

The logo for 'Sun' is displayed in a stylized, pink, rounded font against a solid orange rectangular background.

A new life: Social Services, volunteers, and community come together to give foster youth a chance at a better life

BY KAREN GARCIA

The last thing that Amber Davis remembers before the chaos erupted was tying up the laces of her purple Vans. Davis was 15 years old, living at home with her biological mother, stepfather, two brothers, and stepsister.

Six months before, Davis had been in and out of Vista Del Mar Hospital in Ventura for multiple suicide attempts and had completed a 30-day rehabilitation program for substance abuse. The attempts at suicide and abusing alcohol and drugs were a way to escape her home life.

FULL CIRCLE



“Leading up to being put in foster care, there were a lot of things that were just going on at home, like physically, emotionally, and neglectfully,” Davis said.

Just before she started tying her shoes, her younger stepsister walked into their shared room to grab clothes and purposely bumped into her shoulder. In that one swift movement, she felt all of the negativity that her sister had toward her.

“I lost it. That one shoulder check and everything came spilling out,” she said.

So they pushed each other until Davis pushed her stepsister to the ground, who immediately got up and ran for her father—Davis’ stepdad—crying. Davis knew what was coming. She could be yelled at, hit, or both, so she started lacing up her purple Vans.

The next few minutes were filled with rage. Her stepdad came in the room screaming that she “had no control, didn’t own anything, and didn’t have choices.” When Davis didn’t agree, her stepdad began to hit her.

“He slapped me across the face and grabbed me by the hair. My hair was in a big messy bun, and he grabbed it and started dragging me,” she said.

Her mom eventually joined in, hitting Davis as well. As it continued, Davis finally started trying to hit her parents back.

“That was the very first time that I ever hit back. It was the very first time that I started swinging and kicking in every direction that I possibly could,” she said.

Her mom called the police, and both of her parents stopped hitting her. Seeing her chance, Davis finished tying her shoes and ran out the door of the family’s Nipomo home. She ran as far as she could, looking down as her purple Vans repeatedly hit the pavement. It didn’t take long for San Luis Obispo County Sheriff’s Office deputies to catch up to her in the small community.

The deputy tried to usher Davis into the cop car and take her back home. After being physically abused for most of her life, Davis said going back home was not an option. When the officer tried to handcuff her and put her in his vehicle, Davis punched him in the face. He finally got her in the cop car and drove in the direction of her house.

“Part of me was scared because that was the first time I had ever been handcuffed, in a cop car, and I had obviously punched a cop,” she said. “But I was kind of like, ‘I don’t know what’s worse. Him letting me out right now to stay here or him taking me to juvenile hall.’”

Davis ended up going to the county Juvenile Services Center for hitting the cop, and then she entered the foster care system in San Luis Obispo County. Her journey through the system, finding permanent housing, and continuing her education was rough.

There are a lot of people, programs, and support that get children through the foster system and into permanent homes. The challenge of it all isn’t unique to the Central Coast and neither is the lack of available foster parents. What is unique to the area, though, is a financial program that helps foster youth pursue post-secondary education. After pushing through the uncertainty of her future, Davis became one of those foster youths who graduated from college through this program.

Staying with family

In 2017, the Department of Social Services in SLO County had about 379 children in foster care; 122 ranged from infant to 5 years old, 96 were 6 to 12 years old, and 161 were from 13 to 20 years old.

Department Assistant Director Tracy Schiro said that when Child Welfare Services is called to check on the well-being of a child, the main goal is to keep the child with his or her family.

“[In] far less than 10 percent of the calls we receive in a month do we remove children as a result. We have a lot of resources; we have a lot of programs. We want to keep children at home whenever possible and shore things up in the household,” Schiro said.



Gustavo Prado, business specialist for the Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services, explained that “children can come into care, for no fault of their own, at any age, from birth up to 18 years old.” Currently, Santa Barbara County has about 317 kids in the foster system, Prado said.

SLO County’s Schiro said the department depends on calls from the community, from neighbors, doctors, teachers, or friends. Based on those calls, the department makes a decision tree, a standard model that all counties follow. The tree helps social workers assess a child’s situation. Schiro said it tells her if the child needs immediate help, needs to be checked on within a certain period of time, or doesn’t need attention at all.

“Even on those [calls] we don’t go out on, we often refer to agencies we contract with if they may need parenting help, they might need resources, they might need food in their home, or we figure out how to help,” she said. “We don’t walk away.”

If a child cannot be safely left at home—because the parents are under the influence, the child’s basic needs aren’t being met, and/or there is drug paraphernalia within a child’s reach—then the child is removed. In other situations, Schiro said, people might call because a home is dirty or the child is late to school every day.

“We deal with safety and risk with children not judgment. Our job is to work with the family to be a better provider for their children and better caretakers,” she said.

