Working on a school paper in her dorm room, Shataja White looks like a typical college student. But typical would not describe Shataja's experiences as one of the more than 200 young adults who leave the Allegheny County foster care system every year. She's attending a Penn State University extension thanks to a foundation-supported program for youth who "age out" of the foster care system.

Each year, 240 Allegheny County teens in foster care reach "emancipation" on their 18th birthdays. For some, it's a promising threshold to college or work. For many, it's a trap door that leaves them homeless, traumatized and broke. New foundation-supported programs are creating bridges to help these youth reach healthy adulthoods outside the traditional family structure. By Christine O'Toole Photography by Terry Clark

INDEPENDENCE DAY

No longer living in foster care, Shataja White, shown here in a campus library, is studying to become a pharmacist.

After leaving an abusive home, Shataja White finished high school while living with her aunt. Separated from her three brothers, she coped with the unfamiliarity of a new household and three younger male cousins. "It's sad sometimes," she admits. Varsity sports offered a release and a path forward. Her Woodland Hills High School soccer coach became the catalyst who helped her plan a future after foster care. That future arrived in September, when Shataja entered college south of Pittsburgh at the Pennsylvania State University Greater Allegheny campus in McKeesport.

Coleman Smith prepared for his enrollment at Penn State Beaver in August with the usual paperwork and packing, adding a flourish of freshman spirit: the Nittany Lion logo carved into his hair. It was a surprising flash of bravura for the quiet, controlled basketball player. For the past three years, while earning a high school diploma and competing on a championship team, he's lived in group homes, separated from his birth parents. Of the three young men at his last placement, he is the only one who has been able to make the leap to higher education. The others, he says, are in "boot camp"—programs for juvenile offenders. "I stay focused. I try hard," he says softly.

For Dwan Allston, enrolling at Indiana University of Pennsylvania meant finding a new apartment and day care for her 3-year-old son, Keshunn. After spending her high school years shuttling among family members in Pittsburgh and Tennessee, Dwan is now on her own. That means supporting her son with a frenetic schedule, working 40 hours a week at part-time jobs at Baker's Shoes and a Chuck E. Cheese restaurant while earning her degree in criminal justice. "I sleep as much as I can—but I can never sleep when Kee's around," she says fondly. "My grandma says I can't do it all, but I don't want to live off the system." If her energy and funds hold out, she'll earn her B.S. next year.

These three Allegheny County teenagers aim to beat astounding odds. If they complete their degrees, they'll be among a mere 3 percent of youngsters placed in substitute care for reasons including abusive, neglectful or absent parents—or their own defiance—and yet manage to graduate from college.

Each year, 240 children leave the Allegheny County child welfare system with dreams that mirror those of any other teenager: independence, achievement and support from people who care. But the road to those goals is daunting for these adolescents. They've lived in foster homes, group homes or residential treatment programs an average of 16 months. About half run away at least once. They repeatedly switch schools. Their grades suffer. They graduate at half the rate of other students. Lacking the skills and maturity to support themselves, they may turn to crime. When child welfare experts looked at Allegheny County jail inmates under 25, they found that one-third had spent time in the child welfare system, an indictment of a

GOING TO APPLY TO BUT JEN SAID NO. SHE KEPT PUSHING ME."

Shataja White, student

Christine O'Toole is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to h. *Her most recent story for the magazine, published in the Summer issue, was about the impact two Pittsburgh conferences on women's health and the environment have had on the way women in the region think about how to take care of themselves and their families.*

Percentage of foster children in Pennsylvania 13 and older: **46**

well-intentioned agency that dismisses children from care when they need adult guidance the most.

Pennsylvania Secretary of Public Welfare Estelle Richman sees the train wreck that follows when teens choose to leave the foster care system. "They hit their 18th birthday. At that point, the foster parent says, "Good luck." The Medicare program that has provided their health insurance says, 'I hope you stay healthy.' [The students]often don't know about things like child care, aid for utility payments and food stamps," she says. "They're out on their own, frequently with nowhere to live—just directions to a shelter."

Now child welfare workers are reaching into high schools as well as homes to intercept foster care youth before age 18, connecting them to resources that can stave off coming-of-age disasters. Pennsylvania's foster teenagers can opt to continue in the system and receive support when they choose post-secondary education. Allegheny County's Department of Human Services offers two separate programs that help older youth make the transition to living on their own.

Within the Independent Living Program, five regional agencies provide homes and an array of services to teenagers separated from their families. Reflecting the department's philosophy of giving consumers—even youth within the child welfare system—a voice in decisions affecting them, the panel that awards contracts to the agencies includes youth receiving those services. Another example of involving young people in the process was the department's first workforce development symposium in May, which included current and former foster youth as well as social service providers and staff from workforce programs. Among the ideas that emerged from the session were new opportunities for job shadowing and peer mentoring.

