Lonnell on Graduating From College

To Foster Change

Keeping up in school is no easy task for youth in foster care.

By Jeremy Loudenback, Fostering Media Connections



Photographer © Isabel Avila

"Sometimes you want to be different; you want to be noticed. But for me, I always wanted to be normal. Most of my life, I wanted to be like everybody else." - Lonnell

Every morning before school, 17-year-old Lonnell rises before dawn to make his way to the football field at Manual Arts High School. At 6:00 a.m., he's out of his aunt's home near the Crenshaw Plaza and on a bus to his South Los Angeles high school. Starting at 6:30 a.m.,

Lonnell helps lead the school's JROTC drill team through its early-morning paces. By 8:00 a.m., Lonnell is in class at the college preparatory magnet program at the high school.

This year, the straight-A student is taking three AP classes and ramping up for the daunting

battery of standardized testing that will help determine his college prospects. The precocious teenager has already mapped out his future. He plans to enroll at UCLA --majoring in public policy and political science before attending law school--where he hopes to learn the skills that will one day propel him to the Supreme Court.

One of the reasons he has been able to thrive and set his sights on attending a top-flight university is his involvement with the First Star Academies, a relatively new program aimed at helping foster youth reach college. The national program partners with universities, including UCLA in Los Angeles, to provide support and year-round college preparation to a cohort of foster youth. According to National Director Paige Chan, the program provides college and financial-aid counseling, guidance about which classes students should take to be ready for college and high-quality SAT prep and tutoring. Many students also need to have someone in their life who recognizes their talents and challenges them to excel.



“If you looked at Lonnell when I first met him, he could have been easily written off as a B or C student who was just going to float along and maybe just graduate high school,” Chan said. “Now the sky’s the limit [for him].”

Since entering the foster care system, Lonnell has sped through a dizzying litany of schools across the county: six different elementary schools, three middle schools and two other high schools before finding a happy and busy home at Manual Arts in South Los Angeles.

For foster youth, Lonnell’s story is far from unique.

A landmark 2013

([https://www.wested.org/wp-content/files_mf/1400283692Invisible Achievement Gap Full Report.pdf](https://www.wested.org/wp-content/files_mf/1400283692Invisible_Achievement_Gap_Full_Report.pdf)) study of educational outcomes for foster youth in California found one-third of foster youth attend two or more schools during a single school year, compared to 7 percent of students statewide. In fact, up to 10 percent of all of students in foster care in the state attended three or more schools during one school year. Many placements in the foster care system can be tenuous or temporary, and moves are frequent. When children are forced to change foster

homes or move out of foster homes and into group homes, that means adjusting to a new school, teachers, plus a new set of classmates and friends.

In California, test scores of foster youth lag well behind other youth in the state, even for peers not in the foster-care system who are in the same school.

In September 2016, [data \(https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news-2/foster-youth-california-perform-25-worse-state-testing-youth/21492\)](https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news-2/foster-youth-california-perform-25-worse-state-testing-youth/21492) released by the California Department of Education confirmed what many advocates have long suspected: foster youth face serious obstacles to success in the classroom. Foster youth are also more likely have higher rates of absenteeism and dropout than other students in California. In fact, about 58 percent of foster youth graduate high school in California, compared with the statewide average of 84 percent among non-foster youth. Experts estimate that only about 3 to 7 percent of foster youth go on to earn a college degree.

Lonnell is no stranger to the statistics that tend to dominate the conversation about foster youth in schools.

“Every time I hear the statistics, it makes me want to challenge and defy those numbers,” Lonnell said. “It’s really discouraging to hear those statistics. I want to say, ‘I’m not one of those statistics.’”

Lonnell’s schooling got off to a rough start. When his mother went to jail, he missed out on kindergarten, and at age 6 found himself in the arms of Los Angeles County’s massive foster-care system. Despite turbulent living situations at home, Lonnell frequently excelled at school. In second grade, he was reading at a fifth grade level. Later, in the fourth grade, Lonnell’s teachers wanted him to skip a grade and enroll in a magnet school. The woman who was his foster parent at the time turned them down, something the teenager regrets. During that time, Lonnell was often frustrated in the classroom.

“I was bored and I would start talking or sometimes I would help the other students,” Lonnell said. “But sometimes [my teachers] thought I was acting out.”

Lonnell no longer feels bored in class, and he is determined to follow in the footsteps of Thurgood Marshall on the Supreme Court, as a lawyer and an advocate fighting for racial justice. But don’t expect the ever-modest junior from South L.A. to ask for special treatment. He just wants to be given the same chance to succeed as other students his age.



“Nobody is ever giving the foster youth that challenge. It makes you not even want to try. When I tell people that I’m a foster youth, they feel bad for me, and they go easy on me. That’s not the deal. I want to be normal. I want to be able to compete with everybody. I don’t want anybody to look at my college application and look at it any differently than anybody else’s,” said Lonell.

Lonell is now pulling down straight As and is working hard to make his dream of attending college come true. Besides marching with the color guard of his drill team, he’s a champion debater who also holds down a part-time job as a peer health educator. This sometimes leaves Lonell little time for a social life or even to text late at night about Youtube videos

with his friends, like many teenagers do. Part of the reason is that he’s already thinking about his legacy.

“For me, I have to leave something behind,” Lonell said. “I don’t want to be this kid who switched into the school and maybe even was valedictorian. I want to try to make it have as much meaning as I can.”

Foster Youth Can Defy the Educational Odds

For children and youth in the foster care system who are struggling to overcome experiences of abuse, neglect and separation, a supportive school environment can be important part of achieving normalcy. Succeeding in school can also help foster youth transition to adulthood and increase the likelihood they’ll find their way toward higher education, a career path or self-reliance. There are about 26,000 foster youth (<http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/foster/fosterGrdEnrl.aspx?level=County&cde=19>) enrolled in

Los Angeles County schools, with almost half of them –12,700– enrolled and learning in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Learn More



[\(/learn/family/marcy-on-becoming-a-sister-mom/\)](/learn/family/marcy-on-becoming-a-sister-mom/)

Read Marcy's Perspective on Family



[\(/learn/\)](/learn/)

Learn About Other Key Areas

To Foster Change is an initiative by PBS SoCal that aims to foster understanding, inspire hope and motivate positive actions that change the realities and life outcomes for Southern California foster youth.

[About \(/about/\)](/about/) [Videos \(/videos/\)](/videos/)

[Privacy Policy \(/privacy-policy/\)](/privacy-policy/)

[Contact \(/contact/\)](/contact/)

<http://facebook.com/kcafm/tofochange> <http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbeomhann> <http://instagram.com/kcafm/tofochange> <http://twitter.com/kcafm/tofochange>

© 2016 • KOCE-TV Foundation • All Rights Reserved

[CsyM](#)
[vOp](#)
[OG2](#)
[urR1j](#)

w4te

90iw

]