July 14, 2000

Children's Advocacy Institute
University of San Diego School of Law
5998 Alcala Park
San Diego, CA 92110

To the judges:

They look like any other teens, really. They wear backpacks, ride skateboards, hang out at the malls. That is because they have nowhere else to go. These are teenagers who live on the street in a strange nomadic existence of adolescent cliques and the desperate search for something – anything – they can call home.

Into this world stepped Sacramento Bee Staff Writer Darragh Johnson. She had no idea what she was getting into. As a thorough reporter, she took time to find out. As a graceful writer, she told it well. Her four-part story "Dead-End Dreams, Teens on the Street," chronicled a world full of hope, the vanishing innocence of youth and no happy endings.

Darragh, with photographer Bryan Patrick, devoted several months to capturing the lives of Jen, Alysha, Ryan and Shroomy. The mastery of her work lies not only in the narrative that allows readers to know these four teens; it surfaced before she ever took a note. First, she had to enter their world. She gained acceptance while maintaining distance; earned trust while vowing to report what she saw. Or maybe that's what the kids wanted: Someone who would report who they were, accurately.

They found that in Darragh, who wandered the streets with them at night, slept with them in a leaky cabin, listened to them laugh as they teased each other, felt for them when they cried because no one wanted them. Because of Darragh, our readers felt for them, too.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Joyce Terhaar
Managing Editor
Meet Jen, Alysha, Ryan and Shroomy. They're four teenagers living on the streets of Sacramento. This is the story of their eight-month journey of hope and despair.
The kids downtown are the hardcore kids. They're the ones who have migrated from the suburbs, where they start out as 'couch-hoppers,' moving from living room to living room of friend after friend until they wear out their welcome . . . .

Teens: In summer, 200 on the streets
Above: Shroome wakes up under a J Street sidewalk with his machete at his side. All right: Shroome, second from right, and Jerry get dinner in Old Sacramento from Marie Sinclair, right, and Leola Reaves of the WIND Center for homeless teens.

Here you find people like Blandie. Blandie moved to the streets when she was 14, much like the runaways who are following her footsteps. She is now 21, and the streets downtown know her and talk to her. But sometimes, she scares them. For Blandie, the streets are no longer a safer way to live. She lives in a camp by the American River, and she has a tough, intimidating streetface. Homeless people who can make streetwalkers uncomfortable. Last year, two of her friends were charged with burning Blandie's boyfriend to death. Her lifestyle is proof that the fresh-faced kids who come downtown "to find," as they say, "is better life" might grow old on the streets.

Nights: Dec. 1, 1988, the corner of 18th and 8th streets. The neighborhood is broken buses and vacant lots and warehouses. A light rail train rumbles by, and the sounds of street vendors are heard.

Ryan shows his peanut butter sandwich. He has baseball cap and dark shoes, and he smiles. He is 19 and has been in the streets since he was 12. Alysha has been on the streets since she was 16.

Ryan asks if Alysha would like a sandwich. She says yes, and they sit on the steps of a building. Alysha talks about her past and how she got into the streets. She says she misses her parents and wants to go home, but she doesn't know how.

Ryan tells her that he understands and that he used to feel the same way. He says that he has been in the streets for a long time and that he knows what it's like.

Alysha looks at Ryan and smiles. She says thank you and that she feels better now.

Ryan says that he is happy to help and that he wants to make sure that Alysha is taken care of.

Alysha smiles and says that she will try to stay safe and that she will be back to talk to Ryan next week.


Then they move to the abandoned buildings, riverbanks and underground sidewalks of downtown. Nearly all of the teenagers living on Sacramento's streets grew up here.

Teens: An abandoned house shared with addicts, rat

Continued from previous page

This was a couple of months ago, in October, when they lived in an abandoned Victorian at P and 23rd. They climbed the skinny tree near the front porch, pulled themselves onto the roof and searched inside. Inside, two sheep, drug addicts and a rat. A human's share of the space, as the teens burned into the slit. They reached the rat Sputnik and they tried to avoid the junkie's discarded. Inside the roof, the teens were a glory of jungle — warped and desperate.

It was here that Jen woke up and grinned like life had finally ended. One of the guys placed over and grinned back. "Hey, Sunshine." And the lemon-drop girl was born. She became the chopper one with the nymphotic voice. She was Sunshine, the kids moved to the boarded-up brick place at 14th and V, then to the place on the Sacramento River. Now, DeSoto's nighttime temperatures are dropping into the 70s. It hurts to sit still or even stand. Three-quarters of California's $1 billion citrus crop will soon be ruined by the cold temperatures, and a voice on the radio says things like: "If you own livestock, find a warm place to keep them tonight."

On stage on her bosom, Alysha coughs and pulls her skirt tighter. "I got a lot of food in Alysha's backpack and shuffle on. A man who used to let the teens sleep in his house lives nearby. But they don't go there anymore, not since the night he woke Alysha up trying to take off his clothes.

Now, they figure, maybe they'll stay by another man's house. He lives a few blocks away in midtown. They go to his place sometimes to get drugs. Then they find someone who is hidden, and they lean back and ingest and wait for their brains to shut down. They'll do anything to stay off the boredom. Boredom leads to thinking too much, feeling too much and

weakening what is the junior prom, they talk about which females can be bargained down to maintainers, and whether they were handcuffed the last time they got arrested, and what it means to voice probation and then fail to appear to the court numbers. It does not take long before the streets become the familiar, and everything else is the unknown.}

Traded along the chain link fence. The drug activity here will become so troublesome that few months from now, Leavens & Fishers will close the park for 30 days. This is Biscuit's territory. Most days, she broaches a piece of concrete on the other side of the red and white street, near the entrance to the park. When the girls pass her today, they do not say hello.

Jen pulls at the edge of her blue jeans. She wears it when her hair is flat, and it's flat a lot because she cannot shower regularly. She turns to the girl who sits with them and asks, "Do you have your 84 yet?"

The girl shakes her head. "I gotta go downtown."

She needs the money because six of the teens and an older vagrant have rented a $184 weekly motel room without a warmplace. In West Sacramento, the river finally grew too warm — and they moved a few days ago. One of the teens got a job waiting tables at Las Vegas in Old Sacramento. The young man works a few hours a day at Pretzel Time in the Downtown Plaza. The others who sleep there are expected to scrape — as in, "Could you spare..."
RYAN
Ryan Herbert’s father left before he was born, and Ryan was raised by his stepfather and his mom. He has lived in Germany, North Carolina, Hawaii, Texas and California. When Ryan was 13, his mother and stepfather divorced. When he was 15, his mother left him to live by himself. Since then, Ryan has had 20 foster brothers, six foster sisters and seven acts of foster homes. Ryan sleeps by the Sacramento River and on the streets downtown. He turned 20 in March, but for much of the series he was 19.

SHROOMY
Teddy the Shroom was born in Modesto and was placed in foster care when he was very young. He has lived in California, Colorado, Kansas and Utah, and now makes his home on the streets of Sacramento, where he is known as Shroomy. An avid reader, he has written half of a novel and 34 poems. He did not graduate from high school but does have his GED. He used to dream about becoming a literature professor. For much of the series he was 19. He turned 20 in March.

