

The Columbus Dispatch

A different kind of adoption

A statewide advocacy group works with businesses to help those too old for foster care and too young, disadvantaged or inexperienced to make it on their own.

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

He liked to picture himself an athlete at a small college, catching touchdown passes and earning good grades. He'd live in a nice room and savor every trip to the cafeteria.

This meeting is a funny place to admit that your dream is fading, Robert Payne thinks, but he goes ahead and says it anyway.

"I had to quit football. I got behind on my rent, and I needed to work more. I didn't have the money for me to eat or anything."

The teenager's words hang in the air while the assembled adults try to figure out how to respond. They are gathered in the Dublin suites of Direct Energy, a gas and electricity supplier whose local office sits several miles and a world or two away from Robert's East Side apartment.

Robert and three other central Ohio young people are linked to the company because of a different dream. It imagines a kind of corporate adoption, one in which employees sponsor the four during the course of a year to help keep them from becoming homeless again.

Too old for foster care, too young and poor to make it on their own, these young people with little or no family support are among the nation's most under-served and vulnerable populations.

Their journey from childhood to independence is a forced march. Stumble and there might be devastating consequences. Don't stumble, and there still might be.



Sharayna, right, talks to Angela Lariviere at the offices of COHHIO. Sharayna comes in to volunteer at the office on a regular basis.



Robert Payne and Angela Lariviere, of the Youth Empowerment Program, grab a snack at Wendy's while they talk about his school work. Robert was trying to support

"Cereal and milk," Robert says, half-smiling. "That's all I really need."

Adults know better, but there's little point, or kindness, in telling a hungry young man the things he should aspire to. This effort aims to be realistic. It probably won't solve problems, but it could help a lot.

"It's much more than writing a check," said Direct Energy's Ray Seng. "It's not driven by some benevolence on our part. It's driven by the passion of the kids."

They begin regular meetings at the Direct Energy office in the fall of 2008. Organizers want Robert and the others -- Kim Aquillo, Ebony Hollamon and Sharayna Warmasley -- to talk about how they manage, to report progress, explain setbacks, seek advice.

Ebony beams when she says that, after many tries, she finally earned her driver's license. Seng laughs and promises to be on the lookout.

The four leave the conference room balancing care packages of mops, laundry detergent, towels and other items they need but can't afford.

On the way out, a bottle of dish soap hits the floor and oozes a thick puddle on the carpet. No one is sure whether to laugh or cry.

Angela Lariviere is clairvoyant. She has an unerring ability to spot lonely, struggling teens and young adults who have no place to call home.

"It's a national issue -- the bridge between child services and adult eligibility," Lariviere said. "I have a youth at Otterbein who sleeps in her car over the summer."

Lariviere works for the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio, which focuses on assistance, research and advocacy. She founded the Youth Empowerment Program at the organization a decade ago to draw attention to the plight of the overlooked young people often referred to as "transitional youth."

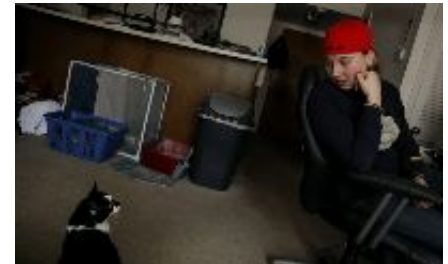
YEP, as it's known, operates as a statewide council of currently or formerly homeless youths ages 11 to 24 who work together to improve their lives.

Lariviere pitched the corporate-adoption idea to Direct Energy, which already was giving money to the housing organization. She recruited Robert, Kim, Ebony and Sharayna from the 300 or so

himself and finish up his senior year.



Kim Aquillo, Ebony Hollamon and Robert Payne talk to Ray Seng at a meeting at Direct Energy. Employees put together care baskets to provide the young people with household supplies.



Kim lives and works on the Northwest Side, where it can be difficult to get around by COTA bus. She says her cat is her best friend.



Robert needed nice clothes to wear to a school dance. Angela checks the outfit he tried on at Burlington Coat Factory on the East Side.



young people involved with the Youth Empowerment Program each year.

The four were working hard. Yet they couldn't earn enough, or secure enough assistance, to keep themselves housed.

Shelter systems and federal housing programs largely focus on single adults or families with dependent children, advocates say. Waiting lists for housing vouchers are long. Among former foster youths, only those who were in foster care when they turned 18 are eligible for a limited amount of support until age 21.

Some Ohio child-welfare agencies put former foster kids in budget hotels during holiday and summer breaks from college. Sometimes they can't even do that.

Doris Edelmann, who works with young people aging out of foster care at the Montgomery County Department of Job and Family Services in Dayton, said she recently had to cut off a college student just because she had a birthday.

"I said, 'You're 21. We can't help you anymore.' She just started sobbing," Edelmann said. "I think it's tragic that we can't help them through four years of college."

Ohio's two-year budget eliminated a \$5 million program that used welfare money to provide life-skills training, job preparation, and housing assistance for young people who had been in the child-welfare system.

