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Out of Foster Care, Into College

By **MICHAEL WINERIP**

BY definition, foster children have been delinquent, abandoned, neglected, physically, sexually and/or emotionally abused, and that does not take into account nonstatutory abuses like heartache. About two-thirds never go to college and very few graduate, so it's a safe bet that those who do have an uncommon resilience.

In a society where many young men and women live with their parents well into their 20s, foster children learn quickly that they are their own responsibility. To find someplace to live in 10th grade Kaleef Starks, now an A student at the University of California, Los Angeles, but back then (to use his words) a gay, effeminate, abused teenager, went to the local library, logged onto a computer and Googled "homeless shelters for youth."

His closest friend at U.C.L.A., Bianca Boccara, had parents who made her go panhandling with them because they knew passers-by would be more likely to donate if they saw a young child.

By the time he was 18, Manny Roque, now a student at Los Angeles City College, had lived in seven foster homes and attended five high schools. He was raised by a mother who was a crack addict and prostitute, growing up in such chaos that he did not go to school until sixth grade and only then did he understand how abnormal it was for a boy his age not to be able to name the letters of the alphabet.

One of his classmates, Shamir Moorner, "born with crack inside me," estimates she's lived in "15 or 17" foster and group homes. She can't say for sure because she can't remember the earliest ones, having been placed in care as a baby.

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IN a 2010 study by researchers at the University of Chicago, only 6 percent of former foster youths had earned a two- or four-year degree by age 24. Those not in college may be in jail; 34 percent who had left foster care at age 17 or 18 reported being arrested by age 19.

Most of the research is bleak — but not all. It appears that extra support can make a difference. The [Chicago study](#) tracked the lives of about 700 foster children in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin. Those in Illinois who were still getting foster care services at age 19 were less likely to have been arrested (22 percent versus 34 percent) than those in the other two states who were on their own.

The same was true for education. The foster children from Illinois, which has long allowed young people to remain in care until their 21st birthday, were more likely to have completed at least one year of college than their counterparts from Iowa or Wisconsin, where the age of emancipation at the time was 18.

Which is why a growing number of colleges — from those that are selective, like U.C.L.A., to those that are not, like Los Angeles City College — have created extensive support programs aimed at current and former foster young people. At U.C.L.A., this includes scholarships, year-round housing in the dorms for those who have no other place to live, academic and therapeutic counseling, tutoring, health care coverage, campus jobs, bedding, towels, cleaning products, toiletries and even occasional treats. Ms. Boccara mentioned the gift cards she was given to a local supermarket. At Los Angeles City College, Marcellia Goodrich likes the free snacks in the program office and Mr. Roque noted the free paper. “It’s useful and helps you stay on budget,” he said.

No one tracks college programs for foster youth. But it is clear there has been considerable growth in recent years, spurred in part by the creation in 2003 of the Chafee grant program, an annual \$48 million federal appropriation used to award scholarships of up to \$5,000. Also important was federal legislation in 2008 giving states the option of extending federal aid programs for foster youth from age 18 to 21.

Seven states are considered to have particularly strong programs. California’s is known as the [Guardian Scholars](#). Texas, Ohio and North Carolina call theirs [Reach](#); Michigan has [Fostering Success Michigan](#); Washington, [Passport to College Promise](#); and Virginia, [Great Expectations](#). Many colleges provide some services, but a far smaller number have the kinds of comprehensive support systems offered at places like Western Michigan University, Sam Houston State University, City College of San Francisco, and community colleges in Tallahassee, Fla., and Austin, Tex.

California has the largest foster population — about 54,000 of the 400,000 in care nationally — and Los Angeles, with 18,500 children, has the most among cities, more even than New York, which has about 14,000.

U.C.L.A. began identifying foster students five years ago when it introduced its Guardian Scholars program, and the results are promising. There are now 250 current and former foster students at the university. The first group had a four-year graduation rate of 65 percent and a five-year rate of 80 percent, which compares favorably with rates for all low-income students (61 percent and 84 percent) and campuswide (69 percent and 88 percent).