JEN
Jennifer Striffler has a first-degree black belt in taekwondo, and she grew up competing in regional figure-skating competitions. “She’s got a real presence on the ice,” says her skating coach. “You can’t teach that kind of artistic ability.” She ran away for the first time in 1986, got kicked out of Rio Americano High School and was home-schooled until she ran away again in October 1990. Since then, she has lived off and on, on the streets of downtown Sacramento. She was 16 for much of the series, but turned 17 in March.

ALYSHA
Alvysa McClain is Jennifer Striffler’s foster sister. She and Jennifer, whom she met at church, are closer than sisters. In April 1998, when Alysha left her last foster home, she went to live with the Strifflers. Alysha has spent the year before her 16th birthday inched to death that she will be turned loose into the world alone, with no family to care for her. She was 17 throughout the series. Her 18th birthday was in July.
Shroomy figures Shakespeare may be one of the few people out there who'd understand what it's like to be a kid living on the streets of Sacramento.

Teens: A refuge at WIND Center

Continued from previous page

Circle downtown, where there are people with change to spare. The nurse tells Alysha she has bronchitis, but she can’t get medicine until tomorrow 5 p.m., and the pharmacy is closed. So the girls stagger down 12th Street toward light rail, through the whispy silence of the city north of the train tracks.

Up the sidewalk, coming toward them, struts the kid who brag about stealing cars and his best friend, the guy who claims he used to deal crank to the boy prostitutes on 19th Street.

These two were the first good friends Jen and Alysha made when they ran away from home two months ago. The kid once gave them $150 in new bills from his front pocket. In his other pocket he’s got a dark brown rock of hash. The afternoon stretches long and empty in front of the girls, and their lives are becoming something they’d rather escape than endure. Drugs come in handy. Yet this time, the girls say goodbye and hurry to accent downtown.

But the next time. One week later, Jen sees the kid. He rides up on his bike and talks her, "Hi, lovey."

"You kiss me," she says. He goes.

They share a joint on the side of the road near Lower & Piemont. A bearded man drives by in an old brown Buick. He slows to talk. He’s got dollar bills rolled neatly between his fingers. The kid pours weed into the paper in the man’s hand. The man slides cash into the kid’s fingers. They both say, "Thanks, kid."

And then Jen kisses the kid again, and she clings to the handlebars of his bicycle. She rides with him to a place in Del Paso Heights, north of the American River, and she gets so high she can’t stop smiling.
The WIND Youth Center is at the eastern edge of the Louvres & Flashes complex. It is a converted warehouse with high ceilings and industrial carpet. The teenagers love it here. They feel safe.

December has turned deadly cold. Shornwy, whose real name is Teddy Joe but whose nickname comes from the psychedelic mushrooms he says he used to do, walks into the center to pick lunch. He sits at the table, grips the edge of his chair and talks about his older brother who committed suicide. As Shornwy pulls up his shirt and shows off the tattoos that remind him of his brother — he has a bloody-red skull on his right bicep, one skull on his right pec, and on his stomach is an open mouth exclaiming razor blades — Blondie walks through the front door.

She looks wild and dirty. Like Jee, Blondie has golden hair and a trilling laugh, and she likes to laugh often, but never in a small and fickle, Blondie is 6 feet tall, with green eyes, high cheekbones and an electrifying charisma. She's a giving woman. She was one of the first teenagers the WIND Center fed after it opened in 1994. On the northern wall of the center, along with the other kids who were on the street at the time, Blondie painted her handprint. It is white, and her long fingers are bony, and they don't connect to her palm. Her handprint is the most notable because it is the first. The handprint she made, even way back then, was made with the hand of a skeleton.

The door is always ready for a date. She walks into the shower room and locks the door.

Which means, Shornwy figures, Shakespeare may be one of the few people out there who'd understand what it's like to be a kid living on the streets of Sacramento.

Blondie surveys the room dressed in the new clothes the center donated to her. Before she leaves, she looks at her feet and says, "I need new socks."

Before Shornwy leaves the center that day, he-tells his date to the back of the building and slouches over. In a quiet, small voice he says to a staff member, "Leila, I need some socks."
'I don't have a family. You think I don't want a Mom and Dad? That's all I wanted my whole life,' says Alysha.

Teens: Girls get caught shoplifting before Christmas

Continued from previous page

mother asks. She says she feels she has chosen Alysha over her family. "We really have that bad, she wonders."

"I don't have a home," Jan whispers. "I don't have a home."

Her mother says that, even though the court still considers her to be Alysha's foster guardian, she has begun to legally terminate that relationship. She refuses to allow Alysha back in her home.

When Jan called, her mother already knew Alysha had been bailed out. In fact, she just visited Alysha at Safeway and the authorities said they would release the girl to her. But Jan's mother decided not to do it. She walked out and left Alysha behind.

And, she says now, if Jan wants to come home for Christmas, in 11 days, she will have to stay alone. Alysha will never be welcome, Jan alone allowed, in her house again.

Jan whispers goodbye and returns to the table. The thin sunglasses slip down to her feet. She pulls them back up and sighs. "I need rose-colored glasses."

More than anything, Alysha wants to forge a family with her parents and brother. In July 1990, she will turn 18. This is a family in her last chance. If she can't make things out with Jan's parents, Alysha will once again become - for always - nobody's child.

And now Jan's mother says: Never again.

Jan puts her head in her arms on the table and sobs. She has forgotten about the job at Contempo.

Streets a 'vortex' that sucks in teens
Streets a ‘vortex’ that sucks in teens

Second of four parts

By Darveigh Johnson

Joe Ruff Writer

The authority take Alysha to a temporary foster home, where she was unable to smoke a cigarette, then send to the nearest bus stop and Hicksboro back to her friends downtown.

Four days later, on a dark Friday night, she and Jan set off on a mission, sneaking and giggling with each other at the Carl’s Jr in Old Sac.

"Me and her," Alysha says, "we make each other laugh all night long." Jan shakes her head so the sound comes out louder. From the speakers above, Sharae closes her eyes. When she wakes up, she smiles. "They make each other laugh all night long," Alysha adds.

The girls are jittery. They finish their burgers and head toward Macy's in the Downtown Plaza.

It is now one week before Christmas. They want presents, they want clothes, they want warm. And if Alysha can't go home with Jan, Jen won't go home at all. They are angry today, as cold and sharp as a studded glass window. They are afraid of things to be different, but they have no idea how to double back on everything that's led them here.

Inside the department store, in an upstairs dressing room, they show hundreds of dollars worth of clothes into Alysha's back pocket and under Jen's coat.

They immediately get arrested.

In the van on the way to Juvenile Hall, Jen looks at Alysha. "Do you think Mom will make me come home this time?"

Jen changes the subject.

Alysha's partner on the Macy's binge was Jenifer, her foster sister, Mrs. Stiffler's biological daughter. Although the girls were booked on the same charge, Jen was allowed to remain in the Stiffler's home in Antelope, where Alysha had to pay rent. She is a foster child who believes the bond to her family is only as strong as convenience makes them. At times like this, when she's become almost more trouble than she's worth, she returns again to being nobody's child.

