December 2, 2001 Sunday
Home Edition

SECTION: PART A; Part 1; Metro Desk; Pg. 1

LENGTH: 7233 words

HEADLINE: READY OR NOT;
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Crashing Hard into Adulthood;
Sunday Report: Nobody would adopt them as children. Now, at 18, the state launches them out of foster homes into the streets, flophouses and jails.

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BODY:

Janea Barton gyrates across the parquet with her fiery-red dyed hair and three-inch platform shoes, thrusting her ample hip into a spike-haired boy flapping around in a donated suit.

Around her, a crush of teenagers wiggles and wails to the depth-charge beat, tearing up the church hall dance floor as a DJ spins the "Thong Song" on a toasty June night.

"The Grind," Janea explains. "I taught myself. I watch a lot of MTV."

Any illusion that this is a typical high school dance is shattered by the circle of social workers and plainclothes probation officers clinging to the walls.

The hundred or so teens are Orange County's newest foster-care graduates, shuttled to Irvine's Mariners Church for a daylong pep rally before the system cuts them loose to fend for themselves.

These are the foster-care leftovers--kids who were too old and too troubled to be adopted by parents looking for cuddly babies, but too vulnerable to be returned to their unfit families.

Passed from relatives to foster families or institutionalized group homes, they have ridden the system to the very end--an 18th birthday or high school graduation. Within days, many will be on their own.

They include kids like Janea, a former chubby-cheeked Girl Scout who started her six years in foster care after she tried to bludgeon her aunt with a claw hammer.

And Monique Luna, the castaway child of a heroin-addicted mother. She became a mother herself at 15.

And Jesse Equihua, sheltered in group homes since sixth grade, when his father put a diaper on him and paraded him around his school as punishment for not doing homework.

At the dance, optimism reigns. Gene Howard of the Orangewood Children's Foundation assures the teens that "things are going to open up for you from now on."

But for many of the nation's 20,000 young people who "age out" of foster care every year, what opens up is the floor.

About 40% fail to graduate from high school, and an equal number wind up on welfare or other public assistance at some point. Within two years, a third have children, usually out of wedlock, and 18% spend time behind bars.

The darkest futures await the hardest cases: those children who arrive on the government's doorstep as victims of unspeakable abuse and neglect, only to be weaned into adulthood on a steady diet of pharmaceuticals to keep them under control.

"Some of these kids don't really have a chance," said Mark Courtney, director of the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children, one of the nation's leading experts on the topic. "If you want to identify a high-risk group for just about any social phenomenon, you'll have a hard time finding anyone more vulnerable than kids aging out of foster care."

Since the mid-1980s, $1 billion has been poured into programs nationally to prepare foster children who outgrow the system. They are taught to shop for groceries, rent apartments, open bank accounts and earn high school diplomas.

It's a start. All the same, they are entering the world without so much as a driver's license, and they'll have no one to fall back on if things go sour.

Beginning in the summer of 2000, The Times tracked Jesse, Janea and Monique during their first year of freedom, when they faced homelessness, violence, drugs and poverty; when the choices they made began to define them as adults.

Orange County Juvenile Court Judge Robert B. Hutson opened their court files--the details of abuse, neglect and violence that delivered them into a foster care system that eventually sent them back to the outside world.

On this summer night, they get a little coddling by the church volunteers. The girls are being lavished with free make-overs and bags of "Big Sexy" hair products. Before they go, each teen will collect an Amway gift certificate and a duffel bag stuffed with such essentials as a toaster, an electric juicer, socks, towels and a toothbrush--all courtesy of the Orangewood Foundation.

When the dance ends about 9, white vans pull up to ferry the teens back to foster homes for their final days.

Orangewood's Howard, who had spent weeks planning the grand send-off, knows what lies ahead.

"The system just drops them like a hot rock."

JANEA: Summer 2000

It starts with a scramble to find a place to live, on the very day Janea graduates from La Quinta High School in Westminster.

"My group home says I have to be out by midnight," Janea says in the school parking lot, still wearing her cap and

gown. "I'm homeless."

She's taken in by the aunt whom Janea, as a young teenager, attacked with a hammer--and letter opener and baseball bat.

Born March 15, 1982, at Long Beach Memorial Hospital, Janea was given up by her mother three years later and left to the care of a father who abused drugs.

"About 99.9% of the time, he was loaded on something. If he wasn't drunk, he was spracked on whatever drugs he may have done," Janea says a decade later. "Our house had no electricity, had no running water, had no heat--had no nothing."

Only after she ran away at 7 years old, and told a patrol officer about her father's rampant drug use, did authorities take Janea and her little brother to live with the step-aunt in Santa Ana. Four years would pass before Janea, during a therapy session, finally spoke of being sexually molested by her father, an allegation he denied.

"Everyone who hears my story feels sorry for me. I'm like, why? These rape victims, all they do is cry and boohoo about it. They make me sick," Janea says. "It never did affect me. It's over. I'm done with it."

Her very denial, so callous and harsh, may suggest something else. Adolescence can dredge up deeply buried wounds in sexually abused children. The pain can erupt in fits of rage, depression and promiscuity--all familiar to Janea.

She entered foster care at 13 after attacking her aunt. Janea ricocheted through a dozen institutional group homes over six years, and made detours to Orange County Juvenile Hall and a home for disturbed girls in Provo, Utah.

