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From foster kid to adult

Lighthouse transition program smoothes process of 18-and-out; teens live on their own, learn to develop coping resources

BY Krista Ramsey

Compared with the brutal death that 3-year-old Marcus Fiesel suffered in foster care, youths who age out of the child-welfare system seem like lucky survivors.

They've been mistreated by their biological families, then shocked when taken from them. They've adjusted to new homes, expectations and rigid rules that make even accepting a friend's overnight invitation a bureaucratic nightmare.

Finally, at age 18 - with support from their foster families and perhaps even reconciliation with their biological families - they're ready for a better life of their own.

It would be fitting if that's how the story ended for foster kids who have suffered so much trauma. But the truth is that while most teens survive the system, only a minority remain unscathed after their wrenching departure from it.

The same system that snatches them from unstable settings when they're children spits them out into even greater instability the day they turn adult.

Youth advocates call it a national disaster.

Many of the 24,000 teens aging out each year celebrate their 18th birthdays by being handed bus fare and their belongings in plastic garbage bags, sometimes being chauffeured to the nearest Salvation Army shelter. That's where many will end up. Within a year of aging out, 70 percent have dropped out of school, half are unemployed, 15 percent are homeless and a fifth have spent time in jail, according to studies by the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children. Research suggests that half the adults in homeless shelters spent time in the child-welfare system.

Tamika Spence faced this uncertain future at age 17. Jostled among 14 foster homes, she had no contact with her biological family, had just given birth to twins and had no high school diploma. But Tamika had one thing going for her: She lived in Hamilton County, home to what youth advocates call one of the nation's best transitional programs for foster youth, the Lighthouse Independent Living program.

Developed in 1981 by Hamilton County and juvenile court officials and administered by Lighthouse Youth Services, the program allows teens an extraordinary test-run at real life - for a full year before they have to do it for good.

Rather than warehousing foster teens in group homes, the program fans them out across the county in their own apartments, steeping them first in independent living instruction, then nudging them - sometimes against their own wishes - to live on their own, with financial support from the county and weekly visits by their caseworkers.

They manage their own finances, shop for their own groceries and get themselves up for school. They deal with landlords and do their laundry. They're expected to hold part-time jobs, establish financial nest eggs and keep their apartments - and noses - clean. Often, their neighbors and high-school classmates know little about their situations.

"There is no independent living program out there that shows as much promise as the Lighthouse program," says Pete Ranalli, whose Vision Quest youth services program operates in seven states and who plans to replicate the Lighthouse approach nationally.

"The differences are putting youth in apartments scattered across the county and that Lighthouse surrounds them with help and support. The program gives kids a year or so to practice being on their own, and they need it. They've been failing all their lives."

What initially can seem like a harsh adjustment for youth who have been so dependent - often forbidden to get a driver's license or a part-time job or use household appliances - becomes an answer to the teens' need for privacy, stability and some degree of autonomy.

"Space and belongings mean a lot to foster kids," says Tamika, who at 16 took 52 hours of instruction on how to become self-sufficient, then moved into her own apartment at 17. "Most of them have never had their own room, and they've never gotten to make decisions for themselves."

The option of underage foster youth living on their own is so rare, so cost-prohibitive - the average cost is about \$24,000 per teenager - and so risky that only 1 percent of the nation's 104,710 foster teenagers will ever have the experience.

"It's counter-intuitive," Lighthouse president and CEO Robert Mecum readily admits. "Ohio child welfare mandates the safety and protection of the child, and that flies in the face of placing him in his own apartment. But the idea here isn't to limit risk, it's to entail it."

The point is to get unprepared teenagers ready for a future that's coming at them faster than at the average teen, who has parents to help. Once out of the child-welfare system, many foster youth will have no buffer to shield them from their mistakes - no parent to pay off impetuous credit-card debt, for example, or help them get a second chance from an angry landlord. So the Lighthouse program not only understands adolescent lapses in judgment, it welcomes them.

"We expect them to screw up - we hope they'll screw up, and learn from it while they're with us," Mecum says. "That way they'll have the resources of a Lighthouse social worker to help work it out. The point is not to kick kids out."

Tamika was in the program for two years, while the average stay is 11 months. Now, five years after leaving the program, Tamika has completed a college degree, taken a job as an educational assistant at Lighthouse Youth Crisis Center and bought a car. She's managing her own apartment, and she spends her evenings helping her children with schoolwork and attending their football games and cheerleading practices.

"When I took my first independent living class, I said, 'I can't wait until it's my turn for an apartment. I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it right, and I'm going to get the full benefit from it,'" she said.

About a third of the more than 80 teens who are accepted into the program each year achieve its full goals. They assume their own leases, pay their bills, establish bank accounts, develop support networks and keep out of trouble. The others sometimes simply aren't mature enough to live on their own yet, or they break rules and get sent back to group homes until they're ready for a second chance.

"But to have a third of these kids being successful as they go into adulthood is wonderful," says Crystal Ward Allen, executive director of Public Children Services Association of Ohio, a coalition of heads of county child welfare agencies. "Not many counties have the wherewithal, the funds or the experience to accomplish that."

Program director Mark Kroner knows that a quarter of the youth accepted into the program have so much trouble adjusting or such poor social skills that they've already been kicked out of foster homes, group homes and treatment programs. So for Kroner, the third who succeed in the program are more than an accomplishment.

"People call them a success," he says. "I call them a miracle."

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In Their Own Words

Decades of effort have been poured into fixing foster care, but one essential step has been missing: letting foster kids speak for themselves.

