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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,

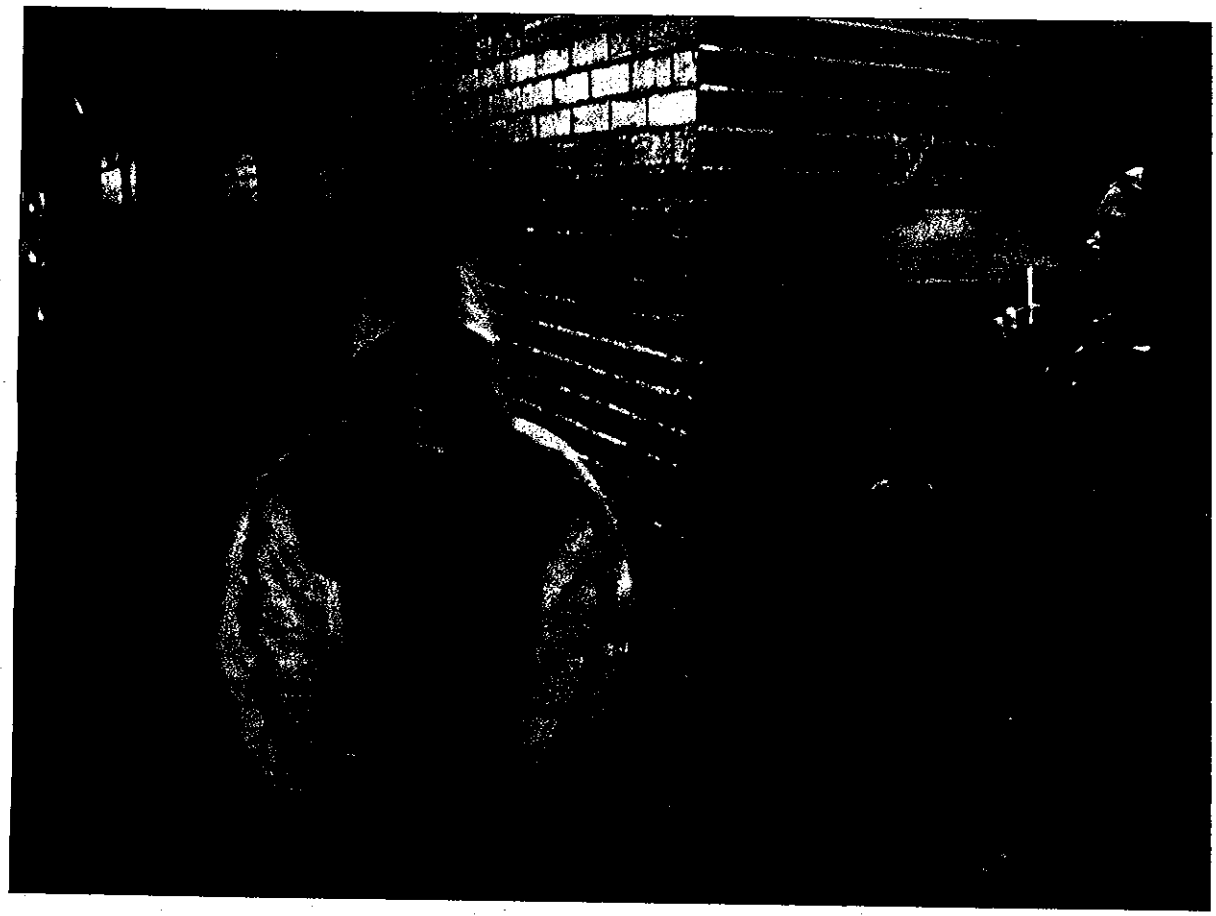
Joyce Terhaar
Managing Editor

The Sacramento Bee

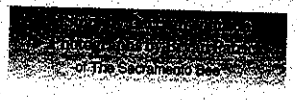
SPECIAL REPORT

DEAD-END DREAMS

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.**



Gritty streets offer teens an illusion of home



of The Sacramento Bee

Above: Jen, left, and Alysha wait for a light-rail train on a winter night on K Street. They prefer life downtown where street kids "don't judge each other." At left: Ryan, left, and friends scatter as a police car cruises the tunnel that connects Old Sacramento and the Downtown Plaza. The Circle, on the eastern end of this tunnel, is a central hangout for homeless teenagers downtown.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This four-part series chronicling the lives of four teens living on Sacramento's streets put a spotlight on a problem easily ignored or forgotten: runaway and homeless teenagers. Please see Executive Editor Rick Rodriguez's column on page 6.

It has come to this: Two bus tickets and a thick black Thursday night, an old hooded sweat shirt and a jacket but no extra underwear, one tube of Bonne Bell lip gloss, two silver barrettes, a package of candy corn and an angry urge to blow.

So at a little before 8 on a night in March, Jen and Alysha are last seen running from their lives as suburban Sacramento teenagers turned homeless downtown street kids. This time, they believe, they will not be back. And when their bus pulls into Humboldt County at 4 a.m., the girls will find a bench under a dim street light. They will watch their breath exhale in cold, white puffs, and hope that soon their friends will find them.

Jen is 16. Alysha is Jen's foster sister. She is 17. When both of them are happy, they grin and sort of bounce like refugee cheerleaders from an all-American high school. But at times like tonight, when their faces are frantic and their giggles become shrill, it is clear they are stretched too tight.

As the bus wheezes toward the fairy tale hills of Humboldt, Jen's mother — Alysha's foster mother — stands at the girls' bedroom window, in their house in Antelope. She watches the rain and checks the temperature and sees that it is 52 degrees. She wonders if the girls have blankets. She wonders if they have warm clothes. They left the house that morning to buy cigarettes but didn't come back. They got to the end of the street and disappeared.

This was the fifth time in five months the girls had run away. It all started in October 1998, when the temperatures dropped and the rains first came. Jen and Alysha were living on the streets downtown, the epicenter for Sacramento's runaways and homeless teens, where they shared drugs, begged for money and slept in condemned buildings. Out of this swirling crowd, they became close friends with two other homeless teenagers named Ryan and Shroomy.

This is their story.

These four teens will take you on an eight-month journey through Sacramento's homeless camps, to a shack in the

Please see TEENS, next page

This series was originally published in The Bee on Oct. 31-Nov. 3, 1999

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

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woods of Humboldt County and back to the city's suburbs. There will be cold nights and hard drugs and the dull gray cells of Juvenile Hall. There will be the crackling highs of close friendships and fickle, sharp betrayals. They'll take you through their childhoods — through stories that describe how a teenager comes to be homeless. They'll bloom in the moments of hope, when they reach out and someone reaches back. And they'll bend under the weight of family history.

These are some of the kids who hang outside Birdcage Centre in Citrus Heights. They're in Carmichael at the North Area Teen Center. They huddle with packs and sleeping bags under the trees at night in Fair Oaks Village. They wander up and down Del Paso Boulevard and throughout Old Sacramento.

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. Then they move to the abandoned buildings, riverbanks and underground sidewalks of downtown. During the day, they hang out at The Circle, that brick-lined space by the Holiday Inn, near the tunnel that leads from the Downtown Plaza to Old Sac.

It's impossible to know the exact numbers of homeless people in America. Various studies peg that figure anywhere from 1 million to 3 million. How many of those are teenagers isn't known either, but the National Runaway Switchboard, a clearinghouse for teens on the streets, estimates that a third of America's homeless are between 12 and 21 years old.

Sacramento's numbers are small but still troubling. Nearly all of the teenagers living on the city's streets grew up here. In the winter, they total about 50. In the summer, the numbers swell to 200 and higher.

The street kids tell stories like: "I was 16 when my mom and I first smoked crank together." Or: "My dad got paroled out of prison up here, so I came to live with him."

Ryan's mother vanished from their apartment and left him behind, by himself, when he was 15. He is now 19.

Shroomy's mom gave him to the state of California when he was very young. He is 19.

Alysha's mom left her twice.

Jen lived in a four-bedroom house in Antelope with her parents and brothers. She was 14 when she ran away for the first time.

Downtown these four teens created a new family. Downtown, they say, everyone belongs. "We don't judge each other," street kids brag, and they're all about the same age. It's like, Shroomy says, they've created on the streets a parallel high school clique where, finally, they are the "in-group."

Yet just 12 city blocks and a few more years of haggard living are all that separate these teens from the crowd at Loaves & Fishes, at North C and 12th streets. Loaves & Fishes is Sacramento's only daytime refuge for homeless adults.

Above: Shroomy wakes up under a J Street sidewalk with his machete at his side. At right: Shroomy, second from right, and Kerry get dinner in Old Sacramento from Marcie Sinclair, right, and Leola Reeves of the WIND Center for homeless teens.

Alysha and Jen hug a friend they haven't seen in a couple of days.

Here you find people like Blondie.

Blondie moved to the streets when she was 14, much like the runaways who are following her footsteps. She is now 21, and the teens downtown know her and talk to her. But sometimes she scares them. For Blondie, the streets are no longer an escape. They are her life. She lives in a camp by the American River, and she hangs with a tough, intimidating crowd — homeless people who can make downtown shoppers uncomfortable. Last year, two of her friends were charged with beating Blondie's boyfriend to death. Her lifestyle is proof that the fresh-faced kids who come downtown "to find," as they say, "a better life" might grow old on the streets.

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Nighttime. Dec. 1, 1998, the corner of 18th and R streets. The neighborhood is broken bottles and vacant lots and warehouses. A full moon casts a yellow circle on the clouds. "It looks like someone on drugs," Shroomy says, "with the pupil all small in the middle." Jen giggles.

The light-rail trains rattle nearby, and the sound mixes with Alysha's constant coughing. Six homeless teenagers hide anxiously in the shadow of a bush, waiting for dinner. It frightens them to stay here, but they don't leave because they are hungry.

Already, they felt threatened by two men who stopped to talk. The men bounced "smileys" — Master Locks swung at the end of heavy chains — against their thighs and glanced at each teen's face. Then cops came but left after Alysha said they were waiting for the WIND Center, Sacramento's drop-in facility for homeless teens, which delivers dinner three times a week to homeless kids downtown.

"You're late," they tell the driver when he shows. It's 7:30 p.m. He hurries to unload the sandwiches, day-old muffins and Capri Sun juice drinks. Alysha, who is tall and skinny with long, blonde hair, is so hungry she doesn't even sit down to eat.

Jen shares her sandwich with Ryan. She is a wispy girl with Doc Martens on her feet and a blue ski hat pulled tight on her head. It makes her face look bare and mean, but in the back little hair tendrils peek out like daffodil petals. Her voice chirps like a bird's, and she wears a size 0. When she still lived at home, she bought her clothes in the children's department.

Shroomy, who is 6-foot-2, sits, stretches his legs in front of him and peels the cellophane from his sandwich. Around his
chain that "weighs about the sa
milk" — the better to crack the
to jack him. When he sleeps at
a machete near his pillow.

Ryan chews his peanut butt
sandwich. His baseball cap ducl
forehead and hides his face. He
jacket sleeve to show off his tat
forearm, in raised letters like a
wound, is the word "RYAN."

"What?" one of the others asl
you're going to forget your nam

The others laugh. Ryan yank
sleeve, suddenly embarrassed b
until a moment ago, made him

The van drives off. Ryan, Shr
Jen and two others are left behi
bored on the street corner. They
go to a bar. They don't have mo
movies. No one owns a car. No c
driver's license. And now it's to
cold for anything but trouble to
walks. But it's too early to go h
of the Sacramento River, where
in cotton sleeping bags spread
They used to have a roof ove

Please s

. . . 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.*

Alysha, right, and Jen try to flag down a ride from Garberville back to the isolated cabin they're sharing with others in the woods of Humboldt County. Right: Shroomy, Ryan and a friend head for the Tower Bridge in search of a new place to stay.

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 F and 23rd. They climbed the skinny tree near the front porch, pulled themselves onto the roof and squeezed inside. Homeless adults, drug addicts and a fat, brown rat claimed most of the space, so the teens burrowed into the attic. They named the rat Splinter, and they tried to avoid the junkies' discarded needles. Outside, the grass and weeds grew unchecked. The place was a gloomy jungle — warped and desperate.

It was here that Jen woke up and grinned like life had finally eased up. One of the guys glanced over and grinned back: "Hey, Sunshine." And the lemon-drop girl was reborn. She became the chipper one with the nymphette voice. She was Sunshine.

The kids moved to the boarded-up brick place at 14th and V, then to a place on the Sacramento River. Now, December's nighttime temperatures are dropping into the 20s. 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."

Jen tugs on her beanie. Alysha coughs and pulls her parka tighter. They put the leftover food in Alysha's backpack and shuffle on.

A man who used to let the teens sleep in his home lives nearby. But they don't go there anymore, not since the night he woke Alysha up trying to take off her clothes.

Now, they figure, maybe they'll stop 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 somewhere shadowy and hidden, and they lean back and ingest and wait for their brains to shut down.

They'll do anything to stave off the boredom. Boredom leads to thinking too much, feeling too much and suburbs, "none of my friends were into" acid. Then she came downtown and "everyone was doing it."

Generally, as the drugs get stronger, they also get more expensive. For some of the kids downtown, something is required in the exchange. Sometimes that something is sex.

In the end, it all leads to trouble. And these are not youths who respect authority. Nearly all of them dropped out or got kicked out of school. They've been arrested for loitering or shoplifting or grand theft auto. They get into a fight and get charged with assault and battery. They sleep in an abandoned house and get cited for trespassing.

