

Opinion: In rich Silicon Valley, a former foster child dies homeless

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How does a young man full of life, with a beautiful smile and a deep compassion for others, end up dying tragically at age 24, lonely and homeless?

This was Carl Wiseman.

Carl entered foster care at age 4. Like many of the 4,500 teenagers leaving foster care each year in California, he was abandoned to the streets at age 18 with the nonsensical expectation of miraculously surviving the path to adulthood.

Every day in Silicon Valley, where millionaires are made overnight, we continue producing the fastest-growing homeless population in our society: youth aging out of the foster care system.

And the problem is about to get worse. Three months after legislators cut foster care payments 10 percent, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger unexpectedly used his veto authority to cut another \$80 million from child welfare services, sending an already underfunded system into further decay.

It's a travesty that we remove these children from neglectful homes, only to raise them in an underfunded, dysfunctional system. While the hope is they will become productive citizens, in reality, the majority will end up populating our adult prisons.

Carl's life exemplified that reality.

I met Carl when he was 10 years old as a biracial foster child coming to church with "Mother Francis," a local woman who is a saint to many needy children. Carl was sweet and energetic. However, like many foster children bouncing from home to home and school to school, Carl had a desire to be loved and be with his family. Both of Carl's parents had died, his father in prison and his mother of AIDS. The result was trauma and loneliness.

At 14, Carl came to a Unity Care treatment home that I operate, having gone from the child welfare system to the juvenile justice system, an all-too-common path for foster youth. During Carl's stay with us, he was able to stabilize and graduate from high school.

At 18, he elected to move to Reno to live with his cousins in hopes of filling the emptiness of a family connection. Unfortunately, that move was unsuccessful, and he moved back to San Jose, homeless.

Carl began bouncing between Unity Care's transitional housing program, the Bill Wilson Drop-in Center and the county jail. By age 21, he was too old to receive transitional housing services and slept in his car, the park, our lobby and the shelters, all while attempting to find a job and some sense of self-worth.

Sadly, on Oct. 11, after contracting pneumonia, he ended up in a coma on life support. After three weeks, Carl died of congestive heart failure.

While we struggled to care for Carl in life, after his death an extraordinary community effort led to his burial. In less than a week, \$4,000 was raised for funeral costs through contributions from county social services staff, foundations, nonprofit agencies and his former church.

Nearly 50 people, many from similar circumstances, attended the service. One youth said: "I came from the gutter and that's all I know, but Carl inspired me, and I'm going try to get out."

Assemblyman Jim Beall, an advocate for foster youth, introduced Assembly Bill 12, legislation that would tap federal funding to extend foster care in California beyond the age of 18 to 21. This is a start. But if we as a community were able to raise \$4,000 in five days to bury Carl, imagine this: If we'd had that same amount to pay his rent for a year, Carl could well have been with us today.

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