

FOSTER CARE | AGING OUT

Her mission: Work to help other foster youth



ROCHELLE RILEY

Jonnie Hill has a toothache. A bad one. But she can't see a dentist. She has no insurance for it, and the policy her adoptive parents had is expired.

Jonnie is, for all intents and purpose, on her own. Now 20, Jonnie spent her first 14 years being shunted from family member to family member, and her next six in juvenile detention and foster care. In the past two years, she became — ready or not — a grown-up.

Jonnie earns about \$1,100 a month as an intern for a foster advocacy organization. She has turned making ends meet into an art form. But, after taxes, \$600 rent, \$50 life and renter's insurance, \$160 phone bill, \$80 cable bill, \$280 for fill-ups and oil changes for her '87 Cadillac DeVille, and buying clothes, shoes and other necessities for Tania, her peppy 4-year-old daughter, Jonnie does not have \$800 for a root canal.

Her struggle is the same as that facing many Americans, many Michiganders. But Jonnie has an added burden. She is among nearly 500 youths who aged out of the state foster care system last year. Each is eligible for up to \$1,000 in transition funds, if they apply. But many foster youths don't know about the so-called Youth in Transition Fund, a onetime payment to be used for rent, security deposits, furniture or clothes.

Jonnie knew, but she also knows that a \$1,000 stipend doesn't cover much. It won't buy a car or guarantee a job. It can pull ends a little closer together but can't make them meet.

Great things ahead

Jonnie is nearing the end of her eight-week internship at the Wayne County Foster Youth Demonstration Project, also known as CIAO, Creating Independence and Outcomes, which helps foster youths get driver's licenses, birth certificates, counseling and such support services as car repairs, interview clothes, tools, eyeglasses and college books.

Jonnie's supervisor is working to turn her internship into a full-time job. Then, Jonnie could give her daughter a sense of security and help Tania avoid the misery that Jonnie can still see clearly in her rearview mirror. It's where she finds her mission.

"I've been praying really, really hard," she said. "I was



KATHLEEN GALLIK

Jonnie Hill, 20, of Detroit, who aged out of the foster care system, spends time with her 4-year-old daughter, Tania Evans. Jonnie works full time as an intern for Creating and Outcomes (CIAO), a program that helps foster youths.

going to pursue medical billing, but I asked God, 'Would you tell me what my career will be?' My career should be helping foster kids."

Three years ago, the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth found that young adults making the transition out of foster care were worse off than any others in the youth population. The task force gave Michigan and four other states a chance to help by supporting programs to help these youths become self-sufficient with GEDs, job training, life skills and support services. The Wayne County CIAO project has 135 participants, most of whom know Jonnie.

But neither the federal government nor the state has dealt with a larger issue: The Michigan Department of Human Services, which oversees foster care, has about 700 child protective service caseworkers and 604 foster care workers. To drop caseloads to 15-1, the nationally recommended ratio, Michigan needs another 130 CPS workers and 190 more in foster care.

At CIAO, Jonnie keeps track of area youth and their files, and she started a youth advisory board to bring foster youth to the agency to discuss their own issues. She also spreads the word about new funding sources and ways to get needs met.

"She's shown so much

About this series

This is the latest in a series of occasional columns by Rochelle Riley on the challenges faced by foster children who age out of the state system and are too old to receive further help. Last year, 457 of the state's 18,959 foster

youths aged out of the system. At 18, they are basically left on their own to find housing, transportation, jobs and health care. The series explains the challenges they face and will propose solutions to make this crucial transition easier.

being moved back to Boston, back to Detroit, and then living with friends until she was 18.

That was the age when Jonnie discovered sex and got pregnant. When her relatives found out, they gave Jonnie a choice: Have an abortion or leave. She moved in with relatives of her baby's father.

After Tania's birth, Jonnie moved around again until a fight with another girl landed her in juvenile detention and then in the foster care system. Three years and three placements later, she had saved enough to move into her own apartment with her daughter. Now, she's struggling to find a place in a better school district.

In August, when Jonnie turns 21, she will lose her last \$400 in Youth in Transition Funds.

Sometimes she just wishes she had some help. But then she reminds herself that she is all she has.

"I saw my real mom in November. She came to Detroit," Jonnie said. "She's sick, and she wanted to meet my

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daughter. ... She wanted me to buy her a pack of cigarettes. I said OK."

That was the first time Jonnie had seen her in five years.

Good reasons for pride

Jonnie's adoptive mother, Irene Hill, who now lives in Coral Springs, Fla., said Jonnie has earned her respect.

"Jonnie has quite a personality. People really like her. She's a talker, and she has a good heart," said Hill, a 54-year-old accounting officer for an insurance broker. "I never thought she would go that far. ... She's so happy with her life and proud of herself, and I'm so proud of her."

Jonnie Hill wants to help other youth who are angry, struggling, confused and overwhelmed as they get pushed into adulthood without a net. She wants to do it because she once was one of them: misguided, disrespectful, a defiant rule-breaker, eager for love in the wrong places.

To that end, she serves on the advisory board for the agency where she works. She is head of committees for Wayne County's largest Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiatives foster youth board. She chairs the mental health committee of the state's new Task Force on Foster Youth and Aging Out.

Moving on

When last we d Katrina McQueen, student profiled if she was a junior a Central High School taking a pre-law d State University. Since age 11, she with her 67-year-old mother, Ruth Min

Since her story Katrina has been Detroit Crosman alternative school home. Her grades proved, and state told her that eve turned 18 last Ma have "aged out" she can remain in until she graduat Katrina is still pre-law class. She independent living the Detroit DHS she plans to mov own apartment. Katrina will be e in Transition Fur still need a job. she said, "will be

— Rochelle Riley

She does all of five days a wee care of her dau keeps up her '8 is on a path tow owning her ow, changing the w But first, sh new apartment

Contact ROCHE rriley99@freepres 4473.

You can link to previous installments of this series from the online version of this column at www.freep.com.