

The Washington Post

Former foster kid overcame odds, with help from many friends, to earn law degree

By Donna St. George
Washington Post Staff Writer
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When Jelani Freeman came home after school one day, his mother was gone. Eight years old, he waited, realizing as the hours passed that she would not be back. She was mentally ill and in need of treatment. His father was in prison.

"I just knew that was it," he recalled.

By the next afternoon, social workers were involved. So began a way of life that he came to know as foster care, a world of in-betweens and stopgaps that brought six moves and inevitable questions about how to get beyond hurt and want and poverty.

On Saturday, against the odds, Freeman will graduate from Howard University Law School, where he has told few of his professors how far he came just to take a seat. Still, his journey has been a source of inspiration to advocates, friends and mentors, including Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who cited him in the 2006 edition of her book "It Takes A Village." Many of those supporters will cheer him on as he crosses the stage at the Washington Convention Center to receive his diploma, one man's humble demonstration of what is possible when grit and determination are melded with offers of help from others. Freeman is not the first child of foster care to earn a law degree, but

experts say many youths who "age out" of the system struggle to finish high school.

For Freeman, what's made the difference has been a kind of makeshift family of those who have cared along the way. Some cooked him dinner. Some steered him toward opportunities. One couple paid for a year and a half of his law school tuition. Many gave him the kind of advice a parent might bestow.

"I sort of see this as a collective achievement," said Freeman, 29, who credits Clinton for his decision to go to law school. He had twice interned in her Senate office, and they had a talk about his career plans. "People say encouraging things to other people because it's the nice thing to do. But she was sincere. She helped me believe it."

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Freeman has become a voice for others who grew up in foster care, giving speeches at workshops and conferences. He serves on the board of the Barker Foundation, which has a program that focuses on foster-care adoptions. He has mentored interns who made the same journey he did: from the foster-care system, to college, to the daunting world of Washington politics.

"A lot of us still keep in touch with him," said Ashley McCullough, 23, who spent eight years in foster care and got an internship on Capitol Hill in 2007 through the same program, created by the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, that brought Freeman to Washington.

McCullough and others say they cannot forget one poignant detail from Freeman's story: When he graduated from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 2002, no one came to watch him cross the stage.

Freeman recalls that as a turning point in his life -- when he realized that the pain of not having an involved family extends beyond childhood.

"This is going to be the time that is different for him," said Marilyn Regier, executive director of Barker, who will join almost two dozen well-wishers this weekend, including McCullough.

Freeman grew up in a series of inner-city neighborhoods in Rochester, N.Y. A couple of

attempts were made to reunite him with his mother, he said, but he was not able to live with her again for long. He has never met his father, and he saw little of his three siblings, who were distant in age.

In foster care, he was first placed with a woman who barely talked to him. "Dinner is ready," she would announce, without using his name. He worried about his mother. "I remember feeling guilty that I was able to have three meals a day and clean clothes, because I didn't know if she did," he said.

His next foster family left him home when they went to the circus, the movies or Chuck E. Cheese's. But Freeman's best experience -- with the Parker family -- lasted nearly five years. When he made the honor roll, his foster mother took him out to dinner. On Thanksgivings, the family went to a grandmother's house.

"Traditions that I had never been a part of, I

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became a part of," he said, until his foster mother died of a heart attack when he was 15.

He lived in one group home, then another. His final placement, for a year and a half, was with an older sister who took him on a foster-care basis, he said, and told him he would have to leave when he turned 18.

Even so, Freeman believes he fared well -- never abused or severely neglected. "Relatively speaking, my story is one of the rosier ones," he said.

In his teenage years, Freeman's grades slipped and so did his school attendance.

"There were so many things going on, I sort of didn't care about school," he says. But that began to change when he met Jackie Booker, a Xerox manager and mother of three who became his mentor in the 11th grade through a community program.

Booker says that when she met Freeman she quickly sized him up -- tall and soft-spoken, "a good kid." After school, he worked in her office at Xerox, and a few times a month they went out: to church, the bowling alley, the mall. They talked a lot by phone.

Booker told him he could not spend \$150 on Michael Jordan sneakers when there were perfectly good shoes at one-third the cost. She rejected his suggestion that he could make money on the streets, like many other

young men.

"They die," she told him.

Said Booker: "He needed to know somebody was around who cared. He needed to know I was there and if he had problems, I was going to help him resolve those issues."

When Freeman finally asked a high school counselor about taking the SAT, she at first waved him off, telling him the college entrance exam was for students who value education.

Freeman took the test, then did better on a second try, after a preparation course Booker helped him find.

At college in Buffalo, he thought he had left the foster-care system behind. He took out loans, received grants and worked several part-time jobs -- remaking his life until the day in fall 2000 when he walked into a

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convenience store and spotted a Time magazine headline: "The Shame of Foster Care." The photo of a 6-year-old beside it reminded him of himself at that age.

He put back the food and spent his \$3.50 on the magazine. "It just kind of shocked me," he said. "I was trying to forget everything at that point."

Freeman still keeps that now-yellowed Time -- a reminder of how many others share his experience and need help.

After college graduation, Freeman landed the Senate internship. It was for those who had grown up in foster care.

"I just loved going into the Senate buildings and the Capitol every day," he said.

For the first time, Freeman was able to look at foster care from the outside, as a policy issue. "It helped me understand the complexities of the system," he said. And as he attended events, Freeman discovered that people wanted to hear from him, someone with firsthand experience.

One speech led to another, and then another. "It grew into a great opportunity to give back, and while I gave back, I kind of gained from it as well," he said.

Freeman finished a master's degree in history at American University and worked for three years in youth-related positions in District

government before starting law school in 2007.

His mother died of cancer during his first year. Freeman, who had once hoped to take care of her, went to New York for her funeral. He fell behind in his classes and wondered whether to stay in school.

Cynthia Mabry, a law professor at Howard in whom he confided, was not surprised when Freeman nonetheless managed to pull off a strong grade in her civil litigation class. Perhaps as in other times of adversity, Mabry said, he seemed to "find it within himself."

But even as others have admired his success, Freeman emphasizes that he did well because people gave him a chance -- the same chance he hopes others from foster care will get.

"This didn't magically happen," he said. "People encouraged me. People supported me. There were programs."

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As he graduates Saturday, his guests will fill all 16 seats he was allotted, plus six more.

They will include Booker, who is traveling from Rochester, and Rachel Lewis, who is throwing a party, and Regier, who calls him a hero. They will also include a Pennsylvania family and a Bowie family with whom he often celebrates holidays. The Maryland couple who helped fund his law school tuition. A onetime boss in the District who considers him a second son.

One person at a time, he has pieced together something akin to family, and as he prepares to cross the stage once more, he says, "that's more important to me than the degree."

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