"We've got to make some change," Alysha says. Mrs. Stiffler reminds her, "because we can't just keep going this way. It just isn't going to work.

"I know," Alysha answers. "I know."

"Mom, thank you so much for coming."

But later, in the court, the judge is less forgiving. Although he releases Alysha to the Stifflers, he revokes their right to be her legal guardians. The state of California becomes, once again, Alysha's official parent.

Alysha and Jen's return home is also complicated by the two months...
Series puts spotlight on a problem easily forgotten

You see their youthful faces as they talk about a job they hope to get or the place they live. You wonder how they could be homeless so young. You wonder whether they will ever find productive lives or whether they're on the road to perpetual homelessness. But you do so only for a fleeting moment as you pass them on the streets or on the mall.

Over the next four days, "Dead-end Dreams" will tell the stories behind four of the faces -- Alysha, Jen, Ryan and Sewoony. We do so to put a spotlight on a problem that can be easily ignored or forgotten except by those directly involved -- that of teenage runaways and homeless youth.

Reporters Darragh Johnson and photographer Bryan Patrick spent hundreds of hours over several months, following Alysha, Jen, Ryan and Sewoony, talking to them, observing the way they live and eventually becoming part of the background in their lives.

The Bee staffers role was not to intervene or to counsel but to observe and to report. And what they saw wasn't always pleasant and was, at times, painful.

They saw -- but in no way encouraged -- drug use. They saw -- but in no way encouraged -- crime. They met color kids along the way who claimed to deal drugs or steal cars. They saw family feuds and inter-group squabbles.

But they also saw young people with hopes and dreams, who were smart and who who want to be loved and who were smart. They saw families struggling with the multitude of issues, looking for answers and hoping for solutions. And they knew Johnson and Patrick were there to witness and listen while events unfolded -- some good, some bad -- in the lives of the four.

In the streets, at cafes along the banks of the Sacramento River, in a seedy, dilapidated shack in Rancho Cordova, Johnson and Patrick were there with them, some days just hanging out for hours at a time.

Our journalists also found an unusual willingness by family members, foster parents and friends to talk about their relationships with the four youths. One such person, Cindy Striffler, Jen's mother and Alysha's foster mom, allowed our staffer into her home and shared her emotions and how they periodically found them over the months the project unfolded. She did so in the hope that others might learn from her family's experiences and that she might find a way to get help for better than before.

In the reporting of the project, Johnson and Patrick were careful not to label their subjects or to judge them. When they asked for money, Patrick recalls he gave them fruit instead. Occasionally, Johnson and Patrick would help their subjects when they asked for rides. But our staffers did their best to uphold a basic tenet of journalism, not to get too close to their subjects lest they lose their objectivity and fairness.

In reporting this type of story, however, you can't help but feel a connection with your subjects. And in this case, it's fair to say that both Johnson and Patrick came to believe and genuinely care about the four and others like them.

In that vein, The Bee has donated $2,000 to underwrite the printing of posters that will direct students to a hotline for help in times of crisis. The hotline, (800) 388-1777, is anonymous, confidential and staffed 24 hours a day by Drugless Youth Services, a 25-year-old non-profit agency that assists teens on teens and their families.

The idea for the poster was first suggested in June by Bee columnist Diana Guggi Kelm as a first step in trying to prevent teen problems before they explode. It was followed up on by Drugless, which asked The Bee to underwrite it. The posters have been printed and Drugless is in the process of distributing them to schools throughout the state.

We hope that the posters can make a difference in the lives of some. And we hope that the powerful stories and photos chronicling the lives of Alysha, Jen, Ryan and Sewoony can do the same.

* * *

Rick Rodriguez is Executive Editor of The Bee.
Teens: Feeling like nobody's kids

Continued from page 5

The youth group retreat, where they got stoned. They were flying high when the youth worker caught them. Their eyes were glazed and their smiles dazed, but they remember the pastor repeating “Drug rehabilitation,” and when they got home, the Skiffles told them, “You're not going to continue living here and doing this type of stuff.” The girls agreed. So just after midnight, these two education teens climbed out their bedroom window and hitchhiked in a new life downtown, together.

They first caught up with a kid who dealt around dealing cars and a guy who says he sells crack, and it wasn’t long before they met two other homeless teenagers, Ryan and Sherry. Now, one of the crowds of kids who make up Sacramento’s street scene, those four created what they believed was a secure, happy family. “These people,” Jen studied one day, “are the best people I’ve ever known.”

But the girls learned quickly that downtown is a jungle, as Alysha says, “You get down there and you just get stuck.” The drugs get stronger. The crime gets more serious. It doesn’t take long before the teens learn that they are surviving on very little, and that utiliza requires their personalities into something fierce, something that does not care about alarm clocks or work schedules or the latest in full-time promises. They are like wolves, says one writer at the Women's Center Sacramento’s drop-in facility for homeless teens. “They become wild out there.”

Ryan, Sherry, Alysha and Jen have been living in the streets of downtown Sacramento. They eat for free. They sleep in abandoned buildings, on blankets, or in downtown Sacramento, a milder version of the camp of the American. They go hungry. They go hungry. They go hungry. They don’t go hungry. One street corner, a boy prostitute who worked 20th Street between J and K, says, “All I wanted was for my Dad to find me and say I love you. Come home, I would have left. But we were all too attached.”

One of Alysha’s former foster mothers says, “The sins of the parents were visited upon the children, and it’s not fair.”

Alysha says, “I don’t have a family. You think I don’t want a Mom and Dad? That’s all I wanted my whole life.”

Far left: Alysha and Jen fill out applications for jobs with a fast-food chain. At left: Jen stretches out in the restaurant manager’s chair. The girls work in the restaurant on the railroad tracks, and she says, “I love Lucy” lunch box purses. Jen says Lucille Ball is her favorite television star because “she’s like a happy person — she’s always fun.”

Jen, wrapped in a blanket, and Alysha, grab an early-morning smoke outside their parents’ home in Antelope. The girls aren’t allowed to smoke in the house. When Alysha stayed in an earlier foster home, she says, “for the first three years, I was good.” But eventually, she says, it became “pointless. I just finally didn’t care anymore.”
Taking risks comes naturally — and not every risk is negative

Most teens who come to the streets do so because they have no choice. It is shown that as many as half of homeless and runaway kids were kicked out of their homes or abandoned by their parents. More than 70 percent of them were sexually or physically abused by their parents. One out of three used to be a family in their youth, and not a lot of those have problems in school.

But there always be hanger on, and it is not uncommon to find the children of affluent, seemingly well-adjusted parents hanging out with the homeless teens downtown. Ryan had a big crush on a girl who worked at The Circle and was a student at Christian Brothers High School. Her guardian parents were both well-paid professionals. One of Jen's favorite people downtown was a guy who umpired on the team at Kentucky High School.

Is there something about the homeless life that appeals to the adolescent state of mind? Are teens more likely to gravitate to certain lifestyles?

Lynne Potvin is a professor of psychiatry at San Francisco University. She has worked with homeless and runaway teens in San Francisco for the past 10 years, and in the author of "The Romance of Risk: Why Teenagers Do the Things They Do."

