

Korina ([00:04](#)):

Boozhoo/Hello everyone. Thank you for tuning into the CASCW podcast. A few weeks back, I had the honor of chatting with Armanda and John of MyVoice of Ampersand Families here in Minnesota during our conversation Armanda and John share really important truths related to their experiences and foster care and their lives beyond the system. Just a heads up that there is mention of self harm, abuse, and placement disruption. In this episode. I am always a believer in listening to and empowering the voices of young people. I believe that is especially true. Right now. Young people are leading, pushing for change and demanding justice. Hear them. And please be well.

Korina ([01:15](#)):

Well, thank you everyone for tuning into the CASCW podcast today, I'm chatting with Armanda and John of the, my voice youth leaders. Hi Armanda and John, can you introduce yourselves?

John ([01:28](#)):

Hi, I'm John I'm 17 and I was in foster care for about four years. Um, and I had some good and bad experiences.

Armanda ([01:37](#)):

So hi, Korina I'm Armanda I'm 22 years old. I'm a full time college student pursuing a degree in social work with minors in gerontology and human relations. I've been a MyVoice youth leader since it started about two years ago. And I'm excited to be here today.

Korina ([01:59](#)):

Awesome. I'm so excited to talk to you both today and to just learn more about you and for our listeners to learn more about you and to hear more about my voice, um, let's just start with, like, what have you been up to the past couple of months? We have been in navigating pandemic life and in Minnesota have been, you know, living through, stay at home orders and now stay safe orders. And just wondering what you've been up to, if there are any activities you're enjoying or techniques that you're using that have been helpful and just kind of navigating this time.

Armanda ([02:34](#)):

I know personally I've been trying to get out into nature going on, walks around the Lake. I'm trying to stay connected with family through zoom. And what have you, um, what's really helped is the oice group. Um, I enjoy like coming up with the itinerary for what we're going to do for the week and just having that to stand with

John ([03:01](#)):

For me, I've been spending a lot of time, like kind of myself with my own thoughts. I've been journaling a lot recently painting, spending time with my cat. Um, I don't do a lot of the MyVoice Meets, but last week we made brownies all together, which was, it was a lot of fun and I'm really looking forward to this coming week's. Um, but yeah, I've just been trying to figure some stuff out personally, work on things on school and just kinda keep motivated, even though it feels like life is kind of all up in the air right now.

Korina ([03:31](#)):

Absolutely. And you both mentioned, you know, you're navigating school and distance learning. Um, and so John you're 17, are you still in high school?

John ([03:41](#)):

Yes I am, I am a junior.

Korina ([03:44](#)):

Okay, and then you're navigating college life (Armanda), how has that been for you that shift to distance learning and everything that comes with that maybe not seeing your peers as much or your friends like, you know, I know there's a whole, there are many dynamics that come to play. I don't know if you want to share a little bit of what that's been like for you.

John ([04:00](#)):

I mean, for me personally, um, all my school has been a lot easier for me because I'm such a person who likes to look around at other students and what they're doing. And so I've done. It's definitely been easier to stay motivated and stay focused on my schoolwork, but I'm also such like just a person who loves to be with their friends. So the social descents and the stay safe and stay home orders have definitely been hard because my friends are honestly such one of the biggest support systems for me and my mental health and my motivation. Um, but we've just been, you know, zooming and FaceTiming and texting all the time. I mean, I don't know if you have anything else to add around that or your experiences on that (Armanda)?

Armanda ([04:40](#)):

Yeah, definitely with college it's, it's kind of up in the air. But like, funding. You know, we got the CARES Act, uh, and the stimulus check, that whole thing going on. Um, but also for me personally, having half of the semester online was easier. I didn't have to commute as much. Um, but on the social aspect, it was hard. Uh, we had a bunch of research, like group research papers and group projects, which we sorta had a learn how to navigate that online. Just tricky, but learning new skills.

Korina ([05:23](#)):

Yup. Adjusting and adapting. I bet. Well, and you both mentioned how important MyVoice has been for you both. Could you share a little bit with our listeners who, who may not be as familiar with what MyVoice is, you know, like what is it, what do you all do? Kind of like, what do you get from it? You know, like what does it mean to be a part of it for each of you?

