

Hope for troubled youths

Valley Youth House guides the once-neglected to jobs and homes. Success is celebrated.

By **Debbie Garlicki**
Of The Morning Call

A thin tree line is all that separates mammoth homes with three-car garages from Camp Fowler in Orefield, where young people like Cristina Colon found a place of her own and a family, not the one she was born into but the one she made.

The affluence just outside the camp is certainly something Colon is not used to. Until November, Colon, 20, was living in her car. Her abusive father had left the family and her mother had kicked her out of the house, she said.

She slept “anywhere I could find parking.”

Until Colon’s grandfather, who could not take her in, suggested she call Valley Youth House.

Now, she has an apartment, a full-time job, friends and responsibilities that come with being an adult.

She is one of about 150 youths ages 16-21 in the Lehigh Valley being helped by Valley Youth House’s Independent Living program.

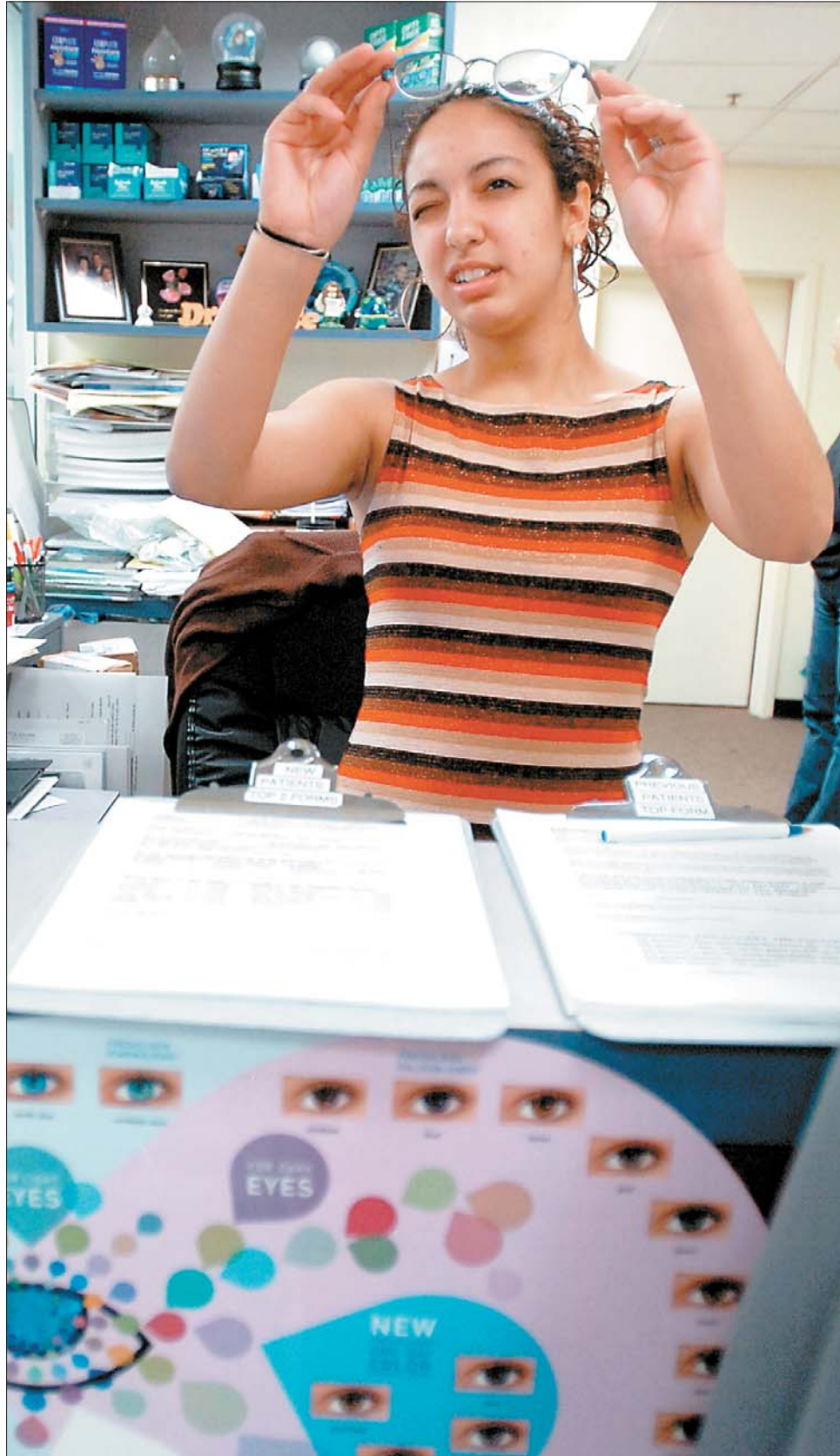
Colon and others recently were recognized for their accomplishments — both big and small — at a banquet and picnic at Valley Youth House’s Camp Fowler, a 41-acre retreat in woodlands accessible by a serpentine road along the Jordan Creek.

Many finished school, and some had received scholarships and financial aid and were going to college. Their goals were to work in theater arts, child care, nursing and cardiology. They had gotten — and more importantly, kept — jobs. They had moved into, or were about to move into, their own apartments.