Teenagers, she says, "have to take risks. The urge is hardwired into their bodies because "the primary task of adolescence," she says, "is becoming an adult.""

But taking risks and trying out new experiences, young adults establish themselves as people with different identities from their parents. Those experiences, Potvin says, can be positive or negative.

Positive risk-taking would include, for example, running for class office, competing on a team or forming a rock band. Negative risk-taking would include taking drugs or drinking alcohol, self-mutilation (as in "cutters" — kids who cut themselves ever and ever again with razor blades), and vandalism or appropriating the homeless lifestyle.

It is a myth, however, that being a teenager means enduring years of wild, hormonal turmoil. Adolescence is not, Potvin says, "all about rebellion."

It wasn't until 1990 that a psychologist named G. Stanley Hall defined adolescence as the turbulent stage of life that separates children into adulthood. His theories were well-received, and when Edmund Poulson came to America he met with Hall, grasped onto the idea, and helped popularize it.

The public bought it, Potvin says, because it made sense. "Teenagers are no longer little, they aren't cute, and they fight back. Parents raise their kids, and kids say, 'Bah!'"

The 1990s only added to the myth that all teens are rebels. The generations gap was created, and adults started believing that "teens are different from us." Potvin says "They are so different that they don't pray or even vote as well as I do."

But parents remain incredibly important in their teenagers' lives. Potvin is the mother of two teens, and she says, "They look to us more than their peers. Even though they don't do what we want, they are taking it all in."

And researchers who study why some people succeed even as others get mixed in unfortunate circumstances have discovered one common theme: resilience is the most important trait of all.

And the single most important factor is creating resilient kids is this: "They each had one adult who believed in them."

"All it takes," Potvin says, "is one adult who cares."

— Barragh Johnson
In the dining room of this house in Elk Grove, Ryan looks up and he is crying. ‘All I wish she would say,’ he whispers, ‘is “I love you.”’

Teens: Abandonment a major theme

Ryan calls his stepfather in Elk Grove and learns that a letter from his mother, whom he hasn’t seen since 1997, has arrived.
Ryan, a veteran of the streets, greets a friend near the tunnel that connects Old Sacramento and the Downtown Plaza.

Continued from previous page... Just got up and left one day. Just left them alone in the house. His mother, who lives in Kansas now, says Shirey and his mom don't know the whole story. She says, "There's things that happen. It was hard, hard times. I couldn't take care of them."

Ryan, Scott Hebert, was born after Shirey's in Heidelberg, Germany, where his mother was one of the last members of the Women's Army Corps. His biological father left the Army base before Ryan ever left the world, and Ryan was called that guy "the beast." He claims he is persistent in Ryan's life, but his mother seems uncomfortable. His piercing eyes come from his family, and he grew into a young man with a talent for sketching, just like his mother's grandfather.

When Ryan was 5, his half-brother DJ was born. Ryan's other married DJ's father. The brothers became close, his stepfather says, and they were best friends growing up. But resentment also lurked between them. "His mother always treated DJ higher than Ryan," the stepfather says. "DJ had a dad. DJ's dad was her husband. DJ was the Little Prince. Ask Ryan. Ask Ryan. Who was the Little Prince? Tell me DJ."

This is not exactly what happens when you ask Ryan, "Who was the Little Prince?" What happens is he makes his face go blank and his eyes turn off, like he just locked the door to his memory. He does not answer.

Alysha Colleen McLean was born in July 1981 in Woodland. She was the second youngest of seven children, and her mother was a pretty woman. Her father is someone Alysha doesn't talk much about. She now carries with her from home to home to foster home, one couch to the next, all of her memories. But she has no baby pictures of herself, and she has no pictures of her mother. When Alysha was 2, her mother dropped her off at the baby sitter's house and didn't come back until she was 8. In between, while she was living somewhere else, Alysha was sexually abused. She was 5 when she testified in open court against that man.

Jennifer Nicole Stryker was born in 1982 in Modesto, CA. She grew up as the second child, the pretty girl sandwiched between two brothers. She started figure skating when she was 4. Her mother, Cindy, made her dresses for her and sewed her costumes. One day Mrs. Stryker would cover a frame with the same fabric as her daughter's dress. Jennifer was her maiden name. "A little doll — a brown-eyed, blonde-haired doll."

But brown-eyed, blonde-haired dolls grew up, and Jennifer grew up troubled. Her childhood was deceptively normal but behind the scenes there were problems. Jennifer says she didn't always feel like she came first in her parents' lives. Her mother says she was her husband often felt shut out of Jennifer's life. These and other difficulties caught up to Jennifer by the time she turned 13.

This was three years ago. Everything that defined her world had begun to fall apart. Her parents started talking about divorce and their mother was threatening to move out of the house.

Jennifer began writing poetry that scared her mother. "It was all about death and blood and stuff."

Jennifer says she dyed her hair black and started wearing black. Her parents disapproved of her tattoo and her name, and she says she returned home sometimes to find some of her more objectionable clothes missing.

Jennifer also fell in school. "I was a mess," she says. "I didn't have any friends."

Her memories of elementary school cross are of playing alone.

Most days, Jennifer left school early to train as a figure skater at an ice rink in Stockton. By the time she was 14, she had also earned her black belt in karate and, and had become good friends with one of the girls from her martial art classes. In the fall of 1993, the two girls were not going to see Jen. "They were going to be there for two weeks. When she returned, she and her mother say they were expelled from Rio Americano High School for truancy, smoking at a party and threatening to fight other kids. She was home-schooled for the next two years.

Yet throughout all this, Jennifer continued to train. As skating was her release, and she was good. Very good. Her mother says she's "captivating." Jennifer's former coach, Debbi Pasztor, says, "She's got a real presence on the ice. You can't teach that kind of artistic ability."

Later, the night after visiting her stepfather's home, Ryan rolls a cigarette by candlelight. He roost in an abandoned warehouse in east Sacramento with no electricity or running water.
Studies of homeless teens across the nation show that **as many as 70 percent come from abusive backgrounds. As many as 30 percent of them used to live in the foster system.**
Teens: Jen 'definitely has a future, if she wants it'

When Ryan was growing up, a successful future didn't seem so inevitable. He was part of a family. He played basketball and did well. At school he never did the best, but he had the potential. Ryan's a very intelligent young man, a very articulate young man.

Elizabeth Shoen of Sacramento, a cousin of Shroomy, collects information from him so she can get some identification documents for him.

His mother would occasionally drop into Shroomy's life, and then drop out again. Eventually, because she had been moved around so much—from Modesto to Colorado to Kansas to Utah—Shroomy stopped being able to remember where she did certain things, like read Shakespeare for the first time or start writing his novel.

But clearly remembers this: When he was very young and living in a foster home, he was sexually abused. The poem he wrote about the incident includes a verse that says:

"How could you be so cruel?"

"I never hurt you."

"Now I'd like to see you again."

"I am the person who did it," he wrote to Alysha and her brother in a letter he gave to adoption authorities. "We did not throw you away. Your behavior has become..."
Mrs. Striffler saw Alysha as a teenage girl who appeared to be trying to get her life intact and getting all right with God and stuff, and I didn’t want to see her get lost to the system.

