

FOR YOUTH

Todd's Excellent Adventure

It is undoubtedly one of life's most difficult stages – transitioning from the secure environment of home to the uncertain world of independent adulthood. It's a daunting period for almost any teenager. Yet, while many of today's children continue receiving support from their parents after their 18th birthday, another group of young adults are thrust into the world with little or no support of any kind.

Youth "aging out" of the foster care system are often left to fend for themselves during a time when they are most vulnerable to homelessness, unemployment, drugs and pregnancy. Without an adult to provide guidance and support, foster youth must navigate their way through a number of tasks to establish themselves safely in society. Such challenges include figuring out how to get a driver's license, locating a place to live, obtaining a job, selecting a college or securing financial assistance and health insurance. Unfortunately, all too often, young and alone, foster youth go astray.

Preparing foster youth for such a transition and increasing the chances of their success in the world have become a priority for many agencies serving foster children, including Casey Family Services. Most adolescents are typically taught independent living skills through traditional programs like counseling or mentoring services. But a group of foster youth, including Casey youth Todd S. from Maine, was recently exposed to some real world situations through an innovative and challenging transitional program, *Experience at Sea*.

The program is a partnership between the founding organization, Community Health and Counseling Services (CHCS), and Ocean Classroom Foundation, with collaboration from South Street Seaport Museum, Hurricane Island Outward Bound, Maine's Department of Human Services and Department of Education.

Out to Sea

It had been an adventure reserved for the well-to-do prep students – a costly journey few could afford. But in May, that all changed as foster youth packed their duffle bags and prepared for an eight-month sea voyage that would take them to 39 ports throughout the world.

A dozen were selected to participate. Yet, only six of the youth who boarded in Rockland, Maine would complete the 10,000-mile journey aboard the Lettie G. Howard, a 19th-century wooden schooner.

Eighteen-year-old Todd was one of the six. "Todd had a lot of determination to stick it out," says Kimberly Coville, his Casey social worker. "He's a success story," she says. Having been in Casey foster care since 1995, he's

made what employees call the "Casey connection." "He views Casey as his family and utilizes the resources at Casey."

Todd has been involved at so many levels, she says. He's participated in the wilderness project twice and has been part of the teen conferences, projects and support groups. She adds that he will often just drop in at the Casey offices to chat.

So when the opportunity arose, she thought Todd would be a perfect candidate for the expedition. "I wanted to be part of something bigger," Todd says. Before the voyage began, the teens spent a month together getting to know one another through team-building and outward-bound activities.

Experience at Sea is meant to challenge the young sailors intellectually, emotionally, physically and socially. The ship and voyage are used as primary teaching tools with the teens receiving high school credits. While aboard, they study varied disciplines relevant to the maritime field including maritime history and literature, applied mathematics, marine biology, oceanography and meteorology.

Under the supervision of eight crew members, including one therapist, the teens also learn all aspects of sailing a vessel, from navigating to standing watch to cleaning sails and mopping decks.

"The rigor of life aboard a schooner contrasts starkly with the six-hour day in a modern Maine high school. Students develop an appreciation for teamwork, decision making, problem solving, dedication and cooperation to achieve a common goal because the schooner demands it," according to program materials. "These skills are critical for transition to the adult working world."

"You learn to be independent because you're forced to do stuff on your own," says Todd. Possibly the toughest part of the voyage was sailing for six and a half days straight before stepping foot on land, he says. But the scariest moment, says Todd, was when a crewmember was swept overboard at 3 a.m. during a fierce storm. The man wasn't visible in the darkness. Only the sound of his whistle wrapped around his neck could be heard.

"As soon as 'man overboard' was sounded, every kid came up from their bunk and did exactly what they had been trained to do under such circumstances. It took them 25 minutes to pull him to safety," recalls Program Director Jim Corr, who sailed with the youth.

Different types of emergency drills were called randomly throughout the week, he adds. But the challenges were not all with Mother Nature. With stops at 39 ports, the youth were exposed to a myriad of cultures and ethnicities and forced to learn how to interact with people without being able to speak the native language.

