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Coral Springs teen prepares to move out of foster care

Girl in Coral Springs foster care group home faces a new world and challenges as she turns 18 today

Michael Mayo

News Columnist

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When she first arrived in Coral Springs in July 2005, Robin Miller spent much of her time running away.

She was 15, a long way from her hometown of Fort Pierce, and even though her family had its share of problems, she missed them.

"I didn't want to be here," Robin said. "My caseworker lied to me, said I was going to be here for only two weeks."

She buckled down and stuck it out. For the last 2 1/2 years, she has lived at Brookwood Florida East, a Coral Springs group home for teen girls in foster care.

Today she starts a new life.

Today she turns 18, which means she ages out of the state system that's been responsible for her since she was 10.

"When I was little, I used to be so happy my birthday was on Christmas, because I figured I'd get extra presents," said Robin.

The gift she gets this year is her independence.

"I'm excited, but kind of scared at the same time," said Robin, a lanky teen with a radiant smile who dreams of becoming a model or a guidance counselor.

She could go anywhere, but she's staying in Coral Springs, close to the support system that's helped her become more stable and self-sufficient.

"I'm choosing to stay in Broward," Robin said earlier this month. "I want to finish school, then go to college. After I went back to Fort Pierce last time, I said, 'No way. I'm not going to do right. I'm going to get pregnant or drop out of school.' It's hard to get a job up there. The environment is better for me here."

After spending the last few years with 13 other girls and constant staff supervision in the five-bedroom

home on a quiet cul-de-sac, Robin has moved into an apartment in Coral Springs with a former Brookwood resident.

Two weeks ago, she sat in the group home and ticked off a list of things she had to do: sign a lease, shop for furniture, bedding and clothes, finalize her moving arrangements.

"My room here is decorated with nothing but SpongeBob," she said. "I need some new things."

Stacy Constantine, executive director of Brookwood Florida East, marveled at how far Robin had come. From troubled runaway to the model resident who's been rewarded with a spot in the so-called "privilege" bedroom, the one that has a television, a lock on the door and two girls instead of three.

"I know this isn't paradise, and I know it's not home, but you make the best of it," Constantine said. "She's made the best of it. We teach them that you can't dwell on the past, you have to move forward."

Robin is in 11th grade, at a delicate crossroads between adolescence and adulthood. She'll be responsible for getting to school on time and paying bills, doing homework and laundry, studying for the FCAT and working part time to make extra money.

It used to be that foster teens like Robin could stay in group homes until they finished high school, but the Legislature's Road to Independence Act earlier this decade changed the rules.

Now Robin has to go out on her own at 18. She received independent living vouchers from ChildNet, the local child-welfare agency, to furnish her apartment. She'll get a monthly stipend of almost \$1,000 from the state as long as she's in school.

Brookwood Florida helps teens such as Robin get on the right path. Founded 80 years ago in St. Petersburg, the non-profit agency opened its Coral Springs home 10 years ago, mainly serving foster teens from Broward and Palm Beach counties. Residents cannot be pregnant or have severe substance abuse problems. Some have had minor brushes with the law.

Two clinicians work intensely with the girls, with group and individual therapy sessions.

Constantine said the home is focused on independent living, teaching the teens to bank, shop, budget and get around on public transportation. "They do chores, they do dishes, they do their own laundry," Constantine said. "It's like normal living in a big family. But many of them are coming from places with no structure."

Robin was placed in foster care after her grandmother could no longer raise her. She said her mother had a drug problem and she was afraid to live with her father. When she was 7, her 17-year-old half-brother was shot and killed in a nightclub fight. "I remember crying on the couch," she said.

Life has been less traumatic in Coral Springs. But foster living has its challenges. Robin has had to turn down sleepover invitations at friends' homes because of curfew regulations. Things that most kids take for granted, such as library cards and drivers' learning permits, are problematic for foster children.

All that changes today, as she's thrown headfirst into adulthood.

Is she ready for life on her own?

"Yeah, I think I can handle it," she said.

Michael Mayo's next column will appear Sunday. Reach him at mmayo@sun-sentinel.com or 954-356-4508.

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