



Editorial

- Features
- Letters
- Random Thoughts
- Other Opinions
- Region Watch
- Books
- Art
- Dining
- Modern Rock
- Other Music
- Northern Seen

Listings

- Classifieds
- Personals
- Hot Dates
- Nightlife
- Dining Guide
- Best Of

Other Links

- Movies
- TV
- Weather
- Business News
- Sports Scores

[Purchase Northern Express Photos](#)

- [About Us](#)
- [Contact Us](#)

FEATURES

[send a letter to the editor](#)
[view archived features](#)

Foster kids

Anne Stanton

Foster Kids
 Forced to Grow Up Fast

May is National Foster Care Month in recognition of the 513,000 kids placed in foster care nationally due to abuse, neglect or sudden crises. Look for blue ribbons this month tied on trees—symbolizing the attempt to end child abuse. This article focuses on kids aging out of the system at the age of 18—about 20,000 kids across the country each year. A program called Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative helps them out.

When Kayla Abel was a sophomore at Kingsley High School, she had to drop out of school to take care of her new baby sister.

She cleaned the house, watched the baby and two other siblings, and cooked dinners while her mom worked at night. After a year, however, she called it quits. She moved in with a boyfriend, who beat her, and then with an uncle and aunt—her fourth set of foster parents.

So ended her “childhood” that was marred by poverty, the passing of an infant brother who died of AIDS, and her mom’s unpredictable behavior. She also had a father who beat her mom, then left her for another woman and remarried. Bizarrely, her dad’s third wife was also his niece who had issues of her own and had sought refuge with the family. A year after his 22-year-old wife/niece left him, Abel’s dad committed suicide. She remembers she was about to turn 12 years old at the time. There was so much heartache in that short time, and still lots more to come.

Unbelievably, Abel’s fortunes have turned around thanks to her own good efforts and a program called the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI). The state Department of Human Services program is aimed at foster kids who “age out” of the foster care program and need a guiding hand and financial help to get them through the next steps of life.

YOUTHFUL PUZZLES

Last week, Abel sat at a table in a nondescript conference room in the state government building in Traverse City. Also at the table were two other young women who had aged out of the system, and several very committed MYOI staffers.

Abel, 21, is pretty with long dark hair and a quick smile. She listened quietly as Marco Dedenbach, the hip-looking MYOI community coordinator, explained that foster kids are deeply at risk just after they turn 18 years old. Typically, they are behind academically and are emotionally scarred from their experiences. They often have no family support to get them through college or trade school. And they can be clueless—like most 18-year-olds—about how to handle money.

The MYOI program, which evolved from the Jim Casey youth initiative, helps anyone from 14 to 23 years of age who has spent at least one day in foster care due to abuse or neglect after the age of 14. The program sets up an account that matches the youth’s personal savings dollar-for-dollar up to \$1,000 a year for major assets, such as a car, college or business endeavor.

Most importantly, the program helps kids understand the puzzles of young adulthood—filling out college and financial aid applications, applying for Medicaid health insurance, visiting college campuses, and navigating the public bus system. In turn, the youths must take a financial literacy training class, deposit money into their

account monthly, attend youth leadership meetings, and complete bi-annual surveys of the program.

HELPING HANDS

Besides the “official” program, there are many ordinary people in town who just lend a helping hand, like Sid Van Slyke, a Traverse City banker and Community Partnership board member, who loans his car to kids for the driving test. Many “aging out” kids don’t own a car or their car won’t pass muster at the Secretary of State (the car might have a cracked windshield, for example).

Denise Busley of the Grand Traverse Pie Company also has helped in a myriad of ways. She holds monthly jazz concerts at her shop and gives a portion of the proceeds to foster kids. Last Thanksgiving, she donated 100 pies that MYOI kids helped make for a Thanksgiving homeless dinner. She also donates five cents for every piece of pie she sells to support foster youth and has a cup on her counter for donations.

Shawn Senmelsberger, 22, who was homeless—or as she says “couch surfing”—at the age of 16, has become a tremendous advocate for the program. She has testified on Capitol Hill and speaks with the authority and diction of a college professor. She splits her time earning a social work degree at Northwestern Michigan College and interning for MYOI. She reels off data as she makes the case that the program more than pays for itself.

“Within two years, 40% are homeless; 60% of the girls are pregnant and have children they can’t support; 55% are on public assistance. More than half don’t have a high school diploma or a GED. If you give them the support they need now, you’ll have someone who will work for a lifetime and give back to the community. So you either pay a little to help them now or pay a tremendous amount for a lifetime.”

ONLY A FRACTION...

The MYOI program—based in Traverse City and serving a 10-county area—is so effective that it has turned the dismal statistics upside-right. Of the 44 college-age youth who are involved, more than half are enrolled in a trade school or college.

The program has one downfall—it isn’t helping nearly the number it could. A total of 98 youth are in MYOI, a fraction of the foster kids who are aging out of the program in the 10-county area. Dedenbach is trying various strategies to pull them in, including working with other agencies that serve foster care youth.

