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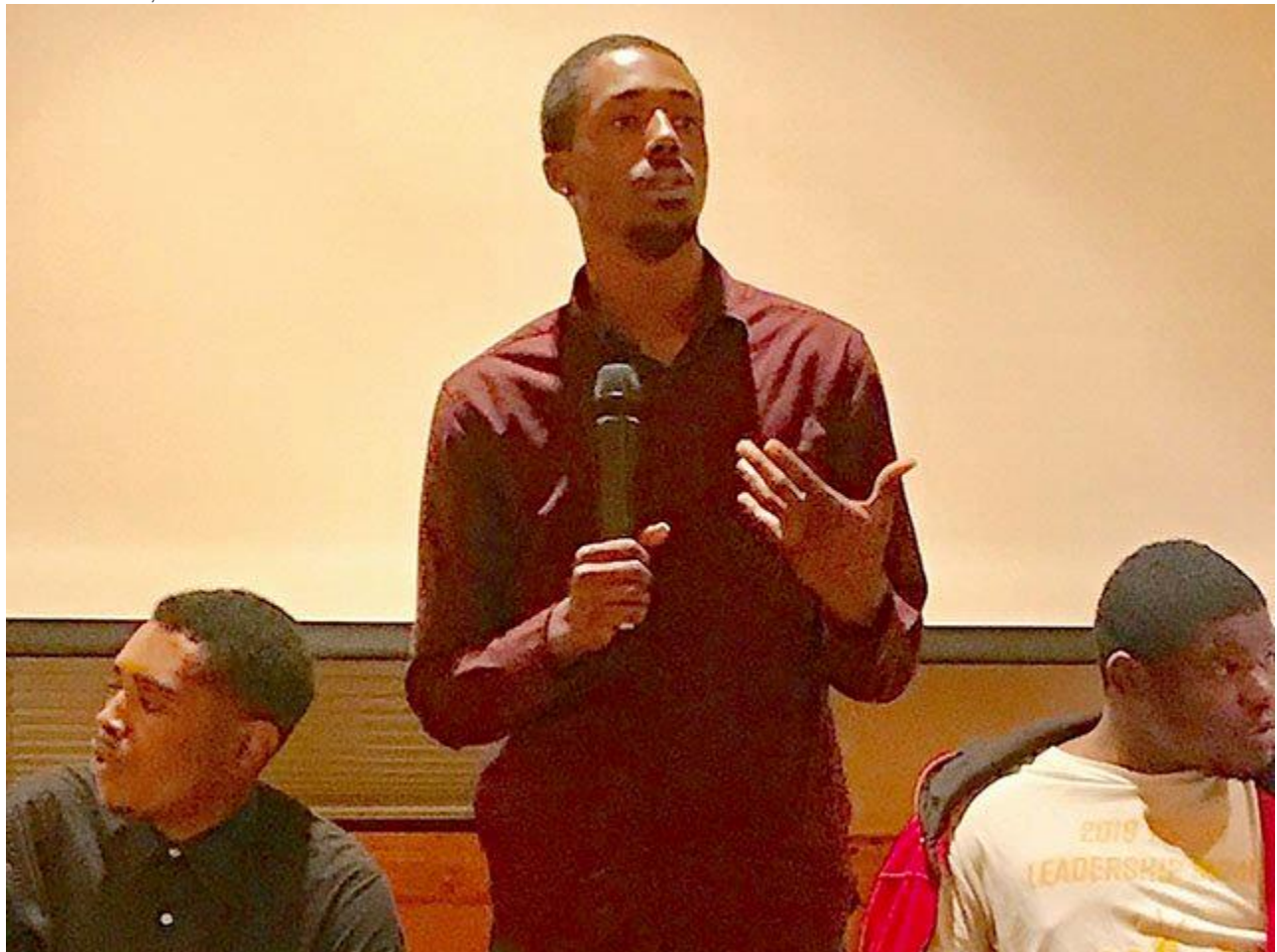
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From the belly of the beast

Foster care graduates will share stories with social workers at UW conference

BY [VICTORIA DAVIS](#)

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Jamie Allen, who grew up largely in foster care: “There are a lot of kids out there who are voiceless and are actually afraid to speak up.”

