

For foster teens, self-sufficiency is tough lesson

Valley Youth House guides them toward steady adulthood.

By Debbie Garlicki | Special to The Morning Call

September 8, 2008



Ruby Marin, 17, of Bethlehem and a recent graduate of Liberty High School has been in foster care for five years. She is now a college student. (Emily Robson, Allentown Morning Call / August 8, 2008)

On the brink of adulthood, Ruby Marin has enjoyed more freedom and shouldered more responsibility than most 17-year-olds. In the year leading up to college, she had a job, arranged her own transportation, bought groceries, cooked her meals and made her doctor appointments.

The Liberty High School graduate has learned to budget and to temper the desire for instant gratification. When a shirt in a trendy Bethlehem store caught her eye, she walked away, knowing that if she were to buy it, she'd have to do without something more important.

"There is more to life than hair and clothes," said the wise-beyond-her-years Marin, now a freshman at [Indiana University of Pennsylvania](#).

She is one of about 170 youths, primarily from Lehigh, Northampton and Bucks counties, in various independent living programs of Valley Youth House, and is one of 32 teens and young adults in a program called Realistic Environment for Adolescent Living for 16- to 21-year-olds who are transitioning from foster care to independence. At this stage of their lives, they will not be adopted. In some cases, their parents' rights have been terminated.

Marin, who will be 18 on Sept. 21, entered foster care when she was 12. She started in the REAL program at the beginning of her senior year of high school.

It is the first time that Marin, who shared a Bethlehem apartment with two other girls, had lived on her own. She kept her room tidy even though there was no one around to nag her about dirty laundry piles.

The youths, who are referred to the program by child welfare caseworkers, live in homes that are subsidized or rented by Valley Youth House, an agency that provides programs for troubled, neglected or abused youths and runaways. Valley Youth House employees sleep at the houses at night.

Marin, who worked at a fast-food restaurant for the past two years, gets \$40 a week for groceries and a monthly bus pass from Valley Youth House, whose work is financially supported by county governments, especially Northampton, Lehigh and Bucks; [Philadelphia](#); federal and state grants; and corporations, individuals and the United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley.

For Marin and others, the program is an opportunity to wade into the REAL world instead of being thrown off the high dive and left to sink or swim.

"When I go through the stress of finishing high school and thinking of college, I stop and take a look at my surroundings," she wrote in a poem that was recognized earlier this year by the state Child Welfare Advisory Board. "Why do the youth and their families act without a care, sometimes so confident that they can take life for granted?"

"It is because they come from their homes full of permanency. But where I am from are many places Â... where

I am from is not one place, and where I am from, I am diverse."

When she looks in the mirror, Marin sees a girl from [California](#), one of six children, some with different fathers. Her poem acknowledges that some part of her will always be the little girl who made sand castles on the beach and listened to the night song of crickets before she and a younger brother were taken from an "unhealthy" environment in the family and lived in various states.

After living on her own, Marin looks in the mirror and sees a self-reliant girl whose confidence is building. "It surprised me that I can do more than I thought I was capable of doing," she said.

Marin has learned to resolve conflicts with roommates and others on her own and not to depend on an adult to fight her battles, she said. She motivates herself to study and do chores, watches "the money in my pocket" and manages her time.

Knowing peers sometimes won't listen, she doesn't lecture them about staying in school and getting a job. Some teens are more mature than others, she said, adding that "how we do life" is different.

In her journal, she documents her doubts, frustrations and worries. "Sometimes I think I am going to be just another foster kid," she said.

When doubts surface, she tells herself, "I have made it this far. Stop saying, 'What if?'"

With help of a life skills counselor, Marin was able to contemplate a future beyond the Taco Bell where she worked, and completed college financial aid forms and obtained grants.

"She has an internal drive to succeed," said Lisa Weingartner, associate director of transitional living for Valley Youth House.

When Marin started classes at Indiana University in August, she was more prepared than some of her classmates for the pitfalls of independence. Marin wants to study biology and hopes, one day, to get into medical school. Her goal is to be a cardiologist.

In her poem, Marin wrote, "Where I am from will never change."

But self-sufficiency has better equipped her for where she is going. If she stumbles along the way, she sees a purpose in that, too.

"Some people," Marin mused, "need to fail to accomplish what they need to do."

Debbie Garlicki is a freelance writer.