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The Brighter Side Of DCF

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August 2, 2009

Her mother died when she was just 2.

She never knew her father.

She was 11 when she first entered the labyrinth of the Department of Children and Families.

Sounds like the beginning of a hard luck story, one we've heard too many times.

And yet, there sat Tina Thomas one recent afternoon, surrounded by adults who all had the same open-mouthed reaction to how masterfully the 18-year-old worked a system that manages to break so many others.

If there was an educational program offered by DCF, Thomas was all over it.

Youth leadership seminars — she was there.

Job readiness programs — that's how she landed the law office internship she has now.

Financial literacy workshops — no question, count her in.

In fact, that's why I'd initially gone to the DCF office on Hamilton Street, to talk to her about a matched savings account program offered by the Jim Casey Foundation for youths in foster care.

Thomas used some of the savings to buy herself a laptop.

But the rest, she wisely invested in certificates of deposit.

She's saving up, she told me, to buy a condo.

But first, Thomas is headed to American University to study international relations, thanks in large part to — you guessed it, DCF.

Yeah, I know, that surprised me, too. But turns out that there are more than 700 kids attending some kind of college or post-secondary training on the department's dime. The tab: \$6.3 million — and worth every penny if you ask me.

How's that for the flip side of aging out of the system?

We've all read the bleak stories and studies. Too many youths in DCF care end up homeless, or parents themselves. Some don't make it through high school, let alone college.

But don't count Thomas among those. Thomas said she understands why some of her peers in DCF care might want out of a system they grow to resent.

But Thomas, a standout track star and scholar at Greater Hartford Classical Magnet School, says she never looked at it that way.

She learned early on, she said, that education is the great equalizer, and if there was a person or program that could help her, she embraced it.

Admittedly, she was luckier than others; she's had a long and close relationship with her social worker, Cecelia Jones, who's as giddy as any proud parent would be about seeing Thomas off to college.

Thomas also has a loving and supportive foster family whom she still lives with and who've repeatedly told her they'd like to formally adopt her.

Thomas, though, doesn't see the need.

"We're a family no matter what," she said. And she added, a little shyly, "I like my last name."

But mostly what Thomas has is an innate sense of herself that belies her age, and an appreciation of what she's capable of.

"I just don't want to have any regrets," she said.

Helen Ubiñas' column appears on Thursdays and Sundays. Read her blog at courant.com/helen.

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