



ISAIAH'S STORY

"Until now, I never had people that are right there for me."

In September 2016, a group of strangers met at a coffee shop near downtown Tulsa. On his way to the meeting, Isaiah Wright felt the nervous energy that often accompanies walking towards the unknown. At age seventeen, Isaiah was about to age out of DHS custody in a state he had only called home for a few months. He had no family in Oklahoma and little support left even in his hometown of Detroit, Michigan.

Weeks before, Isaiah had been introduced to TJ Warren, Stand in the Gap's Life Launch Program Manager in Tulsa. TJ met with Isaiah at Youth Services of Tulsa, where Isaiah was living at the time, and told him that through Life Launch, Isaiah could be paired with a small group of mentors who would spend time with him as he transitioned from foster care to independent adulthood. Isaiah was immediately interested.

Usually, Life Launch youth participants have some say in the volunteers who make up their teams. But Isaiah did not have any preferences about the gender, race or personality types of the people on his team. "He was just happy to have anybody," TJ says.

Now, at age 18, Isaiah is slim, with a wide smile and closely cropped hair. In Michigan, he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a disorder that occurs to the developing brain usually before birth. CP can manifest in a variety of ways and its effect on functional abilities varies widely from person to person. For Isaiah, there are no noticeable physical symptoms of his diagnosis. He attributes this to staying active by playing basketball, running track and "getting his body back in shape."

Isaiah was adopted as a child. He never had a father or father figure and has never met any of his biological siblings. He calls his hometown "heart-breaking". Isaiah was kicked out of his house at age 16 because he was using and selling drugs. After spending some nights in the homeless shelter and others "sleeping in the snow" in Detroit, Isaiah was offered a job in Texas.

"The job," he says, "was very illegal." He stayed in hotels with his employers until they found out that Isaiah was underage. They put him on a Greyhound bus in Oklahoma City and called the police. Just like that, Isaiah was in foster care.

Entering foster care at age 17 meant that Isaiah had virtually no chance of finding a permanent home. Nearly 300 teenagers “age out” of DHS custody in Oklahoma each year. Research shows that many of the 16,000 children who have spent time in foster care will find or be reunited with a permanent family, but as a child ages, the chances of permanence dwindle. When a young adult like Isaiah ages out of the system with no social support structure, they face daunting statistics of high unemployment, homelessness, incarceration, and/or addiction.

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Kaylin and Jarrod Parks felt they had been called to serve as foster parents but that the timing wasn’t right. Kaylin had just finished school and was starting a new job. A few weeks after they made the decision not to apply to be foster parents, they heard a presentation about Stand in the Gap in Sunday morning services at Solace Church. “I was like, this is a sign from God,” Kaylin says. “I can be there for [a Life Launch youth] as much as they need me. I felt like I was fulfilling what God wanted us to do.”

For their fellow volunteer, Frank Andrews, Life Launch provides an opportunity to form deeper and more lasting relationships with foster youth. He and his wife, Alisa, have served on multiple Life Launch teams and promote the opportunity at various Life.Church campuses.

As of their first meeting, Frank had only met the Parks briefly and no one had met Isaiah.

But as the group sat around the table, they began to find common ground. Isaiah talked about his favorite food (pizza), his favorite sport (basketball), his favorite team (Oklahoma City Thunder), his affinity for scary movies (not shared by anyone else on his team), and what he did not like about his coffee (not enough sugar). Since their first meeting, the Life Launch team tries to get together every two weeks. They’ve played laser tag and gone bowling and everyone laughs when they remember their competitive trip to the go-kart track when Isaiah was “trying to drift” and instead kept crashing into the walls.

Using the monthly Life Launch “Life Skills” prompts they’ve received from TJ, the team has also begun to talk to Isaiah about creating and sticking to a budget, keeping track of important paperwork, and practicing gratitude.



Isaiah and Life Launch Tulsa Program Manager, TJ Warren.

Isaiah is in his junior year of high school at Tulsa Central. He lives at the Mental Health Association’s Walker Hall, a Life Launch partner organization that houses older youth. Isaiah has referred some of his fellow residents to TJ after telling them about his Life Launch experiences. After graduating high school, Isaiah hopes to continue his education and eventually work as a correctional officer.

Isaiah says Frank and Jarrod have become father figures. Kaylin believes that Isaiah knows that “If he needs anything, we will drop what we are doing and go to him.” Sitting around in a circle with Isaiah, Frank, Kaylin, and Jarrod talk about praying that Isaiah would realize his potential, not be distracted by “knuckleheads”, and keep pushing for his dreams.

“My [adoptive] mom always told me that I wasn’t going to be anything,” Isaiah says. “She said I’d end up on the streets. Until now, I never had people that are right there for me. My mentors is kinda like my family. I love these guys and I’m thankful they wanted to be part of my life.”

Youth in Oklahoma are ready and waiting to be matched with a Life Launch small group of mentors.
Will you Stand in the Gap today?
Email social@sitgm.org for more information.