

Adopted from a foster home, PHS grad looks to pay it forward

By ANTONIO SIERRA
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By the time she finishes college, Jennifer Kannier could come full circle.

After she graduates from Pendleton High School Saturday, she plans to pursue a degree and career in social work, a fitting profession for the former foster child.

Jennifer said she spent her first three years in Longview, a southwestern Washington town 50 miles north of Portland.

Her biological parents struggled with addiction to drugs and alcohol and Jennifer was eventually placed in a foster home across the Columbia River in Rainier, Oregon.

She would intermittently stay at a drug treatment facility with her mother. But when mom slipped back into addiction, Rainier became Jennifer's longterm home.

But even though Jennifer's world kept changing, she remained relatively unfazed.

"I felt like I was a normal child," she said.

Kannier's fortunes changed after she turned 7, when the state sent letters to her relatives asking if they would be willing to take her on.

Jennifer's first cousin, Wyndi Kannier, answered the call and adopted her, triggering Jennifer's move to Pendleton.

In the first couple of years, state social workers studiously followed up on her placement, going as far as to check to see if all the fire extinguishers in the Kannier residence worked.

Those check-ins from the state have since subsided and Jennifer's life has flourished under the watch of her adoptive parents.

A National Honors Society student with a part-time job at the Round-Up office, Jennifer said she hasn't been especially public about her past. Although she's annoyed when some of her classmates unknowingly make adoption jokes in front of her, she has received strong support from



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

A former foster child, Jennifer Kannier plans to pursue a career in social work after she graduates from Pendleton High School Saturday.

the people she's talked about it with.

Knowing that some of her classmates have absentee parents, Jennifer is thankful that her own adoptive parents took her on and supported her. She's aware that other foster children aren't as lucky.

According to a 2014 study conducted in California, foster children performed worse in English and math than their peers and graduated high school at a 58 percent rate, 26 percentage points below their peers.

Jennifer said it still hasn't hit her yet that she has earned a diploma, but she already has her sights set on where she's going next — Bend.

Jennifer and her adoptive family moved to Bend for a year, when Jennifer was a freshman in high school. The Kanniers ultimately moved back to Pendleton to be closer to her sick grandmother, but Jennifer said she was struck

by Bend's beauty and the friendliness of its residents.

She plans to attend Bend's Central Oregon Community College and live on campus, perhaps learn to ski.

Although she's unsure of which four-year university she'll transfer to after she's done with community college, she does know that she wants to pursue social work as a career.

Jennifer views it as a way of paying it forward for the way the foster system helped her out of a difficult situation.

"I feel like I would be one of the most qualified (social workers)," she said, having been in the system herself.

At the graduation ceremony Saturday, members from both her families will be there. While she's fallen out of touch with her biological mother, she's invited her two biological brothers to watch her walk the stage.

PENDLETON: 150 students are home-schooled in town

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will have to promote itself to gain some of them back.

Yoshioka, who also serves as the district's director of curriculum, instruction and assessment, studied some of the sources that were siphoning off Pendleton's students in November.

Yoshioka said Pendleton has long lost more of its students to surrounding districts than it takes from them — and recent trends reveal that hasn't changed.

According to his research, surrounding districts were enrolling 131 students that resided in the Pendleton School District boundaries. Meanwhile, only 25 students commuted from the surrounding area to attend Pendleton schools.

Additionally, 150 students are home-schooled in Pendleton rather than sent to public school.

A newer trend drawing kids away from the district is online charter, which allow students to log-in to school from a laptop at home. In Yoshioka's survey, 57 Pendleton students chose this route.

In an educational marketplace, Yoshioka said the district will have to advertise directly to the public in the same way charter schools do.

Yoshioka said the district has plenty to advertise, like Pendleton High School's 91 percent graduation rate in 2015-2016, the district's career technical education offerings and more.

While Pendleton probably won't ever be able to compete with the small class sizes school districts like Helix offer, the district may be able to start new services that make a dent in Pendleton's online charter community.

The InterMountain Education Service District recently unveiled IMESD Online, a service for all of its member districts that gives them the ability to create their own online schools.

But bringing those 57 students into the district's

fold won't be automatic.

Pendleton resident Angela Bonzani said she and her husband have never been interested in sending her eight children, six of them school-aged, to a traditional public school.

Home schooling allowed her children more time with the family and better sleep, which was the route the Bonzani took until they enrolled their children in Baker Charter Schools.

Bonzani liked that Baker took away the stress of identifying and purchasing curriculum for her students while still having the flexibility of a home school environment.

"It's a lot like home schooling, because you're home," she said.

Even if Pendleton launched an online program, she has no plans to transfer her kids from Baker Charter Schools because of the resources and attention the programs offer.

Acknowledging that not every family is going immediately jump at the chance of joining a Pendleton online school, Yoshioka said his early expectations for the online program would be 30-50 new students for the district.

Increased competition isn't the only thing depressing Pendleton's enrollment, especially considering that Baker and the dozen other online charter schools are each capped at enrolling 3 percent of a public school district's population.

Pendleton is graying Whether it's because of the national trend of couples having smaller families, or the tight local housing market and family wage jobs, the result is the same.

"Pendleton is an aging community," Yoshioka said.

According to the U.S. Census, Pendleton lost 98 people between 2000 and 2010, less than 1 percent.

But although working age adults and seniors rose by 1.6 percent and 1.4 percent, respectively, school

age children (5-17) declined by 8 percent. The preschool pipeline offered no respite either — children between the ages of 0 and 4 decreased by 6.4 percent.

How funding works Luckily for Pendleton, the state doesn't base enrollment funding on a raw headcount — it's funding per student is actually set to go up.

Michael Wiltfong, the Oregon Department of Education's director of school finance explained that the state uses a metric called weighed average daily membership, or ADMw, to calculate how much money is allocated to each pupil. ADMw adds more weight to special education students, English language learners, impoverished students and other kids that might need more funding to be educated.

School officials lay a lot of the burden of the district's budget cuts on the state budget.

According to the Confederation of Oregon School Administrators, the Oregon Quality Education Commission determined that the state would need to spend \$9.1 billion in the 2017-2019 biennium to reach the national average in instructional time and class size. The current proposed education budget is \$8.2 billion.

With Pendleton down several staff members heading into next year, Yoshioka is unsure if the decrease in faculty will create larger class sizes, which will depend on kindergarten registration.

Despite the school district's slide, Yoshioka said he's optimistic, pointing to incoming Superintendent Chris Fritsch's commitment to boosting enrollment.

Yoshioka also had another figure that made for positive news. The 180 kids already enrolled in kindergarten are twice the amount that were enrolled at this time last year.

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