Most know that when they get sent to Juvenile Hall they will be required to wear institutional underwear worn by kids who came before them. Some say that the California Youth Authority prison smells like wet cement and stale potatoes. Many of them are foster kids who, at some point, became too old, too gangly, too settled into who they are to be cuddled and adored. Others have fled houses where attention was either paid irregularly or only with force.

wearing what to the junior prom, they talk about which felonies can be bargained down to misdemeanors, and whether they were handcuffed the last time they got arrested, and what it means to violate probation and then fail to appear to the court summons.

It does not take long before the streets become the familiar, and everything else is the unknown.

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It's been one week since the night the teens waited for dinner on the street corner. Alysha's cough is worse, so she and Jen and another street girl wander to Loaves & Fishes to see the free nurse. Alysha signs her name in pretty, bubbly handwriting. The big man monitoring the list checks her name, then jokes, "Hey. You didn't put your phone number down."

Alysha lights a cigarette and exhales smoke into his hairy face. "Don't have a phone," she says. "It's called walk around 'til you find me."

The nurse's office is in a trailer at the edge of Friendship Park at Loaves & Fishes where homeless adults spend their days. The girls wait with their backs to the scene — the bodies splayed on the benches, the legs traded along the chain link fence. The drug activity here will become so troublesome that five months from now, Loaves & Fishes will close the park for 10 days.

This is Blondie's territory. Most days, she crouches on a piece of cardboard at the end of the dead-end street, near the entrance to the park. When the girls passed her today, they did not say hello.

Jen pulls at the edge of her blue beanie. 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's with them and asks: "Do you have your $4 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 $164 weekly motel room with brown-stained towels in West Sacramento. Life at the river finally got too harsh — too wet and too cold — so they moved a few days ago. One of the teens got a job busing tables at Los Nopales in Old Sac. The vagrant works a few hours a week at Pretzel Time in the Downtown Plaza. The others who sleep there are expected to spange — as in, "Could you spare

▶ RYAN

Ryan Hebert's father left before he was born, and Ryan was reared 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 26 foster brothers, six foster sisters and seven sets 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.

▶ JEN

Jenifer Striffler has a first-degree black belt in tae kwon do, 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 1996, got kicked out of Rio Americano High School and was home-schooled until she ran away again in October 1998. 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.

◀ SHROOMY

Teddy Joe Hayes 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.

◀ ALYSHA

Alysha McLean is Jenifer Striffler's foster sister. She and Jenifer, 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 18th birthday scared 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

Jen covers her face to blot out the loud arguing of some friends. Afternoons often stretch long and empty in front of street teenagers at loose ends.

Several of the teens from the street s downtown Sacramento hotel room w marijuana pipe is being passed arou

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. It's 3 p.m., and the pharmacy is closed. So the girls straggle down 12th Street toward light rail, through the whispery silence of the city north of the train tracks.

Up the sidewalk, coming toward them, struts the kid who brags about stealing cars and his best friend, the guy who claims he used to deal crank to the boy prostitutes on 20th Street.

These two were the first good friends Jen and Alysha made when they ran away from home two months ago. The kid now pulls $186 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 spange downtown.

But the next time: One week later, Jen sees the kid. He rides up on his bike and tells her, "Kiss me."

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

They share a joint on the side of the road near Loaves & Fishes. A bearded man drives by in an old brown Datsun. 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, bro."

And then Jen kisses the kid again, and she climbs onto 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 giggling.

The WIND Youth Center is at the eastern edge of the Loaves & Fishes compound. It is a converted warehouse with high ceilings and industrial carpet. The teenagers love it here. They feel safe.

December has turned cloudy and colder. Shroomy, 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 get lunch. He sits at the table, grips the edge of his chair and talks about his older brother who committed suicide. As Shroomy pulls up his shirt and shows off the tattoos that remind him of his brother — he has a bloody-eyed skull on his right biceps, one skull on his right pectoral, and on his stomach is an open mouth exhaling razor blades — Blondie walks through the front door.

She looks wilted and dirty. Like Jen, Blondie has golden hair and a trilling laugh, and she likes to laugh often. But where Jen is small and lithe, Blondie is 6 feet tall, with green eyes, high cheekbones and an electrifying charisma. She's savagely funny and affectionate. She is a woman who can walk into a place and make people wonder, "Who is that?"

Yet her beauty is fading fast, compliments of life on the streets. On many winter days, Blondie looks like an aging woman. She often hides her face in the hood of a cotton poncho.

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 streets 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 noticeable because it is the eeriest. The handprint she made, even way back then, was made with the hand of a skeleton.

She is here to get ready for a date. She walks into the shower room and locks the door.

Windsor," Shroomy is saying, leaning too far back in his chair and listing all the Shakespeare plays he says he has read. "'The Henrys' — I call them the Henrys because there are several of them."

Shroomy likes to boast he's the smartest guy around. He likes to boast about a lot of things. He says his hands are registered weapons in the state of Kansas. He says he broke the noses of 24 people back in the days when he boxed. He says he has held more than 23 jobs, including ones as a fire breather and a body piercer in a traveling carnival.

Yet when he talks about Shakespeare, his voice changes. When he sees a book he might like to read, his face flares like a jack-o'-lantern lit from inside. He says, "I just like reading. I like writing. I like everything about it, except for proper grammar, like semicolons and apostrophes and stuff."

His favorite poem by Shakespeare is "The Rape of Lucrece." His favorite play is "As You Like It." The poem, Shroomy says, is about what happens when innocence is defiled. How the trouble spreads outward. The play, he says, is about a troubled family that reneges on its obligations to the children. Shroomy sees a connection between his life and Shakespeare's plots: "All of his plays deal with a very traumatic experience. You figure he probably had something like that happen, and that made him very empathetic to other people."

Above: Shroomy and Kerry clean up in a hotel bathroom before they leave on their planned trip through the Southwest.

Left: Blondie digs into lunch at the WIND Center for homeless teens. She was one of the first teenagers fed at the center after it opened in 1994, and its northern wall carries her painted handprint.

Blondie bleaches a friend's hair on the sidewalk in front of Loaves & Fishes.

Which means, 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.

Blondie emerges from the shower 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 Shroomy leaves the center that day, he too slides to the back of the building and slouches over. In a quiet, small voice he says to a staff member, "Leola, I need some socks."

Today Alysha's boyfriend sports a new look: A half-shaved head and a tuft of yellow curls on top. He's walking up the escalator in the Downtown Plaza, toward the food court. It's Dec. 14. He's got news.

Jen smokes cigarettes and wears blue sunglasses — "I like the world more blue," she says. She fills out a job application to Contempo Casuals, her favorite store. Its clothes suggest things like nighttime seductions and pink neon lights, and her parents, who joined a Pentecostal church four years ago, never liked the clothes she bought there.

"Do you have reliable transportation?" asks the application. "Yes!" Jen chirps. "My feet." Where it asks for "special skills," she writes: "Captain of Drill Team." When she was 11 or 12, her team went to San Diego, she says, "and we had a van — this was before I knew about religion and stuff — that was funny looking, and we called ourselves Skaters for Christ, as a joke."

"Hey." Alysha's boyfriend starts talking before he gets to the table. "Alysha got arrested."

Jen turns around like she didn't hear him right. "Shoplifting," he says. At the Safeway on Alhambra. She shoplifted an eyelash curler. "She bought bags of groceries," the boyfriend says. "She got caught over an eyelash curler."

Jen freezes, and her face gets a strained look like everything she was standing on just fell 20 feet and she's waiting for the crash to come. She pushes her sunglasses on top of her head. Slowly, almost dreamily, she asks if anyone has 35 cents. She goes to a pay phone and dials the seven numbers to her parents' house, which is about 15 miles away from the Downtown Plaza. Her mother answers. Jen's voice goes quiet and respectful.

Why don't you come home, her

Please see TEENS, next page

'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 that Jen has chosen Alysha over her family. Were we really that bad, she wonders.

Jen whispers, "I don't know."

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

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

Jen whispers goodbye and returns to the table. The blue sunglasses slip down to her face. She pushes them back and sighs: "I need rose-colored glasses."

More than anything, Alysha wants to forge a family with Jen's parents and brothers. In July 1999, she will turn 18. This family is her last chance. If she can't work things out with Jen's parents, Alysha will once again become — for always — nobody's child.

And now their mom says: Never again.

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

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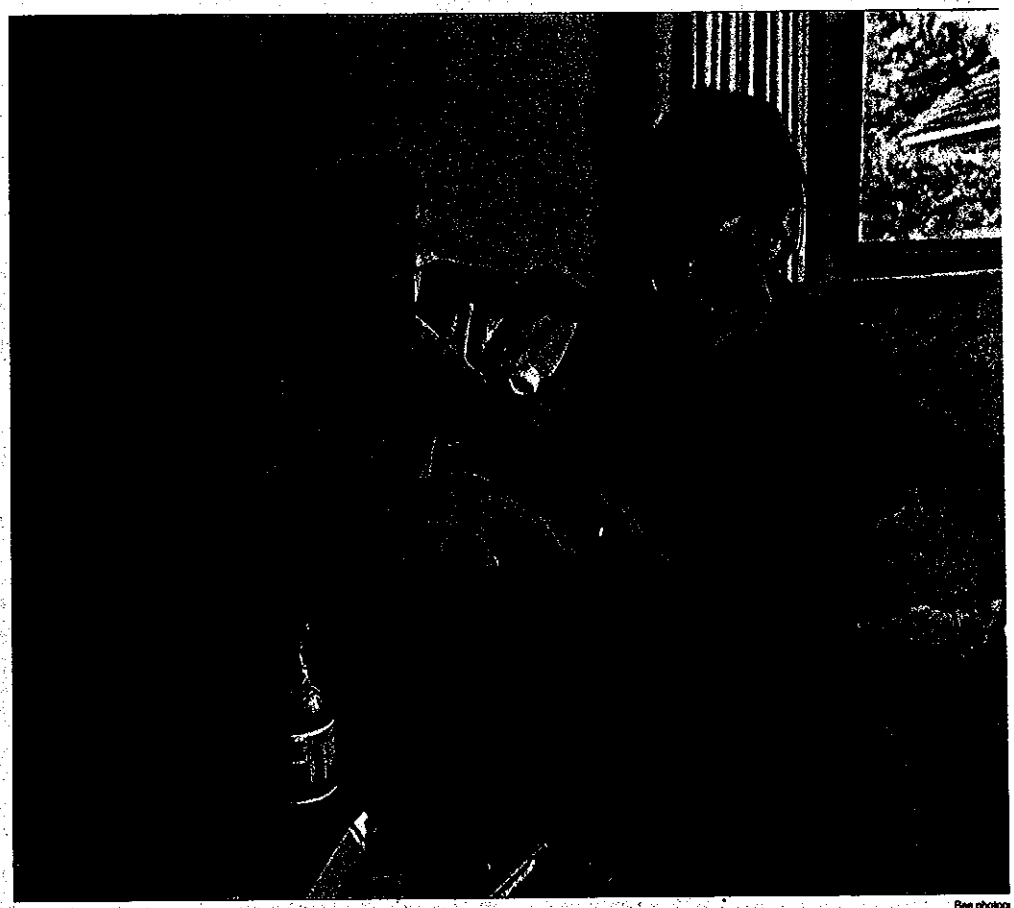

See photog

Cindy Striffler cradles Alysha, her foster daughter, on her lap in her Antelope home as she takes a cigarette lighter from her daughter Jen.

Streets a 'vortex' that sucks in teens

If she can't work things out with Jen's parents, Alysha will once again become — for always — nobody's child.

And now their mom says: Never again.

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

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The authorities take Alysha to a temporary foster home, where she walks outside to smoke a cigarette, then sprints to the nearest busy street and hitchhikes back to her friends downtown.

Four days later, on a dark Friday night, she and Jen eat Famous Star hamburgers and giggle wildly with each other at the Carl's Jr. in Old Sac.

"Me and her," Alysha says, "we make each other laugh all night long!" Jen shrieks and pulls her head back so the sound comes out louder. From the speakers above, Shawn Colvin sings. When it gets to the chorus, they scream their favorite line: "Sonny came ... home ... with ... a vengeance!"

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

It is now one week before Christmas, and they want presents, they want clothes, they want love, they want warmth. And if Alysha can't go home with Jen, Jen won't go home at all. They are angry today, as cold and sharp as shattered glass, teenage girls who want so badly for things to be different but who have no idea how to double back on everything that's led them here.

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

They immediately get arrested.

In the van on the way to Juvenile Hall, Jen later recalls, Alysha asks, "Do you think Mom will let me come home this time?"

Jen changes the subject. ♦

Streets a 'vortex' that sucks in teens

Second of four parts

By Darragh Johnson
Bee Staff Writer

The officer in the cell doorway tells Alysha she has a visitor.

Alysha sneers.

Can't only your family visit you, she asks.

Yes.

Well, she says, I don't know any of my family.

He tells her to come anyway, and Alysha follows him, unsettled and convinced that once again the system is playing games with her.

The officer ushers her through Sacramento County's Juvenile Hall and into a chilly interview room. It has a gray floor and concrete walls. Behind the unsteady table in the middle of the room, Alysha sees Cindy Striffler, her most recent "Mom," the foster mother who one week ago flat-out refused to have anything more to do with her. The 17-year-old girl begins to sob.

Shroomy finds shelter on a rainy day in a downtown parking garage.

She tells Mrs. Striffler, I didn't think you were going to come.

Two weeks before Christmas 1998, Alysha was twice arrested for shoplifting. The first time was for stealing a $5 eyelash curler from Safeway. The second time was for stealing hundreds of dollars in clothes from Macy's in the Downtown Plaza.