For its fifth annual social justice conference, UW-Madison’s School of Social Work wanted to hear from people who know the social work system better than anyone: those who have grown up in it.

Since 2015, the conference has challenged both professional and student social workers to engage in racial and social justice action within their programs. The university typically hosts around 20 experts in the field of social work to discuss the justice-driven disruptions they’ve made to the social work system. This year, for the first time, youth who grew up in the system will be telling case workers how they can do better.

“This is our time to step out, not just saying that there is a problem, but asking ‘What are the ways we as social workers can actively change things?’” says Jenny Braunginn, field and faculty instructor for the UW-Madison School of Social Work and chair of the 2019 planning committee for Social Workers Confronting Racial Injustice Conference.

“This is what this conference was created for,” adds Bethany Matson, a graduate student member of the conference committee and a social worker with Dane County Department of Human Services. “These young people really are better experts on these systems than anyone else because they lived through it every day. They see what happens on the other side that most social workers never get to see and they are here to inform us about how things could, and should, be different.”

Matson spearheaded the idea and connected with [Urban Underground](#) and [Lad Lake](#), both Milwaukee-based nonprofits that are dedicated to providing support and resources to foster care youth and working to build safer and more sustainable communities. Both groups sponsor young adults and teens to speak at social work conferences around Wisconsin.

“They aren’t children anymore, they’re grown up now and they’ve had some very traumatic experiences that they’ve lived through,” says Sharlen Moore, co-founder and director of Urban Underground. “Listening to them

talk is what the system needs and people have been absolutely moved by their stories.”

Jamie Allen is one of the six young adults who will be speaking at UW’s conference on Jan. 25. Allen entered foster care as a 3-month-old, was adopted, but then later removed from his adoptive home. He returned to foster care until he “aged out.” As part of Urban Underground’s Youth Leadership Team, Allen, now age 20, has been speaking at social work conferences for four years.

“When I was first approached about doing the talks, I was kind of nervous because I didn’t know what I was getting myself into,” says Allen. “But now I see this as something I’d like to do long term. There are a lot of kids out there that are voiceless and are actually afraid to speak up. So I feel like I can represent them in this way.”

Allen says he experienced abusive and neglectful adoptive parents as well as emotionally absent case workers, which led to interactions with law enforcement. Allen says the foster care system needs to change, especially for children of color.

“Things started to spiral for me the older I got and the longer I was in the system,” says Allen. “I was traumatized and I needed help but felt like no one would help me. They just stuck me in foster homes and didn’t really care if it fit me. They were just doing things on their time and I didn’t feel heard.”

While living in a group home, Allen says, he was shuffled from case worker to case worker. “They changed so fast it was hard for me to adapt and get to know them, and for them to get to know me,” Allen says. “When I got older I found out that there’s this sheet of paper every case worker gives foster parents to read and it’s just filled with stuff about you. But they read it before they even meet you. The stuff that was on that paper wasn’t really who I was. It wasn’t an accurate representation of me.”

The racial inequities of the system are not being confronted, Matson says. “I think there’s still this ‘savior’ complex that a lot of social workers have because a majority of social workers tend to be white women,” she says.

“They don’t really take the time to understand or acknowledge the complexities of working in a very diverse population.”

Allen, with microphone in hand, is helping broaden social workers’ perspectives by sharing his story. “I feel like people are actually listening,” he says.

At each conference he’s spoken at, at least two case workers approach Allen asking what the best thing is they can do for the kids they work with. Allen always gives the same piece of advice.

“Treat them like your kids,” says Allen. “What path would you want your child to go down? How would you approach your child? I know you’d approach them like you care because of course you’d care. Every client you have is basically your child and they just want to see that someone cares about them.”

“Every day I work with young kids and I always think, ‘We need to listen more to what these kids want,’ rather than us just coming up with blanket solutions for everyone,” says Matson. “This is ultimately their life.... It’s important to have them involved in every step of the process and not just demean them for being children. We could learn a lot from what they have to say.”

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