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GIVING YOUTH CHANCE AT A 'FRESH START' COUNTY PROGRAM AIMS TO PREPARE FOSTER YOUTH

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By Chris Metinko

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Monique Johnson has no problem talking openly and freely about her time in foster care and the effect it can have on a young person.

"It can really harden your heart," said Johnson, 20 of Oakland. "You learn not to trust anyone and you learn not to listen to people because you think they just want something from you."

So last month when Johnson started her job at **Fresh Start Cafe** -- a partnership between Alameda County and food services provider Aramark to give at-risk youth vocational training -- she had a lot to learn about listening, forming relationships and the real world.

"This has helped tremendously," Johnson smiled. "I've learned so much already. Just by dealing with people on a daily basis, in this kind of setting, you learn how to handle things professionally. What's that saying? You can catch more bees with honey than vinegar."

Alameda County and its New Beginnings Initiative for At-Risk Youth are hoping to teach that lesson and more to many foster kids about to time out of the system at 18 years old. The county has helped start three **Fresh Start Cafes** -- at the Alameda County Recorder's Office in Oakland, the Castro Valley Library and the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center in San Leandro. Another cafe is expected to open in the new Ashland Youth Center in 2012. The cafes are the brainchild of County Administrator Susan Muranishi.

The cafe in Oakland provides a paid job and training for six months to foster youth, while the one in San Leandro does the same for youth in the juvenile justice system. The cafe in Castro Valley provides a regular, full-time job for select young adults who have already completed their training at one of the other cafes.

"The program's designed to work with youth and give them training and job skills while also offering them employment," said Lauren Baranco, program associate for New Beginnings.

Baranco said in providing the training, the program also has other benefits, such as improving young people's self-esteem and self-worth. While Baranco points out that there is no exact formula for making such a program work, so far 70 young adults successfully have passed through the cafes since they opened in 2008, many getting jobs as a direct result of their work at the cafes.

Recently, the California State Association of Counties gave New Beginnings a CSAC Challenge Award for the cafe program and the progress the county's Department of Children and Family Services has made in addressing the needs of transition-age youth to become self-sufficient after emancipation from the foster care program.

Sylvia Souble, spokeswoman for the county's Social Services Agency, said the cafes are an excellent example of collaborations and system improvements the department has undertaken in the last five years that have resulted in a historic reduction of the foster care caseload and new programs. In May 2006, a total of 3,085 children were in foster care. As of April 25 of this year, 1,587 children are in care. Children placed in group homes have decreased by 41.1 percent.

Numbers the county especially likes to point out this month, since May is National Foster Care Month.

However, Johnson may look back at this month not so much as a month to honor foster care, but the month that helped start her on the road toward becoming a productive member of the community. Along with her six-month stint at the cafe, Johnson also is taking classes at Laney College and studying social behavior sciences at the school, hoping one day to work with foster kids like she was once.

"I'm very thankful they have this program," Johnson said of the **Fresh Start Cafes**. "It's something that prepares you for the real world."

Johnson also makes a plea to people thinking of helping other foster kids.

"It's very rewarding, but very hard," Johnson said. "If you're thinking about doing it, taking in a foster kid, you should. You need a lot of patience and love, but it can be worth it. We need more good parents."

For more information about foster care, go to www.alamedasocialservices.org.

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