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out of the block

LIKE MANY CHILDREN RAISED IN the foster care system, Tray T.* learned self-reliance at a very early age. In fact, he was so young when he and his 10 siblings were split up that he doesn't remember it. "Our mother and father were addicted to drugs and couldn't take care of us," Tray says. "We went to two different places: My twin brother and I, along with an older brother and sister, went to my great-aunt's in Compton, and the others went with my grandmother, who was already a foster parent." In 2000, Tray's great-aunt passed away, but her husband, Lorenzo, kept the kids and raised the four of them himself.

"We called him Uncle Lo, and he taught me everything," says Tray, now 24. "He taught

me his work ethic, the drive I have, and the real difference between right and wrong. In the community I grew up in, it's so easy to get confused, because you might see a faster way up or out. My uncle forfeited his retirement to take care of us," he says. "He invested in us wholeheartedly emotionally. And because of him, I can read any situation and any person."

That ability might have saved Tray's life; it certainly saved his sanity. "There were family members who would get crazy," he says. "There were times when we were with them when they were robbing a grocery store or dealing or doing drugs. A lot of people in my family struggled with drugs, not just my parents. It was hard on us to keep all that in mind and stay focused."

*Tray T.'s first name is used throughout this article to protect his privacy.

WITH THE GUIDANCE OF EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBERS, TEACHERS, AND UNITED FRIENDS OF THE CHILDREN, FORMER FOSTER CHILD TRAY T. GAINED THE CONFIDENCE HE NEEDED TO OVERCOME THE ODDS, GET A COLLEGE EDUCATION, AND START ON THE PATH TO A SUCCESSFUL CAREER.

BY *Peg Moline* | PHOTOGRAPHY *Lisa Romerein*

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ray and his twin knew education would be the way out. Growing up, they walked to middle school past King/Drew Magnet High School (ranked a silver medalist and one of America's best high schools in 2008 and 2009 by *U.S. News & World Report*). "We would walk by and say, 'We have to go to that school,'" Tray says. "We were definitely motivated. That school was our goal. We competed to get in."

Once he was enrolled, Tray saw the high school as a great opportunity not just to make friends, but also to get to know his teachers, who challenged him. "I was the class clown, so I had to make sure I stayed focused." Tray's biggest challenge, he says, was English. "I loved math; English, not so much. But I still had to take AP classes in it. I was so afraid I wouldn't do well enough to go to college."

The classes Tray did best in were math and economics. "I love numbers and what you can do with them. How you can paint a picture, especially when it comes to investing," he says. "My uncle was in construction, so he knew how to work and work. You need to know geometry and how to make a profit. That's what he did; that's what we did and still do."

Tray saw that his passion for numbers and a good education could help him turn his back on the negative opportunities in his neighborhood. He had always thought college would never be an option, but an English teacher at his high school saw his potential and introduced him to the United Friends of the Children (UFC), a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that

supports kids in the foster care system and helps them get a college education.

Founded in 1979 by children's advocate and philanthropist Nancy Daly, UFC aims to change the face of foster care through its 11-year education

program that starts with foster children in seventh grade and guides them through the completion of a bachelor's degree at a four-year college. Its Pathways program helps them after they emancipate from care up to age 25 by providing emotional support and service-enriched housing, so they have a safety net until they are firmly in adulthood. Eighteen- to 24-year-olds transitioning out of foster care have come to light as a sadly neglected sector.

"The national outcomes for kids who begin their lives in the foster care system are shocking," says Catherine Attack, UFC's director of development. "Nationally, only 13 percent of foster kids will go to college, and less than 3 percent get their bachelor's degree. The hurdles these young people face are overwhelming. We currently serve 1,400 kids of the 30,000 foster homes in Los Angeles." By contrast, 100

percent of the foster youth in UFC's College Readiness program for four or more years graduate high school, 97 percent of that group are eligible to go on to college, and, on average, 70 percent of the organization's College Sponsorship students graduate with a bachelor's degree.

"Tray was fortunate to have one solid place to call home," Attack

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CATHERINE ATTACK,
United Friends of the Children

**DEFYING
THE ODDS**
Tray graduated
with a degree in
finance and is now
working at AIG.



says. “It’s not unusual for kids to have as many as 60 different placements in their lives, and each time there’s a move, there is an educational impact. Tray and his brother are examples of what is possible when programs like ours get the funding they need.

“Nancy created UFC with the board around her kitchen table,” Attack says. “She vowed that everyone would be treated like our own children, and that we would work to give them the future we’d give our own family.”

“It really is about taking advantage of opportunity,” Tray says. He finished his degree in business finance at Cal State Northridge and is now a regional marketing associate at AIG insurance and financial services corporation, which involves serving as a financial advisor for the company’s retirement clients. His dream is to continue to work in client interaction and teach personal finance.

He also continues to work with UFC to share his experience and “help guide younger UFC kids through their journeys,” he says. And he knows that he has not only UFC to thank, but a community as well. “The gifts I received are not only from UFC, but also from individuals who believe in UFC’s mission.”

“Tray is one of our most serving volunteers,” Attack declares. “That’s why he’s not playing sports and music. He and his brother have a staunch belief that by paying it forward, they can help other kids.”

UFC events do seem to make up a big chunk of Tray’s social life. “I love volunteering,” he says. “I like going to events like networking mixers and panels. Coming up, we have our food and wine event, Cultivate L.A.” Tray also loves scary movies, reading about stocks, and hanging out with friends.

Among Tray’s most striking qualities are his warm smile, his rascal charm, his optimism, and his upbeat gratitude. His happiest memory of childhood is the Christmas when he and his brother got their first bikes. “We would ask for a lot of things, but never really received them—that game or system we always wanted,” Tray remembers. “But when we were 9 or 10, we got bikes and always cherished them so much.”

And while self-reliance certainly helped Tray to attain his achievements, he acknowledges how vital the funding and support he

received from UFC has been. “My counselors gave me the confidence to go the next step [by saying] that I deserved the next step, deserved to be in college and then to graduate, to intern at Wells Fargo and Warner Bros., and then apply for and get a job,” he says. “I was able to use my entrepreneurial mind and start laying out the path that would get me where I wanted to go.

“My children might not have to start in the hard place I did,” Tray says, “but I will teach them to treat everyone the same, whether it’s the president or a janitor. We are all human and each individual has amazing capacity. I’ve learned to honor and respect those who came before and paved our way.” ♥

PEG MOLINE is a writer and editor who lives in Mar Vista; her most recent book is *The Doctor’s Book of Natural Health Remedies* (2014).