

## ***Mentors give boost to foster kids***

### **More are sought to help those leaving the system**

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Sexually abused and taken from her home at 13 and pregnant at 16, Tanisha Kershaw could have called it quits and given up hope of having a successful future.

But she didn't.

Instead, she graduated valedictorian from Nancy Boykin Academy in Detroit in 2003.

Kershaw didn't have a car. She took the bus with her baby every day "until I finished. I finished No. 1 in my school," Kershaw said Wednesday.

Kershaw, 20, already has aged out of foster care, but there are dozens of youths in Wayne County who are going through the process.

The state is encouraging people to become mentors to those preparing to leave foster care at 18. State officials, foster children and mentors gathered Wednesday in downtown Detroit to discuss ways to recruit more mentors.

In Kershaw's instance, she and her sisters found themselves in foster care because of sexual abuse by her stepfather -- who was sent to prison. Their mother lost custody, but the girls refused to be separated in foster care.

"My sisters didn't want to be anywhere that I wasn't going to be. The state was going to split us up," Kershaw said. "Then my uncle stepped up and said he would take all of us."

Her uncle Darren Kershaw, 33, raised the girls until Tanisha Kershaw was 19 and one of her sisters left to attend college.

Now, Tanisha Kershaw has custody of two younger sisters and is the proud mother of a 4-year-old daughter and 7-month-old twin daughters.

Kershaw gained support from her uncle, but also mentors including Kelly Ruffing and Sean Blume.

"Sean is great. He's always there for me. He's the godfather to my twins," Kershaw said. "Kelly's always so chipper. You can't help but have your mood change when you're around her."

Blume, 36, can identify with Kershaw. He, too, was in foster care as a child, bouncing around from home to home. He now serves as a community partner for the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a nonprofit organization that helps prepare foster children for independent living.

"I understood the intensity of trying to sustain yourself. You're out there trying to do this all on your own," Blume said.

In Wayne County, there are 600 youths living in foster homes and agencies, but they will age out of the programs at 18, when the state cuts off funding for foster care.

Many are left to their own devices to find shelter and work. Some end up homeless, unemployed and unprepared to deal with life as an adult, according to studies on foster children.

Gary Stangler, director of the Jim Casey program, said it focuses on youths ages 14 to 23. He said turning 18 shouldn't spell more hardships for children.

"Happy Birthday, you're 18. Now here's your belongings in a black plastic trash bag. Good luck. There's nothing to prepare them," Stangler said.

As for Kershaw, she plans to enroll at Wayne State University and major in biology. She hopes to become a forensic analyst.

*To become a mentor in your community, contact the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative at 313-456-1003 or go to [www.jimcaseyyouth.org](http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org). To volunteer with the Don Bosco Hall youth organization, call 313-869-2200 or go to [www.donboscohall.org](http://www.donboscohall.org). A national documentary on foster care youth, "Aging Out," and a local documentary, "Foster a Future," will air tonight starting at 8:30 on WTVS-TV (Channel 56). Contact **SALINA ALI** at 313-223-4554 or [ali@freepress.com](mailto:ali@freepress.com).*