**Teen details life in foster-care system**

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Byline: Hilary Matheson

July 11--Johnny Perez Jr. spent most of his life trying to be "normal" as he was moved 16 times in the foster-care system.

Perez counts on his fingers, saying the name of each placement out loud during an interview at his current foster family's Whitefish home on June 7.

"Yes, 16 placements," Perez said. "I think throughout those 16 placements only five, possibly seven were in foster homes with foster families."

Despite his success as a recent Whitefish High School graduate, state track star and talented musician, the 17-year-old had to adapt to a feeling of impermanence. To get his diploma, Perez had to attend nine different high schools.

"I've been in nine high schools -- nine major moves. Some high schools I've been to twice [back and forth], so I guess 11 moves," Perez said, noting that his freshman year alone he moved four times.

"The last time I finished out a year at a single school was in third grade," he said. "I attended Evergreen Elementary."

Because of his top achievements in sports and academics and plans to attend Grand Canyon University in the fall, Perez said he is considered a success in the foster-care world, but it hasn't been easy.

"I kind of get looked at as a success story," Perez said noting that he went from punching holes in walls to playing sports such as football and competing at state in track.

For a foster child to have more than 10 placements is unusual, Child and Family Services Family Resource Specialist Daniel Donnelly said, but it's always a case-by-case basis. The average number of placements for foster children in Montana is three.

"I teach foster-care classes as part of licensing. Our focus is not moving kids around because of the damage it causes," Donnelly said.

Underneath Perez's positive and confident disposition are the damaging effects of moving from placement to placement and facing hopelessness.

"It hasn't always been the 'I can succeed mentality,'" Perez said. "I attempted suicide twice."

Perez paused when asked what pulled him through, pondering the question.

"If I knew I'd bottle it up and sell it -- I think the strong people in my life," Perez said.

What he pinpointed were the staff members of various institutions in which he's been placed in, and other kids like him.

"I use the term 'family' loosely because my family is very large and I'm unrelated to almost all of them. They are mostly group-home staff and foster family and siblings and other kids in group homes I've built these life-long bonds with," he said.

Placed in foster care at 9, Perez became an expert at having his bags packed at a moment's notice and moving to a group home or foster family.

"When I got put in foster care my mom was put in jail," Perez said. "That began my 16-placement journey throughout the foster-care system."

At first, Perez said he was upset at being taken from his family in spite of a rocky home life.

"When you're that young you want to be with your family," Perez said.

The ultimate goal, Donnelly said, is to reunite children with their biological families.

"First and foremost, the goal is to create a reunification and treatment plan to help the family become a safe place and overcome obstacles," Donnelly said.

Reunification is attempted through supervised visits, working toward unsupervised visits and onto a trial home visit. Only if a parent makes significant progress or achieves treatment goals is reunification possible.

Yet supervised visits, therapy sessions and a month back with his mother when he was 10 or 11 couldn't mend a broken relationship from Perez's perspective and he went back into foster care. He said a lot of anger remained, eventually leading to expulsion from school.

"That was in the heat of abuse from my family. I was acting out," he said.

Perez had to learn how to make sense of and deal with emotions such as anger without parental guidance, which is something therapeutic youth group homes helped provide.

"When I first got put in care, something a lot of kids go through is they have anger issues, so a lot of the stuff was for behavioral health," Perez said. "Group homes try and help us with that, however difficult to get used to, they definitely were a significant help. Some of the staff were some of the most genuinely caring and influential people I've met in my life."

Being in a foster family was very different from the structured therapeutic youth group home environment. Perez described it as going from a "super tight ship" to a less-structured routine.

"I've never had a foster family I didn't mesh with. I did try very hard to make everything succeed because everybody wants that next placement to be their last placement. No kid enjoys being bounced around," Perez said.

For the rare occasions when children are moved to more than 10 placements Child Protective Services Specialist Melissa Cichosz said the goal is to convey to the child that the move is not their fault.

"Sometimes a child is unable to understand why they are moved," Cichosz said.

The length of time a child stays with a foster family is dependent on a lot of factors that a child cannot necessarily control.

"I've had foster homes fall apart because the foster family got a divorce and so all of us kids were disbanded. I've had foster homes where I just showed up after school one day and everything I owned was packed," Perez said, noting one instance that happened after placed in a home for a long time. "I was told my case worker was coming in an hour and I had no idea why and that's after I had been there for two and a half years."

Although he said he's remained in contact with the family, Perez still seems hurt.

"I beat myself up so much for that for so long [why it happened] I just don't want to open that up again. It's six years ago. I don't mind," Perez said glancing out a window.

His current placement has spanned nine months with first-time foster mother Cheryl Sausen of Whitefish.

