

In the NEIGHBORHOOD

Program prepares foster children for the future

By **Maritza Velazquez**
Staff Writer

LA VERNE — James Lindemann has been in the foster care system since he was 5 years old.

He's lived in many different homes, never really having the stability others his age have been afforded.

Now 17 years old, he faces yet another huge transition — he graduates from high school this year and will move forward to Cal Poly Pomona next year.

The LeRoy Haynes Center, where Lindemann attends school, has added the "Transition to Life" program to its list of services in an effort to prepare young men and women for life when they are emancipated at age 18.

"We think that if we didn't have a program like this, these kids would just be so much further behind," said LeRoy Haynes President/CEO Daniel Maydeck. "There's some terrifying statistics out there for kids who leave the foster care system."

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According to Linda Spears, vice president of policy and public affairs for the Child Welfare League of America, about 25 percent of foster youths become homeless in the first year after they are emancipated.

"When I talk to young people exiting foster care, I find them to be the strongest and most resilient kids I've ever met in my life, but they have so much less than other kids," Spears said.

She added that many state laws end services to foster youths at age 18. And although many are trying to expand those services, the economic crisis has impeded those efforts.

But the LeRoy Haynes Cen-

ter has found this program to be crucial in its students' lives and has cut expenses in other areas to do it, Maydeck said.

Students who attend the LeRoy Haynes Education Center, or are residents on the La Verne campus, start the program at 16 and are mentored through the age of 22.

The center has always offered individual transition plans for its students and residents, but Rafael Deloera, the high school's dean and transitional specialist, felt the need to do more.

Now in its first year, the program presently serves 30 students who get help with their resumes, gain job experience and learn how to fill out college applications and apply for financial aid.

Lindemann and 17-year-old Michael, whose last name is withheld due to confidentiality issues, are the first from the school to be accepted to a four-year college.

They will attend Cal Poly in the fall.

"I'm just thankful," Michael, a soft-spoken teen, said of the program. "I didn't think I would be here. I've been in foster care since I was 3 and I've been in multiple homes. Numerous homes. You keep moving. You never have a stable place."

Deloera came up with the idea for the program a couple of years ago after realizing the unrealistic expectations of some of the students.

According to Deloera, the young adults had future plans, but had no idea what it took to get there.

Lindemann said this described himself. Although he didn't have faith that he could be accepted to a four-year university, participating in the program made him believe otherwise.

"I learned that I could do it," Lindemann said. "I basically did have an unrealistic plan about it. I always thought of going (to school), but I never knew what to do."

Both Michael and Lindemann got accepted into the Educational Opportunity Program at Cal Poly, which provides services to disadvantaged students.

Students involved in "Transition to Life" are also able to gain work experience at several businesses. The center pays the students' salaries, while the businesses, such as the Hillcrest Retirement Center in La Verne and the Red Cross in Claremont, give teens the opportunity to build their resumes.

Though Lindemann and Michael are both employed, they got their jobs through other means.

After putting in a few applications, Lindemann landed a job at Del Taco, while Michael works at the Girls and Boys Club in Pomona.

"I tell the kids, 'Don't think

the worst, you are going to get denied sometimes. And that's the real world. You just have to keep on trying and keep putting in applications and be persistent,'" said career counselor Ruby Santana.

The LeRoy Haynes Center serves students from 13 school districts.

According to Deloera, who has been an educator at LeRoy Haynes for 14 years, kids must be referred by their districts and have been labeled with a learning disability to attend the LeRoy Haynes Education Center.

There are 14 graduating students this year who will go into the work force, vocational school or a two-year college.

For Michael, who's majoring in electrical engineering, and Lindemann, who will study history, this next step is a big one.

"I'm a little excited to live on campus, and a little nervous," Michael said. "I just want the simple life, to live and go to school."

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