According to the state website, 33 two- and four-year colleges have a Guardian Scholars program or are in the process of developing one. The first, at California State University, Fullerton, started in 1998 with financial backing from Ronald V. Davis, the former chief executive of the Perrier

Group. Philanthropy has played a role at several universities. Paul Blavin, who made his fortune as an investor, has financed programs at the University of Michigan and Northern Arizona University. The Pritzker Foundation recently gave \$3 million to U.C.L.A.'s program. Casey Family Scholars provides scholarships and support services directly to students, an average of \$3,500 a year to about 220 undergraduates.

Why treat foster youth differently from other low-income students?

Janina Montero, a vice chancellor who developed U.C.L.A.'s program, said most poor children have at least one parent to guide them and provide basic needs — and a place to call home.

There are 25 students at U.C.L.A., including Mr. Starks and Ms. Boccara, who have nowhere to go during holiday and summer breaks, and so live in the dorms year-round. And while spending Thanksgiving and Christmas in a nearly empty 10-story residence hall may sound depressing, it is better, Ms. Boccara said, than her alternative, some cheap motel room. During her first Christmas at school, she said, "I stayed busy, but it was pretty lonely here — no one I knew, just foreign students in the dorm. It does get a person down."

Mr. Starks had a hard time, too: "The first night I cried — a young adult in college on my own." But he also said, "I don't let brokenness get in my way; I've always known if I worked hard, doors would open."

The biggest door so far opened in the spring of 2011, when he was accepted to U.C.L.A. For Mr. Starks, it was validation that he was the kind of person he'd believed himself to be.

"To celebrate," he said, "they had a dinner for me at the group home."

Last summer, living in a dorm was not so hard because by then Ms. Boccara and Mr. Starks had become friends. Ms. Boccara is pretty sure her roommate during the school year has a sense of her background but not the details. "She hears me on the phone, but I don't talk about it," Ms. Boccara said. "The only person I tell is Kaleef."

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THINGS are harder at Los Angeles City College.

Nearly three-quarters of the students qualify for an annual tuition waiver because they are too poor to pay the \$1,400. The average age is 30, meaning many have probably failed at college before. The graduation rate is only 6 percent within six years (versus the national community college average of about 14 percent in three years).

City College, like most community colleges, does not have dorms, and most students find housing through social welfare agencies. Mr. Roque lives in housing financed by First Place for Youth, a

nonprofit organization that serves former foster children. He was 18 when he left the last of seven homes, in 2010, and as is true for many foster youth, there are pieces of his story he doesn't know. He was too young to remember why he was removed from the first two homes. Another house was closed for violations. His fourth foster mother planned to adopt him, he said, but changed her mind.

Last spring, Mr. Roque was rejected by Los Angeles City College for having failed to make adequate academic progress; he says he had twice attended area community colleges, but withdrew without earning any credits. To be reconsidered, he had to write a letter of appeal explaining any mitigating circumstances, which in Mr. Roque's case was homelessness.

He wrote of the transition from foster care to no care: "Couch surfing, from relatives who did not like me to friends who got tired of me. I was not able to concentrate in school or even keep my grade-point average at a 2.0." He also filled a single-spaced page with several more mitigating circumstances and in his conclusion promised to do better: "I have such a good support system in place, people who expect a lot from me, and I am in a place where I can make school a priority. I am serious this time."

Mr. Roque was better than his word, said Jon Lee, director of tutoring for the Guardian Scholars.

"All summer he was the first one in each morning," he said. "He'd put on headphones, sit at the computer with a dictionary and find a website to practice grammar. He'd show me sentences and ask if they were right."

New foster students take a mandatory course that includes lists of proper study skills, which Mr. Roque has memorized.

"Sit in front of the room," he recited for me. "Visit your professors during visiting hours. Have a notebook and binder for each class, not all stuffed in one. Take notes for every class and give yourself five to eight minutes after class to go over them. Ask questions even if they sound silly. Be prompt and considerate with assignments and attendance."

He paused. "Do all they say and you'll be golden."

In addition to the new friends he's made, the computer he won at a raffle sponsored by the Scholars, and knowing that he will not age out of the housing program until March 27, 2015, Mr. Roque has a job working four shifts a week at the Subway restaurant across from the college. "Life's the best it's ever been," he said.