Alysha's partner on the Macy's binge was Jenifer, her foster sister, Mrs. Striffler's biological daughter. Although the girls were booked on the same charges, Jen was allowed to return to the Strifflers' home in Antelope a day later. Alysha had to wait. She is a foster child who believes the bonds to her families are only as strong as convenience makes them. At times like this, when she's become almost more trouble than she's worth, she reverts again to being nobody's child.

"You've got to make some changes, Alysha," Mrs. Striffler recalls telling her, "because we can't just keep going this way. It just is not going to work."

"I know," Alysha answers. "I know, Mom. Thank you so much for coming."

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

Alysha's and Jen's return home is also complicated by the two months they'd spent as runaways. The Strifflers remember answering wrong-number phone calls in the middle of the night. "My whole body would freeze," Mrs. Striffler says. "I'd think: This is it. This is the phone call. I'm going to have to go identify the bodies."

They remember, too, the break-in. It happened in October, on a Sunday morning, about a week after Jen and Alysha ran away. The Strifflers were at church. The family returned home and found a bedroom window broken. The backyard hose was yanked into the living room, and the water was turned up high. Gifts given to Mrs. Striffler were gone.

The burglary did not appear to be motivated by money. It appeared, the police said, to be motivated by something more personal — something like hate or revenge or fierce anger.

It appeared, Mrs. Striffler figured, that her daughters were involved.

Jen and Alysha ran away on a late Saturday night in October 1998. They had spent that evening at a church

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Above: Cindy Striffler laughs as her daughter Jen tries to talk her mother into buying her some candy in a convenience store. Right: Cindy Striffler weeps in the waiting room of Sacramento Juvenile Court as a security fence stretches behind her. She was there with Alysha for an incident that occurred the previous October.

They saw youngsters with **hopes and dreams** *who care about each other and who want to be loved. They saw* **families looking for answers** *and hoping for solutions.*

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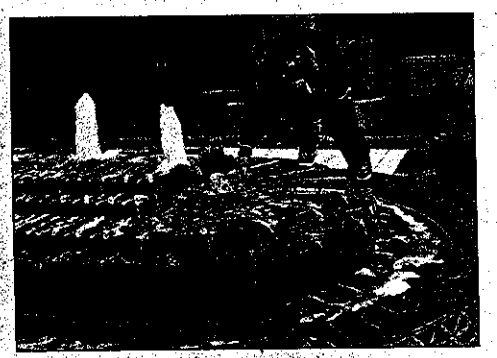


Shroomy fishes change from a fountain in the Downtown Plaza.

Below: A skateboard-carrying Ryan and a friend return to their temporary home — a tarpaulin strung on branches — on the Sacramento River.

Series puts spotlight on a problem easily forgotten

RICK RODRIGUEZ

You see their youthful faces as they ask for spare change, and you wonder how they could be homeless so young.

You wonder what went so wrong in their early lives that they find themselves sleeping in abandoned houses or rummaging through trash bins for food.

You wonder whether they will ever lead 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 Shroomy. 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 homelessness.

Reporter Darragh Johnson and photographer Bryan Patrick spent hundreds of hours over several months, following Alysha, Jen, Ryan and Shroomy, talking to them, observing the way they live and essentially 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 usage. They saw — but in no way encouraged — trespassing. They met other kids along the way who claimed to deal drugs or steal cars. They saw family feuds and inter- and intra-group squabbles.

But they also saw youngsters with hopes and dreams, who care about each other and who want to be loved. They saw families struggling with a multitude of issues, looking for answers and hoping for solutions. And they saw homeless service agencies trying to get the four youths off the streets with little or no success.

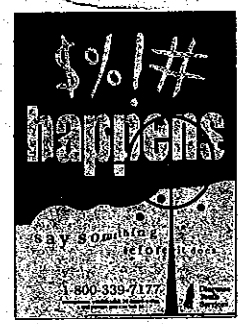
Throughout the project, Johnson and Patrick were given extraordinary access by Jen, Alysha, Ryan and Shroomy. The stories' narrative style is largely a reflection of the fact that Johnson and Patrick were there to witness and listen while events unfolded — some good, some bad — in the lives of the four. In the streets, at campsites along the banks of the Sacramento River, in a leaky, unheated shack in Humboldt County, 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 staffers into her home and shared her emotional highs and lows periodically with 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 connect better with Jen and Alysha.

In the reporting of the project, Johnson and Patrick were careful not to lecture their subjects or to judge them. When they asked for money, Patrick recalls he gave them fruit instead. Occasionally, Johnson and Patrick would oblige their subjects when they asked for rides. But our staffers did their best to uphold a basic tenet of journalism, to not 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 like and genuinely care about the four and others like them.

In that vein, The Bee has donated $2,000 to underwrite the printing of a poster that will direct students to a phone hotline for help in times of crisis. The hotline, (800) 339-7177, is anonymous, confidential and staffed 24 hours a day by Diogenes Youth Services, a 30-year-old nonprofit agency that focuses on teens and their families.

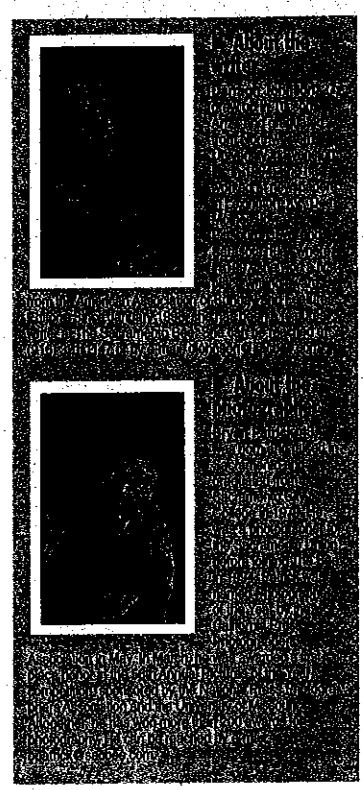


This poster, directing students to a hotline for help in times of crisis, is being distributed to schools.

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

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 Shroomy can do the same. ◆

Rick Rodriguez is Executive Editor of The Bee.



Teens: Feeling like nobody's kids

Contiaued from page 5

youth-group retreat, where they got stoned. They were flying high when the youth pastor caught them. Their eyes were glazed and their actions dazed, but they remember the pastor repeating "drug rehabilitation," and when they got home, the Strifflers 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 suburban teens climbed out their bedroom window and hitchhiked to a new life downtown, together.

They first caught up with a kid who brags about stealing cars and a guy who says he sells crank, and it wasn't long before they met two other homeless teenagers, Ryan and Shroomy. Soon, out of the crowd of kids who make up Sacramento's street scene, these four created what they believed was a newer, happier family. "These people," Jen exulted one day, "are the best people I've ever known."

But the girls learned quickly that downtwn "is a vortex," as Alysha says. You get down there and "you just get stuck." The drugs get stronger. The crimes get more serious. It doesn't take bng before the teens learn that they can survive on very little, and this realization reprograms their personalities into something feral, something that does not care about alarm clocks or work schedules or the intent to fulfill promises. "They are likewolves," says one worker at the WIND Center, Sacramento's drop-in facility for homeless teens. "They become wild out there."

Ryan, Shroomy, Alysha and Jen have been living on the streets of downtown Sacramento. They beg for money. They sleep in abandoned Victorians or boarded-up warehouses or on the banks of the Sacramento River, a milder version of the camps on the American. They go hungry. They don't go home. One street teen, a boy prostitute who worked 20th Street between J and L, 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 stubborn." One of Alysha's former foster mothers says, "The sins of the parents are 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 a fast-food restaurant near her "I Love Lucy" lunch box purse. Jen says Lucille Ball is her favorite television actor 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."

Shroomy says, about life on the streets, "Where else am I going to go? How am I going to get there?"

How did this happen?

How did these four teens — Shroomy, Ryan, Alysha and Jen, as well as the 200 or so who roam the streets of Sacramento during the warmer months — first decide that a homeless, hungry life at the edge of the city was better than remaining in the places they once called home?

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Shroomy was born Teddy Joe Brian Hayes in Modesto in 1979. He was the youngest of his mother's four children, and when he was very young, the kids were given to the state of California. Shroomy says his family fell apart because his mother "got in a car accident. She broke her neck. She severed parental rights to me and my brothers and my sister because she couldn't take care of us." His older cousin Elizabeth Skeen, who lives in Sacramento, says, "His mom did not get in a car accident. She just walked away one day.

Please see TEENS, next page

Above: School pictures and family photos crowd the top of Alysha's dresser in the Striffler's home. Left: Jen and Mrs. Striffler lace up their ice skates at a Roseville rink. A former coach says of Jen: "She's got a real presence on the ice. You can't teach that kind of artistic ability."

Taking risks comes naturally — and not every risk is negative

Most teens who come to the streets do so because they have no choice. Studies have shown that as many as half of homeless and runaway youth were kicked out of their houses 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 foster kid. Three out of five faced problems in school.

But there will always be hangers 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 Downtown Plaza, hung out at The Circle and was a student at Christian Brothers High School. Her divorced parents were both well-paid professionals. One of Jen's favorite people downtown was a girl who competed on the debate team at Kennedy 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?

Lynn Ponton is a professor of psychiatry at the University of California at San Francisco. She has worked with homeless and runaway teens in San Francisco for the last 20 years, and is 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 a separate individual."

By taking risks and trying out new experiences, young adults establish themselves as people with different identities from their parents.

Those experiences, Ponton says, can be positive or negative.

Positive risk-taking would include, for example, running for class office, competing on a swim 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 over and over again with razor blades), vandalism or appropriating the homeless lifestyle.

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

It wasn't until 1904 that a psychologist named G. Stanley Hall defined adolescence as the turbulent stage of life that ushers children into adulthood. His theories were well-received, and when Sigmund Freud came to America he met with Hall, grabbed onto the idea and helped popularize it.

The public bought it, Ponton says, because it made sense: "Teenagers are no longer little, they aren't cute, and they fight back. Parents read these ideas and said, 'Aha!'"

The 1960s only added to the myth that all teens are rebels. The generation gap was created, and adults started believing that "teens are different from us," Ponton says. "They are so different that there's not a prayer we'll ever understand them."

But parents remain incredibly important in their teenagers' lives. Ponton is the mother of two teens, and she says, "They look to us more than their peers. Even though they discount everything you say, they are taking it all in."

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

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

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

– Darragh 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 Shroomy and his cousin 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 a week after Shroomy, 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 womb, and Ryan now calls that guy "the bastard." His father is nonexistent in Ryan's life, but his mother seems omnipresent. His turquoise eyes come from her family, and he grew into a young man with a talent for sketching, just like his mother's grandfather.

When Ryan was 2, his half-brother DJ was born. Ryan's mother 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 esteemed 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?' He'll say 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.

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Alysha Colleen McLean was born in July 1981 in Woodland. She was the second of two children, and her mother was a pretty woman. Her father is someone Alysha doesn't talk much about. She now carries with her, from foster home to foster home, one cardboard box with all of her memories. But she has no baby pictures of herself, and she has no pictures of her mother.

When she was 2, her mother dropped her off at the baby sitter's house and didn't come back into her life until she was 5. In between, while she was living somewhere else, Alysha was sexually abused.

She was 6 when she testified in open court against that man.

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Jenifer Nicole Striffler was born in 1982 in Medford, Ore. She grew up as the second child, the pretty girl sandwiched between two brothers. She started figure skating when she was 6. Her mother, Cindy, made lacy dresses for her, and sometimes for school picture day Mrs. Striffler would cover a frame with the same fabric as her daughter's dress. Jenifer was, her mother says, "a little doll — a brown-eyed, blonde-haired doll."

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

Jen began writing poetry that scared her mother. "It was all about death and blood and stuff," Cindy Striffler says. Jen dyed her hair black and stopped wearing colors. Her parents disapproved of her outfits, and Jen says she returned home sometimes to find some of her more objectionable clothes missing.

Jen also felt lonely in school. "I was a nerd," she says. "I didn't have any friends." Her memories of elementary school recess are of playing alone.

Most days, she 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 tae kwon do, and she had become good friends with one of the girls from her martial arts classes. In the fall of 1996, the two girls ran away to San Diego. They were gone for two weeks. When Jen returned, she and her mother say she was expelled from Rio Americano High School for truancy, smoking a joint on campus and threatening to fight other kids. She was home-schooled for the next two years.

Yet throughout all this, Jen continued to ice skate. Ice skating was her release, and she was good. Very good. Her mother says Jen is "captivating." Jen's former coach, Julia Fessler, says, "She's got a real presence on the ice. You can't teach that kind of artistic ability." If Jen were to

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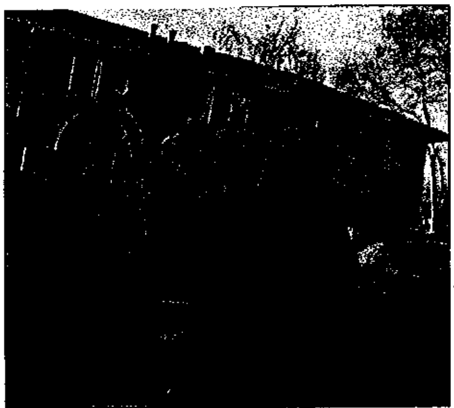
In his stepfather's Elk Grove home Ryan reads a letter from his long-unseen mother. His reaction: "All I wish she would say is 'I lo

With a machete over one shoulder, Ryan chomps on a doughnut in the tent he pitched along the Sacramento River in West Sacramento. For three years he ranged between Juvenile Hall and foster homes.

