

## **Foster Care Graduates**

Ratna P., 23, and Bridget J., 20, are “graduates” of foster care, but both have continued a connection with Casey Family Services beyond the age that most youth officially “emancipate” from the foster care system.

Ratna and Bridget are part of a growing number of young people getting a helping hand in preparing for independence. Throughout New England, Casey Family Services routinely provides foster youth through age 23 with independent living training, housing assistance, counseling, mentoring, vocational training and college tuition assistance.

A passionate champion of youth transitioning from care, Sara Kobylenski, Division Director of Casey Family Services in Vermont, insists that this kind of assistance is both crucial and cost-efficient. “Teenagers who have weathered neglect, abuse and abandonment may not be ready to fly from the nest at the magical age of 18,” she explains. “How could they be? Most haven’t had enough time to learn self-confidence, believe in themselves or build life skills.”

In 1998, Ratna earned a bachelor’s degree in fine arts from the University of New Hampshire. Now an accomplished artist living in Oregon, she has publicly exhibited her paintings, pen and ink drawings, cartoons and puppets and is developing a regional following. Bridget is creating pottery works of art. With Casey’s help, she now has her own wheel, is beginning to sell her work, and is attending community college in Vermont.

A recently completed study of Casey Family Services alumni found that 90 percent of those who received services beyond age 18 have graduated from high school, and 73 percent are employed. Many have gone on to college. Overall, alumni are self-sufficient, responsible and contributing members of society. The results reflect the Casey emphasis on high-quality foster homes and a continuum of comprehensive services. They also underscore the importance of stability, continuity of relationships and services beyond age 18, Kobylenski says.

### **Georgia**

Georgia K., 25, of Vermont, graduated from Prescott College in Arizona in December 1998. Georgia, the daughter of a Greek father and Puerto Rican mother, came into foster care after her father killed her mother in 1987. When he was acquitted by reason of insanity; Georgia went first to live with an older half-sister, who was not able to meet the needs of the young, traumatized teen. In foster care, Georgia began to develop a sense of stability and direction.

A youngster with language-based learning disabilities, she graduated from high school, earned an AA degree at Johnson and Wales University, attended the National Outdoor Leadership School in Colorado, and eventually attended Prescott

College. She has focused on the therapeutic use of the wilderness and on women's studies, and has taught rock climbing and other outdoor skills over the past six summers. She has used traditional counseling, the care of a sensitive foster family that could support her connections to her siblings and grandmother, and the opportunities made available through college grant and loan programs and Casey Family Services to find competency and strength in learning and work.

### **Michelle**

Michelle P., 18, of Connecticut, was removed from the care of her biological family at the age of 10 because of abuse and neglect. Prior to her referral to Casey Family Services in 1994, Michelle lived in three foster homes and a residential treatment center.

In February of 1995, Michelle was placed in a Casey home for long-term foster care. Even there, Michelle experienced the same struggles as many foster teens who do not find a stable living environment until their teens. This includes a strong desire and determination to take control of their lives and become independent. Unfortunately, this population is one of the least prepared for independent living.

After being in her Casey home for nearly three years, at age 17, Michelle sought the services of the state's independent living program to move into an apartment with support services. This was done against the advice of her Casey social worker. After six months of "transition" support from Casey, including assistance with costs and ongoing counseling, the case was closed.

Michele was considered "at risk" early in her independent living despite having lived in a home where preparation for independent living was emphasized. After struggling for nearly a year, Michelle admitted that she was unable to maintain that level of independence and she was moved into a supervised transitional apartment building. By this time, Michelle was "unsteady on her feet" and was at risk of not graduating from high school on time.

Michelle had continued to maintain contact with her foster parents while living outside of their home, and after a year of independent and transitional living, Michelle sought permission from them and from Casey to return to "Mom and Dad." She did this in December 1998 and continues to live with them today.

As a result of this experience, Michelle recently shared in a Casey-sponsored focus group with other Casey teens that she was not as prepared as she thought she had been. Michelle also recognizes that her history of abuse, neglect, and moving from home to home has compromised her transition into adulthood. She has continued to serve as a mentor to younger Casey kids, and to speak during regularly scheduled Casey workshops on transitional living.

## **Jeff**

Jeff is 24, and living on his own. He has taken early difficult life experiences and with the support of his foster family and Casey Family Services has become a successful young adult.

After being removed from his birth family's home, Jeff originally lived for several years in a residential facility. From there he was placed in his Casey Family Services foster home where he lived for more than six years. Jeff, who has severe learning disabilities, required strong agency advocacy to receive appropriate academic services. He worked hard and was able to finish high school and then successfully complete a two-year training program as a Medical Assistant, with help from Casey Family Services .