With 3,206 children in Montana's foster-care system, 6 percent are youths ages 15 and over and there is a need for families to foster and adopt teenagers.

"People saying they'd only adopt 0 to 4-year-olds is very common. We've had people say 'those teenagers are broken -- too much trouble' -- which is not the way to be thinking," Donnelly said.

Fostering a teenager hadn't occurred to Sausen, 54, until she met Perez, who had been a friend of her son, Tommy, the youngest of four children.

"Tommy went off to college and I just still had Johnny in my heart to help him," Sausen said. "When I met him I didn't know if he was officially in foster-care system; I just knew I wanted to get him in a better place and get him through high school."

Sausen was able to take Perez in under kinship care. Eventually she took classes to become a licensed foster parent through Child Protective Services.

"We've had good stuff, some not so good, normal teenage stuff," Sausen said.

She recalled one time when they had a "big blowout" where an average teen would see a disagreement or argument between parent and child as something that's normal and bound to happen. Perez was ready to pack his bags.

"He was already making his plans and knew he would have to move out and go somewhere, so I guess that's kind of the norm that he was expecting; he would just have to move onto the next thing," she said.

Sausen said she knew Perez seemed to be stuck in "fight or flight" mode.

"So we talked in the beginning, I'm sure you are used to fighting or flighting, I know you may self-sabotage, but hopefully, eventually you'll learn you don't have to go to that old stuff," Sausen said.

And so far, it's been a good work in progress.

Sausen said the classes were very helpful in opening her eyes to the reality of what some foster children are facing and how to handle different situations.

"From my own background I kind of know how kids can react -- even how adults react from not-so-good childhoods," Sausen said. "The classes, whew, the classes really open up your eyes to the reality of some severe things."

And if she ever needed assistance there are caseworkers for families.

To maintain what he considered a normal life, he kept his past and the fact that he was a foster child, to himself.

"I kept very few kids from knowing my life -- never told anybody any of the things I've been through. Never told them where I lived," he said.

"People would ask to hang out after school and I'd tell them that I couldn't. I would say 'oh I'm grounded,' when it was because I was living in group homes where you weren't allowed to have people spend the night," Perez said.

What gave him a sense of normalcy was playing sports such as football, basketball and track. He could simply be known as "Johnny the good athlete" rather than "Johnny the foster kid."

What Perez considered normal was "just that kid who could go to football games without having to get it approved a week in advance first. Or go do anything on [your] own in the community without having a staff member watch [your] every action, I mean, even down to the cliche of sitting down for dinner at night with your family."

Perez kept his life in foster care from most of his friends until he became a junior in high school, when he didn't see a reason anymore to be self-conscious about stigmas.

"When I moved back to Whitefish I chose a more open approach. If people asked about my past I would tell them," Perez said.

On social media he would share some of the hardships he went through, not always resulting in positive comments.

"I started getting called Pity King. I just want understanding. There are kids who put on the facade of the happiest kid on earth when in reality they aren't," Perez said, petting his Chihuahua, Paca.

"She was the runt of litter," said. "Her mom wouldn't let her feed ... I bottle-fed her; the first two months of her life she slept in my shirt to maintain her body heat."

Perez said his motivation for sharing his story is to tell the public there are talented and successful foster children out there.

"I want to share that foster kids are normal kids and we exist," Perez said. "You don't hear the success of foster kids. You hear foster kids live in low-income housing, don't go to college, drop out of high school, when there's so many talented kids from the foster system."

In less than a month Perez will celebrate his 18th birthday and "age out" of foster care, but there are supports available such as the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, to help foster children transition into adult independence.

"The foster-care system is trying to help me with college stuff and after high school plans," Perez said. "They have independent living, which is what a lot of kids do, but I'll be living in the dorms. I have my next four years basically planned out. In the summers I'll live here with my foster family."

And Perez still needs a connection to the foster-care system. He doesn't necessarily want to push the system behind him yet. Perez would like to help change the foster-care system.

"Child advocacy is something I feel is not strong enough," Perez said.

In college, Perez plans on studying psychology and eventually working in the foster-care system to "help kids out like myself." He would like to strengthen awareness and community involvement with foster children and families.

Perez understands what the difficult job entails.

"Do you think you have a heart to walk into a family and say 'I deem you unfit as a parent and I have to take your child'? People who work at CPS have to do that. It is so difficult to do that job. It's just gut-wrenching," he said.

For more information on becoming a foster parent call 1-866-936-7837 or visit http://dphhs.mt.gov/CFSD/Fosterparent.aspx.

To report a possible case of child abuse or neglect, call 1-866-820-5437.

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