



DCS: Unadopted teens need not fear becoming adults



After six years in the foster care system, Obed Rodriguez could have opted to strike out on his own at 18. Instead, he decided to take full advantage of several opportunities afforded him by the state's Department of Child Safety. Officials would like more teens who are "aging out" of the system to follow Rodriguez's lead.

Read more Pages 5-6

Inside This Month's Issue

Page 2 — Children find a favorite among detention center staff.

Page 7 — Future gardeners enlightened by experts in the field.

Page 9 — Community partners bring separated siblings together for the day.

Page 12 — CASA Support Council makes holiday a memorable one for kids.

Page 14 — It's open enrollment time under the Affordable Health Care Act.

Page 15 — Kids offer their two-cents on staying out of trouble.

Detention officers — mentor, teacher, confidante, advisor

It's a few minutes past 2 p.m. on a Monday afternoon and juvenile detention officer Mat has just begun his shift at Pima County Juvenile Detention Center. He's barely taken a seat in one of the classrooms when one of the students gives him the news.

"Guess what? I'm leaving today!" the tow-headed boy says, a grin splitting his face.

"That's great. What time?" Mat asks.

"In about 20 minutes," the boy brags.

"Oh, you're not counting down are you?" Mat teases.

Just then, Mat's attention is diverted by a younger boy who seems determined to avoid working on the English assignment in front of him. As the five older boys around him do their best to ignore him, he alternates between making noises and chatting away at 90 miles an hour about several random topics.

Although Mat patiently guides him back to his worksheet several times, the freckled face 13-year-old comes up with new topics to discuss, including how Mat ended up with such a bushy beard when his head is completely hairless.

Keeping the boy on task and at a reasonable volume is a re-occurring theme throughout the rest of Mat's shift, but he is only one of 12 children currently assigned to the 400 Living Unit, Mat's unit.

On this particular night, Mat, a 14-year veteran, and fellow officer, Mary, are watching out for 12 kids. The other 30 or so youths are split into the other living units, including one unit that helps teens prepare for substance abuse treatment either in the community or at a residential treatment center. (Contd. Page 3)



Mat, who has been a juvenile detention officer for 14 years, helps one of the younger boys out during school.

Mary has been working with Mat for about a year and enjoys watching him with the kids.

"He listens to the kids, he doesn't assume things. He gives them chances and if they don't listen, then he takes action," Mary said. "He cares about them. He tries to teach them, but at the same time he plays with them."

The kids are drawn to Mat because he provides consistency, Mary said.

"They like him a lot. He's one of those staff that if they've had a bad day and need to talk to somebody, they'll wait to talk to him," Mary said. "Or, if someone's in a bad mood, they'll open up to him."

While the children and their issues may change, there is a set routine in the detention center. The kids get up, exercise and shower at the same time every day, they eat meals and snacks at set times, go to school and participate in rehabilitative programs at pre-set times. They can also count on having leisure time and bed time at the same time every day.



Mat shares a laugh with one of the kids in the 400 Living Unit as she picks out a book for the evening.

After school lets out on this particular day and the kids devour oranges, Mat takes his boys into a classroom to watch and discuss the 2005 documentary "The World's Biggest Airliner: Building the Airbus 380."

The energy level rises as Mat and the boys talk and laugh about the equipment used to build the airliner, physics, spectacular crashes and the types of aircraft they've flown in.

As the dinner hour approaches, the group gets ready for Monday Night Football. There's plenty of teasing as the group splits as to who will win, the Steelers or the Texans. If it's not football night, the kids usually watch Animal Planet or cartoons, Mat said.

Mat and Mary eat their dinners from home as the kids eat their pulled pork sandwiches, watch the game and chat. Again, Mat's hairless head comes up. When one of the kids asks Mat if he'll play his iPod for them later, Mat says it's up to them, gently reminding them he didn't play it the night before because they didn't follow his instructions. (Contd. Page 4)

After dinner, the TV is shut off as the kids sweep, mop and straighten their rooms. The kids split into groups of two to play card games, write letters, color, or watch the rest of the game.

Mat and Mary join the kids in the games, going from table to table to chat. Other than the occasional reminder to lower their voices, the night's uneventful.