When Social Services determines that a child’s home is unsafe, and the department has already tried to work with the family but the family isn’t trying to meet the department’s expectations, the child is either placed with other family

members or non-relative extended family members. If neither is an option, then the child is put in a group home or in the care of foster parents.

“[Children in group homes] are a big concern for us due to having a personal history of emotional dysregulation, behavioral excesses, and/or due to not having a permanent plan option,” Prado said. “[They] do not have a family that has committed to providing them a permanent, safe, and stable home, or at the least a permanent circle of social and emotional support.”

The age of a child can determine how difficult it is to find them a permanent or even a temporary living solution. Schiro said she has no problem finding homes for children who are 3 years old and younger.

“The older a child gets, the tougher it is. Teenagers, they don’t have a good rap and yet I think they’re delightful,” she said. “I tell people they’ll fix your remote controls, they’ll fix anything on your iPhone, you can have conversations with them. They want to make a difference, and they want to be somebody.”

She said she recognizes how difficult it is for people to open their heart and home to a child in need. But these children often come with a stigma that they’re problematic.

“The kids that go into our system, they didn’t do anything wrong, their parents did,” Schiro said.

Of the 379 kids in the system, Schiro said only a handful are really struggling to get through each day.

Davis was one of those struggling teenagers. After being taken away from her family, she stayed in juvenile hall for three weeks. During that time, she had food, she played sports, and she was going to school—Davis said she knew she was safe.

Shortly after her stint in juvie, she was put into a shelter home and later placed with foster parents. Davis lived with her foster parents for about eight months before she ended up back at the shelter. Living in a new environment with new rules and expectations was a rough transition for her. Davis said she repeated a lot of the same behaviors from when she lived with her biological mom and stepdad, running away and using drugs. Davis was still dealing with a lot of the leftover emotions and trauma from her former home.

“For 15 years I had pushed everything down,” Davis said. “Now, it was the first time that I was away from my family, and now, it was spewing out the surface in every way that it could come out, and I didn’t know how to control it.”

Open arms

According to the Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services, the majority of youth in the system—at least two thirds—live in North County cities or towns, including the Santa Maria and Lompoc valleys. Roughly 60 percent of kids in foster care in the county have one or more siblings in the system as well. The majority of those siblings are living separately from each other.



According to the SLO County Department of Social Services, about 7.7 percent of youths removed from their homes are placed in a foster home, 7.7 percent are placed with a relative, 7.9 percent are put in a group home, 8.5 percent are in the supervised independent living program, 13.1 are percent in a foster family agency certified home, and 50 percent are placed with a resource family home—a non-relative extended family member who is close to the child and family and can offer a temporary or permanent placement to keep a child safe.

The number of available foster parents is low compared to the number of children in Child Welfare Services. That lack of foster parents is a problem in many counties. Prado said that at any given time, Santa Barbara County has an average of 390 children in its foster care caseload, though it currently has 317 youths in the system.

Prado said there is an ongoing shortage of foster homes or resource homes in Santa Barbara County.

“The difficulty arises because children are entering the foster care system on an ongoing or continuous basis, so that we are always in need of new, ready homes to meet the needs of children,” he said.

A huge factor causing a shortage of foster parents, Prado said, is the cost of housing—some families already need to work two jobs to make ends meet.

“Another significant factor we routinely hear is that our community is not aware of the needs of children in foster care and how to go about becoming a resource family home,” he said. “Because of the trauma and disruption they have experienced, some may have special physical, educational, behavioral, and/or emotional needs.”

But overall, Prado said there has been a decrease in the number of youths in the foster system.

“I believe the decrease is due to our efforts to stabilize children with their birth family, the goal being to minimize trauma for the child,” he said.

Schiro from SLO County Social Services said she believes the community doesn’t understand the need for foster care.

“I don’t think they recognize that I have 350 children or more in foster care in any given time and at least 100 of those don’t have a permanent solution,” Schiro said.

She said there is a myth that these issues happen in low-income and homeless families, but it’s “our neighbors, it’s our families.”

“Child abuse and neglect, it crosses all socioeconomic boundaries. It affects everyone,” Schiro said. “I don’t know if the community knows that.”

Davis was removed from her foster parents because of her high-risk behavior. She was told that there were no other available foster homes where she could be placed. She was stuck. Her options were going to an out-of-state group home or reuniting with her parents, which is Social Services’ main goal. But her parents needed to take classes in things like parenting, anger management and domestic violence and needed to see a therapist. She said her biological mom and stepdad didn’t complete the necessary steps to get her back. Davis remembers a meeting she had with her mom and stepdad, her social worker, therapist, and a few others to explore the option of returning home.

“They said ‘no,’” she said with a long pause. “They did not want me back. I was the state or the county’s problem.”

At the time, Davis connected with Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Joan Capponcelli. A CASA is a volunteer who advocates for the best interest of abused and neglected children within the San Luis Obispo County court system. Davis was Capponcelli’s first CASA case.

“She took me to eat Chinese and brought her puppies for me to snuggle,” Davis said.