By April 1998, Ryan and Alysha were living in the street downtown, and Alysha had just moved in with Jen.

The girls met a few years earlier at church, the Abundant Life Fellowship in Roseville. After Alysha left Wino’s foster home and was sent to a temporary home in North Highlands, Jen asked her parents if Alysha could live with them. Cindy Striffler wasn’t sure it was a good idea.

“She had been in jail, and that was known.”

Alysha and Jen shared a bedroom and would stay awake late, giggling and keeping the rest of the family awake, too. The family got into fights about this. Jen stopped eating because it was more fun to stay up with Alysha than it was to awaken at 5 every morning. They got into fights about this too.

The girls started coming home drunk and high, and several times over the next few months, the frustrated Strifflers took Alysha to Children’s Shelter. Alysha would spend a few nights there, and then they would return to the Strifflers’ home. This pattern continued until the Saturday night in October 1998 when the girls finally ran away.

Jen and Alysha moved downtown because they knew “that’s where the kids go.” They remained downtown because they finally found a place where they felt they belonged. “The only two-year-olds don’t understand,” Alysha says.

Jen liked the fact that the downtown crowd approached her. They even named her. On the streets, she became a different person—a more responsible person. At the end of the night, she was sobered up. Like she was a movie star. "Blessed!"

And even though they were still dejected, the girls had a house to go to. Ryan had found a job. Ryan was not going to school. They were not working. They were not preparing for any sort of future. They were not spending every day of the winter on the streets with their friends, and every night they rode the light rail home and went to sleep in the suburbs.

At the very least, though, the girls had a home to go to. Ryan’s house evaporated the day his mother walked out on him. But Ryan held on grimly. He worked for his mother when Ryan dodged characters from the comic strips. One day, he gets the most time receiving in the one who shares his mother’s name: Lou Ann.

Since she left five years ago, Ryan has seen her only once. Two years ago, he took a train home from Sacramento to Albany, N.Y. with his job, and he stayed there for a few weeks, he stayed only four or five days. But not so early in 1996, and she’s written him a note. She mailed it to Ryan’s stepfather’s house in Elk Grove, and he’s come to read it. Inside the front door, he sits on the stairs and takes off his red overcoat. In sixty seconds, he walks through the hallway onto the carpet of the dining room. The house is quiet. His halfbrother hands him the card.

Ryan opens it carefully. He reads the note over and over again, and before he returns the card to the envelope, his juvenile lines like he’s trying to decide what to do.

A few months earlier, when Ryan was still staying on the river, she and Ryan used to get together after the others went to sleep. Ryan would stare at the sky and whisper to her: "I want my Mom."

Now, in the dining room of this house in Elk Grove where he lived for a while until he was asked to leave, Ryan stands up and he is crying. "I wish she would say," he whispers, "I love you."
Teens' hopes blossom in spring

By Darrell Johnson
Sheffield Writer

Just what it seemed that winter's cold would crack
their bone, and his shiver
in the dark, the trees would show
its spirit, the most
delicious season of the year
showed up, Spring.

Suddenly, it was time for wide-eyed,
shoulder-padded girls. The sun shone. The
trees shimmered. Ryan leaned his head
back and shouted at the sky, "The trees are
beautiful!" There was no turning back.
Something had happened. Spring had
come.

And the kids were off the streets.
"I wake up sleeping by the river." Ryan
says, "I go to bed in a fully fur-
ished apartment."

He laughed. He promised. Diggs, a
transitional housing program in Rancho
Caritos for people ages 18 to 21, had an
opening, and Ryan needed to get out. The
downtown life was fading.

His friends Jennifer and Alysha — who
will use Ryan and another homeless teen
named Simon — found a ragtag
family of street kids downtown — were
back home in Antelope. The girls' probation
required them to move home. They were
still fighting with their parents, but they
had no more food, clothes, or schoolwork
anymore. They were warm, and they could
spend every day
talking on the phone and logging the
bathroom, like regular teenagers living in a
regular house in a regular Sacramento
suburb.

"It's better for them," Ryan said.

Shrinking too, had exchanged life on the
street for an apartment in Sacramento, and
and

Ryan's stepfather gave him 18-year-old
Alaskan "a bed up in the
state position.
"

"She's mother says: "These girls are
out of control." One of Alysha's former
father warns her that the 17-year-old girl
may wind up pregnant and with an
abortion, "which will start all over."

Ryan's cousin once asked him:
"Do you want to be like them? And
what people be like, 'Get away from me'.

Why would we want that to be your goal?"

Yet it's not so much that the streets are
a goal for these or other teens living on
Sacramento streets. They're more like
something that happens. A disease. They
are, in Ryan's cousin worries, the short-
term solution that becomes the long-term
lifestyle. They are often a petty break
story.

But now it's the beginning of February,
and the nights are warmer instead of
glum. There is hope that this time, finally,
these kids will make it out. That this time
the hope will shimmer and these four teens
will shine, and none of this will be exag-
gerated.

Now on a sunny morning in the first
week of February, Ryan wakes up in
his own home, in a furnished
apartment at Diggs. By 7 a.m., he and
his roommate are hearing the radio
"Bump! Bump! Bump! Bump!
Nabi-Nabi, Nabi-Nabi!
Bump! Bump! Bump!" The front door is
open, and the window screen across, and
Ryan stumbles on a couch that was deliv-
ered — "still in the plastic!" — the night
before.

He's just finished drawing, in blue,
sketching a drawing, and signs that read "Bum
nies,
ROOM." He gets up to put it in his bed-
room. On the way, he had shown himself around
the apartment, again.

"There's our heater. It doesn't work. This
is my bed. My socks. The bed sheets.
No lights, electricity, no bikes to
ride."

He opened another door and sat at the
top shelf. "Someone could sleep up
there."

The communal life downstairs encour-
ages everyone to share, and everyone
has a shelter he must open it to his friends.

Ryan's new apartment is a triumph of
possibility for homeless friends — but to
share it would be to violate Diggs' rules. Absolutely no one may visit unless
the central office approves, and everyone
must leave by 10 p.m. Diggs workers
patrol the apartments — they let them
in and out, and check all screens, cupboards
and closets — but the kids are used to
bargaining. They get to be friends,
and say they can stay overnight.

Diggs works with up to 15 young
adults who need extra help. They get a
place to live — two per apartment — and
food and groceries, and a place to stay
at night. Ryan's first
shopping spree bought the group a platter of
Tostitos snacks, a box of Crayola Crayons,
a blanket for the front porch, some milk,
and a basket of fruit.

In return, the young adults must get a
Pass for TEENS.
Ryan practices locking and unlocking the door. His door. His keys.
He's on his way out. No more nights by the river.
No more breaking into boxcars to sleep in. No more squatting in abandoned buildings and begging for money. No more being a homeless teenager on the streets of Sacramento. He's got a place.

Teens: Ryan feels thrill of his own room
Life downtown is slipping away... The teens who have been living there are feeling old and ready to leave... 'It feels like everything is fading.'

Jen says. Like everything she hoped to hold onto is deserting her.