Sixteen-year-old Danielle has been in the detention center a few times. Each time, Mat has been assigned as her mentor. She described Mat as encouraging and inspiring. She's even called him at the detention center for advice when not being detained.

"He's always very supportive, but he's not afraid to lay down the law," Danielle says of Mat. "I think he's a good father figure for some of the younger kids. He sits down and takes the time to get to know you. He treats us like a concerned parent. He turns this place into a home away from home, but it's more structured than home."

Angel, 13, and Jesse, 12, had never been in the detention center before. They were scared at first, especially when they met Mat, a former football player and coach. He quickly put them at ease.

"I expected them to be really strict and to be kept in a cell all of the time, but they treat us with respect," Angel said. "Mat looks mean, but when you get to know him he's really funny. He has a sense of humor. If I get carried away, though, he'll check me."

Mat has helped him handle his anger better, Jesse said.

"He's teaching me a lesson about why I'm here," Jesse said. "He helps me be a better person."

The job is a tough one, especially when children come back or graduate to the adult system, but he loves it just the same, Mat said.

"Sometimes they come back in and ask me if I'm mad at them and I'll say no, I'm just disappointed," Mat said. "I'm not here to judge them. I'm here to keep them safe and the staff safe. Hopefully we'll also help get them back on the right track."

Every evening ends with "Community Circle." Each child is asked to use a word to describe their mood. They are then asked to describe their goal for the week and how it's working out so far. Mat offers encouragement and suggestions.

When a medical staff member comes by with medicine around 8 pm, nearly every child takes a turn in line. The kids then retire to their rooms for the night to read or go to sleep.

After the kids enter their rooms, Mat and Mary fold that day's clean laundry and settle down to do paperwork.

"A good day is a boring day," Mat said. "A good day is when we just do our schedule."

Arizona's older foster care children have many options

Every year in the United States, 26,000 children in the foster care system turn 18 without being adopted. More than one in five will become homeless and one in four will be arrested within two years of leaving the system. Only 50 percent will have a job by the time they turn 24 and 71 percent of the girls will become pregnant by 21.

Close to \$7 billion is spent every year for the public assistance, incarceration and lost wages of these young people.

Arizona's Department of Child Safety has programs in place officials hope will reduce all of those frightening statistics.



Veronica Mendoza & Ana Contreras

Ana Contreras is the unit supervisor of the Arizona Young Adults Program, a specialized unit devoted to foster children between 16 and 21. The purpose of AYAP is to help older foster children with those things traditional parents see to – housing, education, clothing and advice on such things as money management and finding and keeping jobs.

“Our major responsibility is to help these young adults become independent and self-sufficient. We want to help them make the transition from foster care into adulthood,” Contreras said.

Obed Rodriguez is in AYAP. The 18-year-old was placed in foster care at the age of 12 when his mother died. After years of living in group homes and foster homes, he is now living in his own apartment, working on his GED and working as an intern thanks to Goodwill's GoodFutures program.

His plan is to go to the University of Arizona where he'll major in engineering management. He also dreams of entering public service one day, perhaps becoming a state lawmaker devoted to foster children issues.

“I've been really blessed and fortunate. Most foster children fall. At 18 you're not an adult, you're still a child, you still need help,” Rodriguez said. “Most foster children don't know any different. They figure they've got it, they know what they are going to do in life and that's just not the case.”

Because he is part of AYAP, Rodriguez receives a housing subsidy, gets financial help with his schooling and has a caseworker who offers him advice and provides referrals to other agencies that can lend him assistance. He got involved in Goodwill's Metro and GoodFutures program thanks to his caseworker. AYAP is available to children as young as 16 and with caseworkers' help the teens determine just how much help (Contd. Page 6)

they'll need and what specific programs they are eligible to participate in.

In some cases, the teens may remain in their foster placement; others may be able to live independently, like Rodriguez. Some participants may only need financial help with housing and schooling; others may need continuing mental health counseling and life skills classes. Young adults between 18 and 26 are also eligible for insurance.

"Our focus is establishing stability for that kid, to minimize the number of moves, to look at the educational services for them, their mental health and their employment possibilities," Contreras said.