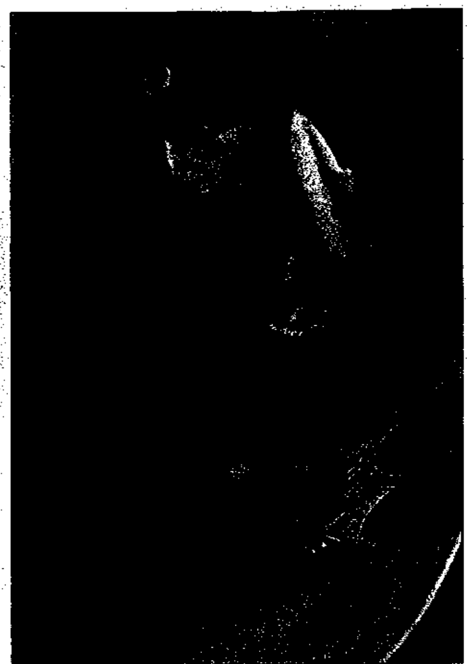
Later, the night after visiting his stepfather's home, Ryan rolls a cigarette by candlelight. Hi roost in an abandoned warehouse in east Sacramento has no electricity or running wate

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.**

Shroomy lugs his bedding through the tunnel that connects Old Sacramento and the Downtown Plaza. Social workers who have tested Shroomy say he "blew us away" with the results.



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



Shroomy leaves a dress shop in Sacramento's Downtown Plaza after visiting a friend there.

Shroomy takes shelter in a parking garage. "Where else am I going to go?" he asks about life on the streets. "How am I going to get there?"

Teens: Jen 'definitely has a future, if she wants it'

Continued from previous page

resume figure skating and try out for the Ice Capades, Fessler says, "they'd pull her (in) immediately."

"She definitely has a future, if she wants it."

▼

When Ryan was growing up, a successful future didn't seem so far-fetched. It seemed, instead, possible — even inevitable. He was part of a family. He played basketball and he drew well. At school "he never did above B's," says his stepfather, "but he has the potential. Ryan's a very intelligent young man, a very articulate young man."

field — in an apartment!" He says it was great. But the question "What happened?" stops him cold. In the moment before he gains control, something flits in his eyes. He stops smiling. "Um, I plead the Fifth." He gets quiet. "I don't want to talk about that."

His stepdad isn't sure of the details. He says Ryan and his mom got into a fight, and she left.

It didn't take long for the rage to catch up with Ryan. He says he kicked in an apartment door and beat up a kid who made fun of his mom. The police came to get him. They said — Ryan remembers this part — "Son, we're going to take you to a safe place now."

For the next three years, until he turned 18, Ryan ricocheted between Juvenile Hall and

His mother would occasionally drop into Shroomy's life, and then drop out again.

Eventually, because he'd been moved around so much — from Modesto to Colorado to Kansas to Utah — Shroomy stopped being able to remember where he did certain things, like read Shakespeare for the first time or start writing his novel.

But he 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 seethes:

How could you be so cruel?
I never hurt you.
Now I'd like to see you

remembers her stepdad. "I can laugh about it now, but it wasn't laughable then." Alysha says, "My stepmom didn't like us." Her stepmother recalls, sadly, "I wanted to reach out to her ... (but) she didn't want to receive me." Finally, after one horrible incident spun out of control, her stepfather says he took her brother to the Children's Receiving Home on Auburn Boulevard. A week later, her stepfather packed up Alysha's stuff and, Alysha says, he "got rid of me," too.

Her stepfather sees it differently. "You are not garbage," 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.'**

Teens: Shroomy has dreams of college, his mom says, but never sent paperwork

Continued from previous page

workers to take Alysha back.

Alysha says that "for the first three years, I was good." But it eventually became "pointless. I was trying for her acceptance so bad. ... So I sneaked out every night. Smoked weed. I just finally didn't care anymore. ... You know how normal kids are like: 'Oh, no, I don't want to get in trouble'? I honestly didn't care. So threaten me about kicking me out. Call them! I don't want to be here anymore."

"This is sad," Wion sighs. "But it's not an isolated case. There's a lot of people who have experienced this and rose above it and gone on with their lives. ... We do reach an age of accountability. We don't have a specific place in society for people who feel like their family failed them," and who therefore never have to get past it.

Alysha, she says, has to get past it.

Alysha says she doesn't know how.

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Foster care finished with Ryan when he turned 18. He had no job and couldn't afford an apartment, so his stepfather invited him to come live with him in his two-story house in Elk Grove.

That was in 1997. Ryan didn't stay for long. He was smoking a lot of pot and sleeping much of the day. Although his stepdad got him a job at McDonald's and enrolled him at Cosumnes River College, Ryan ignored school and got fired from the job. He and DJ weren't getting along, the stepdad says, and one night an argument turned into a fistfight.

Ryan's stepdad didn't know what else to do. He and his wife work in law enforcement. Ryan's drugs could have cost them their jobs. They finally had to ask Ryan to leave.

So in late summer 1997, Ryan moved to the streets of downtown, where he has lived ever since. His stepfather worries about Ryan's future — so much so that he asked that his name not be used. He works in a prison near Sacramento, and he worries about prisoners knowing too much about him and his relationship to Ryan. He worries because he fears, he says, that Ryan may spend part of his future on the other side of those prison bars.

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When Shroomy — Ted to his family — was 18, he moved to Sacramento. He hadn't graduated from high school, but he says he received his GED. He planned on living with his aunt and older cousin, Elizabeth, and trying to get into community college. "He's got dreams," says his mom, "to go to college and become a literature professor."

"But he never sent in the paperwork," says his cousin. "I think he was scared."

Scared of what? Social workers in Sacramento who have tested Shroomy say he "blew us away" with the results. His mother says, "They tested Ted when he was little, and he tested just below genius. Only problem with that was: They told him, too."

But intelligence gets you only so far. Shroomy is the first to admit that what he knows is the streets. What he doesn't know is how to get off of them.

"We haven't had the white-picket-fence family," says his cousin. "Not a lot of our family has succeeded."

She says, "I don't know if he knows what it's like to succeed."

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

The girls met a few years earlier at their church, the Abundant Life Fellowship in Roseville. After Alysha left Wion'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 into pot, and that was known" at church, but Mrs. Striffler also saw 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. And Jen asked, so I thought, 'Well, we'll give it a shot. Everyone deserves a chance.'"

Alysha and Jen shared a bedroom and would stay awake late, giggling loudly and keeping the rest of the family awake, too. The family got into fights about this. Jen stopped ice skating 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 shelters. Alysha would spend a few nights there, and then she'd 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 goody-two-shoes kids don't understand," Alysha says. Jen liked the fact that the downtown crowd adored her. They even renamed her. On the streets, she became a different person — a more carefree person. All she had to do was appear and people yelled out, like she was a movie star: "Sunshine!"

And even though their late December theft at Macy's landed them in court and back in the Strifflers' home, the girls continued to be drawn downtown. They were not going to school. They were not working. They were not preparing for any sort of future. They were simply spending every day of the winter on the streets with their friends, and every night they rode light rail home and went to sleep in the suburbs.

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At the very least, though, the girls had a home to go to. Ryan's home evaporated the day his mother walked out on him. But Ryan holds no grudges; he worships his mother. When Ryan doodles characters from the comic strips, the one he spends the most time re-creating is 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 Greyhound bus from Sacramento to Albany, N.Y., where she was living. He was supposed to stay a few weeks; he stayed only four or five days.

But now it's early in 1999, 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 sneakers. In dirty socks, he walks through the hallway, onto the cream carpet of the dining room. The house is quiet. His half-brother 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 jawline tenses like he's trying to decide what to do.

A few months earlier, when Jen was still staying on the river, she and Ryan used to lie awake after the others went to sleep. Ryan would stare at the sky and whisper to her, "I miss 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 looks up and he is crying.

"All I wish she would say," he whispers, "is, 'I love you.'" ◆

Teens' hopes blossom in spring

Third of four parts

By Darragh Johnson
Bee Staff Writer

Just when it seemed that winter's cold would crack their bones, and its shivery wet darkness would break their spirits, the most delirious season of the year showed up: Spring.

Suddenly it was time for wide-eyed, bare-shouldered glee. The sun shone. The kids shimmered. Ryan leaned his head back and shouted at the sky, "The trees are beautiful! There's no leaves, but they're beautiful!" There was no turning back. Something had happened. Spring had come.

And the kids were off the streets.

"I woke up sleeping by the river," Ryan says, "and I went to bed in a fully furnished apartment."

He begged. He promised. Diogenes, a transitional housing program in Rancho Cordova for people ages 18 to 21, had an opening, and Ryan needed to get out. Downtown life was fading.

His friends Jenifer and Alysha — who with Ryan and another homeless teen named Shroomy had formed 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 no longer went hungry, and they were warm, and they got to spend every day talking on the phone and hogging the bathroom, like regular teenagers living in a regular house in a regular Sacramento suburb.

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

Shroomy, too, had exchanged life on the streets for an apartment in Diogenes, and he'd been badgering Ryan to apply. "He made five appointments before he got up there," Shroomy says. He now serves as Ryan's alarm clock, coming by every morning before 9 to make sure Ryan gets out of bed.

Ryan's stepfather fears his 19-year-old stepson "could end up in the state penitentiary." Jen's mother says: "These girls are out of control." One of Alysha's former foster mothers worries the 17-year-old girl may wind up pregnant and "with an abusive man ... (and) the cycle will start all over." Shroomy's cousin once asked him: "Do you see the old men living on the street? Do you want to be like that? And have people be like, 'Get away from me.' Why would you 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. An escape. They are, as Shroomy's cousin worries, the short-term solution that becomes the long-term lifestyle. They are often a pretty bleak story.

Alysha and Jen share a cigarette in a shopping center near their Antelope home.

Bee photographs by Bryan Patrick

But now it's the beginning of February, and the nights are warmer. Instead of gloom, 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 extinguished.

▼

So on a sunny morning in the first week of February, Ryan wakes up in his very own bedroom, in a furnished apartment at Diogenes. By 11 a.m., he and his roommate are booming the radio: Bump! Bump! Bump! Nuh-nuh. Nuh! Nuh! Nuh! Bump-bump! Bump. The front door is open and the window screens bared, and Ryan slouches on a couch that was delivered — "still in the plastic!" — the night before.

He's just finished drawing, in blue, ebullient letters, a sign that reads "RYAN'S ROOM." He gets up to put it in his bedroom. On the way, he shows himself around the apartment, again.

"Here's our heater. It doesn't work. This is my bed. My socks." He kicks the socks under the bed and slides open his closet door. A pair of boots stands in the corner, heels flush with the wall. They are the only clothes in the closet.

"Here's a little ironing board," he says and opens a door in the hallway. "And big closets." He opens another door and nods at the top shelf. "Someone could sleep up there."

The communal life downtown encourages everyone to share, and if someone has 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 Diogenes' rules. Absolutely no one may visit unless the central office approves, and everyone must leave by 10 p.m. Diogenes workers patrol the apartments — they let themselves in and check all corners, cupboards and closets — but the kids are used to gambling. And they do. Many of Sacramento's street teens find themselves kicked out of Diogenes because they couldn't say no to their friends who needed a place to stay overnight.

Diogenes works with up to 16 young adults who need extra help. They get a place to live — two per apartment — and vouchers for food at Lucky's. Ryan's first shopping spree brought home 48 boxes of Top Ramen noodles, a box of Cap'n Crunch, a two-liter bottle of Pepsi, five dozen eggs, milk, salt, butter and fruit punch.

In return, the young adults must get a

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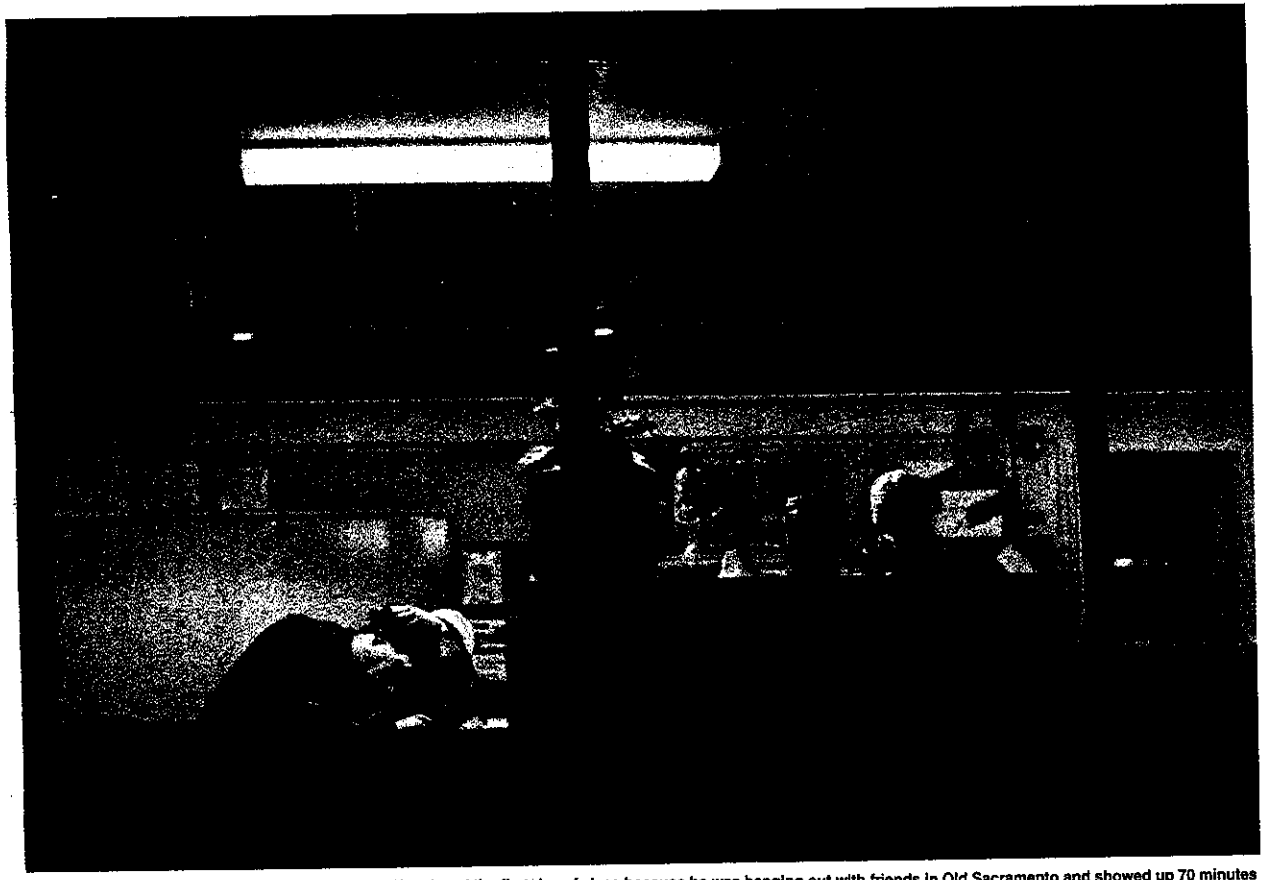
Ryan *practices locking and unlocking the door.* **His door. His keys.** *He's on his way out. No more nights by the river. No more breaking into* **boxcars** *to sleep in. No more* **squatting** *in abandoned buildings and* **begging** *for money. No more being a* **homeless teenager** *on the streets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

Back in their Antelope home after months on the streets, Alysha, right, puts on makeup as her foster sister Jen chats with a friend. The two girls are getting ready to visit friends in downtown Sacramento.