The department's other transition program for foster youth is the two-year-old Independent Living Initiative, which guides teenagers through college and job training decisions. The program includes the work of two "educational liaisons," who are funded by a $300,000 grant from The Heinz Endowments. They serve as mentors, academic counselors and cheerleaders for students in the program.

"Forty-six percent of foster children in Pennsylvania are 13 and older … Our primary goal should be a permanent family for each one," says Joan Benso, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Partnership for Children, a policy advocacy group. "But we must explore other solutions. Voluntarily extending services till 21 is an important ingredient." The partnership's Porchlight Project advocates support for teenagers as well as younger children removed from their families because of abuse or neglect.

"We want kids to spend less time in the foster care system. That's the beginning point," says Richman. "That said, we [also] need a system of guidance or transition."

Marc Cherna, the director of human services for Allegheny County, agrees.

"I often say, my own children would not be able to live on their own at 18. [Our transition program] is all about the life skills we take for granted," he says. "We have not lived up to our responsibilities [to prepare foster children]. We need better outcomes for all."

Cherna's drive to beef up support for adolescents who "age out" of the foster care system is part of a national trend based on compelling research by the University of Chicago. Compared to other Midwestern states that close children's foster care cases at 18, Illinois, which offers support until age 21, sent more teens to college and job training programs.

"Because of the economy and the cost of living, it is almost impossible to have people live independently at 18," acknowledges Howard Knoll, an expert on job-readiness training of foster care youth for the Seattle-based Casey Family Programs, a national child welfare organization. "The question becomes, what options do they have? If they hang on in care, they have a place to go."

The Casey Family Programs' goals include improving the quality of foster care while providing more permanent homes for children so that the number served by agencies is cut in half by 2020. For older foster youth, this means collaborating with other organizations to provide the teens with a supportive community and vocational and academic programs that will help in their transition to adulthood. Casey is working with the Allegheny County Department of Human Services to expand and enhance local workforce development programs available to the department's young clients. The organization is providing the agency with technical assistance for those efforts as well as for other initiatives to improve its services.

says Marge Petruska, the Endowments' senior program director for Children, Youth & Families.

"We will redouble our efforts to build the same bridges to opportunity for these teens as we have done for other vulnerable youth," says Petruska. "It's an exciting and hopeful time, now that the public sector and foundation community have joined forces to focus on this issue."

And research findings confirm that there is desire among foster youth for productive adulthoods. Most teens in the welfare system want to attend college, according to a 2004 study by the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children. With that goal achieved, Shataja, Coleman and Dwan seem poised for success.

"BECAUSE OF THE ECONOMY AND THE COST OF LIVING, IT IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO HAVE PEOPLE LIVE INDEPENDENTLY AT 18. THE QUESTION BECOMES, WHAT OPTIONS DO THEY HAVE?"

Howard Knoll, Casey Family Programs

Support from the local foundation community, including the Endowments, has enabled the agency to strengthen research, record-keeping and data analysis, and to develop a new independent living focus. Over the past five years, the department has received national accolades for its programs.

The Endowments' strategy of funding the salaries of the two educational liaisons for the Independent Living Initiative complements both the agency's efforts and the foundation's historically strong focus on education. Recent examples of the Endowments' education emphasis include its support of high-quality pre-kindergarten throughout Pennsylvania and education reform in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. The foundation is partnering with the Department of Human Services as a way to prevent unemployment and other poor outcomes for older foster youth who often get overlooked in education and training initiatives, But they will continue to need emotional and financial support—not to mention basics like a driver's license, a bank account or a place to live during semester breaks and summer vacations.

Pennsylvania counties differ in their approach and funding for transition programs, but all have access to substantial federal support. In 1999, the national John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program more than doubled previous funding for those over 18. It gives annual room and board stipends of $5,000 for post-secondary education or training—payable to the institution—to teens up to 21 who have left foster care, and permits states to extend Medicaid coverage to the same age. Combined with other sources of financial aid for job training or college—from state tuition aid to monthly stipends to free laptop computers—the support is enough to help every child who qualifies for higher education.

"ONE OF OUR KIDS ATTENDED EIGHT BETWEEN NINTH AND SCHOOL YEARS OF RECORDS WERE

Jennifer D'Amico, left, is one of two Endowments-supported educational liaisons with the Allegheny County Department of Human Services. She is helping Jenauba Lipford fill out a college application for Community College of Allegheny County. Jenauba plans to enroll for the winter term to study criminal justice.