If participants need help learning life skills, a coach will meet with them at least three times a month, Contreras said. They'll go over money management, help them build resumes, teach them about nutrition and how to cook and tour schools with them.

Because everyone wants the children to become more independent over time, the housing subsidy they receive decreases every month, forcing Rodriguez and others like him to learn how to handle their finances.

In 2006, the state also created two education specialist positions. It is Veronica Mendoza's job to assess young adults' educational needs. She helps determine if a child is on track to graduate, if they should pursue a GED and if they need help passing the AIMS test. If the young person has an individualized education plan, she'll make sure the schools are adhering to it. If the child is college-bound, she'll help get them admitted, track down scholarship possibilities and deal with other financial aid.

The battle is keeping some of these young people involved in the system, Contreras said. "If they've been in foster care a long time, if they entered when they were five, six or even 10, whether they are ready or not, they just want to get out of the system," Contreras said.

Thanks to the hard work of caseworkers, however, those numbers are decreasing, Contreras said. In addition, word has gotten out that former foster children may re-enter the system if they've not yet turned 21.

"Some of these kids are figuring out that they can't go home, that they won't have the stability they need if they go home," Contreras said. "They come to understand that if they stay in a group home or in a kinship placement they can continue to be funded, get services and financial support so they can continue their schooling."

Things have certainly changed a lot over the years, Contreras said. Many of the changes can be attributed to the children themselves.

"When I started my career 20 years ago, as soon as children turned 18 and received their GED or diploma we had to close the case," Contreras said. "I think there are other things that can be done, but we're getting there. I love the fact that the kids are strongly encouraged to attend court and have their voices heard. Many have even met with the governor."

Detention Center garden well on way to becoming an oasis

Peggy Young spent 15 years working at Pima County Juvenile Court before she retired and when she was recently asked if she wanted to come back to spend some time with the kids in detention, she was thrilled.

Judge Jennifer Langford had heard the retired attorney had become a master gardener and hoped Young and other members of the Pima County Cooperative Extension Master

Gardener program would be willing to share their expertise.

Juvenile detention center officers created a small garden for the kids in an enclosed recreation area back in 2011, but they've longed dream of expanding and improving it.

For months, the master gardeners and detention staff have been visiting other community gardens and talking about the possibilities with the detention garden.



Members of Pima County Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners program began work on the detention center's fall garden in mid-October.

In mid-October, they culled out dead and dying plants, created the right mixture of donated potting soil and planted an extensive fall garden. Since early November, the group has been meeting with a rotating group of children on Sundays to teach them everything they need to know about gardening, nutrition and sustainability.

“We met with three boys and two girls the first time and they were rambunctious,” Young said with a laugh. “The most delightful thing that happened was they discovered a passion vine covered in caterpillars. The officers were a little squeamish about picking them off, but the kids loved it.”

The caterpillars were transported safe and sound to another location by a detention supervisor, Young said.

The kids were thrilled to be able to water the plants, thin out some beets and hear the gardeners explain things, Young said.

“It’s a wonderful experience for the kids. Right now they are living in a sterile environment. There’s no green there except for the garden,” Young said. (Contd. Page 8)

“Being in the garden brings back a sense of fun and playfulness. Our hope is that somewhere down the line they’ll garden because they find it’s relaxing and fun.”

The master gardeners are just the latest group of volunteers to help out with the garden. Folks from the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, the Girl Scouts of America,



South Tucson Police Department and the CAPE School have made donations or spent time teaching. They’ve even put their backs into it when new compost has been donated.

During the first couple of years, the kids donated their produce to the food bank. Now, detention center kitchen staff uses the produce to create meals with the blessing of the Arizona Department of Health Services.

Everyone involved in the garden dreams of eventually making it an oasis, complete with trees, a koi fish pond and colorful murals, said Kim Chumley, an assistant division director in Detention.

They’ve purposely planted some things to attract hummingbirds and butterflies, Chumley said.

“I really believe the garden brings calmness to them,” Chumley said of the kids. “They enjoy checking on the progress of things as they are growing.



Besides attending class on Sundays, the kids often get to tend to the garden in the evenings and on Saturdays.

It’s good to see them taking care of something.”

Abdul, 13, Angel, 13, and Anthony, 15, agreed they love the garden and being outdoors equally. Angel said likes the different colors of the plants and flowers, while Abdul enjoys watering them.

