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After difficult year, Danny still has no place to call home

Last of three parts

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By Vivian Nereim, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Dorothy Jean Guy and her husband Daniel stand behind their grandchildren, from left, Lisa, Israel, Egypt, Destiny and Jonathan, at their church in Braddock on Sunday. Ms. Guy's grandson Danny is not pictured.

PITTSBURGH -- For Danny's 13th birthday, his extended family gathered, setting up a surprise as they awaited his arrival. His grandmother brought balloons, pink and blue plastic tablecloths, and a feast: strawberries, grapes, carrots, pizza, ice cream. Danny's 7-year-old sister, Destiny, pranced around the table.

"I can't wait to see him smile," she said.

During the short time Danny's family had together that evening, they acted as if everything were normal.

In fact, Danny was living away from them at Auberle -- a state-licensed program in McKeesport for abused and neglected children -- with little chance of returning home. Toward the end of the hour-long visit that day in July 2010, his 12-year-old cousin began to cry. Danny hugged her, then disappeared.

Danny's life has been hard from the start. (The *Post-Gazette* is withholding his last name to protect his privacy.) County officials removed him from his mother's care years ago after she developed a drug addiction. His grandmother has custody of five of his younger siblings, but Danny and his older brother entered the care of Allegheny County's Office of Children, Youth and Families.

"They were basically the ones who helped raise the other children while mom was on drugs," said their grandmother, Dorothy Guy, of Penn Hills.

Like many youths in the child welfare system, Danny, now nearly 14, has shuffled from place to place. This past year, he picked up his life and moved more than five times -- to a psychiatric hospital, a youth shelter and multiple residential facilities.

"These are some of the extreme tragedies in our system," said Gene Wisinski, CEO of Bethesda Children's Home, where Danny lived for several months.

Throughout the year, workers at these programs overseen by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare have struggled with Danny's behavior. Danny has tried to run away at least four times, once after the birthday party when his grandmother discovered that more than \$500 in rent money she brought was missing. When Auberle workers checked for a theft, they found Danny's birthday cash. They took it away, thinking it was stolen, Ms. Guy said.

Furious, Danny fled, running from the building down a long hill outside. Staff members chased and caught him. Ms. Guy went home, the small joys of the day deflated.

Lonely places to live

Despite years of efforts, children in state-licensed facilities continue to face danger at the hands of staff members and peers, as well as their own, according to 361 incident reports obtained by the *Post-Gazette*. Danny has been hurt at least once, leaving a restraint with abrasions and a bloody-looking eye. But ultimately, his story is one of heartache, not injury.

Even when children are physically safe, residential facilities are often unhappy, lonely places to live.

"It's difficult for teenagers anyway, but just think if you're in a group home," said Marcia Sturdivant, head of Allegheny County CYF. "No one wants to live in an institution."

Antonio McCaskill, 21, of Philadelphia, placed in a residential facility as a child, said he acted out in anger.

"All in all, I couldn't really function," he remembered. "I was depressed a lot of times. ... I was always in trouble."

CYF watches over about 250 Allegheny County children placed in "congregate care," a category that includes smaller group homes and larger residential facilities.

"To be perfectly fair, some of the group homes do a great job," said Allegheny County Common Pleas Judge Kim Berkeley Clark, who sits on juvenile court.

"A lot of success depends on a kid making an early connection with somebody at that group home," Judge Clark said.

But for some children, that never happens.

Ashley Hartman, 20, of Mount Oliver, who lived in group homes and youth shelters as a teenager, said one of the most difficult things to do was trying to find somebody to lean on.

"There were a lot of [staff] leaving, getting fired, new people," said Ms. Hartman, who now works for CYF as a youth support partner.

"I couldn't get a bond with anybody," Ms. Hartman recalled. "I couldn't really trust anybody. I did feel very alone."

Danny began the past 12 months at Auberle. But last summer and fall, his behavior began to worsen. He acted out. He threatened to hurt others. He threatened to hurt himself.

At the end of July, he "lost it" after an altercation with a peer, Ms. Guy said. He was admitted to Western Psychiatric Institute & Clinic of UPMC in Oakland.

"He told me there was a kid who had hit him, and he said, 'Grandma, this time I picked up a chair because I was going to defend myself,'" Ms. Guy said. "Boy, you get pretty desperate."

During the next few months, Danny moved back and forth between Western Psych and Auberle. One day, during a transfer, he ran into the middle of the street.

"One of the things I think is contributing to a lot of behavior is the panic that sets in with him the day he is leaving," Mr. Wisinski said.

Eventually, Auberle refused to take Danny back. Although residential facilities are publicly funded, they are privately owned; they may deny admission to a child.

