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On Their Own: Aging out of Foster Care

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KWCH 12 Eyewitness News

9:30 PM CST, November 15, 2010

(WICHITA, Kan.)

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At age 18, you may be considered an adult but that doesn't mean you're ready to be on your own. For hundreds of Kansans, that doesn't matter. They age out of foster care and it's up to them to follow through getting help. We introduce you to two area teens trying to make it on their own.

Everybody has a story and for some Kansas kids the early chapters are not pretty. "My mom smoked crack, drank and smoked pot every day she was pregnant with me," said former foster child Modia Evans. "There wasn't any safe place for me," another former foster child Jonathan Miller.

The themes of Miller and Evans' stories are similar, both grew up without their parents. Evans bounced between extended family until entering foster care at age 17. "I was living like a foster kid before I got into the system," she said. Miller entered the foster care system at age three. "Obviously I hated foster care and I didn't want to be in it," Miller said.

Now both adults, they've aged out of foster care by writing a letter to a judge seeking dismissal from custody. They both made the decision but after that their stories start to differ. "I look at myself and I go, well I'm a product of the system," Miller said. "I wanted something better for myself. I chose to do what I had to do," Evans said.

When Miller was released from custody he didn't know what to do. "It was rough, I was living under bridges." He took us to the bridge in Planeview where he recently spent many months. He wedged a mattress in the beams of the bridge and created a fire pit to stay warm. He did it simply to survive. "It

felt like being on the bottom of the world," he said. You may wonder, how can this happen? Why is a former foster care child left to fend for himself? "I didn't even have shampoo when I came out," Miller said.

The thing is, help is available. Every foster care child starts developing a transition plan at age 16. They work with their life skills coach to plan school, work and housing options for when they age out of the system. Agencies like Youthville work with teens about to age out in hopes of making them successful. "The problem is we have a lot of kids that age out, maybe they were in the system longer than I was and don't want to take those resources. They don't want anything to do with the system," Evans said.

Evans says without help, she wouldn't be a junior at Wichita State. Every foster child in Kansas gets free tuition at state schools. "I didn't have to go to college. I could have chose just to work or not to do anything, some people are fine with that. I'm not one of those people," she said. Evans uses her past to push her forward, balancing school and work to pay her bills and reach her goals. "I believe you can do anything you want to do." Evans is president of the Kansas Youth Advisory Council. It's a group of foster children working to improve the system. They work with lawmakers, agencies like Youthville and foster children. The KYAC is the reason foster children get free tuition. They are also working on a uniform high school credit hour policy for foster children.

Miller is now trying to adopt Evans thinking, knowing it's up to him to change his situation. "I'm not living under a bridge, I have responsibilities," he said. He recently moved in with a family friend. By helping with the kids and around the house, he has a place to call home. "It's my room! It's pretty cool," Miller said. He's also asked help, getting food stamps and cash assistance. They are basic necessities to get his life started. "With hopes and a prayer, I guess I pulled it off." He's taking the steps needed to make sure his story ends up the way he wants.

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