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Holiday Fund helped inspirational siblings beat the odds

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Quasheema and Kamar McPherson don't dwell on their past, but they don't run away from it either.

The siblings lived in foster care most of their young lives, bouncing from one home to the next, living in shelters and with family members in between.

Quasheema, now 20, and Kamar, 18, were separated at one point, but somehow reunited along the way.

Their difficult childhood, however, has not defined them. They have used it as motivation to succeed, anchoring their future with the support and encouragement they both received from the Youth Consultation Services organization in Orange.

The agency, which has an array of programs to service children, provided a safe haven for Quasheema and Kamar through its Aging-in Program for young people like them. It has prepared them for life after the agency's residential program, teaching them life skills they'll need to be independent.

"Just because you are in foster care, doesn't mean you have to give up your dreams," Quasheema said. "Don't worry about what happened in the past. No matter what you went through, keep pushing."

Their parents were on drugs. Quasheema still sleeps with a night light to keep away the nightmares of abusive foster parents. Kamar has let go of his anger at his mom and dad. Maturity has set in and he's at peace with himself.

"I've learned to calm down," he said. "At 18, you think about the consequences of your actions. When you're younger, you don't. I'm a lot more mature now."

He's two weeks away from leaving the program and living on his own with an older brother in Paterson. He's confident and nervous at the same time, a ball of emotion ready for the challenge. Kamar, who has an internship with YCS as a data researcher, graduates from high school this month and has been accepted into a manufacturing technology program at Ho Ho Kus Technical School to study welding.

His sister has been on her own for a year now and has adjusted to taking care of herself since leaving the YCS program. She lives in Paterson in an apartment subsidized by Volunteers of America and is working in the evenings at a clothing store. By the fall, she plans to enroll in William Paterson College, where she wants to major in criminal justice and become a youth probation officer.

Quasheema and Kamar are proud of how far they've come. They recognize their paths could have turned out different. Kamar wants kids currently enrolled in the program to know they should pursue their dreams, and Quasheema advises young girls to write down their goals.

"If you write them down, that means you're going to do them," she said.

She's excited about the future, knowing that she and her brother are examples of what happens when you have caring people like the staff at YCS looking out for your welfare.

YCS has been able to do its work because of The Greater Newark Holiday Fund, an organization that helps those in need through an annual campaign that raises funds for financial assistance and services. Established in 1937, the fund has distributed nearly \$9 million for social services such as substance abuse and mental health counseling.

"We chose to be positive and not negative," Quasheema said. "We are going to be the next somebody. When people read this and see that we've been to hell and back, maybe our story can change somebody."

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