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## Lancaster teen gets a fresh start

### Transitional living facility teaches 16-year-old to how to live independently

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LANCASTER - For Mel Aitchison, getting her license was more than a rite of passage.

She held the white piece of paper in her hand and smiled as her gray eyes brightened in the sun.

The accomplishment was one more sign Mel's life was getting closer to being like any other 16 year-old's.

"I got it," she said while clutching her temporary driver's license.

She sat alone on a crisp fall day outside the Bureau of Motor Vehicles. It was her 16th birthday, Oct. 5, and she waited for her ride home.

Home for this 16-year-old is a place called the REALITY House. A transitional living residence offering a fresh start and life skills to children in the custody of Fairfield County Children's Services.

Many teens share special moments - like getting your driver's permit- with parents or relatives. Mel shares the news with Ward Swift, a REALITY House staff member, who she called right after she got her permit.

#### Struggling Youth

Mel was in the custody of the Fairfield County Job & Family Services for 10 months before moving into the transitional home.

She is one of four teens who live in the home and is supervised by Independent Living Supervisor Heather O'Keefe.

She was born in Romeo, Mich. Her aunt and uncle took her and her four sisters in when Mel was 6 years old. She left at 14 to live with her father in Pickerington. She was placed into the custody of children's services nearly a year ago when her father had a run-in with the law.

He wasn't able to be interviewed for this story.

She has attended five high schools and lived in five different cities in the past two years. She now is a junior at Lancaster High School.

Placement into state custody was unsettling in many ways, Mel said.

"It changed my life because I had a lot of plans for my life based on living with my dad," Mel said as she brushed her long brown hair behind her ear while sitting in the REALITY House basement.

"It was really unexpected, when everything happened, and it's changed the way I look at my dad and the whole thing has affected me mentally and emotionally."

Mel admits she strayed once she was separated from her father. She has been on probation three times and now is on probation for possession after being caught with a prescription drug.

Mel hasn't been in trouble for almost four months and hopes to be released from probation soon.

"I have to pay off my fines." Mel said. "I haven't been in trouble for a while."

A new beginning

REALITY stands for Realistic Employment And Living Independently Training for Youth, and that is what the house aims to do by teaching teens how to live independently and holding them accountable for their actions.

In September 2007, Mel's case worker, Alexis Howard, talked to her about trying the REALITY House in Lancaster.

"She has a lot of independent qualities to begin with," said Family Based Care Director Karla Nelson. "And she was definitely ready for that next step." It's been a positive experience so far, Mel acknowledges. She said the rules and responsibilities have taught her some discipline and forced her to think about her future. She learns to manage her money, how to get jobs and how to handle extra responsibilities.

"The day I moved into the REALITY house, it was September 13," Mel said. "I remember that because obviously it was an important day and a big change."

"I kind of felt scared at first," she said. "I was pretty shy around all the other kids, but I was really happy after that first day."

Life skills for survival

The REALITY House opened with two teens in August 2006. Mel is in the second class of teens to live in the transitional home, which can house up to five residents at a time ranging in age from 16 to 19.

"For the kids who live here, it is a very real experience," O'Keefe said. The house came about when O'Keefe applied for a grant in 2005 to fund a house that would help transition teens into adulthood by themselves.

The grant was approved in 2006, and the majority of funds come from the state.

The first class graduated May 27, 2006. Two previous REALITY House residents are studying at Hocking College, one in interactive multimedia and the other is studying human services. A young man still is in custody and working toward attending the police academy. One other is working in construction.

Participants must follow the house rules, including obeying curfews and going grocery shopping for their own food.

The residents also have to do chores each week and attend classes to help them transition into adulthood alone. They also are encouraged to participate in community service.

Mel rides the bus home or gets a ride from one of the REALITY House staff after school. She then heads off to work, the grocery store, soccer practice or to hang out with friends.

"The REALITY house is helping me a lot actually. I am learning a lot of skills of how to live independently that is helping me for the future," Mel said. "You don't have parents to take care of you, and that is the whole point - to learn to live on your own."

### Building a positive future

Nelson and Howard have seen positive changes in Mel since she moved into the home.

"She is more focused on her future and what it is going to take to get her there," said Family Based Care Director Karla Nelson said.

Mel works two jobs - one at Burger King and another at Taco Bell. She is an assistant coach of a recreation soccer team.

And she is quickly perfecting her driving skills with the help of REALITY House staffer, Josh Komives, who gives her driving tips and lets her drive his car.

Mel wants to attend the University of Michigan and become an attorney. It's a goal she has wanted since the fifth grade.

But she wasn't sure it was possible before moving into the home.

"I want to go to law school for eight years and become a criminal defense attorney. I was just always interested in crime-related issues and arguing," she said with a laugh.

"I'm pretty good at arguing so, I think that is what I want to do."

She has lived in the house for only a month. But she knows the house is the right place for her. And moving in was the right decision.

"I didn't know if it was going to work out for me or not," Mel said about the first day she moved into the house. "But I've realized that it is going to."

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