

# Westchester

COUNTY LINES/KATE STONE LOMBARDI

## 'Aging Out,' Into a World Of Adults

**A**S a parent who has sent her first child off to college, I have learned that a young adult's road to independence is one of fits and starts. My daughter does just fine, except in the grip of sickness or the blues. Then she likes to check in with Mom.

Judging from my own past, I suspect this behavior will outlast college. I well remember calling my parents from my first apartment, seeking guidance on everything from opening a bank account to roasting a chicken. Even with all their help, there were days when I felt overwhelmed.

Recently I had occasion to imagine a youth with a less reassuring scenario: Instead of a loving, nurturing childhood, a solitary experience in the foster care system. A biological family unable to cope. A nomadic history punctuated by trauma, abuse and poor school performance.

At 18, or 21 — depending on the situation — “aging out” out of foster care. Being on one's own. Finding a place to live. Getting a job, or going to school but having to figure out how to pay for it. Being terrified of messing up, because there would be no one there to pick up the pieces.

Daniella Rin Hover knows what that all felt like. She was 16 when she was placed in foster care, after escaping her abusive father. She attended four different high schools in four years and at 19 was pregnant and living in a maternity shelter.

Some of the pieces of her life — especially her transition from foster care to independent living — have been chronicled in a Roger Weisberg documentary called “Bound and Determined,” which is to be screened at the Jacob Burns Film Center in Pleasantville on March 7 as part of a benefit for the Westchester Children's Association.

Afterward Ms. Rin Hover — now 23, married and a

college graduate — will speak. She will be living proof that aging out of the system doesn't have to have negative consequences. But she won't ascribe her success merely to “resilience.”

“You have to be resilient, where you say, ‘I'm going to be moved, all I can do is take control of the way I respond to being moved,’” Ms. Rin Hover said in a recent interview. “‘Resilient’ is a positive word to those people outside the system, but for us, resilience is just a coping mechanism.

“I would use the word ‘Darwinism.’ It's more survivalist.”

To emphasize her point, she described a visit she had made to help a young man who was about to be shuttled to a new foster-care situation. “When youth are moved,” she said, “usually their belongings are thrown into garbage bags and packed for them to be moved to the next placement. Maybe there's no funds to purchase luggage or whatever it is, but when I was at this youth's apartment, and most of his clothes were in a garbage bag, it was so symbolic for me.

“It's a symbol of all the work that he will need to go through to get through what happened,” she concluded.

And indeed, once aged out of the system, youths may find that symbolism hard to escape — partly because they often go back to their families, where their troubles originated.

“One of the reasons why youth in foster care tend to have such a hard time is that they usually end up trying to reconnect with that biological family that they've been removed from,” she said. “You've been removed five years ago, now you are out of the system, so your first thought is let me get back to my family, and of course the issues are still around.”

It is a given that “most agencies are not going to provide therapeutic services” for youths who are no longer in their charge. Therefore, Ms. Rin Hover added: “It's crucial that all youth leaving the system have a support net. There should be at least one individual that is saying, ‘I'll be here with you, no matter what.’”

How to achieve that in any systematic way is not clear. More than half of the 715 children in county foster care are teenagers; 255 are 16 or older. Some live in families, some in group homes. As they prepare to move on, teenagers are taught independent living skills like shopping and money management. But the county is now realizing the need for a mentoring program, so that each person who leaves foster care will have at least one concerned adult in his or her life.

Personally, Ms. Rin Hover is working to do her part, “Just providing any type of support, just being there to accept a phone call when they're going through something.”



Courtney Bennett

Daniella Rin Hover, left, in a film on foster care.