“It’s nice, real nice and it’s good for all of us in here too because we can’t really see plants while we’re in here,” Anthony said. “When we come to the garden it’s good for us. I like watering, touching the plants and looking at them. I like looking at the flowers because they look beautiful.”

Community comes together to reunite siblings for a day

Last Saturday was a pretty special day for 16-year-old “Ana,” but it wasn’t her birthday or even Christmas. It was a day in the park with three of her four siblings.

“Ana” and her brothers and sisters – whose real names are being withheld to protect their privacy – have been in foster care for nearly five years. Saturday was special because the siblings live in four different places and they rarely see each other. Ana and one of her sisters are in the same group home; another sister lives with a relative, one brother is with foster parents and another brother has been adopted.



Sadly, their situation is not unusual. There are so many children in the dependency system, siblings often have to be split up and placed in different foster homes and group homes. There simply aren’t enough foster parents able to take in multiple children.

The only time these children get to see each other it is under less than ideal circumstances. Often times, they see each other in court, at therapy sessions and

during visits with their parents that are being supervised by a case manager required to report his or her observations to a judge.

Back in 2005, over 2,400 children were removed from their parents due to abuse or neglect. Pima County Juvenile Court officials and various community partners decided to take a page out of Maricopa County’s playbook and created the Annual Sibling Reunion Picnic.

Every year, arrangements are made to transport as many separated siblings as possible to a local park where they get to spend hours playing carnival games, having their faces painted, doing arts and crafts, playing various sports and enjoying special treats like popcorn, cotton candy and Eegee’s.

(Contd. Page 10)

Originally, the idea was to give the children the chance to play with their siblings, recruit more foster parents and raise funds for the Friends of the Friends of Foster Children Foundation, said Judge Joan Wagener.

While it's no longer a fundraiser and the sponsors have changed, the first two goals remain. In fact, nowadays, there are just under 4,000 children in foster care in Pima County.



“It sucks not being able to see my siblings,” Ana said. “I don’t get to see them grow up and we don’t ever get to talk on the phone.”

On Saturday, the four kids decorated Christmas ornaments together and played games. Five-year-old “Jimmy” said his favorite game involved shooting water through a series of circles.

Members of the Tucson Airport Authority Fire Department were also on hand with their 6x6 wheel drive crash truck which can hold, deliver, and discharge 3,000 gallons of water and fire-fighting chemicals. The airport’s explosives detecting dog also made a visit with his handler.

“Ana” said she was appreciative so many people came together to put on the event.

“Without them I wouldn’t be able to see my little brother and sisters,” Ana

said.

Judge Wagener has been involved since the beginning. Every year, without fail, something happens to underscore the importance of the event to her, she said. One year, she watched as two giggling little girls broke away from their foster mom to leap into the arms of their teenage brother who quickly began spinning them into faster and faster circles. Another year, she saw a teenage brother and sister walk arm-in-arm for several (Contd. Page 11)

long minutes, reluctant to be apart from one another. In another instance, she saw two little boys tie their shoe laces together, leaving them that way for the entire event.

“That’s why we do this,” Judge Wagener said. “Getting those kids together is just so important.”



Michaela Luna, a Sibling Reunion Picnic committee member, said many times older children in families have been taking charge of their younger siblings because of their parents’ inability to care for them. When those siblings are separated, the results can be devastating.

“Not only are these kids having to experience the trauma from being removed from their parents, but they suffer even more when they

are separated from their siblings,” Luna said. “A lot of time often goes by where they don’t even know where their siblings are.”

Even when children know where their brothers and sisters are, there is no guarantee they will be able to talk to each other, Luna said.

School, extra-curricular activities and therapy sessions can make it difficult to arrange for phone calls and visits. Many times siblings have different fathers so conflicts can sometimes arise when it comes to scheduled visitations. Sometimes, a lack of foster homes means children are placed outside Pima County, too.

“The picnic gives the kids a chance to do normal kid things,” Luna said. “We try to keep it fun and light.”

This year’s event was sponsored by the Foster and Adoptive Council of Tucson (F.A.C.T.), in partnership with Pima County Juvenile Court, Community Partnership of Southern Arizona, Department of Child Safety, Casey Family Program, Office of Children’s Counsel, Vision Quest and the Foster Care Review Board.

