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One of the most daunting jobs for any parent is preparing a child to cross the threshold into adulthood. But what happens when a child is uprooted from her birth family early, placed in an overburdened child protective system, and then abruptly shown the door at age 18? How does that child, along with 2,000 other youths who emancipate annually from the California foster care system, succeed without the safety nets of family?

What happens is that a foster care system focused on protection — but often failing even at that — comes nowhere close to preparing these youths for the financial and emotional realities they will face as adults. It is telling that in 1875, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was formed — modeled after the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, *already* in existence. The child welfare system as we know it today is still playing catch-up, failing to provide the knowledge, skills and connections these children need to succeed.

Three young adults who've aged out of the foster care system recently provided a glimpse into their experiences of the system. All are active board members of Honoring Emancipated Youth (HEY) in San Francisco, a United Way collaborative committed to helping foster youth make the transition to self-sufficiency.



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Robert Beach, 18, entered foster care in Florida at age 10 when his mother passed away. He bounced from family member to family member, finally landing in the Bay Area with an uncle, then in transitional housing, before finding a small room of his own a few months ago. "I was so ready — I've been trying to get emancipated since I was 14," says Robert, laughing at his own exuberance. "I loved it at first, but after three months, the reality kicked in. I couldn't even eat a lot of times."

Ann Ridge's father died when she was young. When her mother was no longer able to care for her, she asked a cousin to raise Ann and two brothers beginning in 1989. Ann, now 22, has been living on her own for three-and-a-half years. Emancipation? For her, it's less about freedom than fear. "Sometimes I have to pay rent and I think, 'Oh, god, where is this going to come from?'"

Kordnie-Jamillia Lee, 24, is one of five children whose mother was diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic. Her oldest brother entered foster care through juvenile probation. Her oldest sister ran away. "It was only a matter of time before the rest of us were taken from her," says Kordnie, who entered the system in Fresno at age 14. "At the time, the first inclination was to put kids with kin, so I was placed with my father who was abusive." Kordnie later lived with an aunt until age 19.

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Of the three, Kordnie has "seniority," but may have benefited the least from the system. While aging out, she got caught in a legislative quagmire. "I emancipated on the cusp of the revision to the Chafee Act of '99," she says. Also known as the Foster Care Independence Act, it extended Medicaid to age 21, provided for special education grants, and doubled funding for transitional housing. But Kordnie's social workers and counselors were either unaware of, or unable to help her obtain, the new benefits for which she was eligible. "As a result, I've never received a Cal Grant, never received food stamps, and was denied the only transitional housing existing in my county," she recounts.

The term "emancipation" mystified her. "It makes things sound fluffy and nice," she says. She always knew its meaning, but never heard it talked about as a process. Rather, she experienced it as a sink-or-swim proposition — as a walk on a plank, rather than a series of "swimming lessons."

Now, with a hard-earned sociology degree, a drawer full of certificates and the life experiences of people twice her age, Kordnie has more than a few pearls of wisdom to pass along. Beginning at age 19, she was a student social worker and taught life skills classes for foster youth. Currently, Kordnie and Robert advise providers with the California Youth Connection on how to work with youth.

She and the others talk about areas that are key to foster youth success: housing, employment, education and connections — both financial and emotional.



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Housing obviously poses major challenges, especially in high-priced San Francisco. Here, it is little surprise that 40% of foster youth become homeless the same year they age out of the system. Kordnie, who just got a place with a roommate a few months ago, has had more than her share of housing hurdles since emancipation. She's worked while homeless, lived in a rehab house of convicted male felons, shared a two-bedroom apartment with seven people, and faced eviction while rooming with someone who was selling drugs out of her apartment. (She jokes that her roommates didn't all share her educational plan.)

"I'm in my fourth attempt at taking a statistics class that I had to drop or failed because of being homeless, moving, having chicken pox," says Kordnie. "If you don't have a place to stay, you can't even think about anything else." But without skills and education, you can't compete for employment, housing or basic needs.

"I have to make sure I have health care, food, clothing and maintenance for my car," she says, listing her living costs. "It's expensive." Ironically, she adds, many emancipated foster youth find themselves compelled to constrain their incomes to maintain benefits. "I had a lot of skills, so I made more than minimum wage," she says, and that effectively cut her off the Extended Opportunity Program (EOP), which provided educational assistance for first-generation students or those with low incomes. "I felt I was punished for doing the things I needed to do."

Unlike Kordnie, about 60 percent of those exiting the system remain unemployed 18 months later. Research shows that early employment could turn this statistic around. Young people who work before their 18th birthday are four times more likely to graduate from high school than those who don't, and they're more likely to work following emancipation.



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As for higher education, only about one in eight foster youth ever graduates from a four-year college. "But the system is full of people who want to be successful," says Kordnie, pointing out a colleague who is getting her master's degree in communications.

Kordnie didn't have the opportunity to benefit from one higher education program — the Guardian Scholars — but she considers it a great model for helping foster youth who qualify. The program, which is expanding in the Bay Area, provides not only financial support, but also mentoring, health and mental care, counseling, connections and housing — a full, comprehensive program.

Financial education and aid are other major needs of emancipating foster youth. Both Robert and Ann have both benefited from Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), a relatively new program for youth. IDAs work by encouraging savings through incentives and rewards for positive behavior. Savings are matched in a ratio of up to three to one. IDA assets are exempt from consideration in determining eligibility for other benefits, such as food stamps. "You can use these savings for school, housing or buying a computer," says Robert. He and the others agree that IDAs are a step in the right direction.

But Robert, Ann and Kordnie have had many needs the system failed to meet. Thrust into foster care first in Florida, Robert was ineligible for many services in California. Struggling with a learning disability, Ann felt stymied throughout school. Frustrated by attempts to find a mentor when she was younger, Kordnie came to believe she was "the only person I can rely on."



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In this regard, Robert has been more fortunate. He was surprised by a call from a volunteer mentor the week he emancipated from foster care. She was a CASA (court-appointed special advocate) worker. "I didn't want to meet her at first," he says. "I was so sick of people coming in my life and leaving." Now he looks forward to their weekly lunches. "She's great. I've never had someone who listened — who didn't care who I am, *what I am* — who just cared for me."

Listening with open ears, hearts and minds, goes a long way, says Ann. "We have needs just like everyone else. Don't single us out. We need to feel whole, not stigmatized."

"A system can't *raise* children, it can't raise youths," adds Kordnie. "What it *can* do is empower you and give you resources. It can help you create community with people who have like backgrounds, who empathize with what you're going through. If you're going to take a child out of a home, you need to be prepared to provide a lot."

For a preview of *Aging Out*, a film documenting the challenges three other foster youth face as they age out of the system, select this [link](#).

The Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation is working with other members of the national Foster Care Work Group to test strategies in three communities that will connect foster youth to schools, jobs and support networks by age 25. The foundation is participating in the development of the three-year, \$1 million initiative in Alameda County beginning this year.



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