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Fostering Success: Orangewood Foundation's Youth Connected Program

By Allison Hata | Coordinated by Robyn Stauffer



Life is unpredictable for youth in foster care. A change in foster care placement is more than just a housing transition; it's often a change in schools, teachers, and requirements to graduate as well. Additionally, it can mean falling behind in classes and losing academic support systems. It's an educational disruption that has long-term consequences. Last year, only 58% of California's foster youth finished high school. Through the new Youth Connected Program (YCP), Orangewood Foundation is focused on creating stability and lifelong relationships for Orange County youth in foster care so that this experience isn't their reality.

As a State-licensed resource family agency, YCP provides an innovative, wraparound support system for 7th through 12th grade students. Youth are enrolled in Samueli Academy, a tuition-free charter school in Santa Ana that offers project-based learning. Additionally, they have the option to live in an on-campus dorm five days per week. They spend the other two days – as well as holidays and summer breaks – with a "resource parent" (foster parent) who provides emotional connection, guidance, and care.

Continuity in Education

"Our program was developed because of this observed need for youth in foster care to have some consistent, stable education," said Jami DeChaney Sheridan, director of YCP.

On-campus living eliminates transportation barriers and places students in a position to seek out teachers easily after school, enjoy an uninterrupted education, get involved in extracurricular activities, and build social relationships with peers.

The fully furnished, three-story dormitory offers family-style living while students are on campus. They share a bedroom with just one other student and are encouraged to decorate their space to their own personal tastes. Each suite has two dedicated dorm staff members who are available to provide academic and recreational support. They monitor grades, as well as help youth develop life skills like meal planning and budgeting that will be beneficial after they age out of foster care. Dorm staff are also in constant communication with resource parents to ensure that everyone is aware of student successes and challenges.



Life at Home

Support provided by YCP extends far beyond school walls, with social workers

and therapists working in-dorm and in-home to ensure that the individual needs of foster youth are met, even when they're off-campus.

On Friday evenings, students head home with their resource parents. Just as they would for a youth living full-time in their homes, parents embrace YCP students as part of their families. They celebrate holidays and vacations together, meet relatives and friends, and form meaningful connections that allow teens to learn essential life skills.

While students return to Samueli Academy on Sunday night, the parenting doesn't end there. Resource families connect via phone calls throughout the week and attend on-campus activities as schedules allow.

Every step of the way, YCP supports both youth and families. Parents have access to specialized training classes to understand childhood trauma, a 24/7 team of social workers and other professionals, and a community of other resource families. Throughout the program, YCP provides adjustment check-ins to ensure that all parties have a voice regarding the health and happiness of their placement.

Resource Families Needed

The stability and relationships established through YCP create a foundation for youth in foster care to persist in school, pursue higher education, and secure employment and housing. There is absolutely a need for more resource parents to make this program a success – without a resource parent, youth cannot participate in YCP.

Resource parents can be individuals or couples over the age of 21, but must meet certain requirements that include having a



stable income, passing a background check, and completing licensing requirements like a basic medical exam and home visit. There is no formal time commitment, but families are asked to support their youth throughout high school.

As one former resource parent shared, foster care is not about being the perfect family; it's about sharing the family you are with someone who needs one. Through YCP, youth in foster care build lifelong relationships that help them on the path to strengthening life skills and continuing their education. They find stability, family, opportunity, and hope for a future of self-sufficiency and success.



To learn more about becoming a resource parent with Orangewood Foundation's Youth Connected Program, sign up for a virtual informational session at orangewoodfoundation.org/ycp. For further questions, contact Director Jami DeChaney Sheridan at 714-942-7475.