

Some teens leaving foster care may face homelessness

By Marty Schladen \ El Paso Times

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Jesus Palacios, 19, recently spent his nights on a bench in Memorial Park. Palacios "aged out" of foster care at age 18 and found himself homeless. (vanessa monsisvais / el paso times)

Life's fortunes could have gone either way last week for Jesus Palacios.

The 19-year-old was hanging around the Pride Center on Montana Avenue, waiting to find out if he would have a place to crash that night or if he would have to fake his way into a hospital or find a spot in Memorial Park, as he has for weeks this summer.

For Palacios and an unknown number of others

like him in the city, misfortune as a child worsened when he became an adult. After turning 18, he left 11 years of foster care with no family to fall back on and seemingly no place to go.

There is little research into what happens to young people when they "age out" of foster care, but two national studies say more than 20 percent become homeless, at least temporarily. By contrast, fewer than 1 percent of Texans were homeless in 2007, the last year for which numbers are available from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, an advocacy group.

There is no official count, but the percentage of homeless former foster children probably is similar in El Paso, said Angelica Terrazas, who runs the Pride Center, a day shelter to help young adults leaving foster care.

The Pride Center assists its 145 clients with challenges such as getting into school and finding a job. It also operates a food pantry that its clients swarm.

But many, like Palacios, still live on the margins.

He was placed in foster care at age 7 because his mother abused him. He still has a scar on his face where she hit him with a

40-ounce beer bottle.

Things were better in foster care, but far from perfect. Palacios went through 29 foster families

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in Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, Port Lavaca, Fort Worth and elsewhere.

"I don't remember all of them," he said.

Through it all, he said, he felt like a second-class family member, sitting at separate tables during meals and constantly being identified as something other than a true family member.

"I felt like I wasn't worth anything," Palacios said. "I was just a piece of paper."

Not all foster children have that experience. Jose Rios, 21, said he almost quit high school, but his long-term foster parents, Victor and Virginia Garcia, implored him to stick it out and graduate, which he did.

"I so love them," Garcia said.

Finishing high school can make a big difference in the fortunes of a person who is in foster care until 18, said Susana Reza, director of El Paso Human Services Inc., the agency that sponsors the Pride Center.

In Texas, those who are foster children when they turn 18 are eligible for tuition waivers at state colleges and for other help, including room and board.

"They'll get more financial assistance if they're in post-secondary education," Reza said.

But only 3 percent of former foster children

complete a bachelor's degree as young adults, according to Casey Family Programs, a Seattle-based group that studies foster care.

Geylen Martinez, 22, is on her way to joining that 3 percent. She has completed an associate's degree in sign language at El Paso Community College and now is working toward a degree in speech pathology. She also helps other young adults at the Pride Center.

Martinez recalled the furnishings in her first apartment: two stools, a TV, a cup, a plate and a donated bed.

"It was so empty and so alone," Martinez said. "Everybody hates being alone -- especially if you've been in foster care."

Martinez said she made many mistakes when she left foster care, but with the help of her sisters, she made it through.

Palacios did not have that support. He has two sisters he does not know and a mother in Juárez who wants nothing to do with him.

A disruptive student, Palacios dropped out of Burges High School. He got a fast-food job and a house with his girlfriend.

But when their daughter was born prematurely last spring and died, he stopped going to work. He lost his girlfriend and his home.

After wearing out his welcome with a friend,

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Palacios spent the summer sometimes going to University Medical Center and faking a back injury. When the staff did not buy it, he would ask if he could spend the night in the waiting room -- anything to be indoors.

"I'm scared of staying out there," Palacios said.

The city's homeless shelters are not much better for young adults leaving foster care, Terrazas said.

"It's really, really scary," she said. "You're talking about a case manager and an 18-year-old standing outside a shelter crying" recently, worried that the teen would be attacked by older, more-hardened people at the shelter.

For two weeks in the past month, Palacios braved it in Memorial Park. He would grab a bench, if one was available. If not, he would place a piece of cardboard on the ground and sleep on it. Fortunately, nothing terrible happened.

Palacios spent his days up to Wednesday at the Pride Center, looking for jobs while the staff tried to find him a place to live. It was critical to find him a home quickly.

"If they become homeless they're likely to stay homeless," Reza said.

Then the fortunes that had run so relentlessly against Palacios changed.

He received a job offer to drive cars to be detailed and run other errands, but he didn't have a driver's license. Staff at the Pride Center found the money for him to go through driver's education and get his license on Friday, so he could start work Monday. Just as important, somebody offered to rent Palacios a backyard apartment in the Upper Valley at a price he could afford.

At least for now, he has a place.

As he sat on a bench in Memorial Park, Palacios said the day had turned out well. But it was with the same wistfulness as when he described meeting his mother two weeks ago and she told him he was a mistake.

"I'm tired of being lonely," he said.

Marty Schladen may be reached at mschladen@elpasotimes.com; 546-6127.

How to help

- The Pride Center at 820 Montana wants to expand services for young people leaving foster care. For example, it wants to open an overnight shelter. It subsists on a one-time \$250,000 grant from the Texas Workforce Commission that expires at the end of 2012 and on donations of time, money and goods.
- To make a donation, stop at the center or call El Paso Human Services at 534-7227.

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