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'Aging Out' and Unprepared for Life

Those Who 'Age Out' of Foster Care Are Dropped from the System

June 1, 2006 — - After his father left, Jesse Aliff was removed from the custody of his alcoholic mother and became a ward of the state of Florida. He spent four years in and out of group homes and juvenile detention facilities. Last December, when Jesse turned 18, he was thrust into an adulthood for which he was unprepared.

"Eighteenth birthday's not as fun as it's cut out to be," Jesse said.

In many states, foster care benefits end at age 18, making Jesse one of approximately 20,000 young men and women who "age out" of foster care each year. In Florida, the welfare of kids who age out is left to private agencies like Connected by 25, which try to provide the education and resources most children receive from their parents.

"They have no bank account, they have no credit history, no employment history," said Diane Zambito, the executive director of Connected by 25. "You're going to do -- what?"

A Story of Self-Sabotage

When he turned 15, the system gave up on Jesse and locked him up in a juvenile detention center. He got out less than a year before his 18th birthday.

"It got to the point where group homes wouldn't even take me anymore, because all I did was run away," Jesse said. "They had to keep me in juvenile detention centers."

Strangely, Jesse came to like detention. He found a counselor there he could talk to, Jason, and he did well -- until just before he was to leave, when he started acting out again. Maybe, he conceded, it was self-sabotage.

"I don't see why I would want to be in a jail situation. I wouldn't want to be in the barbed wire fences and stuff," Jesse said. "But now that I look back on it, maybe I was trying to stay just a little bit longer."

There is one deadline, however, he couldn't avoid.

An Offer Extended

For Jesse, Dec. 21, 2005 -- his 18th birthday -- was bittersweet. No family was there to celebrate, just the social workers and office staff of a group trying to help kids like Jesse.

Chrissy Baker, who lived near one of the group homes Jesse ran away from, agreed to take him in. But after months of his missing curfew and not working or attending school, even Chrissy had had it.

Jesse was not doing any of the things he had planned to do. He no longer looked for a job. A Connected by 25 donor offered him a car, but still no driver's license. The state of Florida will help pay for Jesse to go to school, but he has not applied.

"I would like to be a carpenter, go to school for carpentry," Jesse said, "but right now I'm not all that motivated to go to school, so ... " Jesse trailed off, as he often does when talking about his future.

Unprepared

Jesse's advisers -- Chrissy, his guardian; Jason, a social worker; Diane, at Connected by 25 -- try to push him.

But Jesse, like many other former foster care kids, is emotionally unprepared to take advantage of the few resources that are available to him. One study shows that young adults who were in foster care are twice as likely as war veterans to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

For Zambito, working with Jesse is a constant battle between her faith in him and her frustration.

"He can be the best kid in the world, and I want to ring his neck," Zambito said. "How do you hold someone responsible for things they may not know how to do? And I don't know that Jessie knows how to take advantage of what we have."

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