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Authors foster emotion in 'On Their Own'

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It is often taken for granted in this country that a child who turns 18 is ready for adulthood, having had the advantages of continuous parental support, health care and education.

Whether those assumptions apply to most 18-year-olds is debatable, but there is no doubt that a certain class of young people struggle to keep from falling through the cracks.

These children are graduates of foster care, a taxpayer-supported housing system available in all 50 states for youths who are removed from their homes, mostly because of abuse or neglect from their parents. Some foster children get lucky and form lasting relationships with their foster parents, while others get bounced from one home to another because of behavioral problems or incompatibility.

In 2001, the latest year for which figures are available, 542,000 children were in foster care nationwide and 19,008 left the system because they were too old to remain eligible for the program. In most states, including Nevada, that age is 18.

Of those who "age out" of the foster care system, many wind up falling on hard times while their age-group peers are going off to college.

This American tragedy is captured succinctly in a new book, "On Their Own," published by Westview Press.

With a foreword written by former President Jimmy Carter, authors Martha Shirk, a former St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter, and Gary Stangler, a Missouri resident who is executive director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, put a human face on a population that has been largely ignored.

Shirk and Stangler tell their story through the eyes of 10 children from around the country. These young people were forced to use survival skills without much of a safety net once foster care was in their rearview mirrors.

- **Title:** "On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Age Out of the Foster Care System."
- **Authors:** Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler.
- **Pages:** 307.
- **Publisher:** Westview Press.
- **Price:** \$24.95.

One of the biggest struggles was experienced by Alfonso Torres of Pembroke Pines, Fla., who was separated from his parents at age 10. In a chapter titled "All My Life, I Had Prayed For A Family," readers follow Torres down his path of petty crime. It was a cycle he couldn't break despite vows to straighten up.

When he turned 18 and aged out of the foster care system he was still locked up in a juvenile detention center with a week to go. Weeks before his release he made a phone call to his social worker because he had nowhere else to go.

"I called my social worker and asked, 'What's going to happen when I turn 18?' " Torres told the authors. "And he said, 'I don't know.' "

Raquel Tolston was placed in foster care at age 12 by child protection workers because of her inability to get along with her abusive mother. At 18 she spent time in a Job Corps dormitory in Utah and then moved to San Francisco.

"And for the last 16 months, Raquel has been truly homeless, bouncing from one shelter to another, with brief stays in a motel or a boarding house whenever she's had enough cash to pay her own way," the authors wrote.

In America's heartland they found Casey-Jack Kitos of Lawrence, Kan. Kitos, who entered foster care at age 14 after being removed from an abusive household, saw the U.S. Army as his ticket for a college education.

But medical problems during basic training at Fort Benning, Ga., curtailed those dreams and he returned to Lawrence following his discharge from the military. He got a \$6.75-an-hour job at a gas station and in September 2002 moved in with his friends, Renita and Jerry Freeman, who told him he could stay until their son returned from the Army in May 2003.

"But even without having to pay market rent, he has money problems," the authors wrote. "He has about \$500 a month in fixed expenses -- a car payment, car insurance, his cell phone bill, plus the installment payment on the laptop. Already, he's one month in arrears on his car payment and two months behind on everything else, with a grand total of \$25 in the bank."

Each chapter of "On Their Own" goes into detail about the considerable bureaucratic hurdles the children faced as they tried to find their footing.

Shirk and Stangler don't simply tell the stories of these children, though. The authors also developed common-sense solutions involving education, employment and health care.

These lessons are worthy of attention in Nevada, given the state's historically poor performance when it comes to caring for foster children and looking after these young people once they age out of the system.

This was reflected earlier this year when bureaucratic snafus delayed the allocation of \$1.3 million in state funds intended for former foster children in Southern Nevada. With about 100 Southern Nevada children leaving foster care annually, the money was intended to help them with housing, utilities, health care and other needs.

The funds were finally disbursed this spring by the Nevada Division of Children, Youth and Families, with 10 percent set aside for administrative costs, including mentors for the children.

"On Their Own" should be required reading for all of Nevada's lawmakers and for anyone else who has a hand in foster care. As former President Carter wrote:

"We should dream of and plan for a day when fewer children require foster care. But until that day comes, we have a moral responsibility to prepare young people leaving foster care for their journey into adulthood. Our communities must commit themselves to a common goal of helping these young people to become whole adults who can fulfill their potential and build bright and promising futures."

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