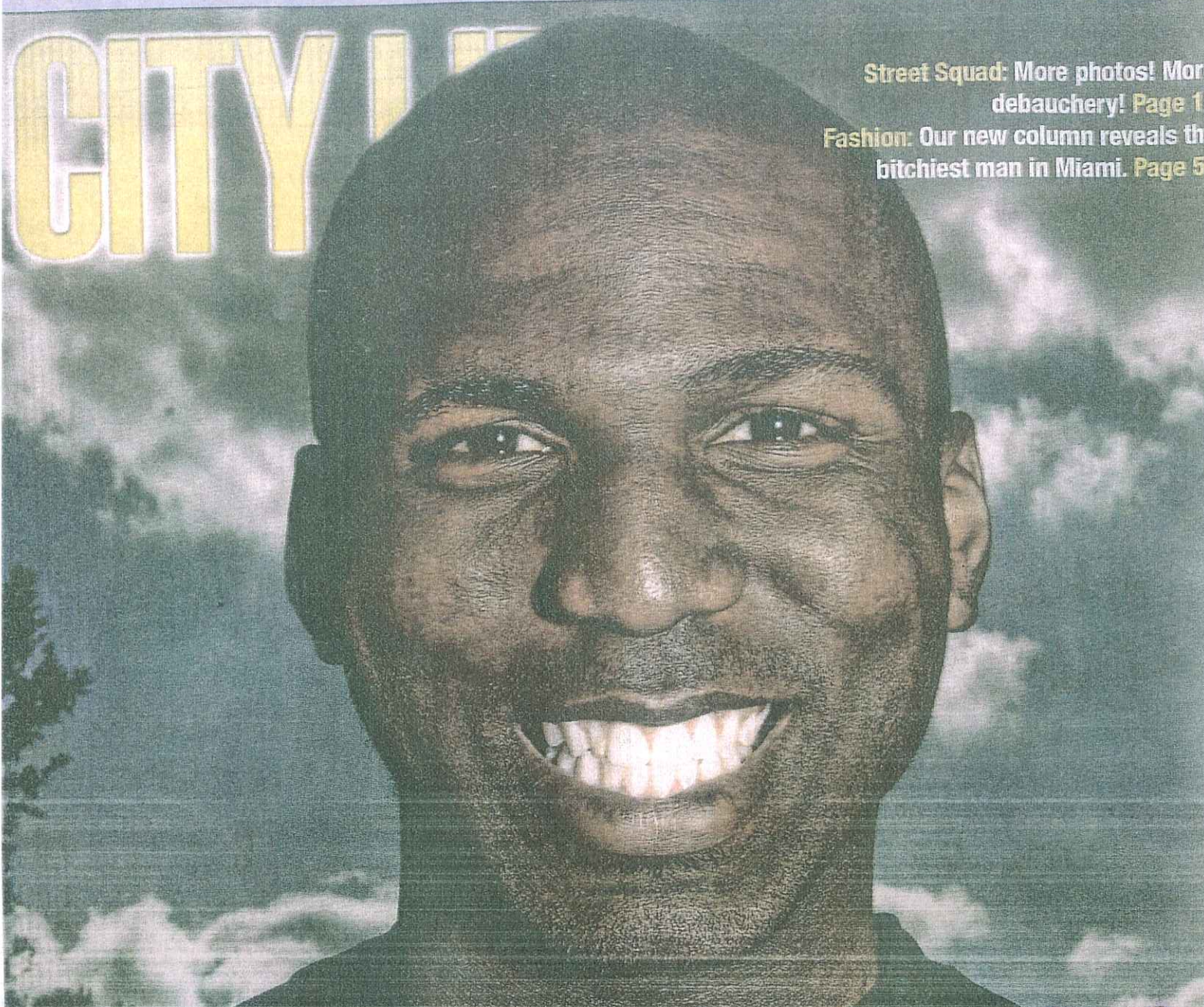


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You're on your own, kids

Few things are as challenging as being a foster kid in Florida. Apparently, state legislators don't think it's challenging enough.

By Joanie Cox



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You're on your own, kids



Few things are as challenging as being a foster kid in Florida. Apparently, state legislators don't think it's challenging enough.

By Joanie Cox



Lean on me: Danny Smith, Racquell Perry and Latasha Davis (left to right) persevered and beat the odds with the help of mentor Steve Rios (opposite page).

Racquell Perry holds her cell phone across a table at Starbucks to reveal a picture of her slinky, gold prom dress. "I'm going alone," she says with a giggle. "I'd rather it be that way. I don't need a date to have fun."

At moments like this, Perry seems like any other outgoing, 18-year-old high-school senior who loves Kanye West and shoe-shopping. But her life has been rougher than that of most kids her age. She was born with crack in her system, has lived in three different foster homes and one group home, and attended eight different middle schools. "I never really thought about this until right now," Perry says, holding back tears. "A lot of people didn't expect me to get as far as I did."

Perry is about to graduate from Miami Northwestern High School in the Top 10 percent of her class with a 4.13 grade point average. She hopes to pursue a Ph.D. at Florida State University. Many of her peers complain about not having the right car or the latest iPod, but Perry has learned to separate her wants

from her needs. She only recently got her first computer.