A habitual runaway, Janea was declared unadoptable even before she bit a social worker at 16. Her therapy included pills for aggression, depression, anxiety and mood swings.

The foster care system, the parent-of-last-resort for an estimated 500,000 children in America, is funded by federal, state and local governments and, in California, is run by county social services agencies.

The ultimate goal is to reunite children with their parents, provided a judge rules they're fit to raise a child.

But many children never go home. Some are placed with relatives or foster families. A lucky few are adopted. Many of the troubled children wind up in group homes that range from secure "residential treatment" institutions to small homes with six to eight children and a 24-hour staff.

Foster parents receive a monthly stipend from the state of $405 to $569. Institutions collect up to $5,732. Some children stay in the system for just a few weeks. Others, like Janea, stay for years.

"I was a placement child," she said. "I didn't have anywhere to go. I wasn't going to a foster home. I was there until I was 18."

Now that Janea has graduated from foster care, she is about to discover life without medication--by choice.

By the Fourth of July, 14 days out of her group home, Janea is working at a Wal-Mart part time. She earns a few dimes above minimum wage and has no benefits. Janea's aunt is letting her sleep on the living room floor.

"I've got to get out of there," Janea mutters. "Sammy and me want our own place."

Sammy is Sam Lopez. He left foster care months earlier and sleeps on a bare mattress in a mobile home a block away. He is 19, weighs 300 pounds and still wets the bed.

On July 11, Janea breaks the news to her former social worker: "You'll never guess. I'm getting married!" One hour and $101.50 in court fees later, Janea and Sam are standing at the altar in the Orange County Marriage License Office.

By 6 p.m., they are back at her aunt's apartment eating tacos. When night falls, Sam leaves for his trailer. Janea heads upstairs alone.

Janea insists she and Sam love each other. She says he lost his temper and pushed her once, and punched out a plexiglass window a while back, but he never hits her. When Janea revealed she was molested as a girl, Sam was very understanding, she says. Not once has he pressured her into having sex.

A week after their wedding night, the newlyweds are in a $25 room at the Alhambra Motel near Cal State Los Angeles. The police had chased Sam out of Santa Ana when he refused to pay rent, and Janea and her aunt had had one argument too many.

A cockroach skitters across the carpet toward a wadded napkin stained with pizza sauce. Janea and Sam watch from the comfort of their twin bed, arguing over who should fling a shoe at the intruder.

"This place is OK--for right this second," Janea says.

MONIQUE: Summer 2000

Inside a tiny bedroom with no closets, Monique Luna plunks down her duffel bags and steps to her new bedroom window.

Monique has found housing at Stepping Stones, a new halfway house in Fullerton for young mothers who need help breaking into adulthood. She has a 2-year-old daughter and a few hundred bucks in the bank.

Lyla wanders in and nestles up to her 17-year-old mom, complaining about stains on her bed. Monique offers a motherly Hmmm. The blanket can be cleaned. All that matters now is that they finally have a little privacy, a phone, the freedom to come and go.

Jim Carson, who runs the program, dangles the keys.

"You have a key chain, Monique?" Carson asks.

Her eyes widen. Monique had always lived in places where others were in charge.

"Nope. I've never had a key chain."

Monique and her older sister were raised by churchgoing grandparents in Stanton, where their mother had left them as toddlers. The older couple provided a loving home but not the vigilance to protect the girls from the world outside.

"I drank beer when I was 11 1/2. When I was 13, I did speed," Monique remembers. "When I first had sexual intercourse I was, I think, 11 1/2 or 12. It was weird. I didn't even like it."

At 14, she was pregnant. Her grandmother, the one person she counted on for help, died a month after Lyla's birth. Her grandfather had died two years earlier. Monique dropped out of high school and worked full time at a local department store. She rented a room from a friend for months before a neighbor reported her and her baby to the Orange County Social Services Agency.

Determined to keep custody of Lyla, she convinced the agency to appoint her boyfriend's mother as her foster parent. Monique legally became the foster sister of the boy who had impregnated her. Once again, she found refuge with a caring family. And once again, it didn't last.

Monique and her daughter's stay ended abruptly seven months later after she got in a fistfight with Lyla's father. When police arrived, they found Monique's face covered in blood.

County social workers moved Monique and her daughter to Crittenton Services for Children and Families, a nonprofit foster care group home in Fullerton. Next door is Stepping Stones, the agency's halfway house for teen mothers who are emancipated. It becomes Monique and Lyla's first stop after foster care.

Days after moving into Stepping Stones, Monique starts scouring north Orange County for day care. The program provides free care for at least a month at the Crittenton Services facility next door, but Lyla is having problems with the other kids. Monique is afraid she'll be kicked out.

"She's a pincher. My daughter's a pincher."

By mid-July, Monique is working 36 hours a week as a nursing assistant at Western Medical Center-Anaheim, waking up at 5:30 a.m. to catch the bus. Each night, after arriving home in hospital scrubs, she cradles Lyla in her arms to read "Winnie the Pooh."

JESSE: Summer 2000

The same week that Monique moves into Stepping Stones, Jesse Equihua and his girlfriend cart his belongings to Rising Tide in Tustin. It's a cluster of apartments for kids leaving foster care and is complete with cheap rent, job assistance and a resident advisor. The transitional housing program is run by the Orangewood Children's Foundation, the private group with close ties to the county Social Services Agency.

