

Friends and Mentors

Church programs help youths who 'age out' of foster care

By Elaine Jarvik
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In the bleak vocabulary of foster care, at 18 years old you "age out of the system."

Officially too old to have a foster family anymore, all of a sudden you're on your own, maybe sleeping on the couch of someone you hardly know. And then, often, one bad thing leads to another. In Utah, more than one-third of the youths who aged out of foster care between 1999 and 2003 were arrested for a felony or misdemeanor within three years, more than half were diagnosed with a major mental illness, more than half received food stamps. These gloomy numbers are what mobilized Dorothy and Bert Dart three years ago to launch the Youth Mentor Project through their church, First Presbyterian. The Darts' idea was to provide wisdom, practical advice and a safe harbor — the kind of help a family member might provide, if the family were stable.

The Utah departments of Human Services and Workforce Services, also alarmed by the foster care statistics, five years ago began to provide education and employment opportunities for former foster youths through the Transition to Adult Living program, Youth Employment Services and Education and Training Voucher funds; and in 2006 the Legislature extended Medicaid benefits to age 21.

Still, a program isn't quite the same as one friendly, consistent voice on the other end of the phone — someone who actually remembers your birthday, who offers to take you bowling, who tells you that, yes, if you stepped on a rusty nail you might need a tetanus shot (and, by the way, would you like a ride to the emergency room?).

"My mentors are stable ground," says Ashley Wagstaff about Ruth and Bruce Lubbers. Wagstaff lived with two different foster families before turning 18; the first set of parents were sometimes abusive, she says, and the second family was "a blessing" but ended up moving to Wyoming.

So she was eager to have a mentor. But, frankly, when she first met the Lubbers two years ago, she wasn't sure it was a good fit. Eventually she realized what made her uncomfortable: She was more used to the high-energy chaos that comes with having a mother who suffers from bipolar disorder, and the Lubbers were so ... calm.

"It opened my eyes to a different kind of living," says Wagstaff, who at 20 is now enrolled at the University of Utah. A couple of weeks ago, when she was having a bad day, she called Ruth Lubbers and cried. Pretty soon she was on her way to the Lubbers' house, where she curled up on the couch under a comforter while they all watched a movie and

ate popcorn.

"As soon as they can see another way of living they can imagine themselves living that way," explains Dorothy Dart. "I think that's the key."

The Darts organized the first six mentors at First Presbyterian in 2005. Now the project has been adopted by Good Shepherd Lutheran in Sandy, which last week started its second group. The prospective mentors and six youths — in mentoring lingo they're referred to as "friends" — gathered at the Transition to Adult Living offices for a "speed matching" event.

Like the "speed dating" it's modeled after, there were mentors lined up on one side of the table and prospective "friends" on the other, with five minutes to size each other up before a bell rang and the mentors moved down the line to meet another young person. As with speed dating, there was a certain amount of awkwardness as the mentors and friends talked about favorite foods and adventures. At the end of the evening, the mentors and friends listed their three favorite friends/mentors, and, later, case workers from the Transition to Adult Living program engineered the matches.

Each person in each pair must commit to working on the relationship for two years, with at least two phone calls or meetings a month. According to the National Mentoring Center, Dorothy Dart says, "a two-year period is almost mandatory if you're going to make a difference."

As mentors often discover, mentoring isn't an immediate happily-ever-after. Sometimes a young person will continue to make bad choices — do drugs, get pregnant, quit a job. Sometimes he'll pull away from his mentor. "They're dragged down by their past," is the way Lubbers describes it. "It's always there to reclaim them."

"I made weekly phone calls whether she returned my call or not, just letting her know I cared," remembers Victoria Bushong, a mentor with Good Shepherd Lutheran. Bushong's foster "friend" was busy trying to finish high school, had recently had a baby and had lived in five different locations in the previous six months.

But Bushong hung in there, and now the young woman "realizes I'm not just another flaky person in her life." The key, she says, "is to not be judgmental. ... I can relate, because I made bad choices" as a teenager, says Bushong, who is now 40.

Although the Youth Mentor Project could be run by all kinds of organizations — and, in fact, there is one starting up through the juvenile court system in Weber County — churches are a perfect fit, says Pastor Mike Imperiale at First Presbyterian.

"Our motivation comes from the great commandment: to love God and love your neighbor," he says. "That's the purpose of the Church, to help each other do these things."

And this particular project, he says, "is an opportunity to make a significant difference in someone's life."

Ideally, says Ken Hull, program manager at Transition to Adult Living, there would be a mentor for each of the 250 youths who age out each year. And those youths would be mentored beginning at age 17.

In addition to getting help from the State's Transition to Adult Living program, and Big

Brothers and Big Sisters, members of the Youth Mentor Project rely on each other for both emotional support and as a network of ideas and resources. Lawyer Bert Dart has helped with court problems; University of Utah professor Jim Strozier has helped tutor math. Mentors have helped a youth pick out a used car, look for an apartment, learn how to balance a checkbook.

"The basic skills of life," as Daniel Romero says. Romero lived with a dozen foster families, starting when he was 11. After aging out of the system, he moved to an apartment but couldn't manage his money. He started doing drugs. He was evicted. When he first met the Darts, he couldn't figure them out.

"I didn't know what in the heck they wanted, why they would bother, for what reason. Were they getting paid?" Romero remembers. Now, three years later, he thinks he knows the answer: "They're seeing a better life."

Romero turned 21 last week, then headed south to Cedar City, where he'll enroll at Southern Utah University.