MYOI, however, has tightly coordinated its efforts with Child and Family Services, a nonprofit that offers adoption and foster care services. It offers many support services, including an “elements” program for foster kids up to the age of 18.

“We meet every week and teach all kinds of skills—interviewing for a job, how to cook meals on a budget that aren’t full of fat and bad calories,” said Gina Aranki, the CFS marketing and public relations director.

“Our last activity was at spring break. What our staff did was coordinate with BATA to put together a bus tour. We called it the Amazing Race. We provided clues to find certain places along the way, with the goal of getting to La Senorita restaurant first. We taught the kids in a fun way how to utilize the bus system. It was great. Twenty-five kids participated.”

TESTED, BUT NOT BROKEN

Abel says most foster care children, like herself, have tremendous resilience. They know how to rise to a challenge.

Abel’s life is proof of that. Jodie Annis, the education planner for the MYOI program, learned on December 5 last year that Abel had six days to study for and take a GED test in order to qualify for an educational training voucher (ETV). The voucher would pay most of the \$12,000 yearly tuition at Traverse City Beauty College where Abel wanted to study. (Abel had to take the test before her 21st birthday, which was on New Year’s Eve.)

Because she’d been out of school for nearly six years, Abel was fearful about taking the test. She put up a good argument. She was married, living with a nice man in Grawn, and was doing just fine. But Annis “stalked” her and twisted her arm, she said laughing. Abel amazed herself by passing the GED the first time out. She’s now attending the beauty school and expects to graduate next year.

Now Abel is urging her other foster care siblings and friends to take advantage of the MYOI program and not to let the past get in their way. The door to her home is open if they need a place to land. She counsels them to think positively: It’s not the situation that affects your emotions, but how you choose to “think” about the situation, she said.

“I honestly think all I’ve been through has made me stronger. I’ve learned not to let myself get lost in my emotions. I still have a lot of trust issues, though. I try holding onto people. I don’t want my friends to leave.”

There are many ways to help youth who are aging out of foster care, such as giving them a free haircut or serving

as a mentor. For more information, call Marco Dedenbach of the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative at 922-5276. For information on the Elements program at Child and Family Services, call 946-8975 and ask for Michelle Overmire or Linda Sommerville.

By Anne Stanton

When Kayla Abel was a sophomore at Kingsley High School, she had to drop out of school to take care of her new baby sister.

She cleaned the house, watched the baby and two other siblings, and cooked dinners while her mom worked at night. After a year, however, she called it quits. She moved in with a boyfriend, who beat her, and then with an uncle and aunt—her fourth set of foster parents.

So ended her “childhood” that was marred by poverty, the passing of an infant brother who died of SIDS, and her mom’s unpredictable behavior. She also had a father who beat her mom, then left her for another woman and remarried. Bizarrely, her dad’s third wife was also his niece who had issues of her own and had sought refuge with the family. A year after his 22-year-old wife/niece left him, Abel’s dad committed suicide. She remembers she was about to turn 12 years old at the time. There was so much heartache in that short time, and still lots more to come.

Unbelievably, Abel’s fortunes have turned around thanks to her own good efforts and a program called the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI). The state Department of Human Services program is aimed at foster kids who “age out” of the foster care program and need a guiding hand and financial help to get them through the next steps of life.

YOUTHFUL PUZZLES

Last week, Abel sat at a table in a nondescript conference room in the state government building in Traverse City. Also at the table were two other young women who had aged out of the system, and several very committed MYOI staffers.

Abel, 21, is pretty with long dark hair and a quick smile. She listened quietly as Marco Dedenbach, the hip-looking MYOI community coordinator, explained that foster kids are deeply at risk just after they turn 18 years old. Typically, they are behind academically and are emotionally scarred from their experiences. They often have no family support to get them through college or trade school. And they can be clueless—like most 18-year-olds—about how to handle money.

The MYOI program, which evolved from the Jim Casey youth initiative, helps anyone from 14 to 23 years of age who has spent at least one day in foster care due to abuse or neglect after the age of 14. The program sets up an account that matches the youth’s personal savings dollar-for-dollar up to \$1,000 a year for major assets, such as a car, college or business endeavor.

Most importantly, the program helps kids understand the puzzles of young adulthood—filling out college and financial aid applications, applying for Medicaid health insurance, visiting college campuses, and navigating the public bus system. In turn, the youths must take a financial literacy training class, deposit money into their account monthly, attend youth leadership meetings, and complete bi-annual surveys of the program.

HELPING HANDS

Besides the “official” program, there are many ordinary people in town who just lend a helping hand, like Sid Van Slyke, a Traverse City banker and Community Partnership board member, who loans his car to kids for the driving test. Many “aging out” kids don’t own a car or their car won’t pass muster at the Secretary of State (the car might have a cracked windshield, for example).

Denise Busley of the Grand Traverse Pie Company also has helped in a myriad of ways. She holds monthly jazz concerts at her shop and gives a portion of the proceeds to foster kids. Last Thanksgiving, she donated 100 pies that MYOI kids helped make for a Thanksgiving homeless dinner. She also donates five cents for every piece of pie she sells to support foster youth and has a cup on her counter for donations.

