



  
**UMFS**  
**CHAMPION**

*Summer 2021*

**THEN & NOW**

For Mackenzie, “the difference is significant.”



# “Looking back to the person I was then to the person I am now, the difference is **significant.**”

**M**ackenzie remembers arriving at the UMFS Child & Family Healing Center (CFHC) in Richmond at 13 years old. She was confused, frightened and “angry at myself because of why I was there and how I got there.”

What Mackenzie didn't understand at the time is that her circumstances were no fault of her own. There was no

blame for her to shoulder, nor should blame be placed on other children and teens who are referred to residential programs. Instead, trauma is the culprit. And for young people who've experienced trauma, it's lack of skill, not will, that prevents them from achieving their goals.

**S**uch was the case for Mackenzie, who entered foster care when she was 6. Before CFHC, she lived with extended family and in various residential programs, group homes, and a juvenile justice facility. Throughout her childhood, she was simply ill-equipped to cope with the trauma she had endured. “I grew up rough,” she said.

What Mackenzie needed then were tools for success so she could build healthy relationships. What she needed was sustained support. Mackenzie said that's exactly what she found at UMFS.

She found support among her peers at CFHC. “You learn a lot of incredible things from people who have been in similar situations,” Mackenzie said. She found it among the staff. “I learned mindfulness. I didn't even know what that was until my therapist

at UMFS taught me.” And she found it in different programs through UMFS. “There were festivals and sports and a greenhouse,” Mackenzie said. “There's a school on campus, and I got to meet new people. There were a lot of things that were a lot of fun.”

Even after Mackenzie completed treatment at CFHC, the support continued. “I had gone to live with a UMFS foster family, and I loved them so much,” she said. But as is often the case, Mackenzie's foster care placement was temporary. “I lived with them for about a year,” she said. “They were really good to me.”

The reality for youth in foster care is that sometimes things change, but sometimes it's those temporary situations that lead to other opportunities. Though Mackenzie didn't achieve permanency with her foster family, she did gain a healthy, natural support. “We

still keep in touch,” she said.

Furthermore, it was through her former foster family that Mackenzie learned about Project LIFE (Living Independently Focusing on Empowerment), a partnership between UMFS and Virginia Department of Social Services that offers older youth in foster care tools and resources to help them prepare for adulthood.

**“They don't judge you, and they **build you up.**”**

Mackenzie, who's now 20, said Project LIFE was instrumental in helping her build the confidence and skills to manage all that's come her way. “Project LIFE is there to support you,” she said. “They don't judge you, and they build you up.”

George Mack, Project Manager for Project LIFE, met Mackenzie when she was 15. “She was very shy and didn’t know where to find resources,” he said. “But she grew in her experience with Project LIFE, and that’s rewarding to see.”

Mackenzie certainly has grown. She has a stable home, a job she enjoys, and a world of opportunity ahead. “I never would have thought I’d be where I am today.”

George said he couldn’t be prouder of Mackenzie’s resilience. “It’s why we do what we do,” he said. “We don’t always get to see the successes, but we know if we start working with youth at maybe 14 years old, in four years we might see something blossom. Mackenzie still checks in with Project LIFE,



“It’s why we do what we do.”

- George Mack, Project Manager

and I definitely appreciate that.”

There’s a lot Mackenzie appreciates, too. From her days at CFHC, to the time she had with her former foster family, to lessons learned from Project LIFE, Mackenzie said UMFS helped her become the woman she is today.

“Looking back to the person I was then and to the person I am now, the difference is **significant**.”

*Invest in UMFS and help young people like Mackenzie achieve their goals. Visit [UMFS.org/donate](https://UMFS.org/donate) to learn more.*

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