Their stories are admirable, heartbreaking, enlightening. They know the pain of being hurt by the people they expected to love them.

They feel the sensitivities of being wards of the state. And they know the awkward limbo of being placed in a foster home but never really feeling part of the family.

The odds are against them, yet they're a band of survivors. The trick, they say, is to find somebody to trust and to learn how to care for themselves

A home to call her own gave her hope

I went into foster care at 14. From 14 to 17, I was in 23 different foster homes. I was running away and everything. There were a lot of problems. I didn't want to listen to anybody. I didn't want to get close to anybody, didn't know who to trust. At 14, when I looked at the future, I didn't see anything for myself. I didn't see a future. I just thought that everything would get worse. But when I heard about the independent living program, I saw hope.

My last foster home was pretty good. I stayed a couple of months. But I felt I needed to be more responsible. I wanted to live by myself because that's better for me. There was an instant change when it was my apartment and I could do what I wanted, within limits.

The independent living program helped me because me and my caseworker got pretty close. Whenever I needed to talk, she was there. I started opening up to people. What I needed the whole time was a steady place to call home. I never had that. I was always moving around. The first night in my apartment, I was scared. I kept the phone right next to me. I was 17 and in my own apartment. I didn't think I was old enough at first, but you get used to it.

Without the program, I think I wouldn't have any support. I'd be doing my own thing on the street, doing drugs. I'd be having a really hard time. That's why I'm so grateful for the program.

Brandy Ricks, 19, Westwood

It was the right time to try independence

I've been in foster care since I was 7. I got kicked out of a foster home for fighting, and I moved around five or six times. Didn't nobody really care about me. One foster home had seven other kids. I thought nobody cared about me, so why should I care about anybody else?

I didn't really know family, going through all those homes. You never get attached to anybody. If we did get attached, we'd have so much different advice to listen to that it would be confusing. The average kid has a family to love. It's a struggle for us. We've got to find somebody to love. We've got to love somebody. When you start a new relationship with someone, you don't know where to start, how to tell people about your past, how to break it down for them. My friends used to ask me why I never talked about my mama so I used to make up stuff - my mama moved out of town, moved to Chicago or somewhere.

If I didn't have the independent living program, I'd probably be running the streets now. I grew up in downtown, the heart of Over-the-Rhine. If it weren't for this program and my last foster home, I'd be locked up.

My foster parent was cool, and she told me I could stay with her. At 17, I heard about independent living. It was a choice for me. I moved in February 2006 during my senior year of high school. Eventually I knew my grandmother - what I called my foster mother - wasn't going to want me in the house. Every parent wants their child to be on their own. It felt like the right time.

The independent living program worked because everybody in it is in the same boat. You can't confide in the people outside it, but we talk among ourselves. When we went through the independent living classes, we got close. We got a bond.

Kelvin Reynolds, 20, Cheviot

The Enquirer / Jeff Swinger

Kelvin Reynolds aged out of the foster care system and went through Hamilton County's independent living program. He is now an assistant football coach for the West End Wild Cats. He works with 6-year-old Danny Leary and his team during a scrimmage.

Without guidance, things would have been different. I don't know where I'd be without my caseworker. My family's never really been there for me. I stayed with my great aunt, but she died when I was 14, and then there was just me. Nobody ever checked up on me. It's hard when you don't have nobody there. You get discouraged.

I was in and out of foster care. In foster care, the families always let it be known that you were the foster kid. You weren't treated like their children were. I never felt equal to their family or their children. My caseworker thought the independent living program was a good thing for me to do, that I was responsible enough, but I didn't want to do it. When my caseworker said, "You're moving into your own apartment," I was so mad. But as time went by, I started to like it.

It was difficult, but it was the best thing for me. I had an apartment in North College Hill, near my school. I walked to school, the Laundromat, the bank, the grocery store and my job at Golden Corral. I learned to be by myself, and I became more responsible and much more mature. You've got to do what you've got to do. After the independent living program, college was easy. It was easy for me to move by myself.

Once I was in college, they moved me into an apartment when I came home in the winter, and I've had an apartment when I'm home for the summer. Without this program, I would have been in and out of foster homes. I would probably have turned out OK, but I would have looked at life differently. I appreciate everything it's done for me.

What kids need is support, having people to talk to, positive people. You need to have people there when things aren't going so good and when they are going good.

Keyasa James, 19, Clifton, student at Wright State University

The Enquirer / Jeff Swinger

Wright State sophomore Keyasa James (left) works with her friend Marche Perkins. After years in foster care, James went through an independent living program.

COULD YOUR CHILD PASS THIS TEST?

At age 18, most foster youth are emancipated from the child-welfare system, and many are left to live entirely on their own. To prepare them, the Lighthouse Independent Living program teaches them to handle the following. If you have a teenager, think about how many of these items your own child can manage on his or her own:

- Working a thermostat.
- Operating an alarm clock.
- Obtaining a Social Security card.
- Opening a bank account.
- Reading a map.
- Understanding tenant rights.
- Making medical appointments.
- Pricing car insurance.
- Cleaning a bathroom.
- Reading a paycheck stub.
- Comparison shopping for groceries.
- Filling a prescription.
- Filing taxes.
- Preparing five good meals.
- Reading bus schedules and using the bus system.
- Operating a stove, microwave and washing machine.
- Putting together a resume.
- Getting along with a roommate.
- Creating a personal medical history.
- Filling a car with gas.
- Safely storing food.