



Helping teens get on track

By Janae Hoffler
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A local teen who once thought he wasn't good enough for college, let alone law school, is back on track.

After growing up in foster care, he aged out of the system a few years ago, he learned about Valley Youth House while staying in a shelter about 10 months ago.

James, 19, who requested his last name not be used for his privacy, signed up for the teen supportive housing program, and found out Valley Youth House had just introduced a new self-advocacy program.

Now he's got his sights set on school, and with the information he's learning every week, he's moving closer to his goal.

Getting Beyond the System made its debut earlier this year in Philadelphia, at Valley Youth House and at the Achieving Independence Center, a Philadelphia Department of Human Services program for teens transitioning out of foster care.

Developed by Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff, co-founders of Youth Advocacy Center in New York, Getting Beyond the System is a seminar that teaches teens how to transition into independent living.

It has gained attention from cities across

the country and the world as organizations and child service departments look to adopt the program.

In Philadelphia, where about 2,500 teens face the difficulty of transitioning to independence, Getting Beyond the System is making headway.

Using a book filled with real cases of children Krebs and Pitcoff encountered in their years working as attorneys representing foster care children, teens like James learn how to plan and reach for their goals, the way system and organizations work, how to find and use mentors, and the rules and rights for children in foster care.

James said Tuesday the seminar is the most helpful because the cases are real.

"The best part about it, it's always two or three people who can relate to what the story is saying, and we can get feedback," he said.

His expression and reluctance to talk about it said his life in foster care wasn't one he cares to remember. He said he became violent as a result, eventually ending up in jail. But that was the turning point for him, and he changed his

behavior, getting released early for good behavior.

Now, he's trying to get his life on track, he said. He's learned his strengths and how to present them, and how to work on his weaknesses. James is in the process of applying to Temple University.

"The goal is to get them to focus on identifying what they would like to do, the steps to do it and make a living wage," said Richard Warner, director of Valley Youth House's Philadelphia office.

Based in Lehigh Valley, Valley Youth House opened in Philadelphia in 2005.

Krebs made a site visit Tuesday to get feedback from the teens and employees at Valley Youth House. She said she tries to visit different locations because the teens' feedback is what she uses to improve the program.

She said Philadelphia nonprofit leaders have expressed interest in having the seminars for adjudicated teens, teen parents and other teens considered "at-risk."

"I started with foster care because they are in custody already, but any young person who needs help should be receiving it," Krebs said.