

Fostering Career Growth for Former Foster Kids

By Amy Griffith, agriffith@nashvillecitypaper.com

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Amanda Foster knows, better than many other young people in their early 20s, what it means to work hard.

Intelligent and well spoken, Foster articulates her goals clearly and matter-of-factly. She plans to earn a master's degree and open a group home for needy teenage girls. She works full-time at Asurion and takes courses at Nashville State Community College when she can.

And Foster has achieved what she has with virtually no family, no community network and no safety net.

Foster is one of hundreds of young Nashvillians who recently "aged out" of the state's foster care system. When kids in custody of the Department of Children's Services turn 18, they're no longer able to live in foster homes or group facilities. Instead, they're on their own, and must immediately support themselves with a job or other financing to pay for housing, transportation, insurance and other necessities many young people have the luxury of easing into.

"I wouldn't say it's hard to find a job, but I would say it's hard to find a good job," Foster said. "I have to have a job to know I'm going to be able to pay for a car. I have to be able to support myself 100 percent."

Foster was able to find work at the Nashville office of Asurion, a provider of wireless handset insurance and roadside assistance, with the help of a handful of community partners determined to replicate the economic and social advantages of kids from in-tact families or close communities.

Funded by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative with facilitation by the Vanderbilt Child & Family Policy Center, organizations including Monroe Harding, DCS, United Way of Metro Nashville, the Nashville Career Advancement Center (NCAC) and the Oasis Center have worked together since 2002 to help foster kids transition successfully into adulthood.

Studies have produced sobering statistics to quantify the challenges faced by kids aging out of the system, according to the Vanderbilt Child & Family Policy Center. In the first four years after exiting foster care, 46 percent of young adults lack a high school diploma. Fewer than one in five are completely self-supporting, and 42 percent have become parents. In addition, 25 percent have experienced homelessness.

“I can’t imagine just being out there, at 18, on my own,” said Kim Crane, a Vanderbilt project director who administers the program. “I didn’t get my first job from the classifieds. I got it from someone my parents knew through my church. Everything is so relational.”

“Door-openers” offered by the program include financial planning education, as well as resume preparation and placements with local companies that have made commitments to providing jobs that hard-working former foster kids can use as a stepping stone to satisfying careers.

Asurion, U.S. Bank, Associated Wholesale Grocers and HCA are examples of companies that have partnered with local organizations to provide jobs that pay \$9-\$12 per hour, provide full benefits, offer some on-the-job-training and feature promotions structures that allow those at the entry level to work their way up. The companies also have mentorship programs for former foster kids.

In exchange, employers are provided with application pools of former foster kids who were pre-screened by the NCAC for basic educational and skill requirements. Once they reach the interview table, young adults have the same chances as any other applicant. And once on the job, they must meet the same work quality expectations as everyone else.

“It was us being creative in the way we recruit, as well as being consistent with our core values. It was perfect for us,” said Paige Boyd, director of corporate recruiting for Asurion.

Though foster kids have the odds stacked against them in terms of getting started as adults, statistics show they’re consistently high performers once on the job. Workers placed through the NCAC are more likely to stay on the job than the average employee at partner companies, according to Ellen Zinkiewicz, a youth contracts administrator for the center. And those involved with the kids regularly testify to their resiliency, loyalty and desire to work hard.

“The foster care system is just full of amazing young people,” Vanderbilt’s Crane said. “They’re so resilient. They’ve made it this far, and we’ve found that if you just give them this little bit of extra opportunity, they run with it. They can do anything.”

The NCAC will launch a new recruitment campaign for companies interested in partnering in January. For more information, call 862-8890.

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