Most of Jesse's adolescence was spent bouncing among institutional homes in Orange, Los Angeles and Riverside counties. While in the system, Jesse rarely saw his mother, who eventually moved to Guam after getting remarried. His father promised to visit often, but rarely followed through.

"I will never turn out like my dad," Jesse says. "He wasn't even really a father to me."

Within days of arriving at Rising Tide, Jesse is sleeping until noon and wailing away on his Fender Squire bass guitar until 3 a.m. His full-time job is hanging out at the pool, skateboarding and cranking up his boombox.

"Last night I got a full body massage by one of the girls," Jesse laughs.

A week later, Jesse is up at 4 a.m. tripping on LSD and videotaping two sleeping roommates: "Look at the white guy! He's on film!"

Until now, social workers had told Jesse when to get up, when to go to bed, what he could watch on TV, what posters could be tacked to his walls.

"I'm not sweating it," Jesse says. "I've got $500 in the bank. So if I'm jobless for a month, that's OK."

JANEA: Midsummer 2000

Leery eyes blink from the dark hollows of Los Angeles Street on July 25, where nightfall turns downtown sidewalks into a concrete encampment of cardboard boxes.

Janea and Sam wade through the stench of urine and sweat, trying to avoid eye contact with the homeless settling in on skid row. A man relieves himself in a doorway, caring little about the two teens walking nearby.

"This is only for one night, OK?" Sam whispers. "You understand?"

"I understand," Janea says. "It's just that I've never seen anything like this before. You don't see this in Orange County."

That afternoon, they had been in an Alhambra motel room with dreams of going to Fresno to live with Janea's mother. Many foster kids harbor fantasies that they were victims of a big mistake, and that the parents who mistreated them are longing to make amends.

Janea's fantasy evaporates with a collect call. Mom hung up on me, Janea says.

With no car and less than $5 between them, Janea and Sam take the 483 bus to downtown L.A., hoping to find beds at the Union Rescue Mission. It's the only shelter in the area that isn't full.

Janea might have been able to avoid this. Before leaving her foster care group home in Westminster, she was encouraged to apply for transitional housing--including the program that Jesse entered. But Janea yearned to be on her own--and left alone. Janea hated the system, and transitional housing is still the system.

Even if Janea did apply, the odds were against her. On average, about 200 children age out of foster care every year in Orange County. There are spaces for fewer than 50 in transitional housing programs. So for most, the very system that rescued them as children does not hesitate to cast them out on their own once they become adults.

"We can take her," a woman at the Union Rescue Mission says, indicating there is no room for Sam.

Sam's only option is a plastic chair in the mission chapel, a cavernous room that echoes with the snores of hundreds of men. The air burns with a suffocating stink. The lights stay on all night.

The next morning, in the predawn darkness, the streets seem less menacing. The tremor in Janea's voice is gone. The young couple board a bus toward East Olympic Boulevard and South Soto Street, to the nearest welfare office.

By 10 a.m., they have a two-week voucher for the Royal Knights Motel in East L.A., $34 in bus tokens, $8.50 in cash and more than $200 in food stamps. By nightfall, their grim, gang-graffitied motel room is littered with Chips Ahoy, Chee-tos and other junk food.

Instead of looking for work, Sam and Janea hang out at a taco stand across the street or lie in bed watching TV.

When the food stamps run out in early August, Janea hocks her engagement ring for $20 to buy a pizza. It's a baffling sacrifice, considering that she is well aware that their next monthly check is waiting at the welfare office 20 minutes away.

Their best hope, it's decided one Thursday morning, is to sell Roscoe, the malnourished, flea-infested Rottweiler puppy they found three days earlier. That'll bring in $300 easily, Sam says.

They pace in front of a 7-Eleven with a crude cardboard sign: "For Sale Baby Rottweiler, Full Blooded." After four hours in the baking heat, Janea gives up and heads back to the motel. Sam insists on staying and hurls profanities when he's left behind.

Five minutes later, Sam runs up, huffing and puffing. He grabs Janea's shoulder and spins her around. They talk, then argue, then shove. Sam cocks his fist and punches Janea's face. Her screams begin before the blood has time to trickle down her chin.

"Somebody call the police! Call 911. . . . Help me! . . . Help me!"

Sam, afraid, drops to his knees sobbing. He locks his arms around Janea's waist and begs her to stop shrieking. After he is pulled off, Janea sprints down the alley--with Sam right behind.

She is shaking with rage when the squad cars pull up. A bright red bruise wells under her right eye as she fingers the jagged edge of her chipped front tooth. Within half an hour, Sam is hauled off to jail.

Janea drifts down Whittier Boulevard, then stops near a storefront ministry. She sits, tilting her face toward the setting sun, and says nothing for the longest time.

"I feel that if I stay with him, I'm just like my mother. My dad hit her," Janea finally says. "Deserved it, though."

MONIQUE: Late summer 2000

For Monique, Stepping Stones seemed like a good fit at first. But a month past her 18th birthday in late July, the house rules are gnawing at her.

The program forbids visitors and has a zero-tolerance policy on drugs and alcohol. Residents are required to work or attend college or a trade school. They must be home at a reasonable hour, and the kitchen must be kept clean.

Monique tries hard. But she is also a rebellious teenager.