"During the late '90s, when communities around the nation were making all these 10-year plans to end homelessness, youths weren't considered in the mix," Lariviere said. "They're completely off the grid."

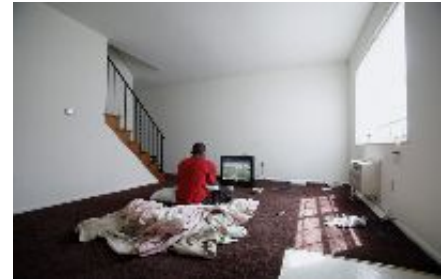
Ohio outreach programs funded through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act made contact with homeless youths more than 17,000 times between October 2008 and September 2009, according to federal data. About 2,400 were in shelters. Just 242 received housing assistance, said Richard Hooks Wayman, senior policy analyst at the National Alliance to End Homelessness, a nonprofit, nonpartisan group in Washington.

"There are less than 4,000 federally subsidized housing units for them across the U.S.," Wayman said. "And that's for all 50 states."

Of the four youths chosen for the pilot program with Direct Energy, Lariviere has known Robert the longest.



Robert often cares for his infant daughter, who was born in February. "It's an amazing feeling," he said.



Robert had no furniture -- just a television and some video games -- when he moved into his new apartment in August.



Robert always has wanted to attend college. He was disappointed when Columbus State Community College officials said he hadn't filled out his financial-aid paperwork properly, delaying his spring-quarter admission.

Multimedia

- [Click here to see a video about the Youth Empowerment Program.](#)

She met him when he was 12 and staying in a family homeless shelter with his father and older siblings. He doesn't remember how many places he's lived, but he knows that an eviction preceded each move.

Robert says he was 16 when his father told him that, if he didn't like sleeping on the floor of a motel room, he should leave.

"So I did."

He soon was working too many hours in the kitchen of a nursing home, struggling to pay rent, feed himself and stay awake during classes at East High School.

"I didn't want foster care, and I didn't want to switch schools," said Robert, now 18. "I feel like every time I get somebody in my life, they disappear."

Ebony, 22, moved to Columbus from Canton during the summer of 2008.

"I was in foster care for 15 years," she said. "And for my 19th birthday, I got cervical cancer."

Kim, 20, went into foster care as an infant and spent her early years moving around with a mentally disabled sister, who died. Kim was adopted at 12 "and it was OK for a year or so," she said.

"Then everything started falling apart. I got kicked out two weeks before my 18th birthday. I was living in a guard shack my senior year of high school."

Sharayna, 22, came to Columbus at 16. She had been trying to stay on her own in Buffalo, N.Y., after fleeing an abusive home but wound up homeless. She came here to be with family, but they made no room for her and she soon wound up homeless again, hungry and sleeping in cars.

Desperate for money, Sharayna agreed to steal a car for someone and got caught. She had been ordered into counseling and mental-health treatment and was staying at a homeless shelter, crying herself to sleep, when Lariviere met her.

Studies have found that more than 20 percent of former foster kids become homeless within the first two years of their independence.

"Our kids are so young and vulnerable," said Edelman, of Montgomery County. "When they go to these shelters, they are just eaten alive."

Most of the young people ache to succeed, she said. When they're little, people look at their troubled situations and understand why they can't. When they grow up and still struggle, they get blamed.

Robert said one of his school principals tried to prepare him.

"She said, 'Robert, when you turn 18, nobody's going to care about your story,'" he said. "It's true."

By the spring of 2009, about six months into the corporate "adoption," Robert has left his apartment, fed up with a landlord who took advantage of his desperation.

"I didn't have a working bathroom for a month," he said.

He is staying in a one-bedroom apartment with his older brothers and his mother, who just left a homeless shelter. He hasn't yet passed all sections of the Ohio Graduation Test, and Lariviere worries that his schoolwork will suffer.

"Robert is quite capable when he's in the right environment," she said. "He's just not in the right environment."

Ebony is working as a VISTA - Volunteer In Service To America - with Lariviere, and she also has found some assistance through the Orphan Foundation. Sharayna is attending classes at Columbus State Community College.

Kim doesn't show up for the monthly meeting at Direct Energy, and Seng worries aloud. He has grown close to her, taking her on golf and church outings. She likes to think of him as a father figure.

Seng tells the other young people that his job at Direct Energy is being eliminated.

"This sucks," Ebony says.

But the company will carry on the relationship, he promises.

Direct Energy has provided \$4,000 for the pilot with the Youth Empowerment Program - about \$1,000 for housing-related expenses for each youth for a year. The company also provides monthly care packages to help meet basic needs.

Seng asks Robert if he needs tennis shoes.

"I'd take a pair, yes sir," Robert says. "Eight-and-a-half."

Ebony needs light bulbs. Sharayna requests shoes and sweat pants for walking and exercising.

"I don't feel right asking," she says.

Seng studies their faces.

"It's not over," he tells them. "I've learned a lot from you guys. I mostly appreciate your growth.

"Reach out to Kim. Let her know who her friends are. Be persistent. If she never calls back, keep calling anyway."

There's always a crisis.