Teens: Jen's teary-eyed as friend departs

Alysha, right, and Jen, at left on steps, say goodbye to Shroomy, in right corner, and Kerry before the two youths set off on what they hope will be a four-month hitchhiking tour of the Southwest.
job, keep the job, start paying rent and save part of their income. If they do not have a high school diploma, they must study for the GED. They must get up by 6 a.m. and attend meetings meant to teach them how to balance a checkbook, create a budget, and interview for jobs.

Yet teens like Ryan and Shreamy have learned to survive by ignoring the rules and flouting inconvenient laws. They justify their lives by believing that they are in control. They perceive that Elengesi's simple list of rules takes away that control.

A week after Ryan and his roommates moved into their apartment, they got into an argument with a woman who lives there. "She all, "There's no reason why a man or a woman should be homeless," Ryan said, his mouth clamped tight with anger. His roommate, too, was turning red. "Not on me," he said. "I don't want to be anywhere they tell me what I can eat, when I can't eat. When I can use the phone, when I can't use the phone. When I can eat, when I can't eat. What I can eat and what I can't eat."

For their part, the Elengesi staff have banned the boys from the shelter. Few of the teens have been there for more than a month. What is happening to Ryan two years earlier, when he got kicked out, is now back in the headlines, stabbing, abandoned houses, where he has lived until now, February 1999. But this time, he promised the social workers, he'd matured. He was 18, and in one month he would turn 20. He was ready to commit to a lifetime of early marriage, part-time hospital work, and eventually a house on the block where they lived. "I'm all about the California 10 and Social Security cards and the rewards of keeping that job (check dollar bills)."

The social workers finally relent, but they warned Ryan that he would have only three strikes before he gets kicked. They promised he would receive only three strikes before he gets kicked. Reason: Ryan's constant="nash, Marv" always the radio in the corner of the room during one of his rants. "This sure...is a dream," he mumbles. "I'm the radio is turned off, and in the abrupt silence Ryan's voice lightly jolts. Ryan and his roommate are heading downtown, and Ryan practices looking and walking the doors. His boys are out. No more nights by the river. No more breaking into basements to sleep in. No more squatting in abandoned buildings and begging for money downtown and shopping from supermarkets and scavenging for pet. No more dumpster-diving for day-old fudge from the Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory in Old Town. No more being a homeless teenager on the streets of Denver. He's got a place.

And now the pretty blonde girl from the Downtown Plaza will give him her phone number; and he will call, and he'll start going to school, and after two years of being a teenager kid, Ryan has finally—don't the boys prove it?—made it. He even called his stepdad to tell him the good news. His stepdad said, from his house in RI, "Great. Good to hear you can do it."

His stepdad recalls thinking as he hung up: "I hope he makes it this time."

Sleeping pills, Jen says, are the only way to fall asleep. And mornings, she says, are worse. She usually wakes after 10, eats a bowl of Frosted Loops and chooses a pair of furred pants and a rib-knitting top. She walks to the bus stop, hopes the bus will be at 7 Avon and transfers to the light rail downtown. The conditions of her probation—she was arrested in December for stealing clothes at Macy's—may require her to be in her parent's house in Arvada, where her life exists downtown.

Today the sun is high. A winter chill settles, but she is happy. She hooks up with the crowd at The Creek, the Downtown plaza, and heads to the Old Town. The group goes to The Station and someone lights a marijuana pipe. One boy takes a hit and suddenly produces a "Life is all about marijuana, alcohol, sex and fool."

"We're only to provide our jobs, the nights are over. carpet cleansers, an older homeless man who is smoking. "There is no way he’s going to be in the room ever again.

Jen looks up. She believes desperately in God. "I don't want to do this," she says. "I need someone to love me."

"No way," Jen says. "I'm not giving up."

Ryan crosses the street. "Why?"

"Because if I don't get a picture ID, I can't go to work. I'm not going to lose my job."

For the last few years, Shreamy has worked a fast food job at the Burger King, and she says, "I want to be someone who can write a letter."

"All you do," Ryan starts to say, "is get your birth certificate."

"It isn't—it isn't, Shreamy said. "I paid money and expected to have it in four to six weeks."

They're been more than six weeks. In the middle of December, Shreamy filled out the forms and sent them to the Office of Vital Statistics in Denver, the city where she was born. Even without the document in hand, Shreamy promised the Pogo's manager in her home. He promised the paper would come now, and he would get his California ID and Social Security cards, so Pogo's could fill out the proper tax forms. But today the manager told Shreamy she cannot continue working until the birth certificate arrives.

Shreamy puts his skateboard outside onto the ice. "I want my birth certificate," he says, "so I can get my ID and get on the streets.

So he doesn't have to go back to living like Brodie.

Brodie is 21. He's lived on the streets since he was 14. A year ago, his brother, David Swindell, was killed when two other street kids decided to teach him a lesson. He died after his skull was cracked in a rumble.

Please see THE END, next page
Boston's Bridge Over Troubled Waters program has both 15- and 30-day drug rehabilitation programs to get teens "used to the idea of a routine and introduce them to the idea of sobriety."

From Portland to Boston, cities scramble for answers

Life on the streets is cold, bitter, lonely and uncomfortable. It can also be addictive. People who work with teenagers say that the longer kids stay on the streets, the harder it is for them to leave.

Those who don't make it off can expect a life of few options. The ones who don't get killed or wind up in prison will likely spend the rest of their lives as homeless adults.

What programs exist to help those kids off the streets? What is being done locally, and how does that compare to what other cities are doing?

The WIND Center, Sacramento's only drop-in center for runaway and homeless teens, opened its doors in 1994. It is housed in a converted warehouse on North C Street, down the block from the adult homeless refuge of Haven & Refuge. It is privately funded.

WIND—Working In New Directions—offers breakfast, lunch, showers, laundry machines and counselors. It operates 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., weekdays. Three nights a week, the program does "outreach," bringing food, clothes and hygiene kits to homeless teens downtown and in Del Paso Heights. Recently, the center began offering drug-counseling classes to its teenaged clients.

The WIND Center's philosophy, says co-director Sister Mary Ann Bengera, is to create relationships with the teen kids. Few of these teens trust adults, WIND staff says; so before they will accept help, they must have confidence in the people who offer it.

The second program for homeless teens in Sacramento is in Rancho Cordova. Less than two years ago, Diogenes opened up its transitional living program, a program of eight, two-bedroom apartments for homeless teens 16 and older. Diogenes also does outreach, operating an emergency shelter for children under the age of 18 and runs a 12-bed group home for teens under 18.

In the transitional living program, homeless teens receive free rent for the first month and vouchers for food. They are expected to get a job and attend life-skills workshops. If they haven't graduated from high school, Diogenes officials enroll them in classes to earn their high school equivalency degree. The structure is set up to give the kids a "hand up, not a handout," but at the same time, the rate of success has been less than stellar.

"I don't think we're as successful as we thought we were going to be," says Jim Rots, Diogenes' executive director. "We lose a lot of people for silly stuff."

Experts admit that getting homeless teens off the streets is an arduous process, but they say some ideas do work. Here's what they urge social agencies to do.