She spends many nights out with her friends--always with Lyla in tow. A 2-year-old needs a schedule and a stable home life, Stepping Stones administrator Jim Carson tells her. He lays out a daily itinerary: mealtimes, nap times, playtimes, bedtimes. Straighten up or you're gone, Carson warns.

But every day, Monique sees other 18-year-olds frittering away the summer, swarming the malls, spending weekends at the beach, while her life is consumed by a job and a temperamental 2-year-old. Money's tight, and in a month she'll have to start paying for Lyla's day care. She already depends on food-bank donations. Her plans to pursue a registered nursing degree have been put on hold.

"It's sad, but I feel old. But then I think, Oh my God, I'm 18. I can't be a little kid anymore," Monique says. "[Lyla] doesn't deserve to have a mom like me.... She deserves a better dad."

Lyla's father is 18-year-old Richard Molina, a Stanton construction worker. When he found out she was dating another guy, she said, he threatened to snatch Lyla in the middle of the night. Later, when she sought a restraining order against Molina, she said only that he threatened to take Lyla by getting an attorney.

Monique's new boyfriend, who is on probation, adds to the stress. He wants to get married.

"Too much drama," the teen mother sighs.

And it never seems to end. A few mornings later, Monique gets a phone call at work: Pick up your daughter at day care--she has lice.

JESSE: Late summer 2000

Life is a lot less complicated for Jesse. After 1 1/2 months at Rising Tide, he's still sleeping until noon, hanging out at the pool and partying past 3 a.m. And he's flat broke. His $500 in savings went to rent--$200 a month--cigarettes and Taco Bell. The power has already been cut off once, and the phone might be next.

"Come on, we're just kids," Jesse says. "We're emancipated youth from group homes; we never had a chance to go get drunk. So we go take advantage on our own."

Paul Bernard, head of Rising Tide, has seen enough. He places Jesse on probation, banning him from the apartment complex during daytime, when he should be out looking for a job. If Jesse isn't working in two weeks, he'll be packing his bags.

By Aug. 9, Jesse is wearing a bow tie and tearing tickets at the Edwards Cinema in the Tustin Market Place. He landed the job after Bernard pulled him out of bed one morning and drove him to the theater to apply. One of the movie chain's executives is on the board of directors that runs Rising Tide.

"I'm getting just above minimum wage, $5.75 an hour," Jesse says as he sweeps up popcorn. "Hopefully, within a couple months, I'll be an assistant manager."

JANEA: Late summer 2000

Bundled in a hooded sweatshirt and a grass-stained Army blanket, Janea snuggles closer to her friends for protection against the midnight chill and the junkies camped beneath the trees.

A two-foot steel pipe lies beside her, for use in case her cache of empty beer bottles attracts a crowd. If they disappear, no one eats tomorrow.

Janea settles in for another night's sleep in East L.A.'s Belvedere Park to be close to Sam, who's sitting in a warm jail cell a block away.

"Oh Jesus," Janea sighs. "I can't wait to get into a warm, comfy bed. Jail is a breeze compared to this. They've got TVs."

The hum of the Pomona Freeway eventually lulls her to sleep.

The day after Sam hit her, Janea arrived at the park pushing a shopping cart. Her friend Dianna came with her, along with Dianna's 17-year-old boyfriend Matt. A runaway from a foster home in Los Angeles, Matt suggested Belvedere Park, a few grassy acres wedged between East L.A.'s Municipal Court, the freeway and a sheriff's station. Police helicopters land 50 yards from where they sleep, descending from the night sky in flurries of dancing lights. No one would dare attack them here.

The three adjust to their new home with amazing ease, living off handouts and recyclable bottles and cans. They commandeer the park's putrid restroom, holding their noses as they take baths in the stainless-steel sinks. Janea even gets her hands on her favorite brand of red hair dye. The nearby branch library offers air-conditioned respite, with free Internet access.

The environs prove too harsh for Roscoe the pup, however. After a few days at the park, Janea gives him to a couple at a nearby McDonald's.

"He needed a good home. His lip was puffed up and he looked sick," Janea says. "We all agree that when we get a house with a yard, we'll go to the pound and get a baby Rott."

After 10 days, they break camp when Sam strikes a deal with the district attorney. Sam is sentenced to 10 days in jail--which he has already served--plus three years' probation, $300 in fines and a year of domestic violence counseling.

"Today is almost as good as my wedding day," Janea exclaims after the Aug. 21 hearing. "I don't have to be by myself anymore."

"Sam!" she screams across the courtyard when he staggers out of jail, head shaved and looking angry. They talk quietly for a few minutes, then he plants a gentle kiss. All is forgiven.

JESSE: Early fall 2000

Jesse keeps reporting to work, and the paychecks keep rolling in. The fridge is full of pizza and frozen burritos.

Jesse's closest friend, Johnny Gardea, hasn't done as well. With no steady job and no money for rent, Johnny has been ordered out by Sept. 10.

On Sept. 2, to kick off Johnny's farewell weekend, he and Jesse make a doughnut run to Krispy Kreme. Jesse is doing his best to cheer up his "brother," as he calls him. Back inside Johnny's apartment, Jesse breaks out a bottle of Captain Morgan's rum. Johnny breaks out two pellet guns, and they head to the back-bedroom window.

The first shot shatters the odometer in Shawn Rainwater's Ford Mustang, then three more strafe his trunk--POP! POP! POP! Seconds later, a shot rips into Sergio Baigorria's stomach, and two others sting Gaspar Paz's back as he holds his 15-month-old son.

