

Group says foster teens need family

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As a teenager in Tennessee's **foster care** system, **Mary Lee** would be pulled out of school twice a year to visit the courthouse, where she would wait for hours to give a judge a few minutes' update on her life.

The proceedings were mostly perfunctory, until the day the judge stopped to ask what it was that Mary wanted out of life. "I want what everyone wants," she remembers telling him. "A family of my own.

"I want parents to come home to during Christmas break from school. I want siblings, just to talk with, to fight with, to have that experience. I want a dad to walk me down the aisle. I want grandparents for my kids."

A week before her 18th birthday, her dream came true -- Lee was adopted by a former case manager. Now 23 and a college graduate, she has joined the growing number of former foster youths who are stepping up and speaking out, telling child-welfare agencies how to better care for future generations of kids.

As studies point to high rates of incarceration and homelessness among former foster youths, programs have popped up around the country to help teenagers survive the leap from **foster care** to adulthood. But many young activists say what they really need is families.

"People told her how much paperwork it was, how much hassle," says Lee of her adoption. "But this means the world to me, to know that I'm connected to a loving family for the rest of my life."

It's an idea that is catching on: The first convention by the California Permanency for Youth Project, which promotes the notion that teens and young adults need parents, was attended by just 40 people. This week's event in San Francisco drew 250 people from 15 states -- including officials from Alameda County, one of the project's first pilot program sites, and Contra Costa County, one of nine California counties joining the project this year.

In the past, child-welfare workers assumed that children over the age of 11 or 12 would probably not be adopted and should concentrate instead on gaining independent living skills. The new movement, referred to as

"permanency," takes the opposite approach, stressing the importance of connecting adolescents with adults who will love and support them forever.

"Every young person needs at least that one parent who will unconditionally commit to them for a lifetime before they're out of **foster care**," said Pat O'Brien, director of You Gotta Believe, a New York City placement agency for teens and preteens. "When you do that job, you go a long way to preventing homelessness in this country."

People need not be skeptical about the prospects of finding adoptive homes for teens, O'Brien told conference attendees Wednesday. "There are an infinite number of families out there for any kid who would otherwise be discharged to nobody but themselves. We just have to expand our minds."

Case workers start by asking teens about family members or other adults already in their lives. In Alameda County, teenage twins found a permanent home with their favorite teacher. Elsewhere, teenagers have been placed with relatives relocated via Internet searches, court-appointed advocates, and, in one case, even a school bus driver.

Angela Egers, now a 22-year-old college student in New York City, said finding her adoptive mother at age 17 changed her life.

"Having a permanent home allows me to breathe, to slow down and actually live life, and not rush, always feel that I have to, have to, have to," she said. "My friends that are in care, they don't have that, they have to work."

Gilroy resident Victoria Navarro, 18, spent 14 years moving between foster and group homes before finding a permanent home with her aunt and uncle 20 months ago.

"I knew I was really part of their family when I got grounded," she remembers. "It was my first time being grounded. I didn't even know what it meant. ... I knew they loved me, though."

Navarro, who became pregnant as a teen, now lives with her husband and baby but still talks to her family nearly every day and plans to start college in August.

"She's come a long, long way," says Julie Hansen, an advocacy worker who met Navarro when she was 16. "When we finally got her connected to her family, it made all the difference in the world. ... It was like the clouds just opened up for her, and all of the sudden she could see everything in front of her."

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