Coordinate their services

Cities whose programs operate in isolation and with autonomy toward each other do nothing to help the kids. Programs become like the parents of six one-legged children, says one program director in Boston, and "kids can play programs against each other." In some ways, this has been the case in Sacramento. While the WIND Center refers teens to Diogenes' programs, and Diogenes accepts those referrals, there are points of friction between the groups.

The WIND Center and Diogenes operate their own outreach programs, and there is limited coordination between them. Privately, people at Diogenes criticize the WIND Center as "not helping." Because the center tries to save the teen the shame of surviving on the street, it therefore makes it easier for kids to stay homeless. WIND staffers report that you can't get anywhere with these kids until you wear them their trust.

For their part, WIND Center staffers have criticized Diogenes for an approach they say has failed everyone: the hardcore homeless kids who have tried it. Diogenes says its methods are meant to teach those kids how to move into mainstream life.

Homeless teens experts cite Portland, Ore., as one city that has worked to involve the organizations' differing philosophies. During a series of meetings five years ago, officials decided to coordinate the efforts of the Portland Youth Services, the police department, the juvenile courts and the different shelters and treatment centers. Though the number of homeless teens may not have dropped, officials believe they are addressing the problem better.

Offer a step between the madness of street life and the structure of a transitional living program (TLP). Boston puts TLP-bound street kids into 15- and 30-day drug rehabilitation programs to get them used to the idea of a routine and introduce them to the idea of sobriety," says Penny Price, the clinical director at Boston's Bridge Over Troubled Waters. In Portland, before teens move into the TLP they must first spend time in the nightly shelter, where they are required to obey a 9 p.m. curfew, be on their best behavior, show up for curfew and follow other rules.

"If you go right from the streets, where you're not doing anything you don't want to do, and into the transitional living program where you have to be drilled, get a job and start following rules—it's too big a shock," Price says. Currently, neither of those approaches exist in Sacramento.

Approach teens with an attitude that sees them as resources.

"They have something to contribute," says Jo Mestery, the program director at Washington, D.C.'s National Network for Youth. "Get them involved in the planning and implementation of" the programs.

In the TLP at Portland's Willamette Bridge, the teen work with the staff to establish the rules of the program. They call it the "self-governed model," and program director Tim Lind says kids feel "more powerful when they're setting their own agenda instead of having an adult tell them what to do."

Portland also runs a small business started entirely by homeless youth. It's called EAT PVE—Entreprenurial Action to Promote Youth Employment—and teens work 20 hours a week for $7 an hour, during 12-week stints. They work the pines in a church kitchen sometimes, and they sell lime from a cart four days a week. They also make deliveries.

Work on programs that stop kids before they hit the streets.

Knowing that as many as 40 percent of the nation's homeless were foster kids and as many as 30 percent of homeless youth say they used to live in foster care, San Diego's South Bay Community Services program is building an 11-unit apartment complex for foster kids who are 18 years old, have aged out of the system but who have nowhere to live.

—Darrell Johnson
Teens: ID bracelet bears name of slain friend

Continued from previous page

Two guys have been charged with the murder in the Blodgett death. They are being held in the county jail in connection with the murder.

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Teens like Ryan and Shroomy have learned to survive
d by ignoring the rules and flouting inconvenient laws. They justify their lives
by believing that at least they are in control.

Alysha, right, quarreled with her foster mother, Cindy Striffler, over Alysha's scheduled appearance in Juvenile Court. During the months that Alysha and Jan, her foster sister, were roaming the streets, the Strifflers found themselves answering middle-of-the-night phone calls. "I'd think: This is it," Mrs. Striffler recalls. "This is the phone call, I'm going to have to go identify the bodies."

Below: Mrs. Striffler and Alysha leave Sacramento Juvenile Court in March after the girl was sentenced to house arrest for an incident that occurred the previous October.
While riding light rail, Ryan shows his friend Kerry doodles he made in an adult continuation class. Attendance was required by the Diogene program as a condition to share an apartment.

 Teens: After missing class, a scary ride
Continued from previous page until everyone's OK.

But she can't count on life downtown, either. It's slipping away. A new batch of kids has come onto the streets — the latest in the assembly line of troubled teens who find their way downtown. The teens who have been living downtown are feeling old and ready to leave. Alpha's boyfriend has been talking about going to Santa Cruz, Ryan's still in Diogene, and Ali and her boyfriend are breaking up. Now Shrewsberry is taking off on a four-month journey, hitchhiking across the Southwest.

"It feels like everything is falling," Ali says. Like everything she hoped to hold onto in deserting her. Shrewsberry takes off on a map of America and storms at it. He plans to travel with another street kid named Kerry. Jen watches her. She hopes it will rain so hard all afternoon that they won't be able to go. Shrewsberry pulls on his guitar and says, "When I come back, my hair will probably be down in right below my eyes. And my guitar will be about four inches long." It will be the proof that his trip has changed him. — made him different from who he is now.

"Okay," Alpha suddenly cries. "She's bored. Let's go somewhere." They migrate to a stairwell in a parking garage and smoke marijuana. Then they head off to the bakers in the Downtown Plaza, Jen quietly sings a song she heard on the radio, "The Old Lady's". Ryan stumbles down in a long, wet street, and say, "All — I — want to be idle somewhere..."...for a...way...from the cold night air...to be...to be. . .which isn't be

In a park, Ryan shows up wearing a new shirt and a new backpack. "I go to school because the man. . .errr..." he says. He's nervous about education.

It's the first night of mandatory classes, but Ryan isn't sure what course he's signed up for. Inside inside, he carries on about, "I'm not going to school, no more classes, no more school..."

They walk through the tunnel, across the Old Stick and down over the Tower Bridge. They stop at the park, listen to their backpacks, and at 5 p.m. on Thursday that started out gray and wet and cold but that breaks into a gentle yellow brightness. Shrewsberry and Kerry walk too fast to catch a ride. A week after that, Shrewsberry's birth certificate arrives in the mail at Diogene. Diogene returns it to the Office of Disillusion with these words scribbled across the envelope: RETURN TO SENDER. Was this the last address?

There was no forwarding address.

Back at The Circle, it's 6 p.m. in February. Ryan shows up wearing a new shirt and a new backpack. "I go to school because the man..." he says. He's nervous

The southbound 81 drops up Ryan throws his cigarette on the ground. He takes a seat in the back of the bus where an enormous man with a large, wide smile is reading a newspaper. Ryan stares at him. "I'm going to stop drinking. I'm going to get an apartment, and a car and a girlfriend.

The woman next to him moves away. "I'm going to get a girlfriend. The guy's got a head around him. And I'm going to stop drinking. His voice rises. The woman's eyes widen. There is silence.

"Take my blue strings" the man suddenly yells. "I'm my hands together!" Ryan rocks in his seat. "I'm my hands together!" Ryan puts his hands around his knees and rocks rocking. The man is at the ground. He seems to be more.
The shack in Humboldt has **four wood walls**, three glass windows and one rotten roof. It's a haven, Alysha and Jen say. An escape from situations that make them sad.

Leaky shack falls short as teens' getaway
he shook his head. His scalp and his hair blew across his face and his eyes. His hands were raised to his face.