Jesse swears he fired only one shot "at a leaf." Johnny was the one aiming at people, Jesse says.

As sirens approach, the two hustle to Jesse's apartment and stash the guns under a mattress. Minutes later, a police bullhorn orders them outside.

The two wounded victims are taken to the hospital, where their medical bills eventually reach $15,000. Jesse and Johnny are charged with three counts of assault with a deadly weapon, and bail is set at $50,000 apiece. They face six years in prison.

"They admitted shooting out the window," says Lt. Bill Fisher of the Tustin Police Department. "You start shooting people, it doesn't matter what it's with."

At Orange County Jail, Jesse is dressed in a ragged orange jumpsuit and sneakers without shoelaces. Deputies put him on suicide watch the day he arrives.

"I'm lost and lonely in here, man," Jesse says, wiping away tears.

On Sept. 16, Jesse's 19th birthday, his only visitor is a reporter. That night, jail doctors put him on Paxil, the antidepressant he was given in foster care. Jesse won't eat.

"It's like my other two birthdays in Juvenile Hall," he mumbles.

Other Tustin police officers later testify that Johnny was the one who admitted shooting the rifle, saying he was trying to "get a rise" out of the people in the alley. Still, Johnny is the one who gets bailed out. Dwayne Brigham, Johnny's volunteer mentor while he was in foster care, forked over $5,000 for a bail bond.

Jesse doesn't know anyone with that kind of money. So he sits in his cell at Theo Lacy Branch Jail in Orange, awaiting trial.

MONIQUE: Early fall 2000

A few miles away, Monique spends most of her shift at Western Medical Center changing bedpans and taking patients' vital signs.

"I really want to be an E.R. nurse," she says. "My job isn't very glamorous. I clean up yucky stuff."

In Room 202, an older woman woozy on Demerol has soiled herself in bed. After changing the sheets, Monique scurries down the hall to the supply closet and grabs a pack of wipes, warming them in the microwave.

"Let me help you," Monique says, gently cleaning the woman before helping her into a fresh bed.

Certified nursing assistants are among the lowest-paid employees in the hospital. Monique works three 12-hour

shifts a week, earning $8 an hour and volunteering for overtime when she can.

In foster care, Monique's counselors told her she was a "natural" when it came to nursing, saying her desire to nurture is a response to not receiving nurturing as a child.

Monique laughs. They were always trying to psychoanalyze her. Not that Monique doesn't have problems. Just ask her.

"I have abandonment issues," she says. "It's not only because my mom left me, but because my grandpa died, my grandma died, and my sister's not around. I'm basically by myself."

For Monique, her father exists in name only--Lorenzo Ramirez Luna. He fled to Mexico after she was born, which she thinks explains her need for constant male companionship: "I want to have a guy around all the time.... I've always had a boyfriend, even if it was somebody stupid."

JANEA: Early fall 2000

Throughout September, Janea and Sam skip between homeless shelters and seedy motels on Beach Boulevard in Anaheim and Buena Park. Some nights they double up with other homeless families, stuffing 10 people into a motel room.

Some days, Janea crawls out of bed at 4 a.m. and takes a bus to Fullerton to sign up for work at a day-labor firm. Her jobs vary from day to day: security guard at an Anaheim car auction; packaging cell phones in Fullerton; working with sheet metal at an Irvine machine shop. On good days Janea pockets $50 or more, but it rarely lasts until morning. When she has the cash, Janea and Sam usually wind up in a soft motel bed.

When Janea is too tired to work, they stay at the First Southern Baptist Church of Buena Park. Unlike other shelters, the church lets the needy stay as long as they want. There is room on the floor to sleep and donated food to eat.

Until now, Janea and Sam dabbled in petty crimes mainly as a matter of survival. Janea wrote hundreds of dollars' worth of bad checks over the summer to buy clothes, blankets, food and medicine--stopping only when stores started rejecting the worthless paper. In the fall, the couple begin shoplifting--stealing shoes from Wal-Mart or raiding a supermarket for toothpaste, tampons and candy bars.

In late October, when the stench from Sam's Nikes becomes too much to stomach, the two know exactly what to do.

"We went to Wal-Mart and jacked him some tennis shoes," Janea says one Thursday afternoon.

One day after work, Janea says, she and another shelter friend pooled their cash to buy a few rocks of crack cocaine for $50--hoping to peddle it on the street and double their money. By the end of the night, Janea's partner found another way to dispose of it.

"He smoked it all. That was so stupid," Janea says, cursing herself.

In November, she says, they hooked up with an ex-con at Orange Coast Interfaith Shelter in Costa Mesa. The ex-con used a screwdriver to bust into a white minivan, and off they went to visit his family in El Monte. They returned in a nice, brown 1979 Cadillac coupe she says they stole at Brea Mall.

"We were having so much fun," Janea says. "I wasn't stressing. I was like, who cares? Let me go to jail."

MONIQUE: Fall 2000

With Lyla starting day care in Garden Grove, the toddler's grandmother volunteers as chauffeur, pulling up at 6:30 a.m. each workday. Monique's boyfriend or cousin usually gives her a ride home from the hospital, and they pick up Lyla on the way.

But rarely, if ever, is Lyla in a car seat. That bothers Carson of Stepping Stones. For months, he has pestered Monique about endangering her daughter's life and flouting the law.

