

Profiles in Excellence: Jessica Rogers

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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It has been said that everyone has a purpose in life.

Some live never knowing their purpose, some find it later in life and for some, that purpose is shown immediately. For Jessica Rogers, she is living her purpose – a purpose she said she knew almost immediately.

Rogers, who described herself as a proud corporate dropout said, "I just didn't feel that's where I was supposed to be. I was making excellent money at a young age, but I wasn't happy. It's always been my calling to work with young people. For me, I believe I was born specifically for this purpose."

The purpose for which Rogers was born is to work with children in the foster care system. As executive director of Connections to Independence (C2i), Rogers is charged with assisting teens and young adults (ages 15 – 21) that are in the Hennepin County foster care system and helping them to transition into adulthood.

Summit Academy OIC President Louis King, in conjunction with the county, started C2i in 2002 as a program within the academy. According to Rogers, King wanted to address the high number of African-Americans in the foster care system that were having trouble adjusting to life on their own and oftentimes coming in contact with the criminal justice system. Rogers, 40, was brought on as a program manager in 2008. A year later, she was faced with a unique dilemma when according to Rogers; King informed her that the program would no longer be a part of

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Summit Academy.

"He said you can take this as your own nonprofit and I accepted the challenge and said I'll take it on," said the C2i executive director.

Rogers assembled what she described as an amazing board of directors, including King who is an advisory board member, and what was once a program within a program is now an organization servicing several teens and young adults in the foster care system. For Rogers, C2i is not a job – it is a life-long calling.

"I was born in Lorain, Ohio, to a 15-year-old mother and a 35-year-old father," recalled Rogers, who said her birth mother was molested multiple times by her birth father. "My mother never once held me. I was immediately placed in foster care."

Fortunately for Rogers, only two months after birth, she was adopted. But for the teens and young adults she assists, many have been placed in foster home after foster home – some living in up to five different foster homes.

"If I'm 40 and having issues with (having been put up for adoption) imagine how a 15- or 16-year-old in foster care feels," said Rogers, who said she has recently discovered she has additional biological siblings, but has yet to meet them.

According to Rogers, C2i prepares youth for living independently as they get closer to reaching adulthood and aging out of the foster care system. Participants are between the ages of 15-21 and focus on a healthy mind, body, and soul approach to learning independent living skills. Youth are assigned an independent living skills counselor who they work with until they exit the program.

Rogers said early on with C2i, she realized the true needs of the individuals her organization is seeking to assist.

"I was writing a check for a girl's electric bill and what I realized we were teaching people how to attain things, but not how to maintain things," said Rogers. "So we switched to a healthy mind, soul and body approach. We're teaching how to cook, how to budget, sexual awareness; we try to expose them to more than the four block radius they're accustomed to."

As someone who was briefly in the foster care system, the mission of C2i is extremely personal for Rogers. But the mother of a 7-year-old son, Peyton, said, though difficult, she tries not letting her position consume her.

"But I love what I'm doing," said Rogers. "This is my life, this is my purpose. I don't feel like it's work. This is what life is supposed to be like."

Rogers said she and her staff tend to get personally involved in the teens' and young adults' lives.

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"I enjoy hearing about kids getting jobs and hearing about them going to college. This is a perfect fit for me," said Rogers.

May is National Foster Care Month.

To learn more about C2i and its mission, visit www.c2iyouth.org.