"Shenney, Shenney, Shenney, Shenney," he repeated. "I didn't know what I was doing. It's like a dream. I don't know what I'm doing."

She fell to her knees and started crying. "I'm so sorry, Shenney. I didn't mean to do it. I was just trying to help."

Shenney turned away from her. "I don't care. You shouldn't have done it. You shouldn't have trusted me."

The streets echoed with their voices. The sounds of the city were all around them. They were alone in the world, and they knew it. They were just two people trying to make sense of their lives and the world around them.

The streets seemed to stretch on forever. They were just two people trying to make sense of their lives and the world around them.
For the rest of the night, the two girls cling to each other while the mortar of their patched-together street family starts to crack. They thought they could outsmart all of that. They aren't so sure anymore.

Kerry window-shops for washing machines in Barberville as Jen and Alysha, left, carry bags of donated food.

Alysha checks her hair in the cabin mirror. Four days after the girls' arrival, the ever-present mud has lodged under their nails and caked every exposed inch of skin.
Teens: They leave for cabin without Ryan

Continued from previous page

Jen stops laughing. Alysha waits a few seconds. She climbs out of Nick's sleeping bag, where she had planned to spend the night, and into his. For the rest of the night, the two girls CEO in much the same while the rear of their patched-together street family starts to crack.

When the girls first showed up in Humboldt, they promised, "We're never going back." To get back to Sacramento, they believed, was to cement their feet to it. Everything they hoped to escape. The cops would arrest them for being runaway who were violating their probation. Alysha would be sent. Jen and Alysha. Jen would be sent home to face her parents. The girls would be separated. For good. They thought they could convince all of that. They aren't as simple anymore.

For the next three nights, nothing in the shuck seems much to anyone else. A guy named Kenny tries to play his guitar, but two of its strings are broken, and the chords come off flat and flat. The beer is going fast, the drugs are almost gone. Even a pup from Sacramento brings home to lighten the mood. The woods wind up instead of escaping the tension.

Alysha chooses the black and gold dog with floppy ears. He gets it from the tin pail around, looking like a golden-haired young man inside the shuck. Rain falls into the tin pail around them, making like footsteps in a hunched heavens, as though everything they hoped to escape is determined to find them. Finally, almost desperately, Jen giggles one more time, and Nick raises his head and screams:

"SHUT THE F— UP!"

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Sharon kicks the puppy and stabs at the ground. He says nothing. "The next morning, he and the puppy all go on the Humboldt, and together they head 300 miles south to San Francisco in Sacramento. Sharon is now 20 years old. He is no longer a teenager who belongs at the WIND Center. Sacramento's drop-in facility for homeless and runaway teens. He is becoming a homeless man who can't give the puppy the care it needs. He gives it away.

That night, Sharon sleep walks, again, in Sacramento. Alysha's words ring in his head: "Don't go back to Sacramento. In a world... you just got stuck."

The same morning Sharon bailed, Jen and Alysha took off and said goodbye to the sea. In Grass Valley, Jen called her grandparents in Winnemucca, near Winnemucca, and asked them to wire 200 for her ticket. Jen and Alysha were angry because, among other things, the guy refused to share their marijuana. When the grandparents cashed the check, the girls bought two 10-hour rides to Southern California, where they planned to stay until they decided what to do and where to go.

For now, Kirtlan keeps alive by hanging with the next generation of Sacramento street kids. The new girls are pretty and diverse, like Alysha, Jen and Sharon; their faces have the rawness and street wear old faces have. They stand and sit, talk to each other, way out, the same way Ryan did with them. The new group of girls are in their late teens, and there is even a younger male named Ryan, with blue eyes like Ryan's and a profile like Sharon's.

One night, in this group, is the son of the Hoghead. A woman named Sam in a law firm with a pool hall and a well-stocked jukebox. They chase out chickens, except for one cuddly couple who look up, someone, and when they hear the kids rumble in, there are nine of them. The girls are 15 and younger. The boys are 16 and older. One boy notes the couple's expression and says, "Those guys probably think we're going to mug them."

One of the girls is 11; she should be in sixth grade. She wears a choker around her neck, with a jeweled patch hanging from it. One of her street friends is a 25-year-old woman who sleeps by the river. The woman is four months pregnant, and she likes to flash her bare breasts when she is drunk. The 11-year-old has learned several attention-grabbing techniques from this friend. Since January, the girl has spent most afternoons and evenings hanging around this crowd of older street people. At 9 p.m., the group gathers, and she meets her mother near Benicia.

The light in the pool hall is a low green fluorescent, and on the jukebox Funky Floyd chants, "Rough House! Rough House!"

"I was on, said Kirtlan. "Did you get it from there?" asks the 11-year-old.

"No."

Please see TEEN page next.
'I don't got nobody to pick me up off my feet
and say, "Here, Blondie."' Her voice quivers.
Blondie says, 'What happens to people like me?'

Blondie admires a flower inside a guano
at Loaves & Fishes.
"Pink carnations are my favorite flower," she
says. "It's my birth flower, and the first
flower I ever got was a carnation,
and it was pink and it was from
my dad."

Blondie, who is frequently found by the fence at
Loaves & Fishes, heads for her camp along the
American River with a friend and her dog. Below: A
letter from a friend in jail has Blondie engrossed at
her camp, which is near the bike trail on the river.
The 11-year-old will do anything to keep her from being lured away. The girl has a brain and a mother who sometimes talks about what they do. Her grandmother lives in an apartment building in Richmond. Every day, they discuss the events of the day, and this is one of their favorite subjects. The girl loves to hear about the events of the day, and she listens carefully. The girl's mother is often away, and she has been known to stay up late at night to talk about the events of the day. She has also been known to stay up late at night to talk about the events of the day.

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Shroomy has dreams of touring with a band he recently formed.
And Ryan, too, has plans to leave Sacramento.
'I miss the old crew,' he says, 'I don't know who's my friend anymore.'

They have dreams and hope

Cindy Stiffler hugs her former foster daughter as she leaves Alysha at a group home in April.

Hardened hearts no answer for homeless teens

This editorial appeared Nov. 7, 1999

A new story of four homeless teenagers unfolded in The Record, the parental impulse was to take these kids by the shoulders, shake vigorously and scream, 'Stop! Don't you know you're ruining your lives?'

In chronicling 10 months in the lives of teens on the street, Sacramento Bee reporter Doug Thorson and photographer Bryan Patrick made it clear that's an illusion. These hard-core street kids have heard many times from parents and stepparents, from foster parents, from counselors at youth centers and the shelters and the shelters and the shelters and the shelters and the shelters... even from the police. But, with that peculiar disinterest that afflicts so many young people, they seem not to hear. Worse, once drawn into the homeless lifestyle, they find it hard to escape.

One of these teenagers - Jen - comes from what looks like a stable, loving family. She reminds us that sometimes even good parents can lose their children. The others - Alysha, Shroomy and Ryan - all were former foster children, abandoned years ago by their own parents. Their situations are palpably predictable, the result of childhoods filled with pain and abuse.
Sears becomes tool to help Sears agencies work its system...