A week before Halloween, the walls come crashing down. After Lyla's grandmother drives up to take her to day care, a shouting match erupts when Carson sees Monique putting Lyla in the car without a child-safety seat. Carson threatens to report her for child abuse. Monique relents, and grabs a car seat stashed in her room.

But for Carson, it's the last straw. He calls Monique into his office and tells her: You're out.

"There are some rules that are hard and fast," Carson says afterward, explaining that child endangerment tops the list. "It has nothing to do with Monique loving her child," he said, adding that she can stay until she finds another place.

Monique knows it was a serious lapse: "But a car seat?" she says, indignant--and worried that the incident may endanger her custody of Lyla, which is still being monitored by the courts.

For two weeks, Monique searches central Orange County for an apartment. She pays $220 a month at Stepping Stones--and now can't find anything cheaper than $700.

"Depression! Depression! I have to move," Monique whines to her friends as they party one Friday night. "Did I tell you what they told me? I could stay at a homeless shelter!"

But the longer she stays at Stepping Stones looking for a new home, the more stressed she becomes.

Two weeks before Thanksgiving, Monique and another young mother are rolling on the floor, throwing punches and pulling hair.

"She was telling me I was a bad mom and I didn't treat my daughter right," Monique says.

That night, Monique shows up at her aunt's front door in Stanton, holding Lyla and a suitcase full of clothes.

JESSE: Fall 2000

Behind bars for just 1 1/2 months, Jesse already has the shaved head of a hard-timer and has mastered all the cellblock lingo.

Jesse is the youngest guy in his unit, F-East, and he's been "hanging with the woods"--the white inmates. You have to pick a side, he explains--whites, Latinos, blacks or Asians--and Jesse decided long ago to reject the Latino label. His father was a descendant of the Tarascan tribe of Mexico and Arizona.

That has caused him problems with Latino inmates. Jesse was attacked the day he arrived at Theo Lacy, but escaped injury when guards intervened.

"It's all politics in here, man."

The week before Thanksgiving, Jesse and Johnny plead guilty to identical charges, three felony counts of assault with a deadly weapon. As part of the plea deal, the judge agrees to consider reducing the charges to misdemeanors if a pre-sentencing investigation finds they have no previous criminal record or history of violence.

Sentencing is set for Jan. 5, giving Jesse 1 1/2 months to sit in jail and worry through the holidays. Jesse's mood

vacillates between helplessness and grim acceptance. On visiting days, he stays under the sheets, knowing the guards will never call his name. He searches for glimmers of hope amid the mindless daily routines, as he reveals in a Thanksgiving Day letter to a reporter:

"Well today it's turkey day and I'm stuck in heer. Man! If I was out there I would probobly be havin' a smoke, or skating or havin' a barbeque or some thing. But here I am writing you guys, sipin' on some coffee and watching out for myself.... This is OK-4-now...."

By December, jail doctors have Jesse on the antidepressants Trazodone and Paxil. He spends most of his time sleeping and has begun going to chapel whenever he can--both the Roman Catholic and Protestant services. Jesse convinces himself the judge will spring him in January, even though his attorney makes no promises.

"I miss my earrings and I miss my cigarettes," he says in early December. "I miss my music, radio, my CDs, my bass, my Boogie Board. I miss my skateboard. I miss being a kid."

JANEA: Winter 2000-01

Janea is tired. She's tired of being poor. She's tired of supporting Sam. She's tired of spending night after night on the hard floor of the church in Buena Park.

"I hate being in a shelter, not having the proper things," Janea says. "I hate not being able to come home, throw my keys on the table--have a table to throw keys on."

On Christmas morning, Janea wakes up inside another dingy room in another seedy Anaheim motel and decides she's had enough. Sam's history. She'll file for an annulment. She'll move back with her aunt in Santa Ana. She's starting over.

Early the next morning, as Sam sleeps, Janea slips out of their room without saying goodbye.

"I think I made the right choice," Janea says. "He can go out and do something with his life--get a job."

Within a month, Janea and Sam are cuddled on a bed in Buena Park's Gas Lamp Motel. Janea's new life with her aunt crumbled after a few weeks.

In the end, Janea says, she had nowhere else to turn.

JESSE: Winter 2000-01

On a cold, rainy Friday in January, Jesse steps out of the brightly lit lobby of Theo Lacy Jail wearing a white T-shirt, baggy shorts and flip-flops. And an exhausted smile.

"I'm free," he says softly, closing his eyes as raindrops wash over him.

That morning, the charges against him were reduced to three misdemeanors, and he was released after 126 days in jail.

"I've got a friend who's going to help me out," Jesse says. A fellow inmate, jailed for drunk driving, had talked his wife into renting Jesse a spare bedroom in their Mission Viejo home. She has a job waiting for him. Jesse's going to be a telemarketer.

About 8 p.m., a gleaming white Jeep Grand Cherokee pulls into the parking lot, and a slender blond woman saunters over to Jesse.

"Hi, I'm Suzanne."

Minutes later, the Jeep's doors slam shut. Jesse disappears into traffic.

MONIQUE: Winter 2000-01

Monique's entire life, including her successes and failures as a mother, are reduced to a stack of reports piled before Juvenile Court Commissioner Gary L. Vincent for a custody hearing 11 days before Christmas.