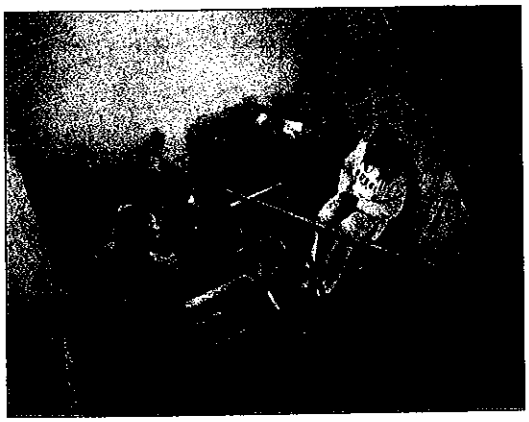
Teens: Ryan feels thrill of his own room



Ryan takes a test in his adult continuation school. He missed the first day of class because he was hanging out with friends in Old Sacramento and showed up 70 minutes

Above: On a warm spring-like day, teens drink alcohol, near the Tower Bridge in downtown Sacramento. Left: Jen and her boyfriend Joei share a kiss in Old Sacramento, a popular gathering spot for the city's homeless teenagers.

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.*



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.

Teens: Jen's teary-eyed as friend departs

Continued from page 10

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 9 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 Shroomy have learned to survive by ignoring the rules and flouting inconvenient laws. They justify their lives by believing that at least they are in control. They perceive that Diogenes' simple list of rules takes away that control.

A week after Ryan and his roommate moved into their apartment, they got into an argument with a woman downstairs. "She was all, 'There's no reason why a man or a woman should be homeless,'" Ryan said, his mouth clenched tight with anger. His roommate, too, was turning red. "Not me!" he said. "I don't want to be somewhere they tell me when I can sleep, when I can't sleep. 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 Diogenes social workers have learned to be wary of teens from the streets. Few of the teenagers last in the program for more than a month.

Which is what happened to Ryan two years earlier, when he got kicked out. He moved back to the riverbanks and the boarded-up, abandoned houses, where he has lived until now, February 1999.

But this time, he promised the social workers, he'd matured. He was 19, and in one month he would turn 20. He was ready to commit to a lifetime of early mornings, polished shoes, deadlines and, eventually, a back-pocket wallet that carried both the requirements for getting a job (a California ID and Social Security card) and the rewards of keeping that job (slick dollar bills).

The social workers finally consented, but they warned Ryan that he would receive only three strikes before he got kicked out. Period. Ryan solemnly agreed.

"Yeah, Mama!" blares the radio in the corner of his new dining room. "This surely ... is a dream."

Click. The radio is turned off, and in the abrupt silence Ryan's keys lightly jingle. Ryan and his roommate are headed downtown, and 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 downtown and shoplifting from supermarkets and scrounging for pot. No more Dumpster-diving for day-old fudge from the Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory in Old Sac. No more being a homeless teenager on the streets of Sacramento. 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 Sacramento street kid, Ryan has finally — and don't the keys prove it? — made it. He even called his stepdad to tell him the good news. His stepdad said, from his house in Elk Grove: "Good. Do good. You can do it."

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

▼

Sleeping pills, Jen says, are the only way to fall asleep. And mornings, she says, are woozy. She usually wakes after 10, eats a bowl of Froot Loops and chooses a pair of flared jeans and a rib-skimming top. She walks to the bus stop, hops the 80 south to Watt Avenue 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 live in her parents' house in Antelope, but her life exists downtown.

Today the sun is high. A winter chill lingers, but she is happy. She hooks up with the crowd at The Circle, between the Downtown Plaza and the tunnel to Old Sac. The group goes to the Sacramento River, and someone lights a marijuana pipe.

One guy takes a hit and suddenly proclaims that "life is all about marijuana, alcohol, sex and food."

"We're here only to procreate," chortles an older homeless man who's smoking with them. "There is no reason to life. No one's ever explained it."

Jen looks up. She believes desperately in God. "He does explain stuff to us," she says. She mentions the Bible. She says, "That's why he sent the Holy Spirit — to inspire someone to write it."

"No way." The man spits. "It was some guy, sitting around ... "

"You really think one person could just write that?"

"Some guy was sitting around, smoking and drinking and stuff ... "

"Shut up."

" ... and 2,000 years later we find it and ... "

"Shut up."

"... and we take it to heart." The word "heart" explodes in his voice.

"And besides." He leans closer to Jen. "Do you think God would let things get as f—— up as they are if there really was one?"

She stares at the man's crooked mouth. Her toe shoves into the ground and her face falls into sadness and everything goes blank. For this, she has no answer.

▼

It starts with the birth certificate, and it will end with the TV set. Other incidents will occur, but first Shroomy must endure the questions of whether he was, indeed, even born. And whether he is, or is not, a full-fledged, employable member of American society.

At about 5:30 on a breezy afternoon, one week after Ryan moved into his apartment, Shroomy gets off the light-rail train and starts walking fast, bouncing his skateboard into his shins.

"Hey," Ryan shouts across Seventh Street. "What are you doing?"

"Being upset," Shroomy yells.

Ryan crosses the street. "Why?"

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

For the last few weeks, Shroomy has worn a baseball cap and a green apron, and he's made sandwiches for customers at a Togo's restaurant. The day he got hired, he yelled to anyone who would listen, "I got a job!"

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

"It — hasn't — come," Shroomy seethes. "I paid money and expected to have it in four to six weeks."

It's been more than six weeks. In the middle of December, Shroomy filled out the forms and sent them to the Office of Vital Statistics in Modesto, the city where he was born. Even without the document in hand, Shroomy persuaded the Togo's manager to hire him. He promised the paper would come soon, and he would get his California ID and Social Security cards, so Togo's could fill out the proper tax forms. But today the manager told Shroomy he cannot continue working until the birth certificate arrives.

Shroomy jabs his skateboard faster into his shins. "I just want my birth certificate," he says, "so I can get my ID so I don't have to go back on the streets."

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

Blondie is 21. She has lived on the streets since she was 14. A year ago, her boyfriend Tommy Swafford was killed when two other street kids decided to teach him a lesson. He died after his skull was crushed with a

Please see TEENS, next page

Jen and Shroomy share a goodbye hug, above, shortly before Shroomy and his friend Kerry, left, set off on their trip. After a rainy morning, the skies had cleared enough by late afternoon for them to head for Interstate 80. "When I come back," Shroomy promised, "my hair will probably be down to right below my eyes."

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 Sacramento's hardcore homeless teens 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 these 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 runaways 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 Loaves & Fishes. It is privately funded.

Ryan eats an omelet he cooked in the apartment he shares under the sponsorship of the Diogenes program for homeless teenagers.

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 Bonpane, is to create relationships with the street kids. Few of these teens trust adults, WIND staffers say, 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 18 and older. Diogenes also does outreach, operates 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 so far, 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 Bueto, 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 animosity toward each other do nothing to help the kids. Programs become like the parents of an acrimonious divorce, 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 "enablers": Because the center tries to ease the pain of surviving on the street, it therefore makes it easier for kids to stay homeless. WIND staffers respond that you can't get anywhere with these kids until you earn their trust.

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

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

Offer a step between the anarchy 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 Genny 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 shelters, where they are required to obey a 9 p.m curfew, be sober when they show up 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 detoxed, get a job and start following rules — it's too big a shock," Price says.

Currently, neither of these approaches exists in Sacramento.

Approach teens with an attitude that sees them as resources

"They have something to contribute," says Jo Mestelle, 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 teens work with the staff to establish the rules of the program. They call it the "self-government model," and program director Ben Root 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 pizza business staffed entirely by homeless youth. It's called EAT PYE — Entrepreneurial Action To Promote Youth Employment — and three teens work 20 hours a week for $7 an hour, during 12-week stints. They cook the pizzas in a church kitchen downtown, and then sell slices 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.

– Darragh Johnson

Teens: ID bracelet bears name of slain friend

Continued from previous page

rock. Two guys have been charged with the murder. On Blondie's right wrist she wears a sterling silver ID bracelet inscribed: RIP T.D.S. On the other side are the dates of his life: 3-31-80 4-27-98.

Blondie still lives by the river, about 100 yards away from his memorial site, in a clearing she shares with her dog Honey. "I named her Honey," she says, "so I could say: 'Honey, I'm home' and have someone come and love and give me affection. ... I guess I was lonely."

Sometimes, late in the afternoon at Loaves & Fishes, the drop-in center for homeless adults, Blondie and Honey play fetch. The dog will only chase rocks. One day, Blondie hurled the stone on purpose over the chain-link fence. The dog ran to the fence and stared at the rock, then looked back at Blondie.

"Oh," Blondie cooed to the disappointed-looking dog. "Life sucks."

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The house is a cauldron of silent walls and swirling tensions, Jen says. So at 1 p.m. on a rainy day when the wind blows cold and spring suddenly seems a false promise, Jen leaves and wanders downtown. "Something lifts," she says, "when I come downtown."

She goes to the quiet darkness of a motel room in West Sacramento. The drapes are closed. The room smells of sweat and unwashed bodies. Jen sits by the window and curls her knees into her rib cage. She is alone with the grim-toothed vagrant who lives here. He often invites the kids to stay with him. He is stretched on the bed, his belly pointed at the ceiling and his bare feet hanging off the end. He stares at the TV.

They barely talk. Jen methodically smokes every cigarette in two packs of Marlboros. The man gets up once to take a shower. A while later, Jen stands up to go to the bathroom. Right before sunset, she returns a stray blue card from the nightstand to the card deck.

When it gets dark and neon lights blaze down West Capitol Avenue, a guy with a bike hustles into the room. He reaches into the drawer in the bedside cabinet and pulls out a one-inch by one-inch plastic bag. At the bottom floats a haze of white powder. He pours the powder into an upside-down light bulb. The man on the bed heats the bulb with a match. Crank fumes drift up. The guy with the bike inhales them through the empty tube of a Bic ballpoint pen gone filthy.

Jen sits beside him and watches.

Blondie, who has lived on the streets for seven years, plays with her dog Honey outside Loaves & Fishes.

▼

She returns home that night. But a few weeks later, she is back downtown, in the dark, in the cold, in a daze. The only sign of spring now is the dead daffodil she grips in her left hand. Her hair is darker tonight — a fading red — and she's wearing a tarnished nose ring. Her laugh still burbles up, a deep sound from such a small girl, but she looks exhausted and skinny and scared.

She says her parents pretty much kicked her and Alysha out of the house. It happened yesterday, on Sunday afternoon after church, when the family got into a monstrous fight. The girls wanted to spend the night downtown with their boyfriends. Their father said no. Yes, the girls pressed. Their mother had said it was OK. "I thought it would be a good timeout," said their mother, Cindy Striffler. But their father, Larry Striffler, insisted, No. Tempers raged. The tension swirled higher until finally, Mr. Striffler said, his "blood pressure was sky-high." He turned to the phone to call the girls' probation officer. The girls figured if he was trying to send them to Juvenile Hall they might as well leave. So they did.

Their mother said the phone call was an attempt to gain control. "No matter what we said, they just did whatever. But now that there's a probation officer, it's like there's leverage. ... I've told Alysha that several times, and I've told Jenifer that a few times, too: 'Screw this. I'm just calling your probation officer. I'm sick of all this crap. You know: I can keep you under control.' "

Once they got downtown, the girls split up. Alysha went with her boyfriend, and Jen now waits at the St. Rose of Lima light-rail stop, next to the outdoor ice skating rink. It is 7 p.m. She is headed to Ryan's apartment at Diogenes, where she will call her mother. By leaving home again, the girls are violating their probation. Their mom is trying to salvage that situation, but Jen won't know what they should do until she calls home. Right before the train comes, a man in a white shirt and tie walks by and hands her a brochure that says: "Enjoy family life. Can families really be happy? How is it possible?"

