

School Softens The Hard Knocks

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TAMPA - Stefanie Domenico started running away when she was 12. It didn't matter where she went.

"Anywhere but home," said Domenico, now 17.

When the foster child finally got serious last summer about her future, she wanted her new life to start right then. That meant two things she dreaded: moving into a shelter for girls and going back to high school.

Her caseworkers had an idea to help ease the transition. Instead of a traditional high school, Domenico might feel ostracized, why not try a school where all the students are in foster care?

Domenico enrolled in a small school that offers tutoring for General Educational Development testing, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test and college entrance exams. She graduated, and Hillsborough County schools named her turnaround student of the year. She's going to enroll in a community college and study education this fall.

Connections With Education opened in Hillsborough County in November, and Domenico's case shows it works, organizers say. On any given day, about 15 students cram into a makeshift classroom inside a grand Victorian house on Palm Avenue in Tampa Heights.

The school offers a teacher and an assistant who tutor teens on English, math, science and other subjects as they prepare for tests ranging from the GED to college entrance exams.

A Hillsborough County schools guidance counselor is on site to track students' progress. In six months, organizers say, 85 percent of the children voluntarily enrolled have stayed in school.

"These kids are saying to us, 'I do want to be educated,'" said Diane Zambito, executive director of Connected By 25, a national pilot program that started the school and uses community dollars to help foster teens further their education and learn life skills. "Being in foster care is not an excuse to drop out."

Balancing School, Adulthood

At times it can be a barrier, she said. From January 2005 to 2006, 101 Hillsborough County foster teens turned 18 and became legal adults, which by law means they have to move out of foster care. Many are forced to find jobs and an apartment and have little time left for school.

Foster teens 16 or older can drop out anytime, Zambito said.

"Kids who are successful have really good foster parents," she said.

Others need the support of Connected By 25 and its school, which is affiliated with Brewster Technical Center and funded solely by \$150,000 in donations, Zambito said. It shares space - for now - with Independent Living Services, which offers guidance to foster teens coming of age and leaving state care.

Next month, classes will move next door to yet another old Victorian, at 405 E. Palm Ave., this one recently restored by Scott Bartlett, of Gulf Stream of Tampa Bay.

Zambito approached Bartlett months ago and asked for a lease as his company rehabilitated the circa-1905, two-story, four-bathroom house, which features two fireplaces hand-painted by Cuban artist Aldo Suarez.

With 3,188 square feet of space, there's ample room for the school's computer lab, open classroom, administrative offices and a kitchen with stainless steel appliances and granite countertops.

"It's important that it doesn't look like 'the system,'" Zambito said. "We want it to look like a home."

About 75 students ages 14 to 23 attend the school at an annual cost of \$3,500 per student, Zambito said.

Next on her wish list: transitional housing for foster teens coming of age and leaving the system.

For 17-year-old Blair White, Connections With Education is her saving grace.

"Without this place," she said, "I'd be on the run."

Traditional foster care agencies "don't listen," White said. Regular high schools make it hard for foster teens. They can't go to proms, go on band trips or even spend the night at a friend's house without having a foster parent along or providing the state background checks of everyone involved.

After getting her GED, White plans to attend Hillsborough Community College and, later, the University of South Florida to study pediatric nursing.

"I think being able to help [children] is really important," she said. "You're not always going to find people to help children."

Cooking Up Dreams

For Carniellius Branton, 18, staying in school means he can keep his \$892 a month state stipend and his apartment. He works at Burger King and hopes to attend Brewster Technical Center before moving to Miami to attend a culinary arts school.

He wants to own a restaurant specializing in Southern food. His favorite: homemade macaroni and cheese.

"They have the right plan, but I think they need more teachers," Branton said of the school. "Right now, there are two or three teachers and 10 to 16 students."

Zambito, whose husband teaches at the school, hopes to add staff as the school grows.

Domenico calls the school "amazing."

"They just care," she said. "They want to see you do right."

Since enrolling, her confidence has grown. She joined the youth advisory board of Hillsborough Kids Inc., the private agency that oversees local foster care and adoptions for the state. Today, she is a vice president, giving other foster children a voice.

Foster care "was tough, but it didn't kill me," Domenico said as she flitted nails painted bright green to match her cap and gown. "A lot of kids lose hope. It takes an arm and a leg to get people to understand. We're entitled to the same rights as kids with moms and dads."

That means a diploma, she said.

CONNECTING

For information about Connections With Education, call (813) 314-2070. The school is sponsored by Conn Memorial Foundation, Eckerd Family Foundation, Lerner Family Foundation, Lightning Foundation, Lumina Foundation and Triad Foundation.

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