

## Runaway, homeless teens find stability at shelter

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — If 14-year-old Rienna were to draw a map depicting how she eventually linked up with the Center for Youth Services, Inc., she'd need a great deal of ink.

Rienna was born in Wyoming County and moved to Arizona with her parents and brother several years ago. Her childhood, she said, has often been troublesome due to tensions with her father, a recovering alcoholic.

"Dad would flip out over little things. He would start yelling and hitting me," Rienna recalled in a recent interview.

Finally, these difficulties escalated so much that Rienna attempted to move in with some of her friends.

"I thought the only thing I could do by running away is that it would make (my parents) stop and think, but it didn't do anything," she remarked.

She briefly moved back home before her parents arranged for Rienna to return earlier this fall to Wyoming County, where she lived with family friends.

Rienna acknowledged that the move didn't erase her problems. "I didn't feel welcome," she said.

Rienna decided to return to Arizona so she could be with her close friends — in particular, an 18-year-old Mexican man whom she said her father is prejudiced against but is the "one person in my life who will do anything for me."

Her desire to go West was so strong that she rounded up some savings of her own — and also took some of her temporary guardians' money without their knowledge — to buy a plane ticket. She traveled by taxi to the Rochester-Monroe County Airport in mid-December, but her plans were thwarted because she



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Center for Youth Services supports homeless and runaway teenagers such as Rienna, pictured here at the center's emergency shelter.

had forgotten to bring some of the money — and also because she was detained by a policeman who had been informed of her plans. When her parents' friends learned she had taken their money, Rienna said, they made it clear that she could no longer stay there.

"I started crying. I said to the police officer, 'With all my options, I would rather be going to jail than to go back home (to my parents),' " Rienna said.

She had apparently reached rock bottom. Yet it was on that day that Rienna's problems finally began receiving the attention they desperately needed.

She was brought to the Center for Youth Services' main office, located at 258 Alexander St. in Rochester. That night, she arrived at the agency's emergency shelter for homeless and runaway children on the city's northwest side.

The shelter, along with the center's

"Host Home" program, has provided temporary lodging for youths age 12-17 in Monroe and surrounding counties since 1981. According to Susan Aiello, the shelter's program supervisor, lengths of stay can range from one to 30 days with an average occupancy of two weeks.

While staying in the shelter or with a host family, teens participate in normal activities such as attending school, performing chores around the house, and taking part in recreational events on the weekend. They also work with counselors — while staying in touch with their families — to develop a plan toward solving their problems on the home front.

Aiello acknowledged that the most common struggle for these youths is "conflict in the family." She added that "the parents want them to leave as much as they want to leave" because they can't cope with their children's behavior.

In addition to the shelter and host homes, the center provides an extensive array of preventive counseling. Founded in 1971, this non-profit agency relies heavily on government and community funding as well as volunteerism.

Yet these efforts alone are not sufficient. Jama Dodson, who serves as the center's director of programs, cites disturbing numbers provided by the Monroe County Youth Bureau: approximately 800 homeless and runaway teens got emergency service in the county last year, with the center involved in 40 percent of the cases. However, another 800 who requested help were turned away due to low staff and volunteer resources.

Dodson asserted that negative aspects of modern society have helped fuel the large caseload.

"Two parents are working; the extended family isn't around; the sense of neighborhood is weaker because we're all scared of each other," said Dodson, former assistant executive director at Catholic Family Center.

Consequently, agencies such as the Center for Youth Services have become an essential outlet, providing hope where before there may have been none.

"I felt like my life was so messed up and I couldn't start over. I was in a big hole," said Rienna.

Although her family problems are not yet resolved, Rienna is confident that the center's help has enabled her to begin building toward a good future.

"You feel so much better. You feel like you can accomplish something," she said.

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**EDITORS' NOTE:** Volunteers for the Center for Youth Services "Host Home" system are needed. Call Rosemary Davis at 716/473-2464 for details.



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