

San Jose Mercury News

Safety net for ex-foster kids

By **Truong Phuoc Khanh**
November 4, 2006

At 2, he was removed from the custody of his mother, a drug addict. At 17, he became a father. At 18, he was emancipated from the foster care system, homeless, a ward of no one.

Daniel Bell's story might have ended disastrously except that he now has a network that wraps him in a blanket of supportive services, including a house that shelters him and mentors who motivate him every day to be a better man.

On Monday, Unity Place Apartments opens with great expectations in San Jose, the first 24 units in Santa Clara County dedicated exclusively to young adults like Bell, 19, who have "aged out" of foster care. It is a hidden population with abysmal statistics: Up to 40 percent statewide are homeless; 20 percent are incarcerated; 51 percent are unemployed.

As Andre Chapman, executive director of Unity Care Group, likes to say of the state's broken foster care system: "We give them a 'Get-into-Jail-Free' card when they walk out our door."

Unity Care works with at-risk youth to provide everything from one-on-one therapy to job training skills. The non-profit agency acquired and renovated the apartments with city and county funds and a small bank loan. The total project cost \$2 million, with \$1.6 million from the city.

"Without housing, they don't have that sense of stability where they can begin to get a job or go to school," Chapman said. "Without a roof over their head they can call home, they have no ability to transition to independence."

Community groups like Unity Care are finally starting to get meaningful state support. This year, California legislators more than tripled the budget for affordable housing and supportive services for homeless former foster youth, from \$1.3 million to \$4.8 million. Proposition 1C on the November ballot would provide \$50 million for programs for foster youth left homeless.

Also, counties and cities are allocating millions of dollars for agencies to acquire properties to house emancipating youth on a permanent basis. The city of Santa Clara gave the Bill Wilson Center \$3.5 million to purchase a 28-unit complex, and San Mateo County is working out the details with the city of South San Francisco to secure an apartment building.

California has more than 80,000 youths in foster care with about 4,000 turning 18 each year. That's when the state stops payments to foster families and to agencies that have served as surrogate parents. At 18, kids become adults overnight and are cut loose from the system.

"The transition can be very stark," said Amy Lemley, policy director for the John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes. "We put all their belongings in a big black garbage bag and wish them well. It's not even good economic policy."

One widely cited statistic puts as many as 50 percent of former foster youth becoming homeless within the first 18 months of emancipation. Bell was living that statistic.

"It was a nightmare," he said. "I'm a person that likes to be clean, but I couldn't. I had nowhere to take a shower."

Born in East Palo Alto to a drug-addicted mother, Bell and his older brother were taken in by Jennie and Edward White, a retired couple who lived in Seaside, near Monterey.

"They raised me my whole life. I love them with my whole heart," Bell said. "They taught me so well, I never even put a cigarette to my mouth."

But then, at 17, he got his girlfriend pregnant.

"I was young," Bell said. "People make mistakes in life."

The Whites asked him to move out.

"I couldn't raise a father," Jennie White, 66, said. "He had just grown into manhood and I wasn't ready to deal with that. It's hard to tell a grown person what to do or what not to do when he was already a father."

Bell moved into a group home in San Francisco. When he turned 18 in April of 2005, he stopped being a ward of the state. What followed was a period of "couch-surfing," from sofa to sofa in different friends' homes.

Eventually, Bell landed in San Jose with Unity Care this spring. Because he was homeless, he was eligible to stay at one of its transitional group homes, sharing a three-bedroom house with four other young men. A requirement was that he find work, which he did as a basketball coach at Luther Burbank School in San Jose. He pays \$326 of his income toward rent. He attends community college.

Now Bell is eager for an apartment of his own. Unity's transitional homes have a maximum two-year-stay restriction, while Unity's new apartments -- and those being developed in San Mateo County and Santa Clara -- are meant to be more permanent, which isn't to say forever.

"We help them get on their feet, get more education and a higher paying job," said Monalisa DiAngelo of Unity Care. The whole goal is to "move them out and bring in other kids."

At Unity Place, Bell will pay rent on a sliding scale, from \$250 to \$500 a month. He will continue to meet with the counselors who have been mentoring him.

"They're like older brothers to me," Bell said. "Every day I mess up; every day they give me a little speech to motivate me."

Eventually, Bell would like to live in a place that can accommodate his girlfriend and their 2-year-old daughter, whom they named Desteny Nicole Bell.