

OPINION

## A Christmas message for Georgia's youth aging out of foster care

Never give up hope. Life will get better. I know because I was there.



A 2010 display of 500 life-sized photos and messages from the children depicted at Woodruff Park in Atlanta. (John Spink/The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

By Richard L. Jackson

Dec 15, 2024



It's that time of the year again when families get excited to gather around the Christmas tree, celebrate the birth of our savior and exchange gifts.

But for Georgia's 700 young adults who age out of foster care each year, this can be a particularly emotional time of year.

I know, I have been there.

I like to reach out to foster kids and those leaving the foster care system at Christmas because, like them, I, too, once felt confused, sad, angry and scared. They need to know that they are not alone in feeling that way.

Let me tell you my own story to help those leaving foster care and trying to make it on their own. It's a simple message: No matter how tough your life has been, you do not have to be a victim.

I grew up without a father. He left when I was just 9 months old. My mother, though kind, struggled with alcoholism and couldn't hold a job for very long. This led to me being neglected. We moved from one government housing project around Atlanta to another, and I attended 13 different schools.

At age 13, I entered foster care after spending days alone at home fending for myself. During

the next five years, I lived in an orphanage and three foster homes before aging out at age 18. I also have vivid memories of spending Christmas at the Methodist Children's Home in Decatur and a kind stranger leaving a Christmas card and gift of \$100 under my door to cheer me up.

But like many foster kids, I wondered: What did I do wrong to be alone? Why can't my mom or dad take care of me? Who will look after me? What does my future hold? Will I ever be reunited with my family? Will anyone love and care about me?

To those leaving the foster care system or even those still in it, please know you are not alone. None of this is your fault. You did not choose your circumstances. I am here to tell you that you can get through this. Life will get better.



Credit: Handout

Richard L. Jackson

Since my time in foster care, I learned that sometimes our biological parents are unable to provide the love and stability we need. Early on, I chose to adopt God as my father, a source of unconditional and unending love who became my anchor in darkest times.

No matter your past, you have the power to change your future. You can break the cycle. You can make better choices. You can succeed. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

This commitment to yourself can open doors you never imagined. Surround yourself with good, positive people who will uplift and support you. Ask for help when you need it — there are people who will guide you if they see your determination to succeed.

Don't let anyone convince you that you're a victim of the world. Yes, life has been unfair — especially to kids who have wound up in foster care. But you're not powerless. By taking ownership of your choices, you become the driver of your own life. Many people doubted me, and I faced rejection. But I refused to see myself as a "professional victim." Instead, I took control and proved that I could rise above my circumstances.

That's probably why, through hard work and determination, I was able to go to college, start a business and wound up where I am today.

You have within you the seeds of greatness. Speak words of encouragement to yourself to drown out negativity:

- If you can dream it, you can achieve it.
- Failure is not a person; it's just an event.
- Learn from your setbacks; they're opportunities to grow.
- Avoid negative people and seek those who believe in your potential.
- It's not about how you fall; it's about how you get back up.

I survived foster care and built a successful life, and so can you. Define what success means to you, believe in yourself, and stay focused. You'll achieve it. Above all, remember this: Never, never, never give up hope.

It's my ultimate Christmas wish for my fellow foster care alumni.

*Richard L. Jackson, the chairman and chief executive officer of Jackson Healthcare in Alpharetta, is the chairman of FaithBridge Foster Care and chairman of Fostering Success Act, a new foster care tax credit that enables taxpayers to aid young adults aging out of the state foster care system.*