Devon is like a ray of sunshine when he walks into a room. He has had many struggles in his young life, including being homeless several times since aging out, but Devon hasn’t let any of that affect the way he carries himself. His story of resourcefulness and resilience is very motivating and encouraging and made him the ideal recipient of the first Champion Award in honour of Jennifer McFarlane.

One thing that brings everyone together is food but unfortunately not everybody has their next meal guaranteed. Devon knows this first hand from his own struggles.

Devon has been a friendly and familiar face at Aunt Leah’s Place since 2013, when he was invited to participate in the Link program by a former staff member. For him, food security was a big thing. The transit security and the clothing provided have also made a difference. At Aunt Leah’s, Devon has met a lot of new friends and has also learned networking skills. In Devon’s words “The program covers your basic needs in a lot of ways, that’s for sure. I think if I didn’t know Aunt Leah’s at the time, 4 or 5 years ago, I don’t know where I’d be right now.”

A big part of Aunt Leah’s Place work involves coordinating food based programs. Aunt Leah’s strives to provide balanced meals which Devon recognizes is important. “Without life skills to do the cooking and food, you’ll only be eating fast food and wasting resources and money on things you should already know as an adult.” Devon said.

When asked about his thoughts about food security for youth aging out of care, Devon responds “Youth from care have it a lot rougher than the average youth with two parents and a dog and a white fence. If they are poor, don’t have money and need food, they can go to Mommy and Daddy or anyone else that they know. They usually have strong community bonds. With youth in care, you usually don’t have that. I can’t go to friends and family mostly because of my own pride. I’m too shy and embarrassed to say ‘Hey, I’m struggling, can you help me?’ Sometimes you’ll get responses like ‘Can’t you ask your family?’ I’ve just noticed that there is a gap between both of them”.

Devon’s Story
Helping Youth Secure Their Next Meal

Aunt Leah’s Place | Newsletter 2018
With the support of Vancouver Foundation’s Fostering Change Initiative and Aunt Leah’s Place, he recently created Spoons Up, an online guide of accessible, free and low-cost food resources in the Lower Mainland designed with youth leaving care in mind. The project aims to ensure food security, combat isolation and provides information about youth-specific resources.

Devon and other youth have personally visited the locations featured on the website to make sure that they are safe and that there is enough to fill their bowls.

Devon is an engaged member of Aunt Leah’s Housing First Committee and wants to become a role model for other people who are in the position he was, especially young males that haven’t had role models in their lives, like himself.

*If you’d like to support youth like Devon and Aunt Leah’s programs please consider joining our Brighter Future Monthly Donor Community for as little as $20 a month.*

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**There Isn’t Just One Narrative of Foster Care**

*A conversation with Martha*

*It’s a sunny Wednesday afternoon and as I’m sitting in Aunt Leah’s brand new downtown space contemplating the alluring photographs displayed on the wall, I’m full of anticipation to meet Martha, the young artist behind the lens who has lent us their art pieces.*

I read the bio on the wall “Martha is a self-taught amateur photographer born in Tel-Aviv, and raised in Vancouver. Martha has always been drawn to photography as a form of self expression and storytelling. They are a second year university student who participated in the Relationships Matter photo voice project documenting the foster care experience from a unique lens.”

Martha arrives shortly with a broad smile and a cheerful spirit and we start our conversation about their participation in the project.

As a brief introduction for those not familiar with it, Relationships Matter showcases a collection of photographs taken by youth who have ‘aged out’ of care. While there’s plenty of discussion on financially supporting youth transitioning to adulthood, the project was meant to help bring to light something that doesn’t get talked about very much: the emotional and mental supports youth leaving care lack without long-term, supportive relationships.
I've seen lots of research about youth from care that only includes numbers but does not include the participant. The photography on the Relationships Matter project allowed us to share our story and experiences. It allowed us to represent ourselves instead of being represented by somebody else.

For the project we were given small Nikon Cool Pix cameras and were allowed to keep them after, so I simply carry it with me wherever I go. I like to capture things natural and work with raw photographs, I’m kind of snobby and prefer to stick with minimal editing.

Yes, the “Peace” photo because it was the first time meeting my young sibling after going into foster care . We had a very difficult time with lack of communication and he went to foster care first. After that, all communication had to go through social workers and it’s not natural. It was like playing “banana phone” where the messages got twisted. “Peace” is about reconnecting, being peaceful and natural, capturing a moment when we were trying to pick up where our relationship had ended.

For other foster care kids, I want them know that everything is going to be ok. There is a good life worth living after you get through all the challenges”.

For everyone else, who may not be familiar, I want to show the complexity of life in the foster care experience and show that there isn’t just one narrative of foster care.

There is a lot of help with life skills but there should be more of a focus on making sure youth who are aging-out have a plan. I wrote my own plan as I wanted to go to university but I had to do the research myself. It’s very intimidating when you’re told at 19 that you are on your own. It would have been very helpful to have someone to talk to.

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For more than 100 years, Central City Foundation has been providing safe, secure and affordable spaces for community organizations that enable them to create innovative and effective programs. As part of its social purpose real estate mandate, the Foundation owns five buildings that provide housing and space to support services like the Vancouver Women’s Health Collective and the Phil Bouvier Family Centre at highly subsidized rents. Every dollar invested in social purpose real estate sees almost $4.00 in social benefit to our community.

One of the social purpose real estate buildings owned by Central City Foundation (CCF) is Aunt Leah’s building in New Westminster. In 2013, CCF purchased the building for Aunt Leah’s Place and has supported several renovations to create a beautiful, functional space for both programs and administration.

“Where others won’t invest, Central City Foundation will, because we listen to our community partners and fund innovative solutions that fit their needs,” says Jennifer Johnstone, President and CEO of Central City Foundation. “We help our neighbours in three ways – by providing funding and support for programs, capital projects and social purpose real estate. For Aunt Leah’s Place, we provide a deep subsidy, upwards of $90,000 a year, as well as the security of tenure of being a Central City Foundation community tenant.”

“It gives Aunt Leah’s and other tenants in our buildings a stronger foundation and strengthens them in a way where they can take risks, develop new programs and develop their own asset base because they have a strong home base. All of that translates into a stronger organization well beyond the value of the rental subsidy itself.”

Central City Foundation believes strongly in Aunt Leah’s mission to strengthen families by supporting young mothers and youth in the foster care system and continues to provide additional capital grants to improve or expand programs and services at Aunt Leah’s. “We are committed to help Aunt Leah’s continue to thrive,” says Johnstone.