

Youth Villages eases transition from foster care

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By Jennifer Fernandez

Staff Writer

GREENSBORO — Brittany Emerson dropped out of Andrews High School during her senior year when she became pregnant.

"When I had my son, I wanted to be focused on him," she said.

Now she's ready to focus on herself, thanks in part to New Day, a transitional living program through the nonprofit Youth Villages. The program works with young people who have aged out of the foster-care system to help them learn to live on their own.

Emerson, 19, graduated Saturday from Brittain Academy, a private school in Thomasville. She will soon move into a new apartment and enroll at GTCC to become a nursing assistant or social worker.

Emerson, who had been in and out of foster care since she was a child, said she felt like her foster family wanted her son to go into foster care. She did not want that for him.

"I really want to be on my own," Emerson said.

Each year about 26,000 young people age out of the U.S. foster care system. Many have no family support systems, and nowhere to turn for help, said Patrick Lawler, CEO of Youth Villages.

The group helps former foster children strike out on their own, whether that means going to college, getting a job or moving into their first apartment.

Youth Villages first came to North Carolina in 2006, winning a contract to serve troubled youth in areas that included Guilford County. The Tennessee-based nonprofit now serves eight North Carolina communities, with Charlotte and Fayetteville lined up to add programs this year.

Guilford accounts for 24 of the 51 youth in the transitional living program. Youth Villages worked with the Guilford Center and the Guilford Department of Social Services to match children aging out of the system with Youth Villages specialists, who work one-on-one with participants.

"They were very excited about the opportunity," said Annie Smith, state director for Youth Villages. "They had kids ready for us."

The program teaches "independent living skills," said Andrea Everett, regional supervisor over the New Day program.

Specialists work with participants on building a resume, hunting for a job and finding a place to live. They also talk about sexual health, healthy relationships and responsibility.

"We're there to assist them any time of the day or night," Smith said.

Each specialist is assigned up to eight clients.

The nonprofit regularly tracks how participants are doing in areas such as education, job search and living conditions. Of 36 current participants in Guilford and Wake counties:

- 33 are maintaining their education or graduated.
- 33 have stable housing.

- 13 are employed.

"The idea is to make these kids become more independent," Smith said.

Constance Crumsby, 21, of Greensboro, hooked up with New Day eight months ago. The 2006 Dudley High School graduate was a foster child who was later adopted. She just started a job at a day care center and works part-time at McDonald's. She's going to GTCC to study early childhood education and wants to get a business degree and one day open her own center for needy children.

She was referred to the program in part because she does not get along well with her adoptive mother and wanted to live on her own.

New Day helped her with her deposit, first month's rent and lease.

"This program pushed me to wanting more," Crumsby said.

Participants stay with the program for different periods of time based on their needs.

Crumsby's time is about over.

"They'll let me loose in November," she says.

Will she be OK then, on her own at last? She pauses for just a second.

"I think so."

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