

Building a life after foster care
By Kevin Graham, Times Staff Writer
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James Fry, 16, who has been in foster care since he was 5, listens to suggestions Sunday at the summit in Tampa.



http://www.sptimes.com/2008/02/11/Hillsborough/Building_a_life_after.shtml

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TAMPA - Tye Maner had one request Sunday before making a motivational speech to a group of Hillsborough County foster children.

He wanted two volunteers to come forward.

Most among the group of 75 teens sat still, sat back or folded their arms.

To the first person who showed enough courage to stand up, Maner gave \$20. To the second, he gave \$10.

"The first thing about life is if you sit back and wait for something to happen, nothing will happen," Maner told them. "The people who stepped up, they got paid."

Maner spoke during the opening session of a youth summit presented by the Junior League of Tampa and Connected by 25, a nonprofit organization that serves young adults ages 18 to 25 who have aged out of the foster care system. Organizers brought together 16- and 17-year-old foster children, with a few younger teens, to help equip them with life skills they'll need when they are no longer eligible for foster care.

Teens spent the day meeting in a pavilion at Busch Gardens, where they heard advice about fitness and nutrition, social and business etiquette, money and legal issues.

"Sometimes, they don't have these socialization skills," said Alejita Rodriguez, Hillsborough liaison for Connected by 25.

Telia Thomas, 16, has lived in foster care since birth.

"I never knew my parents," she said. "I've spent my life moving from house to house. I am a little bit worried."

But Thomas said she's trying to remain optimistic. She plans to attend college. For now, she has narrowed her interests to massage therapy, culinary arts, going to law school or becoming a detective.

Susan Touchton, Junior League of Tampa president, said improving the lives of children in the foster care system is an essential mission of the organization, along with education and literacy. "We can't solve the problem, but we are doing all that we can to help," she said.

James Fry said he appreciates all the positive help he can get.

At 16, Fry has heard a lot of the negatives about what he may experience when he is too old for foster care.

"They say there's a possibility you might not make it," said Fry, who has been in the system since he was 5. "But I don't really listen, because I have a different ambition."

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