"Money is not the barrier for our kids," says Cherna. What requires more effort for him and his staff is inviting children who are about to leave the system to start a conversation about their rights and choices.

Connecting to Help

For Shataja, the conversation began at soccer practice, when Assistant Coach Jen D'Amico befriended her. Last September, D'Amico joined the Children, Youth and Families division of the county human services staff as one of two Endowments-supported educational liaisons, and began visiting students in high schools and institutions. Shataja, her former player, turned up as one of D'Amico's 150 clients. The teen's good grades convinced D'Amico that she had college potential, and D'Amico encouraged Shataja to bolster her SAT scores and apply to four colleges.

Meanwhile, Shataja's legal advocate was cheering those efforts. Bethany Schumacher, an attorney for KidsVoice, a child advocacy group, also was studying ways to support Shataja's future.

After winning a lawsuit against Allegheny County in 2005 on behalf of a former foster child who sought continued support through her college years, KidsVoice collaborated with the Department of Human Services in addressing similar cases. When the agency inaugurated its Independent Living Initiative the next year, KidsVoice crafted a new conciliation process tailored to each teen's individual situation. If he or she is accepted to post-secondary education or training, advocates and department caseworkers meet to discuss the supports that will help them succeed: stipends for daily living, payments for books or bus passes, or alternative housing for those who have no place to live during school breaks. Individuals can debate, accept or reject those offers. They may opt to keep their case open and subject to periodic review, or they may choose to close their case. Even with their cases closed or

3

Percentage of youngsters nationally who are placed in substitute care for reasons including abusive, neglectful or absent parents — or their own defiance — and yet manage to graduate from college:

transferred within the system, post-secondary students receive financial support. To date, Shataja is one of nearly 100 youth who have participated in the process.

This concerted effort behind Shataja kept her motivated. "I got rejected at four colleges. I was going to apply to [a trade school]," she recalls as she relaxes outside her dormitory in T-shirt, jeans and fuzzy pink slippers. "But Jen said no. She kept pushing me." A last-minute acceptance at Penn State Greater Allegheny allowed her to enroll in pharmaceutical studies and land a place on the school's volleyball team.

and Tennessee, but returned to Pittsburgh for her senior year after Keshunn's birth. Her paternal great-grandmother provided shelter and assistance. But Dwan's goal after community college — going on for a bachelor's degree — meant she needed additional encouragement. D'Amico guided Dwan's apartment search in Indiana, Pa., 60 miles east of Pittsburgh, nixing leases that were too expensive. She also found a place for Keshunn in on-campus day care while his mother attends class at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

D'Amico and her co-worker, Monte Robinson, knew that among their job responsibilities as

DIFFERENT HIGH SCHOOLS 11TH GRADE. IN OTHER CASES, WHOLE MISSING."

Jen D'Amico, educational liaison, Allegheny County Department of Human Services

For Coleman, a University of Pittsburgh summer workshop introduced him to forensics science after his sophomore year. An excellent athlete, he aimed to combine his interest in forensics with a chance to play college ball. Wilkinsburg High School basketball Coach Heath Bailey encouraged his ambition; so did his cousin and teammate, A.J. Poindexter. KidsVoice advocate Bill Petulla prepared his conciliation arrangements. D'Amico drove him to college visits. By August, plans were in place: Not only would Coleman enroll in forensics at Penn State Beaver, he would join the basketball squad and room with his cousin.

After she graduated as a 17-year-old mother from Pittsburgh's Oakland Catholic High School, Dwan's Children, Youth and Families caseworker introduced her to D'Amico. Dwan had little support from her mother, now living in Atlanta; she bounced among high schools in Pittsburgh

educational liaisons would be College Admissions 101. The staffers compiled workbooks to distribute in classroom seminars and developed one-on-one sessions to simplify the mysteries of computing grade point averages and paying tuition.

"Some kids are average students. You don't want to derail their dreams. If a kid has a 1.5 GPA and wants to go to Pitt, he has to get ready for the classroom. They need to know the sequence and the steps," explains Robinson, a burly 31-year-old. "That means open your mail! Understand your transcript!"

But the pair also confronted the lax school record-keeping that dogs foster care children who move frequently. "One of our kids attended eight different high schools between ninth and 11th grade," D'Amico says, recalling frustrating hours spent tracking clients' transcripts for college applications. "In other cases, whole school years [of records] were missing."

25:

Percentage of teens nationally who became homeless for one day or more after aging out of foster care.

Unfortunately, such examples are not uncommon because foster children and youth are so transient. Courts may move them in and out of communities, counties or even states. Some youngsters run away, or they may leave a conventional school to attend a residential one or a mental health facility. If they attend a school for less than nine weeks, often no transcript is issued.

