

## Fostering independence

# New center to ease transition into adulthood

By Sonya Campbell  
Staff Writer

Foster-care alumni gathered March 13 at Buckner Children and Family Services' new transition center in Beaumont to help put the finishing touches on the facility before its grand opening, tentatively scheduled for April 1.

The FYI Center: Fostering Youth Independence, named by current and former foster youth, is located at 675 E. Virginia Ave., across from Lamar University's tennis courts and dorms.

Formerly a two-bedroom house, the center is expected to provide "a place like home" for youths who are aging out of the foster-care system.

"We want the kids to feel at home here," said Shari Pulliam, a spokeswoman for Child Protective Services. "They need to feel like they belong."

Among the facility's features will be a kitchen, laundry room, computer stations and offices for staff and guest agencies.

Services will focus on education, employment, transportation, housing, mentoring and financial assistance for current and former foster youths, ages 16 to 25, including those who are on probation or parole or have been released from a juvenile correctional facility.

A \$300,000 two-year grant from the Texas Workforce Commission

enabled the facility to become a reality; however, contributions from the public will be needed to help keep it open.

"We're currently working on a sustainability plan," Greg Eubanks, Beaumont's Children and Family Services director said, noting the community has already begun to help. "That's what's so great about Southeast Texas."

One example of that charitable spirit was a ramp for the physically disabled that was built for the center by a local construction company.

Eubanks said there is also a need for mentors, computer donations and employers.

Mentors, he noted, will undergo a background check and training.

Wendy Chavez, a former foster-care youth who was on hand for the



The Buckner FYI (Fostering Youth Independence) Center is at 675 E. Virginia Ave. in Beaumont. The center will provide services to young adults who are preparing to transition out of the foster-care system.

Photos by Sonya Campbell



recent workday, said she is excited about the center's opening.

"They should have done this a long time ago," she said. "There's a lot of kids in foster care, and they need this."

Not only will the center serve as a "safety net" for the youths who are trying to make the transition out of foster care successfully, it will provide many services under one roof.

"Everything will be in one place. We won't have to run all over the place anymore," Chavez said, smiling.

Anyone interested in becoming a donor, employer or mentor is asked to call Buckner at (409) 866-0976.

### About the agency

Buckner Children and Family Services began in 1879 providing orphan care in Dallas. Since that time, the agency has expanded in programs and scope to a multifaceted faith-based



Greg Eubanks is the director for Buckner Children & Family Services of Southeast Texas.

social service agency providing diverse ministries in a global setting.

Since 1970, Buckner has provided residential care to children in the custody of Child Protective Services in Southeast Texas.

Programs have since expanded to include community intervention and abuse prevention services, foster care and adoption, assessment services in an emergency shelter setting, residential group care, and transitional services for youth aging out of foster care.

## Intimate portrait

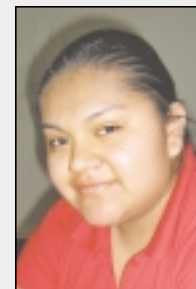
# Foster youth shares story of struggle

By Sonya Campbell  
Staff Writer

As a young child in Mexico, Wendy Chavez longed for a better life.

But that wasn't to be the case — at least, not until years later when she ended up the Texas foster-care system.

Now, at age 20, Wendy continues to come to terms with those early years and is working hard to ensure she'll have a successful future.



Sitting on the floor of the new Buckner FYI Center on March 13 — taking a break from painting walls prior to the facility's impending grand opening — Wendy was among the foster youth alumni who agreed to share their stories with the public.

Born to a 14-year-old mother, Wendy acknowledges the odds were stacked against her at birth. They mounted when her mother left her at age 2.

At 5 years old, Wendy was taken, illegally, across the border into California. She made the trip again at age 7.

Living with her father, whom she said drank all the time and was physically abusive, was a nightmare. Her struggles grew worse as she got older.

When she turned 13, she said, her father managed to get her fake documents and forced her to go to work. Her first job was with a clothing manufacturer.

The following year, she and her father moved to East Texas, where Wendy landed a job at a poultry processing plant. She worked from 4 p.m. to 7 a.m., six days a week.

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**'We want the kids to feel at home here. They need to feel like they belong.'**

— Shari Pulliam, spokeswoman for Child Protective Services

# STORY

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“I never saw \$1,” she said, noting her father never bought her anything — including food and clothing.

Instead, Wendy lived off leftovers given to her by her co-workers.

All that changed, however, when at 15 Wendy showed up at work one day with severe injuries to her face.

When her supervisors questioned her about what had happened, Wendy said she was afraid to tell them

anything since she was working without the proper documentation.

But when she learned her employer was looking into the authenticity of her paperwork, she finally answered their questions — admitting she was in the U.S. illegally, was being abused and neglected by her father and had no formal education.

While her situation looked bleak, Wendy had actually reached a turning point in

her life.

Removed from her father’s custody, she was placed into the Texas’ foster-care system. It marked the beginning of a new and better life. She was placed with a foster family she continues to adore, and has finally been able to concentrate on her own needs.

One of her first tasks was to become fluent in English and begin her formal education. She started her first day

of school as a ninth-grader and has been going strong ever since.

Wendy graduated high school in 2005 — the same year she got her green card — and has since earned a certificate in office technology administration at Lamar Institute.

She is currently working on her second certificate — medical office records — and hopes to be finished by the end of the year and then

get a job as an administrative assistant.

Wendy, who is engaged, noted she plans to complete her education, get a job and buy a home before getting married.

Regarding her former life, Wendy said those early years seem like forever ago. And although she once felt like she hated her father, she now believes everything happens for a reason and has forgiven him.