For a time, Danny lived at a youth shelter in Millvale. He ran into traffic again, this time, staff said, pulling a staff member with him. He returned to Western Psych.

By November, Danny had nowhere to go.

"One of these problems with these kids in care is they create this history where most agencies look at them and say, 'There's no way this kid's coming here, he's going to blow this place apart,' " Mr. Wisinski said.

The only place that would take Danny was Bethesda, located in Meadville, 106 miles from his grandmother's home.

Danny moved there abruptly. His grandmother was not notified for days, she said.

"Why are they doing this to him?" Ms. Guy said at the time, nearly in tears. "This is so -- he has been through so much."

More adjustments

At first, officials believed Bethesda would be a short-term placement for Danny. "He was kind of a limbo kid," Mr. Wisinski said. "Nobody was ever sure whether he was going to be just staying ... or where he was going to stay, and he was confused about it."

But as New Year's passed and spring arrived, Danny was still living in Meadville. In March, Mr. Wisinski recalled getting a call on a Friday evening. Staff told him Danny had run away from campus, walking down the road to an electronics store.

A few days before, Danny had been in Mr. Wisinski's office, asking about a broken keyboard in the facility's recording studio. He wanted to fix it.

"He was going through a cycle of breaking things, punching things," Mr. Wisinski recalled. Mr. Wisinski promised to let the boy tinker with something once he got his behavior under control.

"Well, the behavior didn't really get better," Mr. Wisinski said. "He bolts from campus when staff are changing shifts, and somebody's doing this and somebody's doing that."

Danny fled through the woods to the electronics store. There, he smashed a window with a brick, Mr. Wisinski said. As the alarms sounded, Danny walked in and picked up a television.

When police arrived and asked the boy what he was doing, Danny told them, "They took my TV privileges away tonight, and I wanted to watch the basketball game," according to Mr. Wisinski.

To Mr. Wisinski, this was an "Aha!" moment, when he realized that the boy had been misunderstood.

"He was confirming for us, his is a true processing disorder," Mr. Wisinski said. "A kid who doesn't understand, yet isn't malicious, isn't as violent as people would think."

There was no threat or aggression, he said. "He had solved the problem. It made sense to him."

Danny's stay at Bethesda ended soon after. Mr. Wisinski joined him in the parking lot the day he left. Danny asked about the broken keyboard. His distress was palpable, Mr. Wisinski said.

"He was tearing these bags open, trying to find a certain shirt, or maybe it was a little stuffed animal," Mr. Wisinski said. "I felt so bad, that you could see his anxiety."

In Danny, "it didn't manifest itself the way most kids would, tears or real violence. He was just so hyperactive he couldn't control himself, and it was almost as if he was going to explode," Mr. Wisinski said.

"Some of these kids who have been bounced around a lot become like Scotch tape that won't stick on your wall anymore, I felt that with him at this point. It was so sad. He didn't have anything to bank on."

Mr. Wisinski gave Danny his business card.

"I said, 'I want you to call me when you stabilize.' "

Danny never did.

After the boy and his caseworker drove away, Mr. Wisinski thought to himself, ruefully: "We didn't do very well with that one."

"I will be honest," he said. "Because I think people do need to know what goes on in these facilities. And the more people know, and the clearer they get the story, the better."

Another new place

Ms. Guy said that Danny left Bethesda with a new scar, a mark on his face shaped like a cigarette burn. He is now at Glade Run Lutheran Services in Zelienople, where, so far, he "seems to be OK," she said.

Last week, Danny's relatives gathered for an arranged visit outside the facility, where Ms. Guy had hoped to celebrate some of the children's birthdays.

Danny never arrived.

She called his caseworker. The woman said that Glade Run staff decided Danny could not go because "there were some altercations earlier that day" and they believed the boy was a safety threat, Ms. Guy said.

"We had the birthday cakes there, the balloons, all ready," Ms. Guy said. The ice cream melted. The party went on without Danny.

On the cusp of his 14th birthday, Danny lives life between court hearings.

At a hearing in January, while the boy was still at Bethesda, he slid each hand into his opposite shirtsleeve.

Facility staff members were telling the hearing officer "all the negative stuff about Danny, just nothing good," his grandmother said.

Ms. Guy wanted to make sure the workers knew Danny's relatives were watching. She promised to visit him soon.

"I know everything that's going on is not your fault ...," she told Danny. "I want you to promise me that you're going to do your best and be your best."

"Yes Grandma," the boy responded. "Grandma, I love you."

"I know it seems so hard," Ms. Guy told Danny. "But pretty soon, we're going to all be together."

"We're all going to be together," she said again. "Just trust me on this one."

Last in a series