

Deseret News

Program elevates kids who outgrow foster care

By Amy Huddleston

The Times-News

Published: Saturday, Nov. 20, 2010 7:50 p.m. MST

TWIN FALLS, Idaho — Earlier this year, Nattassia Lee was among the 80 percent of former foster children who find themselves either homeless or incarcerated within a year of their 18th birthday.

The Twin Falls woman was part of a startling statistic in national Court Appointed Special Advocate studies, living with whoever would lend her a couch. Her past included a string of runaways and misdemeanor charges, the products of a strained relationship with her mother who admitted she couldn't care for her daughter when Lee was 15 years old.

Lee was placed into state custody and spent the next three years in foster care — six months with a foster family and 2.5 years in the Ike Kistler Safe House. She turned 18 and aged out of foster care in January. Although she said living in the safe house was a lesson in survival, when she was allowed to go her own way, she found that those survival skills didn't apply to her new life.

Today though, Lee is taking 12 credits at the College of Southern Idaho with plans to pursue a physical therapy degree at Idaho State University. She works nights as a certified nurse's assistant, has her own apartment and just bought a car.

Lee credits her ability to navigate adult life at age 18 to Elev8, a Twin Falls-based program born out of the need to provide children and young adults embroiled in the court system with skills for independent living.

"I had the support to stay off of the streets and out of jail," Lee said. "Having people say that I can't do things I can and I am proving to people that they are wrong. Foster kids can get out and go to school and be on their own."

Melissa Rowe, Elev8 director, saw children spiraling downward every day she worked in child protective services with the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. One particular case put her in contact with Tahna Cooper, Idaho's 5th Judicial District executive director of Court Appointed Special Advocates, a national organization of volunteers who are appointed to speak for abused or neglected children in court.

The two forged a close friendship, cemented by similar dysfunctional family backgrounds and the same passion for children who often fall through the cracks. Their idea to give teens, specifically children in foster care, a place to go for help and resources took a leap forward when they approached Sam Fowler, director of the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Magic Valley.

To attain her master's degree in social work, Rowe needed to complete an internship in her field of study, so she created Elev8 in September 2009.

"We wanted to provide a space for them to come. It was a great collaboration between CASA and the Boys and Girls Club," Fowler said. "But make no mistake, this was born in Melissa Rowe's heart."

The program took off last year, serving about 200 children and young adults from ages 14 to 21. Every Thursday night, the doors of the Boys and Girls Club stay open to welcome in around 50 participants for a family-style meal. Afterward, various Magic Valley businesspeople explain different careers and how to apply for jobs. Resources for finding an apartment, creating a resume or learning to deal with finances are available every week.

CASA staff and volunteers offer their time as mentors to the diverse group of children and work in the

kitchen, preparing meals every week with the help of some of the teens who want to learn to cook and shop for groceries.

It's a collaboration of caring. While some of the teens haven't been in foster care, the majority come from dysfunctional homes. Teens who show up on Thursday nights look like the kids who linger at the skate park, walk through high school hallways and worry about acne and weekend plans. Young couples cling to each other like life rafts. Some of the kids are a little rough around the edges and some start to glow when they are acknowledged by name.

All of them are acknowledged at Elev8.

"We provide this so a kid doesn't wake up and go, I'm just a number," Fowler said.

Cooper said she leaves Elev8 every week wondering how many kids they miss. About 30 children age out of foster care every year in the Magic Valley and are often left to their own devices, without resources or support. The program gives children in foster care a place to invite friends and does away with the stereotypes that are often associated with being a foster child, Cooper said.

"We want them to know that they are wanted here," Cooper said. "A lot of them have never felt they've belonged anywhere."

Colton Stoneman, 18, didn't go through the foster care system.

But when he violated his probation on a 2009 minor-in-possession-of-alcohol charge, he was pointed toward Elev8. Now the tall kid with prominent gauges in his ears and a nose ring attends Elev8 because he's a role model for other kids at Twin Falls' skate park. He started to notice that when he didn't attend, some of the skater kids who had gone before stopped going.

"The best part is you come here and it doesn't feel like a program. You can just be yourself," Stoneman said. "It shows you job opportunities so kids can see a basic idea of where to work."

He credits the dinner cooked on-site as a large part of the pull for Elev8 participants. He often takes home food that's donated by Costco and given to participants each week.

"It is a time to have a normal sit-down dinner, which many of them have never had," Rowe said. "We try to teach table manners and responsibility."

Not only do participants get a meal, but they also get support and love. Rowe keeps a file of all the teens' names and then tracks their criminal histories, education, employment histories and housing situations. The staff also helps with things many children rely on their parents for as they transition into adulthood.

"We try to be proactive before they leave home and we tell them, Let's get these things — an ID, Social Security card and birth certificate," Rowe said. "We have to build that trust with them by being consistent and reliable. We don't do it for them but we work with them to get things done."

Elev8 has three vans that pick teens up across the Magic Valley to get them to the weekly dinner on time. While the food is always a big incentive, Fowler said the teens learn to "participate in their own rescue," which is something that foster care often doesn't teach them.

"The system is so overloaded. We are asking for the impossible. It's a numbers game and it's an impossibility to ask this many people to serve this many people," Fowler said as he held his hands a foot apart and then threw them skyward. "This takes a little slice out of the numbers."

Cooper said Elev8 fills in some of the gaps for children who are close to aging out of foster care. Many of the CASA volunteers act as mentors for the Elev8 program, overlapping their support and care to those who are in desperate need of it.

"Kids are there because they want to be at Elev8. They want to be good citizens. They want to make a difference and be good members of our society," Cooper said. "They will live up to our expectations of them so we have to expect great things."

© 2010 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved