

Dressed for success

Foster youths use a fashion runway to support their peers

By Alison apRoberts -- Bee Staff Writer

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Try this on for size. You're 18 and you're on your own. No older adult to call for advice about all the strange challenges of grown-up life, like the nuances of doing laundry or ordering more checks or filing taxes.

It's not easy to fit into the world when you are expected to start walking around in adult responsibilities overnight. For many foster kids who reach 18 and are emancipated from the system, there's nothing incremental about adulthood. It comes all at once, no returns, no exchanges.

Maybe that daunting challenge makes other things seem easy, like learning to execute a few pivots and ballroom spins and smile at the audience as you walk across a stage.

The young models at the annual Foster Youth Spring Tea and Fashion Show at 2 this afternoon at The Grand downtown (1215 J St.) certainly seemed to be taking their strutting in stride during a rehearsal - their first - just a few days ago in a recreation room of Trinity Cathedral in midtown.

"I do my research; I've seen 'America's Next Top Model' a few times," said Pammi Janda, laughing. "It's just mostly walking and smiling."

Janda, who is 21, has certainly done harder things. Like graduating from high school after attending four different ones; like getting a job as a foster youth employment counselor at the Employment Development Department; like enrolling at Sacramento City College, from which he plans to transfer to a University of California campus and earn a degree in psychology.

Janda is one of eight young men and 16 young women, ages 15 to 21, who are modeling in the show to raise money for scholarships for emancipated foster youths. All the models have been in foster care or are currently in foster care.

Janda watches carefully as Joni Pitcl and Cindy Gootee demonstrate the moves of a routine for the show.

Pitcl is the commander in chief of an army of adult volunteers who make the show happen.

"We have mothers from Folsom and hairdressers from Elk Grove - everybody hits up everybody - it's just great," Pitcl says.

Tonight, Pitcl and Gootee - who snags all the clothes from stores including Marshalls and T.J. Maxx - direct the models.

Pitcl first got involved in the fashion show when it was put on about 15 years ago by Laverne Adolfo, a foster parent and advocate for older foster children. When Adolfo died in the late '90s, the curtain closed on the show.

Pitcl, who is a consultant and advocate on children's issues, started up the fashion show again four years ago. That led, in turn, to the creation of the Foster Youth Education Fund, a nonprofit dedicated to providing grants to emancipated foster youths in the Sacramento area.

The first year of the revived show, in 2002, about \$7,000 was raised for scholarships. The second year, \$11,000 was raised. The third year, \$21,000 was raised. More is coming in this year.

Janda received a \$1,000 scholarship from the fund. He was able to buy books (which can run several hundred dollars a semester) and even set some aside for future educational expenses.

The fashion show takes place this year on the first day of National Foster Care Month. On Tuesday, there will be more entertainment during an 11 a.m. event on the north steps of the Capitol to draw attention to the needs of the more than 82,000 kids in foster care in the state. Local band Mumbo Gumbo will perform, and Victoria Rowell, a former foster care child and actress from "The Young and the Restless," will be among the speakers.

A 10-foot tree with 4,000 ribbons will be displayed to symbolize the number of youths who age out of the state system each year. In Sacramento County, 260 kids left the system in 2004.

The needs of these young adults who are thrust into the grown-up world overnight at 18 has become a focus for advocates and policymakers in recent years. They have higher rates of homelessness, poverty, drug problems and incarceration than other young adults. They also are much less likely to finish college.

Many believe that an ongoing lifelong connection to an adult can make all the difference. A recognized leader in pushing for such connections is Pat Reynolds-Harris, founder and director of the California Permanency for Youth Project. (Among other positions, Reynolds-Harris served as director of the public child welfare agency and of community health services for San Francisco County.)

"It's wonderful to start developing services for these young people, but that alone doesn't work that effectively unless the young person has someone in their life who is supportive of them," she says. "We all need that."

Reynolds-Harris says enduring connections may come through adoption, mentoring, guardianship or other relationships. The adults may be relatives or teachers or bus drivers or foster parents.

"Often the young people know people in their lives that they can pursue," Reynolds-Harris says.

The growing emphasis on permanent relationships comes from talking to kids in foster care, says Miryam Choca, director of California Strategies for Casey Family Programs, which is helping to put on the Capitol event Tuesday.

"One of the things we've done is start listening to the alumni of the foster-care system," Choca says. "And they tell us that states and counties aren't the best to raise children - families are."

Talking to the models at the fashion-show rehearsal underscores the point. Many said they live with or rely on relatives.

"I have an uncle who was always there for me," says 18-year-old Reese Jones, when asked how he managed to beat the odds by finishing high school and enrolling full time at Sacramento City College.

The other challenge these models face is financial.

"We act like it's reasonable for an 18-year-old to be on their own; it's just not reasonable," says Frank Mecca, executive director of the County Welfare Directors Association. "You couldn't have done it and I couldn't have done it."

For now, events like the fashion show fill in the gap, at least a little. And the payoff of the event clearly goes beyond the financial.

Watching the models rehearse provides a study of resilience in action. Even those who start out moving stiffly and unsmilingly, soon start swaggering, laughing and dancing like supermodels. They bounce back,

smiling, from flubbed moves, smashed feet and even a poke or two in the head from an umbrella spoke during a rehearsal for a routine called "Swingin' in the Rain."

"It's a chance to show off," says Shoronne Whitehead, an 18-year-old business student at American River College. She went into foster care at 14 and was in a group home when she turned 18. She now lives in Carmichael and works at a Cold Stone Creamery.

"It's really fun," says Kia Moore, who is 19 and finishing up her high school studies. She would like to become an attorney someday.

"I love it, it's like a hobby," says Misty Sanders of her experience as she prepares for her fourth year of modeling in the show. She's 21 and goes to school at Heald College, where she is studying to become a medical assistant while working at an AMF Bowling Center. She says the modeling experience helps her face down any stage fright when she has to make presentations in classes.

Janay Swain, 20, is the picture of confidence even though this is her first time in the fashion show. She was a recipient of a \$1,000 grant raised by last year's show.

She is a junior at California State University, Sacramento, majoring in social work and minoring in public policy and administration.

"I want to be director of Sacramento County Health and Human Services," she says, smiling. She works with the County Welfare Directors' Association to prepare.

Swain, who was in kinship-foster care living with her grandmother starting at 15, sees the fashion show as a sure confidence builder.

"It's really a self-esteem booster, especially for a girl, to dress up," she says. "And when you have self-esteem, you can do anything."

Foster Care Month

Annual Foster Youth Spring Tea and Fashion Show

WHAT: Former and current Sacramento foster youths put on a show to raise money for scholarships

WHEN: 2 p.m. today

WHERE: The Grand, 1215 J St.

TICKETS: \$25

INFORMATION: (916) 944-4935

Kickoff at the Capitol

WHAT: Events to raise awareness of foster care children and honor those who help them. Mumbo Gumbo will perform at 11 a.m.; program begins at 11:30 and includes Victoria Rowell of "The Young and the Restless," Secretary of State Bruce McPherson and former Assembly member Darrell Steinberg

WHEN: 11 a.m. Tuesday

WHERE: North steps of the state Capitol

TICKETS: Free

For more events and information: www.fostercaremonth.org

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