Armanda ([05:47](#)):

Yeah. So to begin, MyVoice stands for Minnesota Youth Voices. Um, it's a group for youth that have been impacted by the Minnesota foster care, which we focus on connection, education and change. And by doing so we host different social events. We facilitate leadership councils. We attend panel presentations where we talk at colleges or what have you. We make different media participate in advocacy work. We were, um, a part of foster care youth day on the Hill. Um, and we also do peer coaching as well. And this program is open to any youth that's impacted by the system ages 12 to 24. And if you're interested, we also have a website. If you want to check it out at www.myvoicemn.org and MyVoice to me, um, it's a space where youth can come together to have this sort of community where we have an underlying understanding of one, another of a situation that's bizarre, but yet so similar in

different aspects. Um, I personally find it important for people to find their voice, use their voice advocate, just make the world better around them.

John ([07:16](#)):

Going off of what I'm on this side of it being just like a good place. It's definitely for me, just a safe place. And it's so nice to finally know that there are so many other kids out there who are affected by foster care and just that the system in a whole, and especially if you don't know that and you're in the system, it can, you can feel so alone and very targeted and very put down by everything. So if you are interested, please go to the website, like Armanda mentioned, um, and come say, hello.

Korina ([07:48](#)):

I know you both would like to share your stories and a little bit more about your experience navigating the foster care system and what that experience has meant for you. Um, so yeah, if you would, um, be willing to share, you know, whatever it is you're comfortable with sharing to our listeners about kind of your own personal journey and, and navigating, um, the child welfare system.

John ([08:10](#)):

Well, for me, I was originally put into the system when I was very young. I don't know it was taken out of the system by my aunt. So I lived with her for a couple of years of my life, and I was reconnected with my biological family for awhile, but it wasn't a good fit. And it was, it became very toxic, very fast to the point that I had to move back in with my aunt. Um, but upon that and going home to her and her new husband and all that stuff really became detrimental to my mental health. And I didn't know where I fit and I didn't know who I was to the point that I had started to self harm to the point that I had to be put into a mental hospital. And once I was taken out, I was put back into the foster care system. Um, and I stayed in there for four more years until I was yet again, placed into a group home until I'm at my forever home as of four years now at age like 13.

Armanda ([09:15](#)):

Yeah. And a little bit about my story. So I went into the system when I was five. Um, and I luckily was able to go in with my biological younger brother. Um, we went to about three different foster homes together, and then we were adopted by an abusive family when I was 10. And I took that family to court when I was 15 and they still have my brother, but I went, um, it took three years in court. Um, and he finally pled guilty, but by the end of that, so I was in foster care again from 15 to 17. And then I was adopted by my now forever family for about five years now. And yeah, going through the system, I hadn't really met other foster youth and I've heard the statistics, I've heard the numbers, but I, I hadn't connected with anyone else in the system. So that's why MyVoice is also that prominent to me as well, because it just shows that you're not alone

John ([10:34](#)):

Going with Armanda, like you know, hearing the statistics and the numbers and the awful things that are said about kids in the foster care system. One, it just kind of makes you feel even more alone. And when I was in foster care and jumping around, it was always in small towns. Um, I am originally from a very, very small town called Elgin. It's down by Rochester and Wabasha County. And it just is, it was really hard because I knew that there were other kids out there, but I'd never heard or seen or talk to one of them. So, um, you do feel alone, but I promise you, you are not.

Armanda ([11:15](#)):

And going off of that, even like I went to three different elementary schools, four different high schools, and I never seem to have like met any other foster youth. I've met a few people here and there that have been adopted, but it was never like, I could find that connection.

John ([11:36](#)):

I think also, like you said, going from school to school and like always having that fear of being like, kind of I'm moving tomorrow or showing up home and your social worker is there, or your placement worker that has happened to me before, have I had a completely normal day at school and I had come home and my foster parents, like, you're moving, you're leaving. So I, I definitely think it in more of becoming feeling alone, you feel like you can't make friends that you really aren't normal, that you don't get to have friends. And that also was very detrimental to mental health of feeling like you can't reach out. You can't make connections because in the end, nothing really lasts in the eyes of a foster child.

Korina ([12:21](#)):

Thank you both for, for sharing that and sharing your very personal stories and experiences. And, um, and also just like what that has meant for you to make these connections with your peers and to be able to, unfortunately it was later, you know, in your lives where you're able to do that. Um, but that you found a space that feels safe and that feels, you know, relatable and comfortable and where you're able to access your inner power and in advocacy and organizing, and many cool ways of sharing your voices on different platforms. And, you know, thinking for folks who are listening, who may be other youth currently in care and navigating the system or frontline professionals who are supporting youth who are still in care or other caregivers, adults, when you're thinking back to those moments where, you know, you're experiencing these challenges and these ups and downs, and sometimes very painful and traumatic experiences in the system and, you know, struggling to, um, connect with your peers who maybe didn't understand your experience. Like you're saying at schools or you're moving a lot. Um, and maybe, and you weren't having, uh, and always like safe and comfortable, um, family and the homes that you were in. Were there people that you were able to connect with, or even if it wasn't like a person, were there things that were really essential for you and kind of in those tough moments and helping ground yourself, or kind of maintaining hope and kind of pushing forward and helping, you know, like you're going to get through this?

