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TOP STORY

National Foster Care Month draws attention to need

By Jane Bellmyer jbellemyer@cecilwhig.com 16 hrs ago



Tiko Winbush, 20, spent his teen years in foster care with an Elkton-area family. He still gets support from that family and The Arc NCR, which placed him with Robert and Julia Harvey.

CECIL WHIG PHOTO BY JANE BELLMYER

ELKTON — There are 144 children in foster care in Cecil County and, as National Foster Care Month draws to a close, there's good news to share according to the people who work with children, families and others working to make sure foster children are safe and well cared-for.

“There is such a great need for foster families,” said Shalini Arora, director of the Cecil County Department of Social Services. “We need more foster parents and more families to step up.”

Of those 144 children, 89 are also in the Court Appointed Special Advocates program, or CASA.

“We advocate for their best interest,” said Giulia Hodge, director of CASA for Cecil County, which represents the child in the legal system and helps them find permanency.

“There are a lot more adoptions that are happening,” Hodge said. “We have two coming up Tuesday and we had three a week ago. We are happy with the results of that.”

Also happy with the results is Tiko Winbush, who has been in foster care since he was 14. Now at age 20, he is not technically a foster child but he continues to get support through The Arc Northern Chesapeake Region.

“I’ve got my own apartment now,” Winbush said, adding that the Arc and DSS still give him a helping hand.

That includes some financial assistance but more likely than not, just parental advice.

“We’re just like family,” said Briana Johnson, a licensed social worker with The Arc. “You know how they say your kids need you more when they’re grown? It’s, ‘What should I do about this?’ and roommate issues.”

Much of Winbush’s current success comes from his foster parents, he said.

“When I first got to their home, I did not know what to think,” he said of Julia and Robert Harvey.

He had been living with a relative because of his mother’s ongoing health issues, but then had to be removed from there as well. Unlike other foster children, Winbush stayed with the Harveys for the entire time he was in foster care.

“They taught me how to be a man. How to be independent, how to do dishes and laundry and how to garden,” he said.

Winbush was wise enough to quickly realize he was in a good place.

"I had a great opportunity and I was not going to mess that up," he said.

The Arc, CASA and DSS are always looking for caring adults to get involved with their missions.

"It takes a village to raise a kid," Arora said. "There is so great a need."

CASA currently has 68 adults trained to work with foster care children.

"Our next training session starts July 15," Hodge noted. "We would love to have more people."

At The Arc, there is a critical need for both treatment and respite foster care families.

"There are different levels of skills," Johnson said, explaining that training teaches different parenting techniques and how to make a connection with a child who has suffered some sort of trauma. "You have to be creative in how you assign consequences."

Winbush agreed.

"You have to realize that a kid with trauma, you've got to have patience," he said. "He's still going to be a kid and he's going to do stupid stuff."

All these agencies offer assessments and training to those interested and passionate about helping children.

Call 410-996-0100 for Cecil County DSS. To reach CASA the number is 410-996-3025. Those interested in providing treatment of respite foster care can reach The Arc at 410-836-7177, extension 329.

Winbush has since re-established a relationship with his mother, but still maintains contact with his foster parents.

“I appreciate them,” he said of the Harveys. “I hope they can keep the same energy for their other foster kids.”