

For foster kids, a tough road to college

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It's hard to get excited about a holiday when you're in college and you're a foster kid.

Consider the emotional quandary of Lydie Vainqueur, of Bridgeport, who was placed in a foster care as a teenager after her mother died.

"At that point, you really don't know what family is. You know how people would talk about the turkey and everything," Vainqueur said, recalling the uncertainty she felt until her Stratford foster mother called to make it clear she not only didn't need an invitation but was expected at holiday meals, extra bottles of soda in hand.

Then there were permission slips. Before she came of age, there was a big legal to-do whenever Vainqueur needed a "parent's signature." Others simply went home and got their parents to sign. Her form had to go through several hands, including a social worker. The red tape cost her a semester abroad.

"We always try to pass for normal kids, but at the bottom, there's always more," she told post-secondary educators and child welfare professionals at a conference designed to make it easier for foster kids to make it to college and graduation.

The program was held at Southern Connecticut State University, Vainqueur's Alma mater. Even in a state that helps pay the way for foster kids to go to college -- Connecticut is one of a few states that will pay through age 23 -- fewer than 15 percent of foster kids make it to college and less than 3 percent stick it out through graduation.

"It's not just about money. Helping them survive is the other half of the battle," said David Johnston, a senior program associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services.

Foster kids who make it into college often lack a family support system, are challenged academically from changing schools multiple times and hesitate to seek help for fear of standing out.

"I felt I was always five steps behind everyone else," said David Gillan, 31, a former foster kid who lives in Bridgeport. "It seemed like it came a lot more natural to other people."

Gillan's mom died when he was 8, his dad when he was 13. He spent three months in a Greenwich shelter, then a month with a foster parent before disruptive behavior led to a placement at Boys and Girls Village in Milford, where he learned to control his emotions. From there, he spent two years with one foster family and a year with another before turning 19 and moving out on his own.

College was something he promised his father he would do. His first semester at Dean College, a junior college in Franklin, Mass., was made difficult because he said he wasn't well prepared in high school. He qualified for special education, but shrugged off the assistance once he reached college.

His unwillingness to seek extra help led to low grades. It took him four years to earn an associates degree. He is still working on a bachelor's degree as he works as a behavioral specialist at Boys and Girls Village.

Anita Gliniecki, president of Housatonic Community College and a conference participant, said foster kids are one of a number of so-called "at-risk" students who come to her college without all the skills it takes to succeed. Until now, she hadn't singled them out.

"One thing I learned is that these students probably wouldn't come forward. It's up to us to seek them out," she said.

Federal financial aid forms suggest Housatonic has at least 56 students who come from foster-care situations.

Brett Rayford, director of adolescent services for the state Department of Children and Families, said there is a steady rise in the number of foster kids admitted into college. In 2006, it was 168. In 2008, it is 350. Yet, so far this year, 41 have dropped out.

Worst off, it seems, are students who are in guardianship situations outside of the DCF umbrella. Unlike foster kids, kids with legal guardians are not entitled to free tuition and don't have access to case managers.

Darren Ramos, 28, fell into that category. He was taken in by a neighbor after his mom, then godmother died of drug overdoses. His dad was in prison. Still, Ramos excelled in school and college was expected. He got into Curry College in Milton, Mass., and today is an operation technician for WFSB Channel 3.

"Professors need to go out on a limb and take the initiative to approach students," said Ramos. Its unlikely foster kids are going to make the first move, he added.

Johnston said colleges need to create peer-support groups for foster kids, but do it quietly, because most foster kids don't want to walk around with a label. With such a group, they would gain access to mentors, like Gillan and Vainqueur.

"Things are different now. We advocate. We share. We talk. I hope it makes a difference," said Vainqueur.

Originally from the Caribbean island of Guadalupe, Vainqueur lost her mom at age 15, shortly after moving to the states. Vainqueur not only had to adjust to foster care but entered Bunnell High School not knowing English. Yet, she got good grades and her foster mom, Patricia Robinson, insisted she go to college.

"She was like, it's an opportunity of a lifetime. Don't waste it," said Vainqueur, who now has an master's of business administration and works as a buyer at Sikorsky Aircraft.

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