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HOLIDAY FUND: Foster kids learn to live on their own at Daybreak

One of 18 programs of Youth and Family Enrichment Services, Daybreak helps troubled teenagers and foster kids transition to independent living.

By Marion Softky

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Shelton remembers living in six -- or was it seven? -- foster homes since he was 5.

Now 18, Shelton has been "emancipated" from foster care. But he is hardly a seasoned adult ready to make his way in the world.

Unlike too many graduates of foster care who hit the real world at 18, unprepared to function as grownups, Shelton is getting a graduate course in living skills, thanks to Youth and Family Enrichment Services (YFES), a major provider of services to young people and their families in San Mateo County.

Shelton is living at Daybreak, a shelter in Redwood City run by YFES, where troubled teens spend six months, or more, learning what they need to know to build successful adult lives.

Right now, eight young people between 16 and 21 -- six girls and two boys -- are living in the shelter. They are learning to get along together, cook, do household chores, go to school, hold jobs, and -- really important -- manage time and money.

They need to hold a job and save money for when they set out on their own, says Amanda Oxenhorn, program coordinator at Daybreak. "They turn in 60 percent of their income."

Shelton is living at Daybreak as part of a new program at YFES that helps young people newly emancipated from foster care make the transition to living on their own. It also provides some apartments where former foster-care kids can practice living by themselves, with lots of support, counseling and supervision.

"It's their first taste of living on their own," says Bob Rybicki, executive director of YFES.

YFES is focusing several of its new programs on foster care -- and the violent family situations that often lead to it -- because the need is so great. The foster care system in California is failing, Mr. Rybicki says. "Everyone knows it's broken; it needs to be fixed," he says. says Bob Rybicki, executive director of YFES.

Throughout California, fewer than half of foster children graduate from high school; one in five is incarcerated, Mr. Rybicki says. "Our programs are really trying to give youth the best opportunity to succeed."

Shelton's story

"Mom was sick and couldn't take care of us," says Shelton, who was living in Pacifica at the time with his two younger brothers. "They told us Dad was in Texas. We were told the government couldn't find him. ... I didn't believe that."

Shelton talks calmly about high points and low points of 13 years in foster care, when he hop-scotched to families in Oakland, East Palo Alto, Pacifica, San Mateo and San Francisco. "Making friends was hard. We moved a lot," he says.

"Auntie Betty was really good to us," he says. But they left her for a family that was going to adopt them -- and ended up beating and abusing them.

Shelton's last seven years with a single mom with four older kids in Pacifica was "the best ever," he says. "My best friend lived across the street. We told each other everything. He's smart, 4.0 smart."

Shelton also loves all sports, especially tennis and badminton. He's proud of his trophy for most improved player in badminton at Jefferson High School, where he graduated last summer. His other favorite classes were cooking; he loved a summer job as assistant chef at the Coyote Point Yacht Club.

Now Shelton is at Daybreak, preparing for the rest of his life. "I'd like to be an assistant chef, a chef, or have my own business," he says.

He has a heavy schedule. He gets up at 7 a.m. to get to classes at San Francisco City College, and recently landed a job at See's Candies at Sequoia Station in Redwood City.

He also participates in cooking, chores, and programs at Daybreak. "It's helpful; it's giving me future skills," he says, moving into the kitchen to fix some dinner.

Then he lights up. At Coyote Point, he says, "The last thing I could make was shrimp fettucine. I also wanted to make tilapia with a sauce of lemon juice, butter and capers over seasoned rice."

INFORMATION

More information about Youth and Family Enrichment Services, write, call or visit the agency online at: 610 Elm St., Suite 212, San Carlos, CA 94070; 591-9623; yfes.org.