Other students' experiences proved that the devil was in the details. Two students with university acceptances did not know how to supply the housing deposits demanded before enrollment and consequently lost their places. D'Amico says it was a lesson learned as the program moves into a second year.

Sharlene Gray, director, The Bridge of Pittsburgh

"IF THEY DECIDE TO LEAVE TURN BACK A DAY OR A WEEK LATER

As September began, the liaisons tried to be unobtrusive but supportive. D'Amico's secret weapon is a quick text message to the students' cell phones. "It's just a way to check in—to ask how was your day," she says. But the added responsibility to keep in touch with the freshmen, as well as introduce high school seniors and juniors to the initiative, means that the two liaisons' caseload will steadily increase. Joann Heffron-Hannah, program director for the Independent Living Initiative, welcomes that challenge. "Now we are able to reach kids younger. We can work on their deficits and increase our numbers," she says.

Plans for adulthood can falter without support, both practical and emotional. A third of the teens studied by the University of Chicago received help for behavioral and emotional issues. Myra Powell, director of The Hub, a drop-in center for homeless youth, says the reason is clear: "Hurt people hurt people." For volatile teens, a connection to services can be elusive.

Shannon Hagen, 18, has lived at a shelter for homeless youth for seven months and doesn't give a lot of details about why she left the foster home where she had been staying. Though she completed high school while living in the shelter, she has no plans for the future. "I accomplished one thing. I graduated," she says in a conversation at The Hub. She says she would like to attend community college, but "procrastinated" about applying. About the foster care system, she says, "They care about us when we're little. Why aren't they showing it now?"

Occasionally, she says, she has visited job training offices. When asked what she needs to move forward, she sounds perplexed: "I'm not sure. I don't ask for too much."

Though giving disaffected teens like Shannon a hopeful vision for the future is a goal shared by the child welfare system and workforce development programs, bureaucratic barriers have kept the two efforts apart. But now, more than a dozen local programs are working to change that.

Caseworkers visit foster children in their homes. Mentors—college engineering students, young professionals from Leadership Pittsburgh and fellow foster care alumni—offer a glimpse of future careers. A downtown drop-in center for foster care teens, The Bridge of Pittsburgh, offers a broad, casual array of services that cover the basics: daily living skills, workforce development and higher education. KidsVoice assembles ongoing county support when teens enroll in post-secondary education. An annual resource fair, co-sponsored by KidsVoice and the Department of Human Services, provides advice on everything from driver's license permits to college admissions.

THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM, THEY CAN'T TO CHANGE THEIR MIND."

"We surround them with people. It's a wide array of services," says Heffron-Hannah of the department's Independent Living Initiative. Jen Staley, a KidsVoice attorney, agrees that there's no shortage of assistance. "There's an immense amount of resources, but they must navigate the maze," she says.

Making More Options Available

For those looking for work after high school, the Casey Family Programs' Knoll wants an immediate introduction to existing employment programs. "Where are there opportunities to create more effective partnerships with the local workforce development effort? Anyone who's 18 in the welfare system should be registered at Career Links," he suggests, referring to the local jobs agency. "In Allegheny County, that should be an immediate thing—it's all free." Knoll also wants to see other training programs re-invigorated. "The apprenticeship system for trades has broken down," he says, while noting that local trade unions have recently met with county officials to examine apprenticeship programs.

The Bridge of Pittsburgh attempts to address some of these employment and educational challenges that the youth face by providing job readiness classes, SAT preparation, tutoring and daily guest speakers. Thursday afternoons always bring higher-ed admissions representatives. Once a month, advocates from KidsVoice conduct a raucous "know your rights" Jeopardy-like game. More than 400 youth have visited, with 232 opting to become regular members.

"If they decide to leave the foster care system, they can't turn back a day or a week later to change their mind," Director Sharlene Gray emphasizes. "That's why it's critical to communicate with them so they can opt in for job training or school.

Pending Pennsylvania legislation would allow foster youth to opt for a trial release, rather than permanent emancipation at age 18, and re-enter the system if they wish. The Pennsylvania Partnership's Benso is among those who welcome the shift.

"We all know that not every decision that a young person makes works out. They need support to give them room to grow and mature to take the next step," she says. "Let's give them the benefit of every doubt to get there." *h*

At The Bridge of Pittsburgh, which takes its name from the region's many spans, foster care teens can receive job readiness assistance and tutoring services. Above, group leader Brian Scott, left, talks to Keith Young, middle, and Christen Coleman, right, during a Boys 2 Men workshop on the roles and responsibilities of being a man in today's society.