

"This is who I am."



At the national Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) conference, 17-year-old Alexander Lopes captivated the audience.

He represented Connecticut and the New England Youth Coalition (NEYC) while articulating his views on how to improve the lives of children in care who are part of the LGBTQ+ community.

This was not the first, nor the last time Alex will impact the experiences of others.

Alex is a transgender youth transitioning from female to male. "I started questioning in 2019 but really even before," Alex stated. He remembers at 8 or 9 years of age cutting his hair very short while a "conservative" foster parent "shut down" his expression. "My 9–10-year-old self told me it was wrong."

Alex had no LGBTQ+ exposure growing up, or an outlet to explore his identity. This in part led to the deterioration of his self-respect and worth.

A number of years later, Alex took part in a 20-day DCF Wilderness school expedition for young people to develop leadership skills while backpacking, rock-climbing, canoeing and taking part in other challenges. He met a transgender youth who explained their identity. "A bunch of us were curious about it," Alex stated.

They listened intently, asked questions and the conversations continued throughout the journey. "Oh, this kind of makes sense of what I'm feeling," Alex thought to himself.

In Fall 2019 Alex "came out" to his friends and eventually his DCF Social Worker. "He/him pronouns feel the best for me," Alex articulated.



At the time, Alex was living with a foster family who did not acknowledge his expression or desires to change his name from Cecilia to Alex. "You are too young to know what you are talking about," he remembers hearing. "What if you change your mind in the future?" was a question posed to him.

"Are you sure?" Alex was asked repeatedly.

At the time, Alex's therapist of over five years was the most stable person in his life. He leaned heavily on this relationship. "She always supported me," Alex recalls. "She was one of my biggest supports when I came out."

How did Alex stay strong during this critical period in his life?

Alex knew he wanted more for not only himself, but for other youth in the care and custody of the Department. "My personality and my will to advocate for other kids kept me afloat," Alex emphatically stated.

As a freshman in high school, Alex founded the Gay-Straight Alliance, meeting with fellow students on a weekly basis to discuss healthy relationships and how to educate colleagues and peers about the LGBTQ+ community. That work evolved to include students and their allies.

The "fit" between Alex and his foster family was not healthy and as a Junior in high school, Alex remembers worrying about where he was going to live. He took it upon himself to ask his current and former teachers about their interest in providing a home for him.



Alex was bold in his approach.

"Hey, would you like a kid?" Alex asked school personnel as he knocked on each classroom door. He recognized it was a "big request."

Amy Brazauski was Alex's former English teacher who was approached by Alex's friend. "Alex needs a new mom," he stated. "I'm more like a big sister type," Amy initially thought and then realized Alex was actually looking for a foster parent. Amy "knew the gravity of the situation" and "had to think about it more."

"At my age people get proposed to for marriage. I got proposed to for a foster child."

Due to a number of extenuating circumstances, time went by, and Alex remained in his current placement. Amy and her interests to provide a home were not far away.

Enter Social Worker Vincent Espino out of the Danbury Office.

Alex credits Vince, a former youth in care himself, for "making it happen." He outreached to Amy and again explained Alex's continued need. "I felt really honored that Alex went forward with my name," Amy stated.



Continuity of schooling is so critical to youth in care. It was brought to Amy's attention that Alex may need to leave his school community - where he has extensive LGBTQ+ supports - if a new family could not be located.

This was the "turning point" for Amy. "He is coming with me," Amy told Vince.

"Vince has been phenomenal."

Amy was eventually licensed as a kinship placement and Alex was moved to his new family. They are supported by Children's Community Programs, a therapeutic foster care agency out of New Haven. Amy's describes the process to becoming licensed as "really doable" with each step along the way manageable.

As far as caring for adolescents? "Teenagers are often misunderstood," is her message to others. Having an adolescent was the perfect fit for her right now and could very well be for others.

Amy credits her family and friends for embracing her desires to accept Alex into her home and they have embraced Alex as part of a large supportive family network.

Alex and Amy have been together for approximately four months. "How luck am I? Not every teen ends up being who he is. He is such a treasure to have," Amy fondly stated about Alex.

"We have a really great way of communicating with each other."

What was the first day of placement like? Alex moved in and immediately the next day he was going to the previously mentioned CWLA conference in Washington DC. When a few items were absent his travel list, it was Amy - at 10:30 p.m. in her pajamas - going to Walmart with Alex to make sure Alex had all he needed!

"Despite his many hardships, Alex continues to smile, laugh and love who he is and who he is becoming. Saying I am proud of Alex doesn't quite define how I feel. It's youth like Alex who make the long hours and extra effort worth every second. He ignites a flame that makes you want to work harder, and makes you want to do the job with passion and determination to ensure our youth succeed. With every accomplishment he achieves I feel a sense of relief that maybe I'm doing this social work thing right after all," stated Vince.

With fierce self-determination and a growing "village," Alex continues changing lives.

Alex has been a member of the NEYC for three years and was chosen among 10 other applicants to attend the CWLA conference this past May. He has written a blog for Youth Action Month. "I am a published author," Alex stated as his work appeared in the Imprint Newsletter entitled ["Am I Really Accepted?"](#)

He is working to educate foster parents about LGBTQ+ youth. "We are not different than any other youth," he stated. "Foster parents may not react appropriately because they simply do not know." He is advocating to make training on LGBTQ+ policies mandatory for foster parents during the licensing process. He believes with more education will come "better preparedness for what is out there."

"No kid is too young to question themselves," he wants DCF staff to understand. "When a kid comes out, support and educate them."

"I truly believe the best part about working with Alex is that he isn't done yet. He has many goals and many dreams which means we still have much work to do. His journey is just getting started and I am grateful to be able witness his successes firsthand," Vince added.

What does Alex's future hold?

"I want to continue what I am doing. Enjoy what I am doing," he stated. He desires to stay close to his "village" and go to college in-state after graduation in 2024. His impact will further be felt someday as Alex aspires to be a public policy lawyer in order to "make a difference."

Alex has clear message for other youth in the LGBTQ+ community. "There will always be someone who accepts and supports you. Be true to yourself," he stated. "Get into a safe place and be proud of who you are."



What is he most proud of?

"How far I have come and how resilient I am."

Thank you, Alexander, for sharing your story and changing lives!