When the train comes, she boards and sits silently until the Starfire stop, where she gets off and walks along the edge of Folsom Boulevard, under the Highway 50 overpass, toward the Shell station where she will take a left to get to Ryan's apartment. The night is moonless, and only when a car drives by and its headlights shine on the edge of the road, can Jen see the broken glass and trash she is walking through. Men on bicycles ride past slowly and stare.

She lets herself into Ryan's apartment with the keys he gave her, and she calls her mother.

"Hi. I'm over at — Why? ... When? ... Ohhhh ... Said yes to Diogenes? Mmmm hmmm ... But she wasn't saying we could ... Oh, yeah. So we can go there tonight?"

Her mother has solved the girls' problems — for now. If Jen and Alysha check into the Diogenes Emergency Safe Shelter for children (which is different from the transitional housing program), their probation officer won't issue warrants for their arrest. Now Jen must return downtown to find Alysha so their mother can drive them to the shelter. The panic has started to rise. "I just hope Alysha's down there," she says. "She just better be down there."

She walks to the end of the street to wait for her mother, who soon pulls up in a new Thunderbird. Religious music plays on the stereo. Cindy Striffler has been crying. "Once again," she says, "I'm out my girls." She wants them to come home, but her husband is furious. Because he loves Jen and Alysha, he tries to set boundaries, he says. When the girls don't heed those boundaries, he gets angry, and Alysha pushes harder. He still loves Alysha, but is not convinced that she should come back to live in their house, he says.

And if Alysha doesn't come home, Jen won't come home. They are teenagers who define themselves not by their family, but by each other.

By 9 p.m., Jen and her mother have scoured Old Sac and The Circle. The kids in the area haven't seen Alysha. Jen tells her mom to drive to a gas station on 16th Street, near the freeway. There, they find Alysha and her boyfriend. The girl trips into Mrs. Striffler's arms and sobs, "I love you, Mom!"

She won't let go of the hug. She does not want to go to the shelter. She turns to Jen and says, "At least you get to go home."

"No, I don't," Jen says.

"Really?" Alysha asks, her face suddenly happier. "Really? You're going with me? Well, that'll at least be better if we do it together."

But that doesn't stop her from saying, as they head to the shelter: "I'm being sent away again. I keep thinking I'm not going to care, and every time I care."

▼

Jen and Alysha stay at the Safe Shelter for about a week. By the time they are allowed to return home, the tensions have risen so high that their dad only smiles shyly and says nothing when he comes home from work and sees them watching TV. About an hour later, he tells Alysha: "Nate called you." Alysha nods.

Their mother spends the day crying. Jen's face looks stretched-out and unhappy. "I'm bored of crying," she says. "I don't think I could. My tear ducts are all dried up."

She escapes by turning the TV to Ricki Lake.

Her mother asks, "Why are you watching this?"

"Because," Jen answers, "I like to watch people's lives that are worse than mine."

And now, near the end of February, as spring seems to have blown away permanently with the shrill wind and drizzle that replaced it, Alysha and Jen run into Shroomy on the light-rail train. Strapped to his back are a bulging green pack and sleeping bag.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Alysha asks.

"We hadn't decided." Shroomy looks sort of sheepish. It's clear he's decided now. The TV pushed him over the edge. After he lost the job at Togo's because he didn't have his birth certificate and couldn't present a valid California ID, Diogenes took away his TV. The rule is: You don't get a TV 'til you get a job. The rule became: If you lose the job, you lose the TV. Shroomy felt, once again, like everyone else was controlling his life, but none of those people cared about him. "And when I can't fall asleep by watching 'M*A*S*H,' " he says, "then screw it."

When they get off the train, Shroomy sits down and rests his pack on the steps at the Hard Rock Cafe in Downtown Plaza. Jen sits next to him. She's dyed her hair a deep purplish burgundy, dark as a bruise.

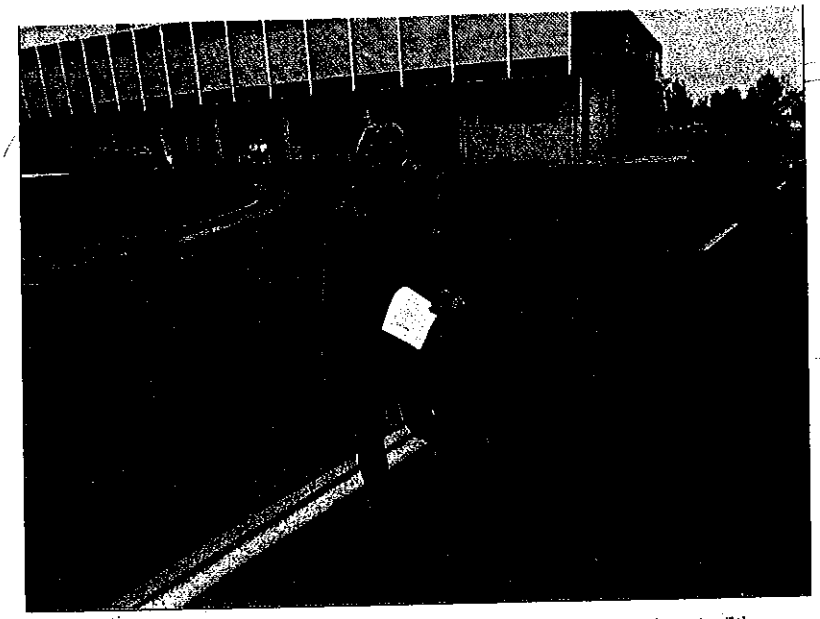
"What if we just locked you in a closet, and you'd never be able to go forever?" She looks up. He smiles at her. But she's serious. Life at home requires "too much" effort, Jen says. She doesn't like "having to go to counseling, working out our problems." She says, "I just want to hide ...

Please see TEENS, next page

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

Alysha, right, quarrels with her foster mother, Cindy Striffler, over Alysha's scheduled appearance in Juvenile Court. During the months that Alysha and Jen, 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 adult continuation class. Attendance was required by the Diogenes program as a condition to share an apartment.

Teens: After missing class, a scary ride

Continued from previous page

until everything's OK."

But she can't count on life downtown, either. It's slipping away. A new batch of kids has come to 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. Alysha's boyfriend has been talking about going to Santa Cruz. Ryan's still in Diogenes, and Jen and her boyfriend are breaking up. Now Shroomy is taking off on a four-month journey, hitchhiking across the Southwest.

"It feels like everything is fading," Jen says. Like everything she hoped to hold onto is deserting her.

Shroomy takes out a map of America and stares at it. He plans to travel with another street kid named Kerry. Jen watches them. She hopes it will rain so hard all afternoon that they won't be able to go. Shroomy pulls on his goatee and says, "When I come back, my hair will probably be down to right below my eyes. And my goatee 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.

"C'mon," Alysha 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 heaters in the Downtown Plaza. Jen quietly sings a song from her favorite movie, "My Fair Lady." Rain sluices down in long, wet sheets, and Jen murmurs, "All ... I ... want is a room somewhere, far ... a-way ... from the cold night air ... la-la la-la la-la ... oh wouldn't it be lovely?"

By 4 p.m., they've hooked up with more kids, and they're slouched around a long table. Everyone leans in a different direction. They do not look at each other.

"Hey," someone finally notices. "It quit raining."

It's 4:20.

Shroomy stands up. He sighs. Runs his hands through his hair and says, "All right. Everyone give me my hugs because we're leaving."

His pack is huge, and he seems smaller than usual. As he leans over to hug his friends, the brand name JNCO on the back of his jeans glares. He is wearing, for the first time in months, the same jeans he wore, back in December, on the night when he and Alysha and Ryan and Jen waited on a street corner for dinner to arrive.

Shroomy turns and hugs Jen. "Bye-bye," she whispers, crying. He touches her hair and turns around, and he and Kerry walk down the escalator and out of the mall and into The Circle, where Shroomy first met all these guys.

They walk through the tunnel, across the Old Sac boardwalks and over the Tower Bridge. They hoist their backpacks higher, and at 5 p.m. on a Thursday that started out gray and wet and cold but that broke up into a glittery yellow brightness, Shroomy and Kerry walk toward Interstate 80, thumbs out, hoping for a ride.

About a week later, Shroomy's birth certificate arrives in the mail at Diogenes. Diogenes returns it to the Office of Vital Statistics with these words scribbled across the envelope: RETURN TO SENDER.

There was no forwarding address.

▼

Back at The Circle, at 6 p.m. in February, Ryan shows up wearing a new shirt and a new backpack. "I gotta go to school tonight," he says. "I'm getting an education."

It's the first night of mandatory classes, but Ryan isn't sure what course he has signed up for. Inside his backpack, he carries no pencil, no notebook, no class schedule and no map, only a neatly folded copy of the Sunday comics and a girl's phone number. These are the two things in the world Ryan does best: draw characters from the comics — especially Peter from "Fox Trot" and Luann — and get girls' phone numbers.

At 6:45 p.m. a group of kids heads into the shadows of Old Sac to smoke some pot. School starts in less than an hour, but Ryan follows. By 7:20, high and jittery with the drugs and the kids and the big crowd that's gathered, Ryan is still hanging around downtown.

"You're going to miss school, dude," says his Diogenes roommate. If he does, it'll be serious. He's already got two strikes against him at Diogenes. If he gets one more, they'll kick him out.

"What bus do I have to catch?" Ryan asks again.

"Eighty-one."

"Where do I catch that?"

"I have no clue," the roommate says. "You had the bus schedule last night."

Ryan is quiet again. He doesn't want to leave. He especially does not want to go by himself. He reaches out to the girl who is trying to pierce her belly button with a safety pin. He pulls her toward him.

"I can't go with you," she says.

By 8:40 p.m., one hour and 10 minutes after classes began, Ryan gets off the bus in front of the Winston-stein Adult Center on Morse Avenue. It takes him 10 minutes to figure out that the office is closed. He hunches his shoulders under his empty black backpack, and he slouches across the street to wait for the 81 southbound. He has now missed the first day of school. He bums a cigarette and strikes a match. The flare is a singular light on the dark, narrow street.

"Oh, man." He starts pacing. "I'm probably screwed. Oh. Man."

His stride gets longer. "This'll be just my friggin luck. OK. Lemme see. I got a reasonable explanation. I left and didn't have the paper I was supposed to have to figure out where I had to go to — plus I didn't have the — Oh! I'm a dumbass!" He's shouting now. "I'm stressing out. Probably going to be homeless again. This isn't good." He's pacing faster. "This isn't good. This isn't good. I'm scared. I'm done for. Toast. I'm losing my apartment tomorrow. I'm a nobody. Good for nothing. I'm a homeless person."

The southbound 81 drives up. Ryan throws his cigarette on the ground. He takes a seat in the back of the bus where an enormous man with angry, wild eyes is murmuring at the walls.

Ryan stares at him.

"I'm going to stop drinking," the man says. "I'm going to stop the dope. I'm going to get an apartment, and a car and a girlfriend."

The woman next to him scoots away.

"I'm going to get a girlfriend." The guy rolls his head around. "And I'm not going to do no more dope." His voice rises. The woman's eyes widen. Ryan still stares at the man.

"Take my shoe strings!" the man suddenly yells. "Tie my hands together! Please!" Ryan rocks in his seat. "Tie my hands together so I can't do no more dope!" Ryan puts his hands over his ears and keeps rocking. He stares at the ground. He plugs his ears harder.

"Somebody!" the guy shrieks. "Please!"

Ryan flinches out of his seat a little. "Driver," he tries to say to the front of the bus. "Ma'am. Um." But she doesn't hear him. Ryan looks frantically back at the guy, then up to the front at the driver, then he suddenly jumps up and draws close to the woman driving the bus.

"Um, driver," he says quietly. "There's this guy back there who's yelling. He's talking to me. He's been — "

The guy screams: "Don't be snitchin' on me!"

Ryan turns and yells: "You're bothering me!"

"Lookitchoo," the man snarls. "You're snitching on me."

No one on the bus knows where to look, and Ryan is spinning around like he's been spooked, and the bus driver picks up her radio and says, "I have a situation that's developing." No one's breathing. Ryan's eyes are wide and jittery and terrified. "I'm (bus) 81. Southbound on Northrop." Ryan stares at the man and hates him.

The guy is finally hauled off the bus. All Ryan can say, in a strained and seething voice, like the guy is the ghost of everything to come, is: "That guy was talking to me. He was talking to me."

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.*

Jen watches as a visiting dog is treated to dinner outside the teens' forest shack. The shack has no electricity and no running water. Its front door was taken from an old refrigerator. A collection of tin pots captures rain as it leaks through the roof.

Bee photographs by Bryan Patrick

Leaky shack falls short as teens' getaway

Last of four parts

By Darragh Johnson
Bee Staff Writer

The shack leaks.

The wood has rotted. Rain drips into pots on the floor, and a shrill wind blows through the cracks. Shroomy rubs his hand across his scalp and down his back. He stops when he finds what feels like a pimple. It's a tick. He kills it between his fingernails. He licks his forefinger and wipes away the blood. Jen watches and winces.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Six homeless kids came from Sacramento believing these hideaway hills of Humboldt County would be their Oz. They imagined a rustic cabin in a clearing in the forest. There would be a stream behind their home, and the hills would be lush with trees and flowers. Here, outside the town of Garberville, they believed they would escape the unbearable street life of Sacramento. They would be happy, and life would be good.

They believed this even though everything in their past has taught them to expect nothing from the future.

