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Opinion

## Foundation helps foster care youth

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By Saba Gebrai

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On March 17, 2011, we at Park West Foundation lost a shining star, a Blue Baby, both an athlete and a scholar.

Merceela Faith Pippen, a Mumford graduate, member of Mumford's "Hoop Squad," a graduate of Michigan State University and Foster care Alumni, made her transition in Detroit's Receiving Hospital due to medical complications at age 22.

Since 2006, Park West Foundation, along with many partnering agencies and volunteers, have had the pleasure of supporting, learning and knowing hundreds of youth in and out of care, such as Merceela.

Each year in Michigan, thousands of children remain in the state's care due to neglect, abuse or and/or absence of a parent. And not all of those children and youth who come into care will have the academic and social success Merceela was able to attain. Normally, the family is where a child will begin to form a cultural, social, religious and other layers of realities that affirm one's identity. The family is planted in a community due to parent's obligations such as employment, child's school, place of worship, doctor's office, extended family connections etc.

In the absence of a parent, these connections normally established by the adults in a family, are lost and thus, the child.

Specially during May, and everyday there are many ways that good people with an understanding of the privilege of being a part of a child's life can do to make a difference.

Schools can do more.

Mumford High School should be proud to have been involved in Merceela's life. The Mumford family served as advocates, an extended family all through high school, specially during events such as the Prom. Five years after graduation, coaches, teammates, a former principal were all represented at Merceela's funeral. We can learn from Mumford, a perfect example that it takes a village to raise a child. People need to recognize talent in youth and give them an opportunity for meaningful activity and to have their own voice.

Most youth in care are forced to leave childish ways early and have better insight of societal ills and have increased empathy for the plight of other children in need.

Merceela was involved in many projects to give back to other children, including mentoring in the Foster Care Summer Camp of Michigan State University School of Social Work, partly sponsored by Park West Foundation.

Merceela gave back to other children in need through Park West Foundation's Blue Babies, who are Michigan's Children that overcame various adversities, but still chose to commit, to lead by example and serve as guardians/advocates of children's rights. Family support and life-long connections are needed.

Merceela's family connections, her sisters, brothers and the Neal family's unconditional love and support added to her stability and consistency contributing to her academic and social success.

During Foster Care Month, Park West Foundation & the Blue Babies encourage all to have faith. Enough to take the first step and have the privilege to be in a child's life.

Have faith that every little gesture of sincere dedication and consistency makes a big difference.

Have faith that you can inspire a child to reach his or her full potential.

Saba Gebrai is the program officer and Blue Babies director of the Park West Foundation. It was founded by Albert and Mitsi Scaglione of Park West Gallery in 2006 to more effectively address needs of foster care youth aging out of care by supporting innovative, creative and lasting solutions. For information, go online to [www.Parkwestfoundation.org](http://www.Parkwestfoundation.org) or <http://www.saveourchildrencoalition.org/> for upcoming events.

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