Monique and Richard, Lyla's father, sit silently. Richard casts an unsettling presence, with a pierced eyebrow, shaved head and a "Lyla" tattoo scrawled across the back of his neck.

For 20 minutes, Monique's lawyer praises her client's promising nursing career and college plans.

The judge agrees.

"You don't expect to see that kind of maturity from someone 18," Vincent says. "We have a result here that's about as positive as you can get."

Monique wins sole custody of Lyla, with strings. A social worker is to check on them for six months.

On Jan. 4, Monique and Lyla walk into their new home at the Emerald Gardens Apartments in Buena Park--an apartment subsidized by the Orange County Housing Authority.

The only pieces of furniture are two donated beds and Lyla's kiddie table. Except for a bottle of juice, the fridge is bare.

"I have my own room. My daughter has her own room," Monique says, smiling. "I have my own kitchen, and I don't want to wash the dishes every time I use them. I can just leave them there."

Monique is home.

EPILOGUE: Summer 2001

More than a year has passed since Jesse, Monique and Janea were sent into adulthood with a handshake and a duffel bag stuffed with socks and a toaster.

In that time, another 2,300 children "aged out" of foster care in California. Some will wind up sleeping in homeless shelters, getting pregnant or landing in jail. Others will find a steady job or head to college--working hard and finding ways to persevere.

To improve the odds for all emancipated foster youths, Congress in 1999 approved the Foster Care Independence Act, setting aside $140 million a year to help young adults make the transition to self-sufficiency--doubling federal funding over previous efforts.

Still, the increased funding doesn't help much. In California, only about 10% are expected to receive assistance, said Sylvia Pizzini, deputy director of the state's Children and Family Services Division. There simply is not enough to go around.

This year, Democratic lawmakers in Sacramento vowed to make California's troubled foster care system--and emancipated foster kids--a legislative priority, introducing a $300-million package of reforms during a flashy press conference in April.

By July, the proposed funding had been whittled to $19 million--thanks, in part, to the money spent during the

state's energy crisis.

The Orange County Social Services Agency, which a 2000 grand jury criticized for abdicating responsibility for emancipated foster children, has announced plans to hire 12 "coaches" to guide the youths through the services available to them.

Still, some welfare experts say there's no telling what these efforts will accomplish. No one really knows what programs are the most effective for these kids, or what amount of funding is really needed.

Jesse, for instance, had transitional housing, job assistance and independent living classes. Yet three months into freedom, he was in jail.

On his own for months now, Jesse still struggles. After a month or so of living with Suzanne and working for minimum wage at her Mission Viejo mortgage company, he packed his bags and moved in with a friend a few miles away. Six weeks later, he moved in with a girlfriend and her mother--sleeping on the couch.

After flirting with employment at Jamba Juice and losing out on a job at Stater Bros. because of his criminal record, Jesse finally finds work: pouring lattes at a neighborhood Starbucks.

A chunk of every paycheck goes to paying the nearly $6,000 in court-imposed fines Jesse owes--mostly to reimburse the victims for their medical bills. Almost everything else is gobbled up by rent, groceries and other necessities.

"It's such a drag. I can't save anything," Jesse says one September afternoon, slurping a lemonade at the Laguna Hills Mall food court.

It could be worse, he says. His probation officer and the prospect of drug tests keep him in line--working steady and no partying. Plus, a few weeks shy of his 20th birthday, Jesse got his driver's license.

"Now that was sweet," he says.

Monique has managed to piece together a relatively normal life in Buena Park. She's taking nursing classes at Cypress College--starting the slow process of working for her registered nursing degree.

Even when she lost her job at Western Medical Center in May, in part for missing too many days of work to go to school and care for Lyla, Monique bounced back. She landed a higher-paying job with a local nursing registry--which gives her flexible hours, and allows her to go to school and care for Lyla.

But her final ascension into adulthood, and as a mother, remains elusive.

After all she had accomplished in the past year, Monique walked into Orange County Family Court on June 4 expecting to win full, unfettered custody of Lyla.

She walked out sullen, dejected, almost in tears. Lyla was to remain a ward of the court for a few more months--at the very least.

"I was ready for it to be over," Monique says.

But it's far from over. In late August, Monique reveals that she's seven months pregnant. Just like her first pregnancy, when she was 14, Monique found a way to keep it a secret from everyone but her closest friends. Her bulging belly makes that impossible now.

It happened in February, she says sheepishly, when she briefly got back together with Richard--her old boyfriend

and Lyla's father.

Richard held her hand when the baby girl was born on Oct. 24.

Monique cradles the newborn Brianna in her arms a month later as she sits in Family Court, waiting to hear if she'll finally win full custody of Lyla. This time, she leaves smiling.

"I want to thank you for being an example of how difficult circumstances can be overcome," said presiding court Commissioner Vincent, after declaring Lyla was no longer a ward of the court. "You're young, but you don't act like it. We wish you well."

Janea's prospects remain much dimmer. After months of sleeping on floors and jumping from job to job in the spring, she discovers she's pregnant.

In April, she and Sam board a Greyhound bus--armed with $30 and two one-way tickets to Las Vegas. Vegas would give them a clean slate, a place they can start over and do it right this time.

After spending a week at a homeless shelter, the couple are recruited by a local ministry that requires them to beg for donations on street corners and outside supermarkets.