She knew everything that Davis had been through and what the next possible placement was for the 15-year-old.

“Poor Joan; she’s so sweet. I told Joan straight up, ‘If they send me there, no one will ever see me again,’” Davis said.

But behind closed doors, Capponcelli was the person who was going to take a chance on Davis. Without Davis’ knowledge, Capponcelli was working on how to adopt her.

Relief and hurdles

Davis’ social worker picked her up from the shelter to transport her out of state. With all her clothes in trash bags, Davis hopped in the car not knowing what her next move was. The social worker then drove up to this gated community.



“It was actually, like, in that moment, very picture perfect, because this home had a really long driveway and it was a really nice home,” she said.

“What the heck are we doing here?” Davis asked. Her social worker responded that she wanted Davis to meet someone. With reluctance, she got out of the car and walked up to the front door.

“The door opens and this big German shepherd-rottweiler named Capone came running right at me, and I start instantly crying,” Davis said.

It was Capponcelli’s dog. Capponcelli and her husband, Pete, came out to greet their new daughter and welcome her into their family of two daughters and four dogs.

“Today when I refer to my mom, I’m talking about Joan, and when I refer to my dad, I’m talking about Pete,” she said.

She’s not going to sugarcoat it—while settling in with her new family, Davis still had trouble following the rules and using drugs. But it was something she worked to get over because she realized pretty quickly that she had parents who cared.

The next hurdle was making up for all the schooling that she had missed and figuring out how to get herself through college.

Education success

Nationally, about 85 percent of foster youths communicate a desire to go on to post-secondary education. Out of that 85 percent, around 10 to 15 percent actually start their post-secondary education—at a university, junior college, or vocational program. From those who actually start, around 5 to 8 percent of those youths finish their education and earn a degree.

Marie Hughes, education services manager for the Family Care Network, said all of these numbers translate to foster youth being the least likely group of people to persist through higher education. The agency serves San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties through multiple programs designed to strengthen and preserve families and individuals impacted by trauma.



Family Care Network facilitates the Transitional Age Youth Financial Assistance Program (TAY-FAP), geared toward helping foster youth pursue post-secondary education. It provides financial assistance to any foster or former foster youth who participates or is eligible to participate in the Independent Living Program. The program is the only one of its kind in on the Central Coast and is currently not offered anywhere else.

LIVING LIFE

These days, Davis works full time for Family Care Network, studies for her master’s degree at USC, and loves her husband, Cody Gambel, and their dogs.

Hughes said that the program started in 2010 after a discussion about how foster youth could afford to go to college. It’s a collaboration between SLO County Social Services and the Family Care Network.

The program looks at how each individual foster youth can contribute to his or her college or university expenses, targeting the gaps and trying to fill them.

“With that being said, this isn’t a full free ride, and we’re not just throwing money out there; these students are working very hard,” she said.

Since the program's inception, 230 local foster youths have participated. Of those, 75 percent are employed while attending classes full time or part time.

"I think that speaks highly of their determination and their self-contribution," Hughes said.

To be eligible for TAY-FAP, a foster youth needs to be eligible for the Independent Living Program and a court dependent in the county. If a court declares that a child is a court dependent, the judge then decides whether a child should remain with their parent or remove parental rights—if placement with a relative is not possible, the child is usually placed in a foster home. The Independent Living Program is designed to provide resources and support foster youth and probation youth between the ages of 14 and 21. It's a voluntary program that offers current and former foster and probation youth access to services through local organizations and agencies to support a successful transition into adulthood.

As of 2017, 38 degrees had been earned by youth in the program. Those include bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, and vocational certificates.

Two of the 38 belong to Davis.

Before finding a home with the Capponcellis, Davis wasn't really thinking about her future.

"I never thought about college, growing up, or anything like that. It wasn't about college. It was about the day to day," Davis said. "I just assumed my life would turn out the way my biological mom's did."

Capponcelli was the one who really asked Davis about her goals, aspirations, and what she wanted to do with her life.

These conversations opened Davis up to the idea that she was capable of attending college, and with the help of TAY-FAP, she pursued it.

In 2015 she received her associate degree from Cuesta College in sociology. Davis attended Sacramento State University and had the full college experience by living in the dorms, earning her bachelor's degree in sociology. At 24 years old, she currently works for Family Care Network and is taking online classes at the University of Southern California to pursue her master's degree in social work. After getting her master's, Davis hopes to continue to work for Family Care Network as a social worker and a therapist, in order to give back to a community that gave so much to her.

She wants to work on the Central Coast, because she's experienced the foster system and sees a lot that can be improved for the next generation of foster youth.

"This is where I went through the worst times of my entire life, but also the very best. This is where I met incredible people, incredible programs, and this is where my future was built," she said as her eyes welled up. "This is where I am meant to stay because there are kids just like me living in this exact county going through the exact same thing I went through, and they need me."

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