Aging out of foster care - and into college

By Leonard Edwards
San Jose Mercury News

Article Launched: 10/08/2007 01:34:46 AM PDT

Big things were happening in Michelle's life this past spring. She was turning 18, graduating from high school (the first person in her family to do so) and her juvenile court case would be dismissed. And Michelle was frightened.

She was frightened because she was a dependent child of the juvenile court and had been in foster care for five years. Her father was in prison and her mother had not been heard from in several years. Michelle didn't know what she was going to do with her life. When asked in court, she said she might get a job and possibly move in with her boyfriend.

Michelle is one of several thousand foster children in California who will "age out" of foster care this year (about 200 in Santa Clara County). That means their cases will be dismissed, there will no longer be a social worker supporting them, and they won't be going to juvenile court anymore. Some will return to the same parents they were removed from years ago, and some will join the workforce. Most will have a difficult time. Studies show that foster youth aging out of the child welfare system are more likely than other youth to go on welfare, end up in jail, become homeless, or have their own children removed into the same system that they came from.

That is understandable. Foster children have had little stability in their lives. Their parents have failed to provide a safe home for them, they are likely to have lived in several homes before they age out, and they do not have a safety net to support them when they are on their own.

Five years ago I organized a luncheon for foster youth in Santa Clara County who were about to age out of the child welfare system. Funded by the Philanthropic Ventures Foundation and supported by court personnel, attorneys, child advocates and social workers, the luncheon featured foster youth who were in college and people who could inform them about educational opportunities. The luncheon was a success and has been held every year since then. Three years ago, San Jose State agreed to host the luncheon on campus. Former foster youth then attending SJSU spoke and showed the foster youth around the campus.

Then something wonderful happened. SJSU embraced the idea of helping foster youth move to higher education. The university, with the generous help of Connie Lurie, created CME (Connect Motivate and Educate) Society, a program to support foster youth interested in college. Bringing together all segments of the university, SJSU has been able to help foster youth apply for admission, help them with housing, assist with financial aid, and even provide mentors. The luncheon continues, now with Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge Katherine Lucero leading the juvenile court efforts to ensure better outcomes for our foster youth.

Ideas for expansion are being considered so that community and junior colleges can be a part of the program. Still other ideas will be explored at a conference SJSU and the Silicon Valley Children's Fund are hosting in November: http://www.svcf. org/BlueprintConference 2007/savethedate.html.

A few weeks ago, SJSU President Don Kassing hosted a barbecue dinner at his home for former foster youth entering the university. The new students were excited to be there with the SJSU leaders of CME, particularly Connie Robbins-Hernandez, director of the program. During the evening I went over to Michelle and asked her about college life. She said she was loving it. Then I asked her why she decided to go to college. She said she had never thought of it until she went to the foster care luncheon. She made up her mind when she heard that college was possible.

I believe we all have an obligation to give our children goals and to help them achieve those goals - foster children in particular. SJSU is making this a reality.

LEONARD EDWARDS is a retired Santa Clara County Superior Court judge. He wrote this article for the Mercury News.

<div style="text-align:center">[Close Window]   [Send To Printer]</div>