"A lot of people stereotype foster kids. The average foster kid doesn't graduate — only about 50 percent do," Perry says. "I encouraged myself. If more people took time to see what was going on with foster kids, I think graduation numbers would rise."

About 30,000 foster kids live in Florida. Seventy percent want to attend college, 20 percent enroll and less than 5 percent finish. Twelve to 18 months after they age out of the system at 18 years old, 38 percent become unemployed, 34 percent turn to welfare and 25 percent end up homeless.

"It certainly hasn't been easy for me or my eight siblings," Perry admits. She lived with her grandparents until she turned 12 and entered foster care. "When I found out my grandma died, I wanted to give up completely. I was living in a foster home and didn't find out until years later. She was my heart and I know she'd be so proud of me and my grades." Perry

rolls up her sleeve to reveal a tattoo bearing the name *Gram*.

No longer in the system, Perry is living with one of her sisters. "When I moved in with her, I had to learn how to be a teenager and do things like go to the mall," she says. "I watch shows like *My Super Sweet 16* and these kids that can't even drive yet are getting BMWs and spending \$700 on a dress. I could buy a car with that amount of money."

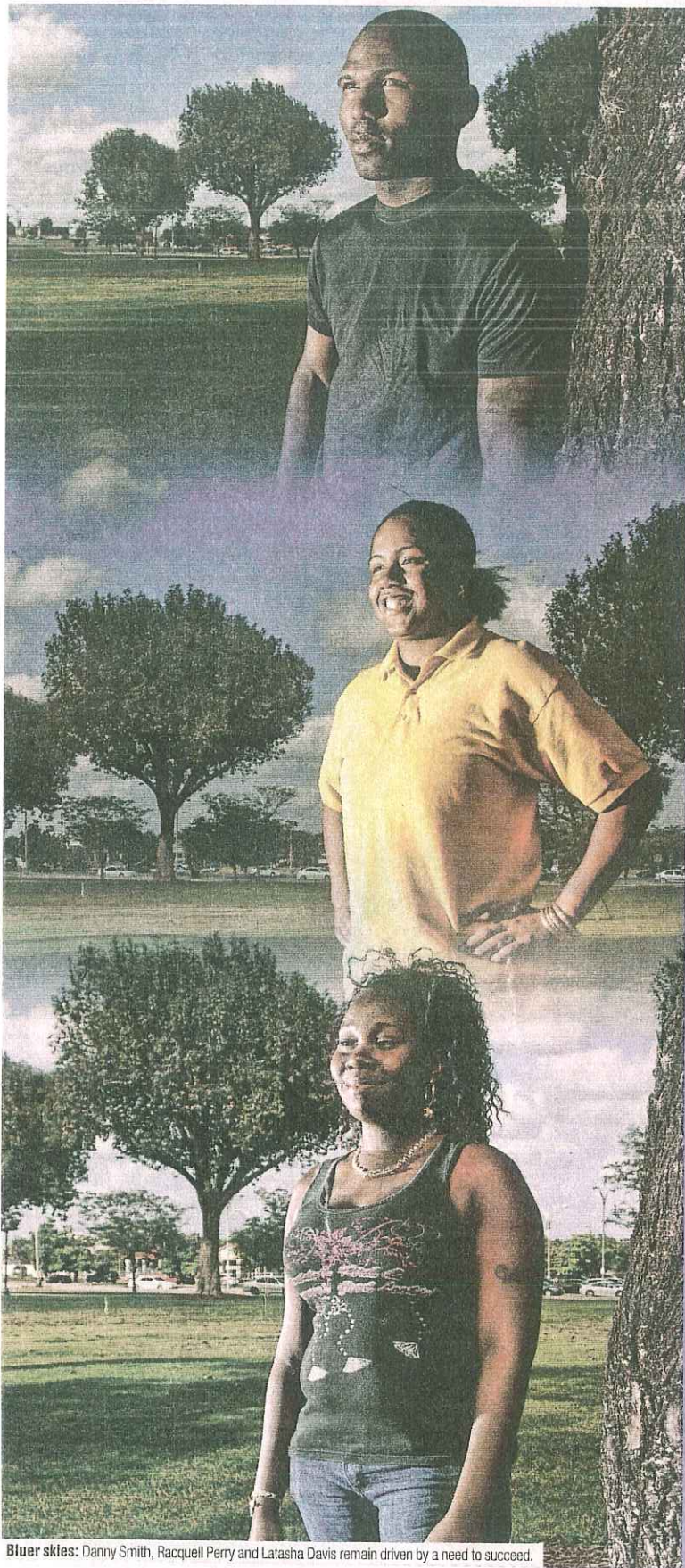
Despite her chaotic upbringing, Perry has learned to forgive and move on. "It's always a test. I feel like, 'Why did this happen to me?'" she says. "But I've learned a lot and met so many people. I wouldn't change anything. It's like a blessing now."

