

Phoenix Dream Center Opens Program for Foster Youth

Many foster kids entering adulthood have lived in wonderful homes, are quite capable of going to college and are well situated on a career trajectory.

But a sizable number of young people turning 18 have bounced from foster home to foster home—or have lived in an institutional setting for as long as they can remember. They may not finish high school or receive any training about holding a job. Many have no place to go and could end up homeless or imprisoned. They battle unemployment and drug abuse and depend on public assistance to get by.

While foster kids stay in the system until age 21, at 18 they no longer are eligible for state subsidies unless they are engaged in full-time work or are a full-time college student. Thus, around 25,000 adolescents a year “age out” at 18, when they technically can no longer live with a foster family or in a group home.

In January, Phoenix First Assembly of God, in an effort to bridge that three-year gap to full adulthood, began housing those who age out of the foster care system in a program called Dream Center Living Youth (DCLY).

“Because of circumstances in their lives, these kids often are delayed in their social and emotional growth,” says Sherry Jones, co-director of DCLY with husband Robert D. Jones. “It is incredibly difficult to go through those years of really becoming an adult.”

The Dream Center renovated space for 18 young people for the new program. In a safe, homey environment, former foster youth can finish their high school diplomas, earn General Educational Development certificates, enroll in college, learn

vocational skills and prepare for independent living.

DCLY participants are required to take classes at the Dream Center from a wide curriculum list that includes such topics as anger management and addiction recovery. They gain nutritional, financial, technological and spiritual insights.

A \$450 monthly program fee is covered by donations as well as state subsidies. Enrollees are required to open a bank account with a portion of their government aid covering costs. The Dream Center supplies utilities, three daily meals and all basic living essentials, such as laundry detergent, toothpaste, deodorant and toilet paper.

Those in the program must attend Tuesday evening Bible study, Saturday night youth service and Sunday morning worship. Jones says the government doesn't object to religious instruction.

"The Phoenix Dream Center has a good reputation for revitalizing lives," Jones says. "Faith-based agencies are getting more acclaim as we show that we have a greater success rate than other programs do."

The Joneses, who have attended Phoenix First Assembly for 20 years, are committed to DCLY. In fact, they gave up their home and moved into a 650-square-foot apartment on the Dream Center site. The couple interacts with enrollees practically every waking hour.

Robert Jones has been a pastor and special education director. Sherry Jones has a master's degree in special education and a doctorate in educational leadership.

Two young married couples—Marshall and Heather Gadd, along with Joe and Monica Robinson—handle day-to-day minor problems for the participants, while the Joneses get more involved in serious counseling situations.

According to Sherry Jones, most of the teens who commit to

DCLY are non-Christians, yet it's understood they are going to receive frequent instruction from Scripture.

"You can't just tell them what they have to do," Jones says. "But we can get them thinking in terms of what is appropriate in how to treat others, how to be respectful, how to be successful in life."

Jones says some teens hostile to God upon entry have become Christians and experienced a tremendous turnaround.

"We lose a few, and that hurts," she says. "But we give them parameters for their behavior and structure for their lives that still allows them the independence to grow to adulthood."

Everett Plunkett moved to the Dream Center in the summer because he had no family or friends offer to house him. Plunkett, 18, was in the custody of Child Protective Services from the age of 4 until leaving a group home just before arriving at the Dream Center.

"I'm looking for how to be independent, how to take care of myself and be on my own," he says. "Before I came, I didn't know God. But God is really not that bad once you get to know Him. I love it here."

Jones notes institutional living often isn't a nurturing environment for foster kids.

"A lot of them come here and disassociate with their past, they disassociate with their families, they disassociate with God," she says. "They don't know what they want; they just know they don't want a life like the one they had."

At the Dream Center, residents experience God's love and acceptance, Jones says.

"We don't focus on their negatives; we don't focus on their past," she says. "We try to set them up for success."

The past, for some residents, is traumatic. Sheila Lucero is another 18-year-old DCLY student. When Lucero was 10, her mother became homeless. Lucero's mother agreed to let her daughter move in with a relative of a friend rather than try to make it on the streets with her. For the next three months, Lucero says a young adult male at the residence repeatedly raped her.

In all, Lucero lived in 17 group homes and with four foster families. She served a brief jail sentence because of a knife attack and also spent time hospitalized for cutting herself. She is looking for some stability at the Dream Center.

Lucero finds the staff easy to talk to and has enrolled in community college classes with aspirations of becoming a nurse.

"I am trying to save up money to get my own apartment," she says. "I need to learn how to live on my own."

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