Corr had developed an interesting curriculum. One assignment focused on teaching the youth about bargain hunting, budgeting and decision-making. "I sent them out as a group to select one item and get the price from three different stores, and then return to the ship. I talked to them about how to barter and work out a deal." Todd, he says, became particularly good at bartering.

Todd affirms the challenges of life seem to pale in comparison with what he experienced in open water. "There was no television, no radio, no computer onboard," he says. "But when you're not standing watch, you just want to sleep. You're so tired."

And even that wasn't always easy. One night during a fierce storm, a leak in the deck led to Todd's bunk getting completely soaked along with all his personal belongings.

In addition, he says, the youth had to learn time-management skills ... they had to run the ship, attend "class," and do their homework. The classroom setting, he jokingly adds, varied. "Sometimes it was up on deck under the sun or beneath palm trees on an island."

Many of the life skills the youth learned were on the boat itself, Corr says. The kids were responsible for the provisions (food and water). They went on the island and did all the shopping, he says. "And, they often had to cook the meals on their own without the cook's help. This meant planning meals that included special diets, vegetarian meals, deciding how much to cook, and what to cook."

No matter where in the world he happened to be, however, Todd was only a cell phone call away, jokes Coville. "On New Year's Eve he called me. He was having such a great time."

Corr could see the change in Todd over the course of the journey. "He was beginning to look out for other people and becoming more part of a team. He could see that he now had the resources in himself to chase down anything he wanted to do. And that even if he couldn't get something right off, he could eventually achieve what he wanted by having some perseverance."

Shortly after the voyage ended, Corr visited Todd, who greeted him with a smile and said, "You were right." Corr says he knew what Todd meant. "I had told Todd at the beginning of the trip that he would learn things by going to sea that would stay with him for the rest of his life and help him through challenges he normally might not be able to handle."

Coville agrees the voyage has benefited Todd greatly. "In many ways Todd is becoming his own advocate. He is better able to recognize and articulate what his strengths and challenges are. Most important, however, is his recognition that it is difficult to plan for the future without supports."

Todd utilizes and values his support system and continues to meet with his Casey social worker and/or Family Support Worker Sonny Prescott on a weekly basis, she says. With his high school diploma in hand he has enrolled in a two-year degree program in computer technology. Todd attends classes part time and is presently in search of a part-time job. In January, Todd is planning on increasing his course work and beginning driver's education classes. He is residing in a "host home" where he has his own space, yet is able to benefit from the day-to-day mentoring relationship provided by the host family.

"Todd is much more ready now for whatever else lies ahead for him," says Coville.

Todd is not the only one who benefited from the rigorous journey. Of the nine youth who completed the program, four are attending technical colleges and one expects to be accepted soon. Two others are planning on obtaining their high school diplomas and say they want to eventually attend Maine Maritime Academy and work at sea. In fact, one graduate is currently working on a clipper ship out of Baltimore, Maryland and plans on studying marine biology in college. The ninth teen hopes to take his senior year of high school at sea – once again. In addition, five youth who participated in the *Experience at Sea* program have been involved in the UPS School-to-Career Partnership, as well.

Next Foster Youth Group to Set Sail

Whether or not foster youth would be able to continue participating in the *Experience at Sea* program had been in question – until recently. A federal grant providing \$200,000 per year for the next three years, along with other private funds, ensures that other foster youth will have the opportunity to go to sea, says Jim Corr, program director.

The grant will support program participants who are under the custody of the Department of Human Services. The youth will be between 17 and 20 years old, and will be either living in foster care, group homes or homeless shelters. The next voyage is tentatively scheduled for May 1, but Corr hopes to establish a halfway house where the youth will stay for three months prior to the voyage to receive pre-sailing training. The voyage will also be shortened to two four-month expeditions that run consecutively. If youth completing the first phase wish to, they can continue onto the second four-month voyage.