

She's head of the household, and she's only 17



Mary Metheny is the retired homeless liaison from Beaverton and currently works as a McKinney-Vento Homeless Education coach for the Beaverton School District.

BY MARY METHENEY
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Susan is an attractive, well-spoken young woman who works as a receptionist at a small trucking company. She is the sole support of a family of three and is a full-time student with solid plans for the future.

Her two dependents have medical issues and do not work; as a result, Susan's paycheck is quickly depleted. She receives Supplemental Security Income benefits, which along with her salary covers only her rent. Food stamps in the amount of \$562 are the primary source of food for her family each month — \$6.25 per person per day — and Susan utilizes two church pantries for additional food and necessities.

Susan is 17. Her mother and aunt rely on her to keep them housed; they are both active alcoholics. Her father was killed in a car accident many years ago. Susan doesn't remember him but is grateful to him for continuing to provide for her.

A strong and accomplished self-advocate, Susan appears hostile at first glance. When the power was about to be disconnected in her home, she contacted Portland General Electric to demand a payment plan. In other areas, the school liaisons were able to help. Susan was assisted in enrolling in a health insurance plan and was directed to the Teen Health Center on the campus of Beaverton High School. An untreated sinus infection was treated, and a prescription was paid for

with donated dollars from a Caring Community Fund, managed by the homeless liaisons' office.

Before becoming the head of the household, Susan was able to maintain a nearly perfect GPA. Currently, she is passing all of her classes but is frequently absent or tardy due to her work schedule. Her dream of being a veterinarian is lofty, and she knows it. Next fall, Susan plans to attend Portland Community College, eventually transferring to Portland State University. When asked how she will cover the cost of college, she pauses before saying, "I'll figure something out."

The missing pieces in this scenario are any future memories of a childhood. There will be no yearbook, no senior prom and no small part in the spring musical. Susan is functioning as an adult without the benefit of ever having been a carefree teenager. The homeless liaisons in her school district can fill in some of the equity gaps by asking the school to help out. Waivers can be given for school activities, flexible schedules can be created, and required school supplies can be provided.

The home environment is a dramatically different story. Dysfunction in the home frequently becomes so extreme that students give up and leave, which often leads to dropping out of school. In Susan's case, she is so devoted to her mother that leaving isn't an option. Her drive and her maturity help

her to have an endgame.

Sitting in the office of the McKinney-Vento Program, Susan contacted Luke-Dorf, St. Vincent de Paul and Central City Concern. She had persuaded her mom the night before to seek help with her addiction. Susan was hopeful. She sounded like an experienced advocate as she spoke with the agencies and took pages of notes. When she left the office, she was happier than the staff had ever seen her. Maybe this was the turning point she had been praying for.

Several days passed before anyone in the McKinney-Vento office was in contact with Susan. When she did appear, it was to pick up her TriMet student bus pass for the coming month. She wasn't forthcoming about how things were going at home but did mention that her mom was influenced by her aunt's partying ways and that any talk about getting sober had stopped. She was looking for a small studio apartment for her mom and herself, one that would accommodate only the two of them. She was certain that her mom would choose her over her aunt and her alcohol.

It seems that she can still function like a teenager: very hopeful and a little naive.

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In 2014, nearly 20,000 Oregon students were registered as homeless. This column is part of Street Roots' ongoing coverage on issues related to students experiencing homelessness.

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