If you are interested in becoming a foster or adoptive parent, please contact:
www.fosterandadoptivecounciloftucson.org.

CASA Support Council works hard behind scenes for kids

Everyone remembers what it was like as a child those few weeks before Christmas arrived every year – trying your hardest to stay off the naughty list, dreaming about the presents under the tree and looking forward to large family get-togethers.

This year, more than 3,800 Pima County children will not be home for the holidays. They'll be spending time in foster and group homes, away from their parents and maybe even their siblings.

Every year, the CASA Support Council for Pima County tries to take a little bit of the sting away for foster children who have CASAs by hosting a holiday party with the financial support of community partners, such as Tucson Electric Power.

“Many of our children have never had a celebration of Christmas,” said CASA Support Council President Linda Koral. “This is a way for them to meet Santa and enjoy a lot of play activities.”



Because of the need for confidentiality, the day and location of this year's event is being withheld. However, the children will not only see Santa, but they'll get to spend time with his elves, eat pizza, play games and take home a super plush teddy bear. The Support Council will also mail CASAs a gift card for each of their CASA children.

“This event is just pure fun,” said Chris Swenson-Smith, Pima County Juvenile Court's Children and Family Services director. “This is a chance for Court Appointed Special Advocates and the children to enjoy the day together. There are no reports to write about it. Hopefully it's just a break for the kids from any stress or worry they have in life.”

The Support Council is a 501(c) (3) non-profit organization, as well as a Qualifying Charitable Organization in Arizona. The mission of the all-volunteer Council is to support the unmet needs of children in foster care who have a Court Appointed Special Advocate.

Using individual donations, grant money and funds from placing Christmas trees in retail stores, the Council pays for things that the state's Department of Child Safety, foster parents and group homes may not have the resources to fund, (Contd. Page 14)

Koral said.

For example, the council covers the cost of car seats, school supplies, emergency clothing, and items that will enrich the lives of the children, such as camperships, art and music lessons, extra-curricular sports fees, computers and dance classes. In addition, the Council reimburses CASAs for mileage and outings with the children.

They also contribute toward the CASA program's recruitment efforts and special event expenses. Lastly, they host a volunteer recognition lunch every year for the CASAs.

Krissa Ericson, Pima County Juvenile Court's CASA program manager, is incredibly grateful for everything the Council does, much of which is behind the scenes.

Pima County's CASA program is in the midst of a huge recruitment drive. The goal is for every foster child to have a CASA by 2020. It's a huge endeavor considering only 130 of the 3,800 children in foster care in Pima County now have an advocate.



For more information on the *CASA* program and the Support Council visit: www.pimacountycasa.org. You can also follow *CASA* of Pima County on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/casaofpimacounty> or on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/CASAPimaCounty>



Now's the time to enroll in or change health care insurance

Emmett Alvarez and PCAP are waiting for you.

Alvarez is the man to see if you have yet to obtain health care coverage under President Barack Obama's Affordable Health Care Act or if you want to change your existing plan so that you may potentially receive more tax credits or cost-sharing benefits.

"Those who like their current plan and rates don't have to anything unless they have been notified that their plan is being phased out or if they have experienced life and/or household changes such as marriage, a new child and employment changes," Alvarez said. "Every year there will be minor changes to current plans and which insurers will be made available through the Marketplace."



Emmett Alvarez

Open enrollment under the Health Care Act is Nov. 15 through Feb. 15, Alvarez said. Alvarez is the man at the Pima County Juvenile Court Center who helps people apply for AHCCCS, food stamps, PCAP and health insurance.

Congress passed President Barack Obama's Affordable Health Care Act in 2010. Under the act, uninsured Americans now have health care insurance options available to them. They're able to get preventative care and they can't be turned down for insurance because of pre-existing conditions, either.

People can apply for AHCCCS, they can obtain insurance through their employers or they can shop for coverage on the new Health Insurance Marketplace. If they choose the latter, they may be eligible for tax credits that will reduce their premiums.

Alvarez said people will be pleased to know that many of the issues that plagued the Health Insurance Marketplace website have been resolved. In addition, people can now find out what plans their doctors accept by simply typing in their doctor's name.

