



August 17, 2010

Kids aging out of foster care get help

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Special to the Record-Eagle



Elements, a class offered through Child and Family Services of Northwestern Michigan, helps teenagers learn skills including shopping on a budget and banking. Special to the Record-Eagle

TRAVERSE CITY — As a young girl in foster care, Pecol Green, of Traverse City, remembers not knowing where she might end up next.

Green, now 26, entered foster care because of abuse and neglect at age 10 in Detroit. She said resources were often made available to her, but she didn't know how to get them and each place she moved she didn't know what her living conditions would be like. Her story echoes what its like for many children statewide in the foster care system.

Child and Family Services of Northwestern Michigan is raising funds through its 21st annual Brown Bag Campaign to meet the needs of children in foster care not met by the system and raise awareness about foster care in the area.

Gina Aranki, public relations director, said the campaign helps cover costs for extra things the state can't, allowing kids in the foster care system to have the same opportunities other children do.

One of the programs offered at Child and Family Services is the Elements program, which helps older children in foster care transition into independence as adults.

The program, which is funded through grants and donations, teaches students everything from shopping on a budget in a grocery store to how to open a bank account and apply for financial aid.

"Most of these kids, they're going to leave the system at age 18 and they're expected to be able to be on their own," Aranki said. "Without programs like this, their outcomes aren't great."

The program is designed to help older foster children find the resources they need to succeed in adult life and also understand how these resources work.

"David," a student in Elements, said the program allows students to work toward adulthood and creates a chance to succeed on their own.

"Elements aren't just fire, wind, water and earth," he said. "Elements is who we are, and everything we strive for. Elements empowers young adults to change themselves and the community, creating a path for lost hope for children in foster care as we go towards independence."

For Green, not knowing and understanding her options was a hard part of her foster experience.

"It wasn't that I didn't have the resources, but I just wasn't made aware of them," Green said.

Elements costs about \$1,300 a year per child for a basic program, none of which comes from the state. Aranki said without support from the community and fundraising, such as the Brown Bag Campaign,

programs such as Elements couldn't happen.

The Brown Bag Campaign raises about \$24,000 each year. Brown paper bags are inserted into local publications, where people can write checks as donations and send them back to Child and Family Services. This year, the traditional brown bags are white. Donors are encouraged to decorate their bag. The bag with the most unique decoration will be awarded a prize for a one-night stay at the Great Wolf Lodge in Traverse City.

Aranki said although the funds raised are great, the awareness raised through the campaign is even better.

"We've had a couple situations where someone has read about the campaign or seen the insert, and they've picked up the phone and made the phone call saying, 'You know, I want to be a foster parent,'" Aranki said.

With the right support, any child in foster care can succeed, Green said. For Green, her own success story has inspired her to go into social work; she is an intern at Child and Family Services.

"Some people have the idea that all foster youth are bad and that's not necessarily the case," Green said. "Many foster youth go through problems, but if they receive the right support then they can make a positive change in their lives despite what they have been through or where they come from."



Traverse City Record-Eagle 120 W. Front Street Traverse City, MI 49684