

Harwell brothers

model success to at-risk youngsters

by Lanny Larson

With new Fresno State degrees in hand, Byron Harwell (Mass Communication and Journalism) and brother Brent Harwell (Criminology, law enforcement option) spent the summer of 2013 working on the next stage of their journey from foster care to college success to helping others follow their lead.

Graduating from Chino Hills High School in Southern California, the Harwells accomplished what only half of foster care youth are able to accomplish. They are among only 3 percent of former foster-care children who earn college degrees.

Now, they want to help other disadvantaged children beat the odds, so they've enrolled in Fresno State's Master of Science in Student Affairs and College Counseling program, planning to counsel students before and after they get to college.

The brothers' childhood didn't predict success. They were homeless for a time, had a gambling-addicted mother, struggled in a big family (there are nine Harwell siblings) spread between California and Indiana, made multiple moves, repeatedly missed school and seldom had enough money.

One result, Brent Harwell told an ABC 30 reporter, "I didn't know how to read or write or do math, and that was really tough for me growing up."

Byron Harwell remembers being asked to read aloud in sixth grade: "I tried sounding it out and it just wasn't happening. The kids were laughing at me. They probably didn't know what was going on, but it hurt."

The Harwells were in foster care for two years before their older brother gained legal custody and they began attending school full time in Southern California. Brent was diagnosed with a learning disorder and held back a year, putting the brothers in the same grade.

After high school graduation, Brent wanted to live in the San Joaquin Valley and play football for the Bulldogs. "I wanted to be with Brent, so I decided to come here," Byron says. "Plus, I heard that Fresno State has great school spirit, and I wanted to go to a college that had that."

Once at Fresno State, the football dream didn't pan out, but the Harwell brothers benefitted from the Renaissance Scholars Program aimed at helping students with foster care backgrounds.

Byron says the program "helped me grow into the leader that I am today." It paid for an internship and helped him build an on-campus network and add to his résumé.

He worked for Upward Bound, mentoring more than 70 high school students and maintaining records of all student contacts and reports. Byron says he guided students in math, English, science and social-cultural studies workshop sessions. He also recounted his life story to encourage them.

Byron was a resident assistant for Renaissance Scholars and student adviser for the Educational Talent Search, which reaches out to first-generation, low-income high school students.

"I love the feeling when students would come tell me that they got a good grade on a test or in a class because of what I said to them," he adds.

"I was able to talk to a lot of students every week, and I began to love the field of counseling," he says. "I am not a doctor but I was saving lives. I realized that counseling was meant for me."

Both Harwell brothers are grateful for Fresno State opportunities.

Brent Harwell receives award from Dr. Paul Oliaro, Vice President for Student Affairs.



Brent Harwell says he got help from multiple Fresno State programs:

- Renaissance Scholars provided "academic advising, [guidance on] my own personal life issues, grants for my cost of living and networks for the internships I completed."
- Summer Bridge "helped me get to know the campus, with counselors guiding me to take the right G.E. classes" and to complete six units before his first semester to jump start his academic success.
- "Services for Students with Disabilities helped me with first priority in adding classes and getting help in my classes with note taking," he adds.



"The staff, faculty and professors were willing to help me succeed. I encourage all foster youth to not only follow my footsteps but to do it better and become positive example for other foster youth," says Byron.

"I can't thank Fresno State enough for the help it has offered me, including my education," Brent says. "When I get the chance, I advise any youth to get the help they need and don't be afraid to chase their dreams."

Outside of class, the Harwells continue to be engaged in helping at-risk youngsters – Byron, through the Renaissance Scholars Program, and Brent through 2nd Home Inc., which helps give youngsters skills to get out of custody and into foster care or family homes.