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Foster-Care Veteran Seeks to Use Tech to Ease Transition to Adult Life

By Nicole Wallace



THINK OF US

LEADING FROM EXPERIENCE: After growing up in foster homes, Sixto Cancel started a nonprofit that is developing an app to help young people with similar histories navigate life after 18.

Sixto Cancel is an enthusiastic guy. Get him talking about the potential of data and technology to help young people in the foster-care system and his passion ratchets up another notch. His voice brims with feeling; his already rapid delivery hits staccato pace.

But Mr. Cancel, 25, doesn't just talk about the power of technology. He's the founder and chief executive officer of Think of Us, a nonprofit in Richmond, Va., that is building a mobile app to coach young people in

navigating challenges like housing, employment, finances, and health care as they age out of the foster system.

The goal is to help young people leaving foster care beat a grim set of statistics. Only 58 percent will graduate from high school by age 19. More than 20 percent will become homeless after age 18. At the age of 24, only half are employed.

"One of the things that we say as a country is that you can become anything that you want," Mr. Cancel says. "That's not completely true right now. Different people are given different places to start in life."

His work is gaining high-powered support. Think of Us's board includes business executives and officials from both the Obama administration and Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign. It has won grants from Google.org, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, and the Pritzker Foster Care Initiative. In 2016, Think of Us was part of Fast Forward's Accelerator program for technology nonprofits.

Tough Lessons

Mr. Cancel knows better than most what foster kids go through.

Growing up in Connecticut, he had a long and tangled experience with the child-welfare system that began when he entered foster care as a baby. At six, he was reunited with his biological mother, only to return to the system the following year.

At nine, he was adopted by a woman who he says became abusive. Watching an episode of *Law & Order*, he says, he realized it was up to him to make his own case to go back to foster care. "I literally taped a tape recorder to my chest and started to build the evidence," he recalls.

Mr. Cancel returned to foster care at 15. A year later, his older brother, Tyson, was murdered. Tyson, who had also spent years in foster care, was in his early 20s, working, and trying to go to school. He had wanted to become guardian to his two younger brothers.

Tyson's death laid bare for Mr. Cancel just how hard it is to succeed after leaving foster care.

"That's why I started to go on this journey," he says, "trying to think through how do we have an organization that really says, 'No matter where you're starting off, no matter how many cards you have to play, you're going to play those cards so strategically that you're going to set yourself up for success.' "

Mr. Cancel is making waves in a field that hasn't fully embraced technology.

"He's like the Mark Zuckerberg of child welfare," says Sandra Gasca-Gonzalez, director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and a Think of Us board member. "He is taking his experience of foster care and translating it into wanting to improve the whole system."

'Human Connection'

The technology Mr. Cancel's organization is developing encourages young people to build a personal advisory board of supportive adults — case workers, family members, teachers, coaches, and others — and work with them to develop a transition plan. The app offers practical features, like a video and checklist about what to look for when touring a rental apartment, and helps both the young person and those in his or her support system communicate clearly with one another.

"We're focused on the human connection," Mr. Cancel says. "We're not looking to replace humans with technology."

Think of Us plans to roll the product out in coordination with the government agencies and nonprofits that run foster-care systems. As more young people use the app, the data they generate will help officials improve the system by identifying trends, such as an increase in the number of youth requesting help in preparing for the SATs, or large numbers of young people watching videos about mental health.

"It allows us to actually start to assess what are the biggest needs across the system and then be able to say, 'Here's the data you should be using for next week's strategy, for this month's strategy,'" Mr. Cancel says. "That is where I believe human services has to go."

Data in Real Time

Think of Us has been testing the app with kids in foster care. This fall, the nonprofit will work with the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation to roll out the app to 400 young people in Omaha.

Sara Riffel, an associate vice president at the foundation, thinks the app will benefit youth by helping them build stronger support systems. But she's equally excited by the back-end data she and other leaders will be able to access. Ms. Riffel thinks the technology system will uncover gaps in services that aren't on the organization's radar.

"The important thing with the app is that it's real data in real time," she says.

Dealing With Doubters

Five years ago, it would have been unusual to see a leader in child welfare who had personal experience in the foster-care system, Ms. Gasca-Gonzalez says, but it's becoming increasingly common.

Like Mr. Cancel, many of those leaders got their start in the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. The intensive, 17-state program, which is part the Annie E. Casey Foundation, helps young people in foster care develop the skills and relationships they need to successfully transition out of the system. It also offers leadership and advocacy opportunities at both the state and national levels.

As a Casey fellow, Mr. Cancel spoke to lawmakers about the importance of extending foster care beyond age 18 and changing regulations to allow young people in that system to do things other youth take for granted, like attending sleepovers and learning how to drive.

"He's not afraid to push back, very firmly but very appropriately, when something is incorrect or he doesn't agree," Ms. Gasca-Gonzalez says of Mr. Cancel's interaction with policy makers. "I've seen him in some high-stakes situations, and he manages really well."

Despite Mr. Cancel's success, it isn't always easy to be a 25-year-old CEO. Ms. Gasca-Gonzalez says that while there are many people in the field who see Mr. Cancel as the leader of an innovative nonprofit, some still see him as a young person just out of the foster system.

"It's a daily challenge to try to overcome that," she says.

Mr. Cancel acknowledges that it's frustrating when people underestimate him because of his age. In the spring of 2016, he organized a hackathon at the White House that brought together coders and child-welfare officials. He says some of the people he talked to didn't believe the event would really happen.

His guiding strategy — and the advice he offers other young nonprofit professionals — is to check your ego and always remember who you're serving.

"We've been socialized wrong with, 'Give credit where credit is due,' " he says. "No, no, no, give credit where credit's going to give you the most advancement for your young people."

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