"Oh, Shroomy!" Jen's voice suddenly squeaks. "You need to get happy because you're not happy." She tilts back her head and starts to pour 40 ounces of Miller Genuine Draft down her throat. It's raining harder outside, and into the pots surrounding her the drops come faster and louder. The wind screams. Jen says, desperately, "This needs to be a happy place!"

Her words disappear in the rattle of wind and rain.

It's nearing the end of March. This month that came in like a lamb is going out like a lion. Jen and Alysha, her foster sister, showed up four days ago after another fight with Jen's parents, Alysha's foster parents. They caught the Greyhound bus to Humboldt County, where some homeless friends from Sacramento had fled two weeks earlier. The girls got off the bus and waited all night on a bench under a street light. Next morning, their friends found them. It was the day before Jen's 17th birthday, and Jen, Alysha and Shroomy — everyone except for their street friend Ryan — were reunited.

Ryan wasn't with them because they wouldn't let him come.

At the end of February, at the same time that Shroomy took off on his hitchhiking trip across the Southwest, Diogenes kicked Ryan out of his apartment. Shroomy meant to be gone for four months, but his trip only lasted four days. He retreated to the streets of Sacramento, and he and Ryan and a few others moved into an abandoned warehouse off Stockton Boulevard. Together they started planning a new escape. At times, when talk turned to Humboldt, Ryan eagerly joined in. "After we leave ... " he would say. "Up in Humboldt ... " But behind his back, the others told Shroomy that Ryan whined too much. They didn't want him to come.

Shroomy, right, dines on food-bank beans in the shack while Jason finishes a cigarette. Kerry and Alysha are in the background. The sleeping bags and backpacks crammed into the cabin, below, don't leave a lot of space for walking. "This is more like a fort," says Alysha's boyfriend Nick. "Like something you'd play in as a kid."

For a long time, Shroomy tried to protect Ryan. The two are almost the same age — they were born one week apart — and Shroomy helped his friend by urging Ryan to move into Diogenes. He acted as Ryan's alarm clock. Most recently, he persuaded the group to stay together, with Ryan, at the warehouse. But when the others decided to ban Ryan from their adventure, Shroomy was forced to choose. He chose the group.

On March 7, everyone celebrated Shroomy's 20th birthday together, in Sacramento. A few days later, on the night before the group took off for Humboldt County, two other street kids cornered Ryan in Old Sac. Shroomy felt bad about what the two planned to do, but he didn't stop them. They swaggered up to Ryan and told him, "You complain too much. You can't come."

The group left without him. Ryan celebrated his 20th birthday one week after Shroomy's, alone.

Once upon a time, from October to February, Ryan, Shroomy, Alysha and Jen were like family. Jen said things like, "These people are the best people I've ever known." Alysha, who has bounced from foster home to foster home, said, "I've had all these people who were supposed to be my family and weren't. And I come down here" — to the streets of downtown — "and find people who act like family is supposed to act."

The youths proved their closeness by sharing everything. Alysha can beg better than the others put together, and she always pooled her earnings. When Shroomy bummed cigarettes from strangers, he passed them around. Karma, they believed, would punish kids who hogged the marijuana and smoked it alone.

Out here, Jen once said, "if you only got what you could get—"

"—it wouldn't be that much—" Alysha said.

"—so we all do it together," Jen said.

The streets seduced them.

The streets are destroying them. They have already urged Shroomy to turn his back on Ryan, the one guy who counted on Shroomy the most. Within the next few weeks, the other guys will turn on Shroomy. Jen and Alysha will split up.

And soon the streets will cast their spell on the next group of teens to come downtown — the runaways and homeless youths who are following in the footsteps of Shroomy, Ryan, Alysha and Jen, who themselves followed in the footsteps of a 21-year-old homeless woman named Blondie, who has been on the streets since she was 14.

▼

The shack in Humboldt has four wood walls, three glass windows and one rotten roof. "This is more like a fort," Alysha's boyfriend Nick says. "Like something you'd play in as a kid." It's a haven, Alysha and Jen say. An escape from situations that make them sad.

That escape seemed fiendishly simple, at first. It was easy to run from their house in Antelope, easy to catch the bus to Garberville, easy to meet up with their friends. The hard part came as soon as they arrived. The shack, on land owned by one of the homeless youths' mother, has no electricity and no running water. The only way to get clean is to bathe in the stream, which is colder than the 40-degree temperatures outside. When the wind blows, it sweeps up the front step, which they concocted from fenders ripped off a faded VW Bug, and bangs into the front door, which was taken from an old white Frigidaire. In the surrounding clearing are a broken-down piano and a rusted sink. A bird dive-bombs them when they scramble through the woods to go to the bathroom.

Even getting to the shack is a challenge: They must walk two miles down a narrow, winding road, then veer left when the road veers right. They must grab hold of overgrown tree roots and climb the first muddy hill, cross the log bridge over the creek, scrape up two more muddy hills and cross another rotten redwood bridge.

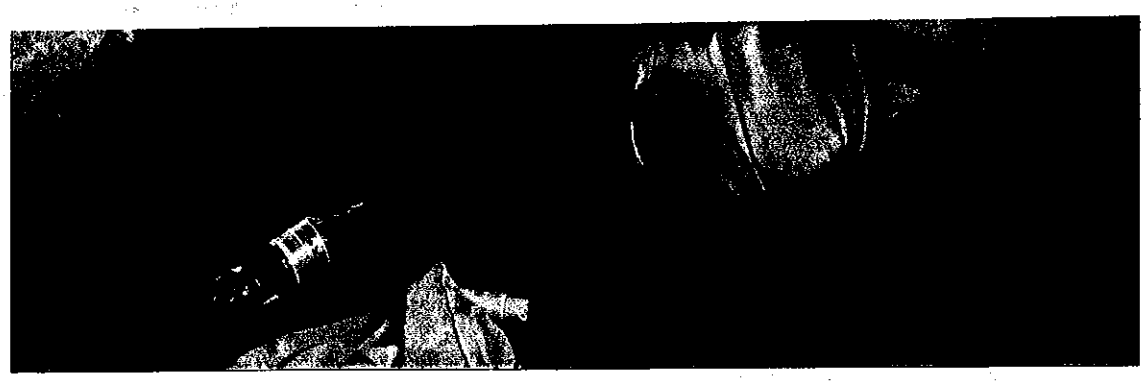
Mud has already started etching itself into their bodies: first in the dried wrinkles of their hands, then across their cuticles and into their skin like a tan. It stiffens their jackets and jeans and boots. The rain is relentless. And the girls can tell their

Please see TEENS, next page

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 Garberville 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.



Alysha hugs Jen, left, amid a muddle of sleeping bags in the Humboldt County cabin. The two girls are feeling increasingly estranged from their male cabin mates. The girls will soon leave the cabin and say goodbye to no one.

Teens: They leave for cabin without Ryan

Continued from previous page

friends don't want them here. One morning, while heading into town 10 miles away, the group splits up. The guys hitchhike without Jen and Alysha, then talk angrily about them. "They can't stay here," Nick says as he and Shroomy stand under the grocery store awning and wait for the rain to stop.

"They're illegal runaways," Shroomy agrees. "They're going to bring the cops down on us."

Nick plunges his hands deeper in his pockets and hunches his shoulders. "They have to go," he says. Shroomy nods. They watch the rain for a while and say nothing until Nick adds, as though he wants to break up with Alysha but doesn't know how, "Doesn't Alysha realize why I left Sacramento in the first place?"

By Sunday night, four days after their arrival, the dirt has caked under the girls' fingernails and in gritty clumps on their hands, faces and clothes. They have become pungently discolored, and their unwashed hair hangs in oily, glommed-together strings. The guys are hoarding the marijuana, and they've stopped talking to the girls. The girls are hogging the beer.

Outside, night spills like dark ink. Every noise in the trees is the mountain lion they've been warned about. Jen is shrieking her trademark, high-pitched giggles, and the sound echoes wildly inside the shack. Rain falls into the tin pots around them, landing like footsteps in a haunted house, 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!"

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 Jen's. 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.

When the girls first showed up in Humboldt, they promised, "We're never going back." To go back to Sacramento, they believed, was to cement their feet in everything they'd hoped to escape. The cops would arrest them for being runaways who are violating their probation. Alysha would be sent to Juvenile Hall. Jen would be sent home to face her parents. The girls would be separated for good. They thought they could outsmart all of that. They aren't so sure anymore.

For the next three nights, nobody in the shack says much to anyone else. A guy named Kerry tries to play his guitar, but two of the strings are broken, and the chords come out flat and tepid. The beer is going fast, the drugs are almost gone. Even a puppy Shroomy brings home to lighten the mood winds up instead exposing the tension.

Shroomy chose the black and gold dog with floppy ears. He got it from the back of a pickup on the side of a road. Shroomy says, "I'm thinking of naming him Daedalus. Or Icarus. Maybe Icarus. He flew too close to the sun, and his wings melted." The puppy stretches his snout to lick Shroomy's face. When they finally scramble home, Shroomy's friends start yelling at him.

"Dog's got ticks. He's sick."

"What were you thinking?"

"We don't have any dog food."

"He can't stay here."

Shroomy holds the puppy and stares at the ground. He says nothing.

The next morning, he and the puppy give up on Humboldt, and together they head 250 miles south to Loaves & Fishes in Sacramento. Shroomy is now 20 years old. He's 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 Shroomy sleeps, again, in Sacramento. Alysha's words from months ago ring in his head: Downtown Sacramento "is a vortex ... you just get stuck."

The same morning Shroomy bailed, Jen and Alysha took off and said goodbye to no one. In Garberville, Jen called her grandparents in Tehachapi, near Bakersfield, and asked them to wire $200 for bus tickets. Jen and Alysha were angry because, among other slights, the guys refused to share their marijuana. When the grandparents' cash arrived, the girls bought two 13-hour rides to Southern California, where they planned to stay until they decided what to do and where to go next.

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Months earlier, in October, logic like this had delivered Jen and Alysha from their house in the suburbs to the streets of downtown Sacramento.

Logic like this now lures the next generation of kids — the new teens who are starting this cycle all over again — downtown. One day, Ryan runs into one of them.

He stares. She's a short girl with cinnamon hair. Her skin is the color of new porcelain, and her clean sweat shirt and jeans show no signs of outdoor living. Ryan recognizes her.

"I hitchhiked here from Sonoma," she says and rearranges her face to look tougher. The sun is strong and warm today, and Ryan and the girl walk toward The Circle, the brick-lined space between Downtown Plaza and the tunnel that leads to Old Sac. She spits and makes it, three feet away, dead-center into the garbage can.

"My boyfriend's locked up," she says. "He's in Yolo County Jail." He is 18. She is 15. "I'm living with his mom right now."

She says she left her grandparents' house in Sonoma County, where she was living, in the middle of the night last Saturday. She took with her "a little bag with a couple of pairs of underwear, socks, deodorant. And I had some animal crackers with the frosting on them and some marshmallows." She says, "I got a ride from some guy at a liquor store who took me to Napa. I told a lady I was lost, and she picked me up ... and took me here." On the street, the girl calls herself Kirstin. She grew up in Sacramento, but she says her parents tired of her "running away and getting drunk and high... and stealing and stuff." So they sent her to Sonoma to live with her grandparents.

She squints into the sun, peels the cuticles on her fingernails and calls herself "a loser." "But it's OK if I'm a loser," she says, "because my (boyfriend) likes me. Russell said as soon as he gets out, we're going to go somewhere. But I have no idea where."

She raises her hand to her mouth and bites the edge of her thumbnail. "It's wherever he thinks we could go, and wherever he thinks we could stay alive."

For now, Kirstin keeps alive by hooking up with the next generation of Sacramento's street kids. The new girls are pretty and clean, like Alysha and Jen were when they first arrived downtown. The new group of guys are in their late teens, and there is even a younger one named Ryan, with blue eyes like Ryan's and a goatee like Shroomy's.

One night, this new group scrambles down the stairs of the Hogshead, a basement bar in Old Sac with a pool hall and a well-stocked jukebox. The place echoes with emptiness, except for one cuddly couple who look up, startled, when they hear the kids rumble in. There are nine of them. The girls are 15 and younger. The guys are 18 and older. One boy notices the couple's expression and says, "These 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 chain around her neck, with a locked padlock hanging from it. One of her street buddies is a 21-year-old woman who sleeps by the river. The woman is four months pregnant, and she likes to flash her bare breasts at strangers. 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 girl takes, by herself, Bus 51 south to her home near Broadway.

The light in the pool hall is a low green fluorescent, and on the jukebox Pink Floyd chants, "Run! Run! Run! Run!"

"I was on acid," Kirstin says.

"Did you get it from Tim?" asks the 11-year-old.

"No."

Please see TEENS, next page

'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?'**

Teens: Newcomers yearn to belong

Continued from previous page

"Good, 'cuz his acid doesn't work. I got two for $6.50."

"Whose here is good?" Kirstin asks.

Kirstin sits on Mike's lap. Mike is 19. The 11-year-old walks up behind a man named Chad and swings her hips and snakes a twitch up her spine. Chad, who is 20, ignores her.

The 11-year-old sets up the pool table, takes a cue stick and breaks up the balls. She looks at one of the guys and says, "Nice ass," and she leans against the wall and waits for someone to join her game. She watches Kirstin swing her hips in slow circles. She gives up waiting for someone to come play with her, and she practices shooting the cue ball by herself.