WHEN Mr. Lee started tutoring at the community college, he thought he was going to save everyone who walked through the door. He believed it was just a matter of putting in the hours. But early on, he watched as most cascaded through the cracks. There have been 300 students in

the program for at least a semester since it began in 2009, and so far 14 have graduated or transferred to a four-year college.

“It’s hopeless to help students who haven’t come to the realization that they have to want to do it on their own,” he said.

For Randy Davis, who is on the honor roll and is the student government parliamentarian, the light bulb went off late, two years ago, when he was 25. Part of the problem was his family, he said. He never knew his father, hasn’t seen his mother in 10 years, his grandmother who had cared for him is dead and two brothers are in jail.

But partly, he said, it was him. He has been arrested multiple times on drug charges.

“I can’t put it all on others,” he said. “I have no bad feelings toward my biologicals. I tell people, ‘Leave the past in the past,’ but I hear people say, ‘If I had parents I would have done better.’ Well, you don’t have parents. You got to learn to roll with it.”

Mr. Davis, Ms. Goodrich and Ms. Moorer have been known as the Three Peas in a Pod since they formed a study group last year that helped them all get A’s in a geology course. But while Mr. Davis and Ms. Goodrich are applying to four-year colleges, Ms. Moorer, who’s 27, dropped out recently.

On the Friday I first interviewed her, she said, “I haven’t told anyone, but today is my last day.” She is a single mother and said the reasons had to do with her 8-year-old son. “I’m going all the time. There are nights we don’t eat until 9,” she said. “This weekend I’m making a new plan.”

But the following week there still was no plan, except that she did not want the Scholars staff to know. “They’ll pressure me to come back,” she said. “I’ve broken down a couple of times in my life and I can feel it coming on, so I just need to slow it down.”

When Veronica Garcia, who runs the Scholars program at the community college, found out, she pushed for Ms. Moorer to take at least one course, and the young woman promised that she would. Ms. Moorer said she’s fearful of being one of those women who is 40 years old and still trying to get her associate degree.

THE leap from foster care to U.C.L.A. is enormous, and there are things those who reach the far side share. Ms. Boccara said that from the time she was little, school was the one place she felt happy. Mr. Starks said his teachers intuited the harshness of his life and encouraged him. Donovan Arrington, a U.C.L.A. sophomore, said he always felt he was imposing on people; doing well in school made him feel less of a burden.

Having come so far, they are not willing to be overlooked. When Rayvonn Anthony Lee, who has overcome abuse, legal problems, serious illness and homelessness, was rejected by U.C.L.A., he appealed. He is now a senior, majoring in contemporary classical music composition. One of his

professors, Adam Schoenberg, said Mr. Lee is a great student, but what stands out more is his will.

“I was able to get to know him after class,” Mr. Schoenberg wrote in an email, as he was always very ambitious. “He would ask to show me his compositions several times after theory class, and he even took a bus — because he didn’t have a car at the time — from the west side all the way to downtown just to have a lesson with me (and it probably took him close to two hours with all of the bus changes). It was clear from the get-go that Anthony is hungry to make it as a composer.”

Angel Gabarret has lived on the streets of Los Angeles before and does not intend to again. In September, he used the money he’d earned working at a carwash to pay his rent through the end of the year. “Now I just have to worry about education and food and that’s it,” he said.

He was born in Honduras, orphaned at a young age and, still a child, made his way north to Guatemala, then Mexico, and finally the United States, a street urchin supporting himself by gathering firewood, hawking newspapers and helping women sell vegetables in local markets. He didn’t learn English until he was 18 and it has taken him five years to graduate from City College, but now at 27, with a B average, he is applying to California State University, Long Beach.

Most days he arrives on campus by 7 a.m. and works at an outdoor bench. Afternoons, he goes for tutoring at the Scholars office. After several false starts, he has decided on a career.

“I think accounting is doable for me,” he explained. “I understand the concepts. I’ve learned the accounting equations. It’s a very, very clean job. You work indoors in a nice office. You’re supposed to dress up with shiny shoes and dressed-up pants.”

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