By late June, they are back in Southern California, living in the ministry's offices in South-Central L.A. Now almost six months pregnant, Janea is shuttled to a Rite Aid in Burbank three times a week to hit up shoppers for spare change. Thirty percent goes in her pocket; the rest goes to the ministry.

"They tell me I'm having a girl. She's healthy as a horse," Janea says. "I hope so. I'll tell ya, I'm worried about this kid."

By November, Janea and Sam are back on welfare and living in a subsidized apartment in Buena Park. After quitting his job as a supermarket security guard, Sam spent nearly half his final paycheck of $300 on a new cell phone. He now works as a janitor at Knott's Berry Farm.

Janea's labor pains begin Nov. 20. Leilanie Lopez arrives the morning of Nov. 21, weighing in at more than 8 pounds.

"Thank God that's over," Janea mutters.

The day Janea comes home, one of the first calls she makes is to the local welfare office--to ask for vouchers for milk and food.

Those who work with the foster care children see an inevitability to their lives--an intractable cycle of addiction, abuse and indifference that is tough to break, regardless of government programs.

"Remember who we're talking about here," said Carson of Stepping Stones, the transitional housing program in Fullerton that caters to teen mothers. The kids he sees year after year "have been beaten, abused and raped--many times by their own parents. That's normal life to them.

"These are damaged kids."

GRAPHIC: JANEA: The day after being punched by her husband, who was promptly jailed, Janea Barton prepares to sleep in a park. She braces for a chilly night: "Jail is a breeze compared to this," she says. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times
MONIQUE: The daughter of a heroin-addicted mother, Monique Luna became a mother herself at 15. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

JESSE: Most of Jesse Equihua's adolescence was spent in a variety of institutional homes. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

TRYING TO STAY CLEAN: Unemployed and homeless, Janea uses the squalid restroom at Belvedere Park in East Los Angeles to dress and wash. With other homeless youths, she lives off handouts and selling recyclable bottles. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

TEMPORARY REFUGE: After Janea's voucher expires, Dianna Martinez, right, invites her to stay in her room at the Royal Knights Motel in Los Angeles. Janea says she was molested by her father. "Everyone who hears my story feels sorry for me. I'm like, why?" Janea says. "These rape victims, all they do is cry and boohoo about it. They make me sick. It never did affect me." PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

(3 photos) THE FIGHT: An argument escalates to violence. Janea reacts to being punched by husband Sam Lopez, left. "Somebody call the police! Call 911 . . . Help me! . . . Help me!" she shouts. After refusing his plea to quiet down, she seeks to escape. A police squad car soon takes Sam away. He is jailed for 10 days and is fined $300. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

THE REUNION: "Today is almost as good as my wedding day," Janea says of Sam's release from jail. "I don't have to be by myself anymore." The next month, the couple live at homeless shelters and seedy motels in Anaheim and Buena Park, often doubling up with other homeless people and sometimes sleeping as many as 10 to a room. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

Janea, bundled in a stained blanket, prepares for another night outdoors. Jobless and hungry, she resorted to writing hundreds of dollars worth of bad checks and shoplifting food and clothes. She also tried to sell rock cocaine. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

A YOUNG MOTHER: Monique Luna waits at a bus stop with her 2-year-old daughter, Lyla. After giving birth at 15, Monique rented a room from a friend for months before a neighbor reported her to the Orange County Social Services Agency. Monique works to support Lyla. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

(2 photos) TEENAGE PARENTHOOD: While Lyla sleeps inside, Monique parties, above, with friend Theresa Luna, left, and cousin Diane Lopez, right, in Lopez's garage. Monique gets up at 5:30 a.m. for her job as a nursing assistant in Anaheim, but spends many evenings socializing with friends. It's one habit that jeopardized her stay at a Fullerton halfway house, Stepping Stones, where Lyla, right, peers out the window. Monique was evicted for failing to follow the rules. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

WORKADAY WORLD: Jesse Equihua yawns as he arrives for his shift at the Edwards Cinemas in the Tustin Market Place. Although he said he had hopes of becoming an assistant manager, an assault charge ended his employment there. Of his partying nature, Jesse says: "Come on, we're just kids. We're emancipated youth from group homes; we never had a chance to go get drunk. So we go take advantage on our own." PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

FOUR MONTHS IN JAIL: Line of inmates files into the mess hall at Theo Lacy Branch Jail in Orange. Jesse, awaiting trial for a pellet-gun assault, was attacked his first day in jail and later began "hanging with the woods"--the white inmates--and attending church. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

ON HIS OWN: Jesse spent his days loafing before Edwards Theater job was given to him. "I've got $500 in the bank. So if I'm jobless for a month, that's OK," he says. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

GAMBLING ON LAS VEGAS: Janea sits dressed against the cold. After taking a bus to Las Vegas in hopes of a fresh start, Janea and Sam, after a week in a homeless shelter, are recruited by a ministry that requires them to beg for donations on street corners. Two months later, they are back in Southern California. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

HANGING OUT: With Josh Wilkinson, left, also a former foster child, Jesse spends some wages on video games. A portion of each paycheck goes toward court-imposed fines. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

MOTHER AND CHILD: In the midst of her 36-hour-a-week job, Monique settled into a routine in which each night she would cradle Lyla in her arms to read "Winnie the Pooh." She recently won full custody of Lyla, after giving birth in October to another girl, Brianna. PHOTOGRAPHER: GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

LOAD-DATE: December 2, 2001