Perry credits part of her ability to rise above her troubled circumstances to the Road to Independence Program, in which the state pays former foster children ages 18 to 23 from \$892 to \$1,042 a month. A recent bill before the Florida House of Representatives would have cut \$7 million from the already underfunded

program, but it was voted down last week. And no additional funds will be granted to the maintenance-adoption subsidy, which aids families who adopt children with developmental and physical disabilities. This will affect community-based care agencies such as Our Kids and ChildNet, which aids foster kids in South Florida.

By July 1, more than 200 foster children will be adopted in Broward County. The Plantation-based ChildNet had planned to secure adoptions for an additional 300 children in the next fiscal year. The state subsidizes care for 96 percent of children adopted out of foster care. Many of these children have health problems, physical impairments, behavioral issues or developmental disabilities. Cutting subsidies will likely discourage adoptions because many prospective parents lack the means to care for these children without state assistance. Services for abused children also took a hit of almost \$19 million.

continued next page



Bluer skies: Danny Smith, Racquell Perry and Latasha Davis remain driven by a need to succeed.

from previous page

A projected 1,200 kids will age out of foster care this year in the Florida, with more than 100 kids in Broward alone. With no family to go home to, these youth depend on the state for financial assistance. No new funds for ChildNet means many are likely to end up homeless and may see a reduction in their monthly assistance. Others will lose education benefits, eliminating their best chance to become self-sufficient. ChildNet may now have to decide between providing services to children in foster care, assistance to youth aging out of the system or assistance to adoptive families.

"It's going to be a very challenging year. We're going to have to see how the community will respond to this challenge," ChildNet CEO Emilio Benitez, says. "It costs approximately \$150 a day to keep a child in a group home. A family who adopts a child receives a monthly adoption subsidy of approximately \$375 a month. Do the math. It is not only better to place a child with a loving family than in a foster-care group home, but it is also cheaper."

Benitez also fears there will be no money for adoptions next year. "I'm obliged to continue paying over 1,800 families in Broward County who have already adopted a child the adoption subsidy fee until that child turns 18," Benitez says. "Since there's no increase in funding for adoption subsidies, there may be no funding to do any adoptions next year. That would be a tragedy, since those children may have to stay in foster care at a higher cost to the state, instead of going to a loving home."

Danny Smith entered the foster system after the Florida Department of Children and Families came to his trashed home and case workers deemed his mother an unfit parent.

"I was 7 when I went into the system," the 19-year-old Smith says. "The hardest part was not seeing my parents or family."

Smith rebelled against his foster parents. "I walked 10 miles one day and snuck off to see my mom," he recalls. "I got kicked out of my foster home." He also got arrested after his friend started a gang and they got into a fight with some kids from a rival neighborhood. But he says his next foster mom, Belinda Henderson, turned his life around. "She treated me like a son and didn't give up on me. She taught me how to read," he says.

A year ago, Smith got involved with Educate Tomorrow, a nonprofit organization based in Miami-Dade County that helps 16- to 18-year-old foster kids go to college, find jobs and learn how to live on their own. Educate Tomorrow, which has more than 200 mentors

and mentees, is funded by the federal government, a group called The Children's Trust, corporate sponsors and private fundraisers. Latasha Davis says a weekend retreat sponsored by the program helped her get a job and learn to manage her time. Davis was born into the foster-care system in Miami. She got adopted at age 7 along with her four siblings but was verbally and physically abused by her adoptive mother. "The case worker knew she was abusing us," Davis says. "But because we were placed somewhere, no one did anything about it." At age 12, Davis attempted suicide in order to draw attention to her situation and free her brothers and sisters from the woman's care.

But the failed attempt only compounded her problems at home. "If we had friends, she'd beat us," Davis says. "She became friends with the principal and teachers at our school so no one would believe us."

Davis went on to live in six different foster homes and got pregnant at age 15. "That got me kicked out of where I was staying," the now-18-year-old says. "Before I had my son, I was real rambunctious — slashing tires and breaking windows to get attention. There wasn't much food while I was pregnant and I was living without lights and water. People ask me why I work so hard. I never want to end up like that again."

Two years ago, Davis got involved with Educate Tomorrow after meeting a mentor named Steve Rios. "Steve told me to sign up for dual enrollment — college classes while I was in high school," Davis says. "I thought he was crazy because I couldn't even get through high school. But I'm graduating with my GED on May 8 and I'm living in my own apartment for the first time."

Rios is a mentor at Educate Tomorrow and has been its director of campus-based programs since 2006. He spends most of his day with a cell phone to each ear attempting to talk kids like Davis out of giving up. "What we're doing is allowing these kids an opportunity to make it in life," Rios says. "These kids have seen things and survived things you can't even imagine. When so many people turn their back on you, having someone there to say, 'I care' and 'How can I help?' makes all the difference."

But with less funding available, fewer children will be able to hear such words.

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System failure

1. Two-thirds of the homeless in Miami-Dade County are 18 to 23 years old.
2. About 65 percent of foster children have one or more siblings.
3. May is National Foster Care month.
4. For more information on Educate Tomorrow, visit EducateTomorrow.org.