After graduation from the program, Jeff worked full time while obtaining his emergency medical technician's certification. Jeff is currently working two jobs: one in a hospital medical records department, and the other as a medical dispatcher. This second position in particular requires someone with not only good judgment but significant poise and maturity.

Jeff has continued his relationship with Casey staff and returns regularly to take part in foster parent training and workshops for teens approaching issues of transition.

## **Bob**

Bob R., 18, left Casey Family Services care after three disrupted foster home placements. He then spent the better part of two years in and out of psychiatric hospitals and shelters after refusing services from Casey and DCF in 1997. By then he had not finished high school, had no job treatment or means of support.

Bob moved in with his birth father in an isolated small town in Maine. When this situation did not work out, Bob, then 18, asked Casey for help in late 1998, drawing on the long-term Casey relationships he had made.

Since reconnecting with Bob, Casey has designed a transitional living contract with him and has helped him with housing and a job search. Currently, budget issues are a particular challenge and Bob is working on money management with Casey staff. Other goals have included getting a driver's license, car, and a GED. With high performance at his job, Bob has nearly completed his probationary period and has made friends at work. He has begun to address birth family issues and is excited about his future. He has derived satisfaction and heightened self-esteem from helping others: He is now a mentor for other Casey youth and regularly shares with others the lessons he has learned from experience.

## **Michelle**

Michelle M., 21, has been involved with Casey Family Services from the age of 13. She recently graduated from college with a degree in psychology and has been accepted to the Boston College Graduate School of social work. Her long-term goal is becoming a psychologist. Last summer she worked as a youth counselor placing younger adolescents in summer jobs in a variety of settings.

Michelle's family has a long history of involvement with the Department of Social Services (DSS). They were first referred in 1982, and Michelle's first placement followed in 1983. After six months, Michelle was returned home. There continued to be reports of neglect and abuse filed over the next few years. In 1989, Michelle was placed in a foster home through a private agency and she remained there until 1993, when she was placed with Casey.

During the course of that placement, there were attempts to reunify Michelle with her mother to no avail. At one point, the goal was identified as adoption, but again changed to reunification. Yet Michelle's mother has had a long-term history of substance abuse and severe depression. Her father has a history of violent behavior, domestic abuse and mental illness. He has not been actively involved with Michelle for many years.

In 1992, the idea of reunification with her birth family was abandoned, replaced by the goal of long-term foster care. Since that time, Michelle has worked very productively with one social worker. Although she has had three placements through Casey, she now has reached a point of stability in her current kinship placement with her aunt and uncle, with whom she stays when she is home from college.

Michelle has faced numerous difficulties and obstacles in her life. As a young child she suffered the trauma of abuse, neglect, and loss of parental figures. For a variety of reasons she had three placements during her high school years, which involved leaving friends behind, working with new therapists, as well as changing schools. Despite tremendous adversity, she has persevered. She has utilized therapy to deal with issues from the past, which have had an effect on her life. She has worked closely with Casey through some very difficult times and has taken advantage of the casework relationship as well as a variety of other services offered, including group workshops, individual counseling, life skills training, assistance with tuition and ongoing supportive relationships. With the support of a guidance counselor, in her sophomore year, Michelle was awarded the Christian Herter Scholarship for four years. This is for students facing hardships who turn their lives around.

Michelle also was encouraged to take advantage of the independent living program offered by the state, and this assisted her in developing independent living skills and applying for additional financial aid. She served as an active member of the

Advisory Council to the state Department of Social Services Commissioner as well as a peer leader in the DSS Area Office.

Michelle has participated on a panel presented to younger Casey kids around the importance of making a plan for oneself beyond one's 18th birthday, and making use of all services and supports available. She is also continually available to take part in training for foster parents and youth alike.

Michelle has worked hard to stay safe during adolescence, always keeping in mind her long-term goals. She has made a conscious choice to refrain from drugs and alcohol and to separate herself from peers who appeared to be making poor choices and decisions.

During Michelle's involvement with Casey, we were able to help her become connected to some biological family members, including her two maternal aunts. They both were able to provide support and respite care for her. One aunt, now her foster parent, has been a mentor and role model for Michelle. Michelle's mother has provided as much support as possible given her difficulties, and she has worked well with Casey. Another significant figure for Michelle has been a former foster mother of five years, whom we have encouraged and helped to continue the relationship.

In summary, Michelle has taken something from every placement and experience she has had. Her philosophy has been to take advantage of any and all opportunities and to become the best person she can be.