No small feats for youths who only a short time ago were homeless, in foster care or in secure facilities in the juvenile justice system.

“The step to all this freedom and responsibility is pretty darn big, and we like to acknowledge their successes in that,” said Lisa Weingartner, associate director of Transitional Living, one of the components of Independent Living.

Valley Youth House, a nonprofit organization with a \$12 million annual budget, serves about 8,000 youths and



Denise Sanchez The Morning Call

CRISTINA COLON, 20, who once lived in her car, now works for National Vision Center at the Wal-Mart in Whitehall Township. Youth Valley House helped give direction to her life. She now hopes to study speech therapy at Lehigh Carbon Community College.

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parents by providing shelter, counseling, life skills training and recreation.

Independent Living covers three other programs that stress education and maintaining a job and housing.

It was started in the 1980s when social service providers realized that youths were often ill-equipped, because of unstable backgrounds, to deal with the realities of bills and a grown-up's life when they reached 18 or graduated from high school.

•How many people who were abused or neglected are ready to be on their own at 18?Z asked Bill Motsavage, Independent Living director. •The answer is very few, if any. So we try to help them with the transition.Z

Nationally, only half of youths who have been in foster care have a high school diploma or equivalency diploma when they are discharged, he added. At Valley Youth House, the graduation or equivalency rate is 75 percent to 80 percent.

Not all of the youths have

committed crimes. Some have been abused or neglected by parents who can't or won't care for them.

In the past, some of the youths would have been housed in locked facilities where they'd wear jumpsuits without shoes so they couldn't run. And they wouldn't have belonged there, Motsavage said.

Independent Living was developed as an alternative to traditional child-welfare placements,Z said an out-of-breath Motsavage, taking a break from an intense basketball game at the picnic.

The Adolescents Achieving Independence program serves youths in foster care who are ready to go to college or live on their own with help.

Others participate in the Transitional Living program where they live with other youths and advisers in residences at Camp Fowler or eight others homes. Some are still on probation, but most are in foster care and need a •step downZ program before they live on their own. There is separate housing for young mothers and babies.

In the five-year-old Supportive Housing program, those ages 18-21 live in their

HOW TO HELP

To donate new or gently used furniture and household items, such as dishes, utensils, pots and pans, curtains and other necessities to the Supportive Housing program, call Valley Youth House at 610-820-0166.

own apartments. Valley Youth House helps furnish apartments with donated items and initially helps pay for rent, food and bus passes. Youths pay their cable, electric or gas, and cell phone bills. If they have a car, they pay for insurance and gas.

The goal is to get the youths paying all their expenses.

Program coordinators have keys to the youths' apartments and can monitor all finances and bills.

Participants lose some privacy, Colon acknowledged, but added, •For what I am gaining, it is nothing.Z

Youths can be in the program from a few months to five years. When they leave, Valley Youth House continues to be •their support network and quasi-family,Z Motsavage said.

Last year, 88 percent of youths in Supportive Housing were able to stay in their apartments, which Motsavage considers success.

Jaime, 18, was in Independent Living programs. Now, he lives with his grandmother and mother and has jobs in sales and security. •I've learned to manage money a lot better than I used to,Z said Jaime.

•No one thinks of kids as homeless.
•But homelessness knows no race, gender, creed or age.Z

MICHELE ENGLER
program coordinator,
Valley Youth House's
Camp Fowler

He also gets along better with his peers and has come a long way since he entered the system after starting a fire in a trash bin, he said.

Krystal, 18, a hostess and server, lived in many secure facilities and had been expelled from school for selling

drugs. She is considering a career in nursing, and has an apartment and savings and checking accounts. She is proud of the lease with her name on it.

Nikita Lay, 19, who had lived in a juvenile detention center and a group home, has been involved in Transitional Living and Supportive Housing. She had periods of •house-hoppingZ and lived with a boyfriend and her mother. Still, counselors allowed Lay to make those moves because she had to learn that there are consequences to choices, Weingartner said.

When the decisions turned out to be bad ones, Lay called Valley Youth House.

•The success is the relationship that we built and the fact that she felt comfortable enough to call and say, •I do need help,Z Weingartner said. •Ownership of her own choices is really the success.Z

Lay, a night auditor at a motel who wants to finish school and go to college, now has an apartment. •It feels good to wake up in the morning and know it's mine,Z she said.

Independent Living helps youths learn to use public

transportation and helps them get important documents they might not have, such as Social Security cards and birth certificates.

Cristina Colon remembered how frightened she was when she was alone. •I had no clue what to do,Z she said. •I knew I had to get from Point A to Point B.Z

Colon, who was not in the child welfare system, recalled making her first call to Valley Youth House and talking to Michele Engler, program coordinator for Supportive Housing.

•No one thinks of kids as homeless,Z Engler said. •But homelessness knows no race, gender, creed or age.Z

Colon has paid off her debts and has applied to Lehigh Carbon Community College. She wants to study speech therapy.

She considers other youths and counselors •a close family.Z She never again wants to call a car home.

•You know how happy I am to have a bed to sleep on finally?Z Colon asked. •This program has been my biggest blessing.Z

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