A car breaks down, a phone bill is too high, a job is lost. Most teens and 20-somethings rely on their families to snatch them from the brink.

"I have this whole group of kids who don't have anyone but Charlie and me," said Lariviere, 38. She and her husband, Charlie, and their two teenage children never say no. The voice mail on her cell phone fills up with pleas and questions every day.

"I grew up homeless and in transition, and Charlie grew up different - rural and in poverty," she said. "So our house is an open invitation. It doesn't matter when."

Lariviere can't mend broken hearts. But neither can she stop trying. She makes Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, offers a spare bed when she doesn't have one, helps fill out tax returns and rental applications.

She and Charlie showed Robert the ocean.

"Every time I've traveled, been out of Ohio, it was with her," Robert said. "Miss Angela wants to help everybody. But she can't. It takes too many grants."

The Youth Empowerment Program lives up to its name. It is youth-led, and the advocacy is fierce. But passion doesn't always trade for cash.

Like many nonprofit efforts, YEP has just scraped by lately. "I've cut my budget in half," Lariviere said, from \$200,000 a year in 2008 to less than \$120,000 for 2010.

More than once, she has paid staff members out of her own pocket.

Robert said he has seen her cry. He knows who the tears were for.

"When we get mad, Miss Angela feels bad because there's only so much she can do," he said. "I just wish somebody would help her."

On a rainy morning last summer, Robert pulls into the parking lot at his high school. Lariviere, also an East High graduate, is there waiting, as usual, in place of a parent.

They watch as administrators review his transcripts. He has just enough credits to graduate, but, after several tries, he still has to pass the science section of the graduation test.

More worries loom. Kim is back in the picture but struggling; she still grieves the death of a friend, her car blew up, she is nearly out of money.

Sharayna is doing well, but Ebony is pregnant. So is Robert's girlfriend.

Too many of the young people, Lariviere says, "have never had a break their whole lives."

And yet, they keep getting back up. It's easier to do when there is an adult who will at least listen.

"When they hit that wall, why shouldn't there be someone to pick them up and say, 'Look how good you're doing'?" Lariviere said. "The point of this whole pilot was to take these youths who are working so hard and give them a little sparkle."

The Direct Energy program ends in the fall, with Seng participating in the last meeting by phone. He now has a different job with Direct Energy in Pittsburgh; the Dublin office is to close in June.

Seng tells the four young people that he and his wife, Geralyn, will be praying for them "all the time."

Ebony is overwhelmed, but she hasn't lost her sense of humor. After a recent eviction, she tells the Direct Energy staff, she almost rented a U-Haul and left town.

"But things come as they are, and I have to accept that," she said, smiling. "I don't have screens in

my new apartment, and the flies are like family members now."

Lariviere said she knows that the sponsorship made a difference. The support - regular, positive contact with adults who care - mattered even more than the money. Her goal is to develop more sponsorships in an independent program, as a boon for young people and for philanthropic-minded companies.

Support from others "really is helpful - a whole lot," said Sharayna, who now lives in a group home and hopes to begin an internship at the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio.

"Sometimes, it's not enough, for me, to know that I'm doing it for myself."

For Kim, YEP and the Direct Energy program were constants to return to when problems piled up.

During the year, she had moved back in with family only to become despondent, and without housing, when it didn't work out. She spent six weeks in a women's shelter until she had enough money to stay in a new apartment with a roommate.

She works at the Mall at Tuttle Crossing. An athlete, Kim seeks joy coaching young children in a church basketball program.

"I got a hug from a child with Down syndrome," she said, her face brightening. "I kept it all day."

Robert finally gets the phone call in January. It's hard to tell whether he or Lariviere is happier.

"He passed the OGT!" she yells. "Robert can go to college!"

Lariviere, through her tears, thinks back. "Do you know how easy it would have been for him to make money selling drugs?" she said. "He's never, ever done anything like that. He just wouldn't."

Robert can hardly believe it himself. He won't let Lariviere persuade him to participate in a high-school graduation ceremony, but he doesn't hide his gratitude.

"Being a kid, I just wanted to have fun, not worry about paying rent," he said. "I was so tired sometimes I couldn't wake up. She's the reason I graduated from high school."

In February, he and Ebony each became parents of healthy daughters. Early parenthood is common among young people who have been homeless or in foster care.

"With our youth, abortion or adoption is almost never a part of the conversation," because they want to be the kind of parents they never had, Lariviere said.

Robert's daughter lives with her mother and grandfather. He cares for her often. "She is a blessing," he said.

Lariviere tries to be hopeful about a new state effort that promises to focus on youth challenges. She sits on the "Youth and Young Adults in Transition" committee through the governor's Ohio Family and Children First council. The goal is to improve resources, policies and services among state agencies.

"The systems don't talk to each other very well," Lariviere said.

Robert enrolled at Columbus State and started classes on March 29, only to quit a few days later because of a snag with his financial-aid paperwork. If his family could pay the tuition now, the aid office said, he'd probably be reimbursed soon.

Robert said he would have to try again next quarter.

"Sometimes, I'm about to cry," he said. "But I have come far from where I started."



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