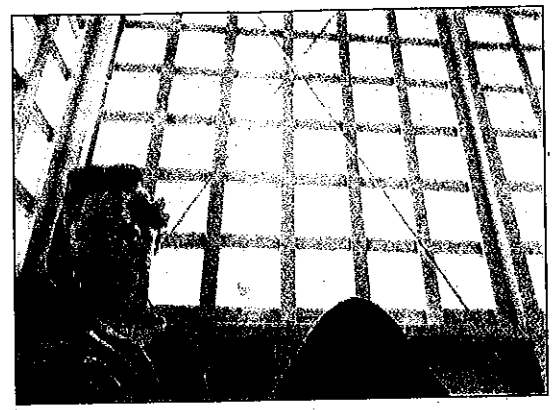
Kirstin slides a dollar into the jukebox and programs four songs: "Garden Grove" by Sublime. "Suck My Kiss" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. "Intergalactic" by the Beastie Boys. "Bittersweet Symphony" by The Verve.

"Whip it!" screams the song from the jukebox. "Whip it good!" Suddenly, Kirstin veers toward Chad. He bends toward her mouth and kisses her. The 11-year-old girl quits playing pool. Kirstin and Chad lean into each other near the dartboard. "Let's go," Chad says to her.

"It cost me a dollar to pick all those songs. Don't you want to hear 'Suck My Kiss?'" Kirstin asks.

Chad leans down to kiss her neck.

The group leaves the bar.



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.

Blondie admires a flower inside a gazebo 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."

At their grandparents' house in Tehachapi, Jen and Alysha stay in the spare bedroom. The grandparents buy them clothes and talk about enrolling them in school. The girls try to persuade the grandparents to give them a car. Jen dyes her hair black as a crow's wings, and Alysha colors hers more chestnut brown. But after a few days, the girls decide they are bored. Jen calls her boyfriend in Sacramento, and he tells her he misses her. One night, they grab some blankets, pillows and jugs of wine. They unlock the bedroom window and leave.

Their grandparents wake up the next morning and find the window left wide open and the bedclothes missing. Jen's grandmother calls her daughter, Cindy Striffler, Jen's mother and Alysha's foster mother. When Mrs. Striffler's father gets on the phone, Jen's mother says, he tells her, "I don't understand. Why did they leave? What did we do wrong?"

The girls hitchhike back to Sacramento, where they stay in an abandoned warehouse near Stockton Boulevard and try to avoid the cops.

▼

The 11-year-old will do anything to make the kids downtown like her. The girl has a home and a mother she sometimes talks about, but she comes to The Circle every day and has been staying later and later. Tonight, say the street kids who were hanging out with her this Sunday night, it's the same old story: 9 p.m. and strangely quiet and sad out here, just a bunch of kids trying to keep from being bored.

The 11-year-old is with an 18-year-old guy she has kissed, hard, on the mouth, and another guy who is 20. Once, when the 20-year-old seemed upset, she told him she'd have sex with him "right now... if it'll make you happy." She added, "I have a condom."

Not long ago, she took a straight-edge razor and sliced up her forearm from her elbow to her wrist. "It doesn't hurt," she said then, "if you don't put alcohol on it." The girl is young, but she's also tall, and she has the kind of fat rolls that can be construed as "well-developed."

On this night, kids with her say, she is flashing her chest at the few strangers left in Old Sacramento. She is about to go too far. And when that happens, her friends won't help her.

Near the train depot, by the Sacramento River, the girl flashes one last crowd of people — a crowd of homeless adults. Someone in that crowd, a woman, gets offended. The woman shakes free of the group and, says one of the witnesses, swaggers up to give the 11-year-old girl a "talking to."

The crowd backs away from her "because you don't interfere," says the 18-year-old boy who has kissed this girl.

The woman pulls out her "smiley" — a sharp-edged Master Lock hung on a heavy chain. The 11-year-old's face, the witnesses say, drains. They remember her whimpering, "But I'm only 11. I'm only 11."

They remember that the woman doesn't listen, or doesn't believe her, or doesn't care. They remember that the woman swings back her hand and hurls the lock into the back of the girl's head. There is so much blood, the witnesses remember, they can't see where the exact cut is on her head.

And when the woman and her crowd take off, the witnesses say they force the 11-year-old to stand up and walk to Carl's Jr., where they try to quietly wash off the blood. Nobody thinks about calling a doctor. They're afraid of the cops.

But one of the workers at Carl's Jr. notices the blood and phones the police.

As soon as the red-and-blue lights show up, everyone runs.

They leave the girl alone.

▼

On the streets, you treat your enemies better than your friends. And you trust no one. The 11-year-old doesn't yet know that. Blondie does.

As the weather warms into spring and summer — when even more teenagers flee their homes and move to the streets — Blondie is still crouching by the fence at Loaves & Fishes, in the same spot she was in last December when Alysha and Jen passed her on their way to the nurse's office.

One afternoon, she and her friend JD talk about someone they know who got off the streets.

"He turned on me," JD sneers.

Blondie pounces.

"What're you talking about?" she asks. "You were talking about getting domesticated yourself."

JD blushes and shakes his head.

"Tell the truth, JD."

He tries to make his face look blank.

"You said," she reminds him, and her voice gets squeaky and sarcastic, "'It's getting violent out here. Maybe I'm going to go live with my cousin in West Sac.'"

She glances at him, but he won't look back at her. He concentrates on chucking pebbles into the sidewalk. Blondie pulls her hand into a fist and she jabs her forefinger at JD's face. Her green eyes glint and she asks, "Well, what happens to people like me who can't say, 'I think I don't like the violence so I wanna leave?'"

The sun behind her slants dusty and gold, and she blinks her eyes fast and bends forward from her hips, closer to JD. She says, "I don't got nobody to pick me up off my feet and say, 'Here, Blondie.'" Her voice quivers. "'Here.'"

She drops her fist and stops talking. Her face is silent. But across her forehead is the wide-open look that crossed Jen's face when Shroomy first said good-bye. Her mouth has gone slack, and she looks like Alysha when she said, "Five real families have got rid of me. ... You think I don't want a Mom and a Dad? That's all I've wanted my whole life." In the freeze of her eyelids is the look Ryan gets when someone mentions his mom, the same look he got when the other kids told him, "You can't come." And her expression is a perfect replica of Shroomy's loneliest face, a face that is vulnerable and sad and young and scared.

Blondie says, "What happens to people like me?" ◆

A 14-year-old runaway plays with a knife in an abandoned warehouse in east Sacramento that's his temporary home. The room, known as the "sex room," is littered with trash and used condoms.

Homeless as the night approaches, teens amble toward the welcoming light of the tunnel to Old Sacramento.

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.'*

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

They have dreams and hope

In October 1998, Ryan, Shroomy, Alysha and Jen

Shroomy

EDITORIAL

Hardened hearts no answer for homeless teens

This editorial appeared Nov. 7, 1999

As the story of four homeless teenagers unfolded in The Bee, 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 Darragh Johnson and photographer Bryan Patrick make it clear that's an admonition these hard-core street kids have heard many times: from parents and stepparents; from foster parents; from counselors at Diogenes transitional living program and the WIND drop-in shelter for teens; even from the police. But, with that peculiar deafness 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 are former foster children, abandoned years ago by their own parents. Their situations are painfully predictable, the result of childhoods filled with chaos and abuse.

I formed a family. By March, that family had crumbled. Spring and summer only reinforced what they'd already learned: They were very much on their own. Here is a look at where they are today.

Shroomy works the basketball-toss booth in June at a carnival in a shopping center along Florin Road. By the end of July he had quit his job.

▶ ALYSHA

In the seven months since the girls ran away to Humboldt County, Alysha has lost all contact with the Strifflers — Jen's parents and her foster parents — and has lived in a series of foster homes and group homes. She finally ran away, for good, in June. She moved into Diogenes' transitional living program, but she didn't stay long. At the end of July, she turned 18 and became what she had always feared: Nobody's daughter. She spent the rest of the summer being homeless.

About a month ago, though, she got a job and moved into an apartment with a friend. She admits that "it's hard to become responsible," but she says she's working hard. Her new roommate is encouraging her. He says, "She's really turning her life around." Alysha dreams of becoming a manager at work. She has not spoken to Jen in months.

▶ JEN

Jen was in and out of her parents' house all summer long. But in August, after the group of street people she was hanging with turned against her and threatened to beat her up, she called her mom and asked to come home.

She has stayed home ever since. Her grandfather in Tehachapi died in September — before Jen could apologize for the way she and Alysha treated him and her grandmother last April — and the suddenness of his death has prompted Jen to reconsider the way she has lived.

She and her mother have become "really close," Cindy Striffler says now, and the family went to Disneyland together at the end of October. Jen has started studying for her GED; and she says she hopes to take classes at Sierra College next semester. She is thinking of becoming a journalist.

With a hat upturned for change from passers-by, Ryan and his friend take it easy in the tunnel between Downtown Plaza and Old Sacramento. Right: Jen, who is wearing an ankle monitor because she is under house arrest, keeps a foot inside the house as she chats with a visitor in April.

▶ SHROOMY

Not much has changed for Shroomy. After he returned to Sacramento from Humboldt County, he lived in an abandoned warehouse until he signed on as a traveling carnival worker. He worked the mini-basketball hoop for two months at small carnivals throughout Northern California. By the end of July, he had fought with his boss, quit his job and he was back, sleeping on the streets of downtown.

In August, he returned to Diogenes and vowed to succeed this time. A few weeks later, he got angry and walked out. He is living again on the streets. He is no longer sure that he wants to become a literature professor. Instead, he is dreaming about "going on a world tour" with the band he says he recently formed. But first, he says, "I have to get motivated."

▶ RYAN

Ryan, too, lived on the streets until the middle of June, when he hooked up with Shroomy's carnival crew and started working the quarter-toss booth where people tried to win miniature stuffed chihuahuas. Sometimes he would sleep, he says, on the asphalt under the rides, but "I can't complain. I've got cigarettes in my pocket every day."

Yet by the middle of July, Ryan also lost his job. He returned to Sacramento's streets, and he's thinking about leaving town sometime in November. Life downtown, he says, seems sadder these days. "I miss the old crew. I don't know who's my friend anymore." ◆

Series becomes tool to help teens agencies work to fix system

By Matthew Barrows
Bee Staff Writer

This story appeared Nov. 18, 1999

Lorrie Lewis, who works with young runaways with the Placer County Sheriff's Department, has one of her top prevention tools tacked to the department's bulletin board.

Lewis said she is using The Bee's four-day series, "Dead-End Dreams: Teens on the Street," to show children who end up in her office or in Juvenile Hall how easy it is to slide into a homeless lifestyle and how hard it is to pull out of it.

The Placer County Sheriff's Department is one of a number of local groups using the series — which chronicled the lives of four homeless teenagers — as a prevention tool and as an example of why the system designed to help runaway teens needs to be fixed.

Sacramento City school board President Jay Schenirer of the Foundation Consortium, a coalition of 16 foundations that deals with children's issues, said the series will be passed out in February at the California Policy Makers Institute.

The institute, he said, is an annual meeting of local, state and school board policy-makers who discuss possible changes in the system that handles abused and neglected children. The meeting will be held at the University of California, Davis.

In addition, officials with the Western Center on Law and Poverty have also requested extra copies of the series. Lewis, the community services officer in Placer County, said nothing gives young runaways a bigger jolt than what they read in black and white.

Lewis said she remembered a case a few years ago involving two local girls — about 14 years old — who decided to accept a ride with a couple of young men.

The trip went westward along Interstate 80, stopped in Oakland where the group drank alcohol and took drugs and ended up in Santa Cruz. The next day when the girls returned home, one of their mothers took her daughter in to see Lewis.

Lewis sat the girl down and handed her an all-points bulletin issued that day by Santa Cruz authorities. The bulletin was about a young girl with blond hair and blue eyes whose severed head had been discovered in a 5-gallon paint can in Santa Cruz. "The girl looks up to me and says, 'I have blond hair and blue eyes,' " Lewis said. "That girl never ran away again. She realized how close she had been."

According to Lewis, 475 children in unincorporated Placer County were reported as runaways between July 1998 and June 1999. ◆

chaos and abuse.

According to Sacramento County officials, 30 percent to 50 percent of foster kids in the county end up either homeless, on welfare or both.

In the past, the scattered system of group homes to which so many foster teens are assigned received too little state or local oversight. Emotionally and physically damaged kids, some suffering from serious mental illness, didn't get the attention or the services they needed. The government then abruptly cut them loose when they reached their 18th birthday — an age at which few were able to get a job, pay rent and deposits, and set up housekeeping independently. Many went directly from foster care to the streets.

State legislation approved last year will increase oversight for group homes and services for the foster kids assigned to them. In addition, legislation pending in Congress would appropriate funds to provide for these former foster kids, to help them bridge the difficult gap between ages 18 and 21.

Yet while a new generation of foster kids may benefit from the promised reforms, they come far too late for the teenagers portrayed in Dead-End Dreams.

Having doubled the number of children it places in foster care, Sacramento County authorities are now moving to protect these youngsters from homelessness. New job training and housing programs are planned. In addition, the county is looking for a place to place a residential treatment program for drug-addicted former foster kids. The county may also lobby the Legislature and Congress to expand support for foster kids beyond age 18 to age 21. All those initiatives make sense and deserve support.

Still, many readers worry understandably that government assistance, the network of private shelters, food kitchens and handouts only make life on the streets more comfortable, facilitating homelessness and drug addiction. The reality is that without those services, the kids would be worse off, stealing or selling their bodies for food. The communities in which they exist would be more dangerous. The society that allowed it would be more heartless than the one we call home.

How does the larger society induce kids on the cusp of adulthood, addicted to drugs and a homeless lifestyle, perhaps mentally ill or emotionally disturbed, to come in out of the cold? As the repeated failures with the teenagers in Dead-End Dreams show, it's hard. There are no easy answers. But hardening our hearts and doing nothing is not an option. ◆