Shawn Senmelsberger, 22, who was homeless—or as she says “couch surfing”—at the age of 16, has become a tremendous advocate for the program. She has testified on Capitol Hill and speaks with the authority and diction

of a college professor. She splits her time earning a social work degree at Northwestern Michigan College and interning for MYOI. She reels off data as she makes the case that the program more than pays for itself. "Within two years, 40% are homeless; 60% of the girls are pregnant and have children they can't support; 55% are on public assistance. More than half don't have a high school diploma or a GED. If you give them the support they need now, you'll have someone who will work for a lifetime and give back to the community. So you either pay a little to help them now or pay a tremendous amount for a lifetime."

ONLY A FRACTION...

The MYOI program—based in Traverse City and serving a 10-county area—is so effective that it has turned the dismal statistics upside-right. Of the 44 college-age youth who are involved, more than half are enrolled in a trade school or college.

The program has one downfall—it isn't helping nearly the number it could. A total of 98 youth are in MYOI, a fraction of the foster kids who are aging out of the program in the 10-county area. Dedenbach is trying various strategies to pull them in, including working with other agencies that serve foster care youth.

MYOI, however, has tightly coordinated its efforts with Child and Family Services, a nonprofit that offers adoption and foster care services. It offers many support services, including an "elements" program for foster kids up to the age of 18.

"We meet every week and teach all kinds of skills—interviewing for a job, how to cook meals on a budget that aren't full of fat and bad calories," said Gina Aranki, the CFS marketing and public relations director.

"Our last activity was at spring break. What our staff did was coordinate with BATA to put together a bus tour. We called it the Amazing Race. We provided clues to find certain places along the way, with the goal of getting to La Senorita restaurant first. We taught the kids in a fun way how to utilize the bus system. It was great. Twenty-five kids participated."

TESTED, BUT NOT BROKEN

Abel says most foster care children, like herself, have tremendous resilience. They know how to rise to a challenge.

Abel's life is proof of that. Jodie Annis, the education planner for the MYOI program, learned on December 5 last year that Abel had six days to study for and take a GED test in order to qualify for an educational training voucher (ETV). The voucher would pay most of the \$12,000 yearly tuition at Traverse City Beauty College where Abel wanted to study. (Abel had to take the test before her 21st birthday, which was on New Year's Eve.) Because she'd been out of school for nearly six years, Abel was fearful about taking the test. She put up a good argument. She was married, living with a nice man in Grawn, and was doing just fine. But Annis "stalked" her and twisted her arm, she said laughing. Abel amazed herself by passing the GED the first time out. She's now attending the beauty school and expects to graduate next year.

Now Abel is urging her other foster care siblings and friends to take advantage of the MYOI program and not to let the past get in their way. The door to her home is open if they need a place to land. She counsels them to think positively: It's not the situation that affects your emotions, but how you choose to "think" about the situation, she said.

"I honestly think all I've been through has made me stronger. I've learned not to let myself get lost in my emotions. I still have a lot of trust issues, though. I try holding onto people. I don't want my friends to leave."

There are many ways to help youth who are aging out of foster care, such as giving them a free haircut or serving as a mentor. For more information, call Marco Dedenbach of the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative at 922-5276. For information on the Elements program at Child and Family Services, call 946-8975 and ask for Michelle Overmire or Linda Sommerville.

Sippin' and Steppin':

May benefit for foster care kids

Pie, coffee and a great line-up of bands are featured in a May 29 fundraiser for youth aging out of foster care.

The Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI) will hold the benefit at the City Opera House from 7 to 10:30 p.m. Event proceeds will help youth pay for emergency needs.

The featured performers are part of the Earthwork Music Collective. Headlining this event will be Joshua Davis (of Steppin' In it) and the Fool Rooster Band of Lansing, who will bring their brand of honky-tonkin' Michigan roots music. They will be joined by the dynamic duo Breathe Owl Breathe and Chris Dorman, a newcomer to the

collective. There will be plenty of room to get down and dance.

Grand Traverse Pie Company and Higher Grounds Trading Company will provide pie and coffee during the benefit. Tickets are available at The City Opera House box office, Grand Traverse Pie Company, and Higher Grounds Trading Company Coffee House. Cost is \$18 in advance and \$20 at the door. Go to JamforYouth.com for more information.

Take your Place
at the table

The Festival of Tables raises about \$100,000 a year for Child and Family Services, a nonprofit that helps place abused or neglected children into foster care or adoptive families. The agency also provides support services for kids and parents.

This year, a group of "aging out" foster kids made their own table—infininitely expandable in honor of foster families, who are "notorious for enlarging and rearranging the dining capacity of the table in honor of the newest member arriving at dinnertime."

Here are event details :

- The Village at Grand Traverse Commons (Building 50) in Traverse City, under a really, really big tent.
- Gala Preview Friday, May 9, 6:30 p.m. - 10:30 p.m. \$100 per person
- Ladies Luncheon Saturday, May 10, 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. \$50 per person

Go to www.festivaloftables.com for more information.

[back to features](#)