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When Neil Ford Jr. looks at himself in the mirror, hopefully he realizes the strength of the person looking back at him.

At 18 years of age, Neil is the youngest member of the Statewide Advisory Council (SAC), a legislatively mandated body which serves to advise, support and provide policy, practice, budgetary and other recommendations to the Department of Children and Families.

Yet, he stands for so much more.

Once in congregate care, Neil is an articulate and outspoken youth about Connecticut's behavioral health system - one in which he has been involved since 9 years of age.

Neil uses his experience to help others and improve systems. "I am not doing this for the money. I am doing this so the voices are heard," he stated.

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Neil recently outreached to Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly of the Department of Children and Families, requesting to meet with her and share his views to improve Connecticut's service delivery.

May is Mental Health Awareness month and for almost 30 minutes, Neil - in his thoughtful and charismatic ways - took full advantage of the opportunity to share his views with the Agency's leader.



Neil described one placement at the Solnit North Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF) as "too short" and "hard on the family" to attend therapy sessions because of the distance the program was located from his home. His recommendation was to actually extend the amount of time youth are in congregate care to a minimum of 9 months instead of 6 months.

Those beliefs were based on his experiences at the Children's Center of Hamden (CCOH). "I feel like that time at the Children's Center was beautiful. I had the time away, I was able to be to myself and reevaluate myself not only by doing family sessions but by being there."



Neil described the time spent at the congregate care facility as "beneficial" getting "intense treatment" from people who "want to see you thrive."

"Being able to voice yourself and being able to get your opinions across is definitely one of the things you focused on," he further stated.

"The love that I got from the majority of the staff members is why things went well at the Children's Center," Neil said. He and an employee named Jose even looked alike leading to Jose calling him "Son" while Neil referred to Jose as "Dad." For Halloween, Neil dressed up just like Jose!

Neil spoke highly of Jose and Niesha. "They were unlike any other staff members. They still showed me the same love that they showed me when I first got there."

He believes CCOH gave him the "Unconditional love I needed in order to feel safe and secure."

Neil is now giving back to the same place where he speaks so highly of the care he received and does outreach at the CCOH on a weekly basis. He has a passion to check in on youth 24/7. "I want those kids to feel like they are being heard and are not there just because they had some issues at home," Neil stated.



The rewards of his work and the impact he has on others are evident in a recent experience with a resident. "Mr. Neil, I'm leaving on Friday, I won't be able to see you," the youth called out to him. "I just wanted to thank you because the past couple of months, they've been easier because you've been coming and I've been able to talk to you and you really understood me."

Neil has met with new Waterbury Mayor Paul Pernerewski to advise on how to intervene with youth who are having a behavioral health crisis. He also gave insights on how to address violence within the city, given Neil recently lost his friend to homicide.

Neil also takes part in mental health advocacy in his free time. Reaching out to Board of Education members and informing parents of the "Dos and don'ts" about youth experiencing a mental health crisis.

Neil's work has not gone unnoticed as he is the subject of two articles written about him in the Waterbury papers.

Neil also gave accolades for the support he received from Social Worker Ryan Shove of the Waterbury Office. "We love Ryan," Neil was quick to point out.

Obtaining a Nursing Degree in Psychiatry is Neil's long term goal starting with earning a certificate as a Registered Behavioral Health Technician. This August, he will begin work towards a General Studies degree at the University of Maryland on-line program as the first step. Neil aspires to work at an in-patient level of care and "Be able to help youth and direct youth" within that setting.



"You are very impressive. Very impressive. You could do anything you can put your mind to," Neil was told by Commissioner Hill-Lilly. "Just don't let your mind limit what you can do. You have the 'it' factor. The 'it' factor. Nobody can explain 'it'. 'It' is a superpower."

"Your experiences happened as a way to "prepare you for what you are going to do for the lives of other kids," she further added.

Neil has a message for youth across Connecticut. He suggests that they have some type of "support person they trust." Growing up, Neil did not have that person and he believes youth need that one individual they can go to when they are having a hard time which may lead to a connection to services.

Neil is equally clear on what he believes young men of color should consider. "I want them to know not to be scared to reach out even if no one believes you," he stated. He continually sought support for himself when younger but no one listened. Neil wanted an "outside" perspective not just "family" perspective on what he was experiencing. "It is okay to trust others outside of your family with your feelings. There are people out there who actually care about your mental health and well being and want to see you thrive and want to see you succeed," he added.

Neil articulates the pressures within families to not seek outside supports. "We care so much to keep it within the family," he stated.

Neil is a community advocate, peer support, motivational speaker and a leader within his community.

He is also a person with "lived expertise" and exactly the voice that can change systems. "Being that sturdy stepping stool that people need in their lives is the most important role we can play with others," he stated.

Thank you Neil Ford Jr.!

You are an inspiration!