John ([14:10](#)):

Um, for me, it was one, my grandmother has always just been a huge support for me, but also my social worker and my adoption worker were always a very big part of me staying okay and stable and knowing that things will get better. Um, and I remember like that monthly visit was always just something I always looked forward to. Like, it was like the highlight of my month where I would tell them everything that was going on in school. And the next point I was going to be in, they really did kind of become a parent figure to me because of the people I was living within the foster care system, didn't always care. They didn't always show up to things. They more fed me and made sure I was clothed and let me do my own thing. So my social worker and adoption worker were really the only people who listened and talked me through what was happening and made sure I understood and that I was comfortable.

Armanda ([15:09](#)):

Yeah, I'd have to agree with John. About my last social worker and my adoption worker. Um, they really helped support and be a voice for me. Um, being that my social worker before my last social worker,

um, she thought it was a terrible idea for me to want to find an adoptive family at the age of 16. Um, she thought that it was stupid and that I should plan to age out of the system. Um, so my last social worker really fought to keep me motivated and to help me see like what I deserve. Um, my adoption worker, she was awesome. She traveled from the cities to Morehead, which is where I was at the time just to see me. And she really listened to what I wanted. And she saw me as who I was and not that kid in the case file, you know, which was super important to me, but also, um, it was like music and nature kept me going and just the thought of like a future knowing of what I deserve. Um, and to be able to help others find their voices in the future as well. That that's what kept me going.

John ([16:40](#)):

I would have to agree with that. Like I was lucky for both my social workers that I had while I was in the system to be such just good and honest people and care and listen. And just like Armanda said, they seen me as a person and not as a file that had everything that I've ever done wrong in my life put in it. So I think that just social workers who are honest and true and listen and family members that you can keep in contact with are just such a big support for youth in the system.

Armanda ([17:17](#)):

For sure. And for the youth that are possibly listening, like word of advice, know your worth, find your voice, use it, advocate for yourself and others. Like just find that hope in every situation and know your rights, fight for your rights and fight for your worth of having an adoptive family.

John ([17:42](#)):

Because you are worth it. You are strong and anyone who puts you down has no what it is like. So trust me, it gets better. It doesn't seem like it. And then sometimes it's really hard, but it does. It does get better.

Korina ([18:00](#)):

Thank you both for those really important like nuggets and words of wisdom, I think on both sides and for both youth who are still living and breathing this experience and those supportive adults that we know from experience that research tells us everything shows us like supportive adults are so essential for, for all youth and especially youth experiencing foster care and who have been in many ways disconnected from their families, sometimes their communities, um, and so much more. And, um, and I wonder if you all, so I'm thinking of, you know, connection looks very different for all of us right now. And so, as we're talking about social workers who are doing really great social work and engaging and in supporting youth, um, and your own experiences and what that's looked like and felt like, I don't know if you have additional thoughts on kind of in life, in a pandemic, how can those frontline professionals, or even those caregivers, those foster parents and resource parents, or advocates, you know, serving in a community agencies like, um, if you have ideas or thoughts on just like how to continue to support and engage in engage with, and for youth right now

John ([19:22](#)):

For me, my biggest thing that I, I always think is helpful is listen, talk to them, don't think that they're, you know, miserable, but don't also think that they're fine have open and open conversations with them and do stuff together. Like if you're a foster parent, don't just treat this pandemic as you know, we're all in the house together, we eat together and we spend some time together. But like set up at least like

once a week or something, something that you all agree that you want to do to build that bond stronger. And also it's a good time to talk about what they're thinking and how they're feeling.

Armanda ([20:06](#)):

Yeah. Just like John said, you know, open communication, having an open mind, um, definitely like privacy as well. Like we all need time for ourselves and time to reflect, and it's a crazy time in a crazy world. Um, but also just reach out, you know, like what we're doing here, listen to the youth, um, help find groups like my voice or foster club or youth in action where foster youth can come together and connect and have a mutual understanding of how crazy and vulnerable it is to be in this system, especially during this time.