If you aren't sure if your cost-sharing benefits and tax credits are changing, they simply need to go to www.healthcare.gov to find out, Alvarez said. Consumers may also go to <https://www.getcoveredamerica.org/> to schedule at many other assistor locations throughout Tucson.

Clients can call the 24/7 Marketplace call center at 1-800-318-2596 to speak with a trained customer service representative. Representatives will be available in English and Spanish, and there will be a language line to assist callers in over 150 additional languages.

They can also opt to go to www.healthcare.gov or they can call Alvarez to set up an appointment at his office at the PCJCC, 2225 E. Ajo Way. His office number is 520-724-2227.

Alvarez is certified by the Affordable Care Act and licensed by the Arizona Department of Insurance.

Voices

Since the PCJCC is here to help strengthen kids and families, it seems only appropriate the kids in our Detention Center have a platform from which to speak. We'll be asking them questions periodically and printing some of their unedited answers here.

If schools taught a subject matter that taught youths how to stay out of detention, what would that class be?

I think if schools taught a school subject that taught youth how to stay out of detention, it would be called "Choices Matter." They would teach you how to make the right decisions, but it would also be run by a former juvenile delinquent. They would know how kids think and would be able to explain how horrible detention is in a deep emotional level. - Erin

It would be keep kids out why because more and more kids just keep coming to juvie so tell em to go shoolh because you need to get an education. - Dominick

Common thinking is what the class should be called. It would teach kids how to learn from mistakes they made that brought them here. Most kids don't have that skill. - Anthony

Math because it keeps me from leave the house. P.E. because I will be practiceing instead of being in the streets. - Anselmo

It would be life skills. To teach youth the ways of life & how to be successful making the right choices. - Balentin

The subject would be about making right choices. It would be about making right choices because that's where youth usually mess up at. Making the right choices can never get you in trouble with the law. So that subject would be the best one to learn. - Flavio

Playing sports because it keeps me doing something instead of just staying at h ome and doing stuff I'm not supposed to. - Safwan

Physical education because it would keep kids busy and allow them to let out all of their energy. Then they wouldn't have time or the energy to focus on doing any negative behavior. Therefore, keep them out of this place. - Manny

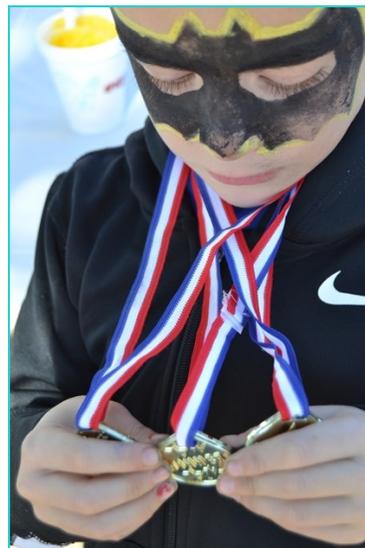
Lifeskill could keep me out of detention. Because lifeskills is a good schooling prosses to go to. I go to lifeskills on Saturdays lifeskills helps me not to yell at staff. But other people should go to lifeskill it really work it can help you if you are so so mad at someone they will calm your mind down where you'll be so so so happy then being mad your life will be a new slat. -- Jesse

Adoption Day 2014





Sibling Reunion Picnic



Odds & Ends



Upcoming Events

Thursday, Dec. 25 — Christmas

Milestones

Judy Schwartz, Calendar Services, 15 years

Michael Bushey, Probation, 25 years



Assistant Detention Division Director Rachael Long congratulates our most recent GED graduate. So far this year, 15 children have earned their GEDs while staying in the PCJCC Detention Center.

PCJCC Communications Bulletin

Published periodically

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**believed
and
practiced**

HERE

Universal Truth No. 1 –

Children succeed when they are surrounded by adults who believe they can succeed, NO EXCEPTIONS.

Universal Truth No. 2 –

Children succeed when they have meaningful and sustainable relationships with caring adults.

Universal Truth No. 3 –

Children succeed when they can articulate their future in more than one destination. (Home & Family, Community & Service, Hobbies & Recreation, Education & Career)