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'Aging Out' gives haunting look at 3 faces of foster care

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One's first impression of David Griffin, one of three subjects focused on in the PBS documentary "Aging Out," is that he embodies the stereotypical foster-care nightmare. Griffin entered the system at 6 weeks old, bouncing among 20 state-supported situations in Pasadena, Calif., as he grew up, none of which gave him the psychological and emotional support he clearly needs.

Angry and somewhat narcissistic, he clings to no vision of what it means to have a family or a safe harbor. "Home means just my body," he says in a hard-edged voice.

At 18, Griffin's so anxious to sign out of the system that he doesn't even want to finish high school, a court-ordered requirement supervised by the group home in which he's staying. His reasons for leaving make him sound like an adult, but only to anyone unfamiliar with the responsibilities of adulthood. He wants to be free. He wants to be his own man. With no diploma, no concrete plans and lacking the ability to take responsibility for his actions, Griffin's setting himself up for failure.

Compared to the other cases in the 90-minute documentary, which premieres on KCTS/9 tonight at 10, his trajectory looks easiest to predict. A rosier future is in store for Los Angeleno Risa Bejarano, a survivor of neglect and abuse who goes on to be the first in her biological family to graduate from high school and earn scholarship money for college, and has a supportive foster parent.

Twenty-year-old Daniella Anderson, a young pregnant New Yorker with ambitions of attending college also eager to leave her group homes, and the system, is in a more precarious situation. Soon after the film begins, she has an infant to care for when it's clear she can barely look after herself.

As you may expect, none of "Aging Out's" soon-to-be closed cases proceeds simply. One, in fact, shuts with a punch to the gut that not even the film's directors could have seen coming. Fate and the subjects' volitions play equal roles shaping the documentary's drama, but directors Roger Weisberg and Vanessa Roth deserve credit for resisting the urge to make "Aging Out" into a tragedy or a feel-good tale. The only certainty is that you may never again take your family for granted, regardless of how annoying they are.

You'll often find yourself silently cheering for these three, empathizing with their frustrations and, more often than not, shaking your head at their foolish naivete.

The heart of "Aging Out" is in the revealing photos and home movies that Griffin, Anderson and Bejarano gave producers -- particularly home movies Griffin's first foster parents, Bob and Pearl Galasso, shot of him as a toddler.

One moment, he's a tow-headed angel. But then we see him screaming, upending tables and throwing chairs. A slice of footage from his adolescence, many group homes and juvenile justice facilities later, shows him bug-eyed and stumbling days into a meth binge. Few would blame the Galassos for letting him go. But then, David's stubborn arrogance and victimhood makes you wonder: Did foster care fail him, or was this child of a paranoid schizophrenic simply beyond the level of help the state could provide?

Comparatively, seeing Bejarano's story allows for occasional gulps of fresh air. The high schooler clings to a fierce work ethic, juggling two jobs to save money for college and professing the importance of education. But even she can't resist the temptation to experiment with drugs.

"Aging Out" debuts a week after the release of a University of Chicago study of more than 600 people who grew up in foster care. It found more than a third of its subjects lacked a general equivalency or high school diploma, as opposed to only 10 percent of the peers in their age group. They also were more likely to become pregnant and be unable to pay for living expenses. The study also found youths allowed to stay in the system until they turned 21, which Anderson could do, fared better than those released at 18.

The documentary brings those stats to life, although it doesn't offer much in the way of solutions. Are there transitional services and mentoring programs to help young foster-care recipients enter the adult world? If they exist, we don't hear much about them -- or the lack of them. Without such a coda, a sense of helplessness overtakes you while watching Anderson and the others grasp at coping.

Anderson has a boyfriend, Veasna Hover, who also grew up in foster care. He wants to take an active role as a parent, but the system doesn't allow them to live together. Once they do strike out on their own with their son, they can barely pay rent and begrudgingly turn to welfare. "It's nice to know we have support," she says, holding her baby. "I only wish it could come from a family instead of a system."

"Aging Out" leaves you with the haunting sense of how inconsequential an individual's potential becomes in a system that cuts loose some 20,000 young people a year, many with no safety net to fall back on and little preparation for the transition into adulthood.

It's also a subtle, poignant endorsement of any positive family connection a person can draw upon, either for support or as a model. At one point, Anderson shows her boyfriend's family photos while recalling how her father would beat them with two-by-

fours, and how her mother did nothing to stop it. When Veasna comforts her by observing that she had a mother, but not a mom, you understand exactly what he means.

Channel surfing

Fox may be putting Simon Cowell into mothballs, but replacing him with Gordon Ramsay may not amount to ideal summer wear. Judge for yourself when "**Hell's Kitchen**" opens at 9 p.m. Monday on KCPQ/13 and gives a number of kitchen slobs -- including a round, doughy baker named Dewberry -- the chance to win their own restaurant.

What do we get in the bargain? Ramsay angrily raining his fury down upon the staff's competition, and when he's not doing that, calling his customers bimbos. We're going to wait for this one to percolate a bit before taking a closer look.

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