Korina ([20:56](#)):

Yeah. And you know, and summer is upon us. Well wait, is it officially summer yet? No, it's close. It feels like it, it's hot right now. It's so close and it is hot and I love it. I'm not complaining. Um, but in thinking, you know, I've been in having many conversations, whether it's with, um, you know, friends and family who are parents and caregivers, or, you know, and kind of more work-related conversations around, um, just thinking of our kids and our youth and how summer is gonna look so different for all of us, you know, lots of activities are canceled. Pools are closed, is closed, parks are closed. Um, just so much of what we, we know as summer in Minnesota in the, you know, when, when we fight through those cold winter months and so summer can be everything to us. Um, and so I dunno, I'm thinking of our youth who are going to be navigating summer very differently.

Korina ([21:52](#)):

I don't know if you both would want to share if you even know. I know like life is like day by day right now, but if you have, um, thought at all, like how are you going to navigate summer? Or if you have ideas, um, or like resources you want to share for youth who may be listening or adults supporting youth. And that could be like the small things. I don't know, like if it's music or getting outside, like you said, nature. Um, but yeah, if you have any thoughts of like, okay, how you're thinking of an approaching going into this warmer weather and staying safe.

John ([22:23](#)):

I agree that like the summer is going to be so crazy because for me swimming and being in water and like being outside, like that is such a way that I realized that this summer and I decompress in the summer and I clear my head in the summer. So I think if you're like me and you like being in the water or you like being outside in summer, still go outside, go on walks. You don't have to go on walks with people, go out on your own, bring a notebook, find the place that you like. And just sit down and write down all the good and the nastiness and the bad that you're feeling. And then, you know, walk back. I think that is one of the easiest way to a navigate through the summer of not being able to see friends and not being able to see family members who are older and also, you know, the pools and the parks and all that type of stuff being shut down.

Armanda ([23:16](#)):

Right. And even in a group home setting, like it can be hard to have access to go outside. Um, so definitely going back to professionals, listening to youth and trying to make accommodations for them during this time. It's really important. Um, just take time for yourself. I know for me personally, I ordered a bunch of books that I'll read outside of college. So I'm excited for that. Um, also I've been spending a

lot of time with my cat. My cat helps me through a lot, you know, she can't talk much, but she's a great listener. Um, and just zooming with family and friends, it keeps me connected. It feels even though we're not there in front of each other, we can at least see and still in a way interact.

Korina ([24:15](#)):

Is there anything else, you know, that we haven't talked about that you want to share or that you want listeners to know and be thinking about

John ([24:24](#)):

For me, if you're a youth and do you feel unsafe and something bad is happening in your home, do not be afraid of what will happen if you speak out because your social workers, your adoption workers, anyone who is assigned here to you to help you are there to protect you without a certain job, and they will get you out. And they will find you a place where you are safe and where you are loved and when you are cared for. So do not feel bad for speaking out if something bad is happening.

Armanda ([24:58](#)):

And I'd like to talk about, um, communication with biological family. Um, it, it is important, but it's also important to remember your safety and your worth. Um, like if just like John said, if there's anything bad happening in your foster homes, or even if you in your respite homes or your group homes, like don't be afraid, take the chance that I did and your life will be so much better in the end because of the courage that you have. Um, and when it comes to your biological family is just be safe, um, create those boundaries. And it's up to you, um, with how you want that to go. And I encourage, uh, professionals to help guide you through that process and to support them and encourage them, um, to create those healthy connections.

Korina ([26:15](#)):

All right. Well, thank you Armanda and John, I really appreciate you both taking time to chat with me and to really like speak with our listeners and share with them some really important truths and, um, and sharing your own wisdom and your experience, um, in advocating for yourself and for other youth. And I just really appreciate your time and I hope you both stay well and find ways to continue to stay well and take care this summer.

John ([26:46](#)):

Well, thank you for having us. I mean, it was, it was actually quite a lot of fun.

Armanda ([26:50](#)):

Yes. Thank you. Thank you for listening and letting us share truths and hopefully others out there will come and join us with our MyVoice meetings and meet new people.

Speaker 1 ([27:03](#)):

This podcast is brought to you by the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. This podcast was produced by Korina Barry. Our series editors were Denise Cooper and Cliff Dahlberg music was composed by big cats. And this podcast was supported in part by a grant from the Minnesota department of Human Services, Children and Family Services Division. For more information, please visit the CASCW website at cascw.umn.edu. Thank you for listening and stay well, everyone.

