

Equipped for success - Laptop donation supports more than 70 local foster youth

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When Georgia flipped open her new sleek laptop, she marveled at how much easier it would be to work on her homework, and envisioned her grades improving.

Georgia (whose last name is withheld because she's a foster care dependent) has been living on her own since January, shortly after she turned 18. Currently, she's saving up for a car and searching for summer work before attending Butte College in the fall.

She considers a laptop necessary for her success, but acknowledged it was not at the top of her list of financial priorities, and it would have taken a while to purchase one on her limited income.

"Having the resources at your fingertips is very healthy and important," she said. "When you're sitting in your college class and you see everyone pull out their computers, you're like, 'Oh, I have one, too!' versus that shameful feeling of, 'Oh, I don't have one.'"

The free computer wasn't just a thoughtful graduation surprise for Georgia. It was one of about 1,200 laptops that will be donated to transition-age youth (16 to 21 years old) in the foster care system across 35 California counties this year, funded by \$400,000 from Rural County Representatives of California and National Homebuyers Fund in partnership with iFoster, a nonprofit child advocacy organization. About 75 youth in Butte County will benefit.

Nationwide, there are more than 430,000 children in foster care, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and California is home to about 60,000.

Like Georgia, iFoster's co-founder Serita Cox grew up in foster care, which is what motivated her to advocate for foster children and fill gaps in their care. Since its laptop program launched in 2012, the nonprofit has donated more than 9,000 computers to foster youth.

The organization, now in its eighth year, has always had a goal of providing "the resources and opportunities that children and youth growing up outside their biological home ... need to become successful and independent adults," Cox said from her office in Truckee.

Though the nonprofit supports youth in many ways—through scholarships, stipends for sports and arts activities, tutoring and job skills training—laptops have remained the No. 1 request.

Indeed, while 90 percent of middle- and upper-class youth and 79 percent of low-income youth in the U.S. have access to a computer at home, that number is significantly lower for foster youth in urban and rural counties, at 21 percent and 5 percent, respectively, according to an evaluation of iFoster's laptop program by the University of California. Donating the computers has resulted in significant improvements for youth on many levels: academics, relationships with friends and families (foster and biological), self-esteem and overall satisfaction with life.

Christina Porter, coordinator for the federal Independent Living Program, appeared delighted to present Georgia's laptop on Monday (May 7). She said, "having something tangible that's theirs is very important."

Porter oversees an office in Chico that provides life-skills coaching, job and college application assistance and case management for transition-age youth in foster care. Every year, her program purchases laptops for graduating students. The iFoster donation will save her office about \$7,000, which will go to a fund for schooling and housing for emancipated youth.

The iFoster laptops have all the bells and whistles—the Intel computers operate on Microsoft Windows, and come with Microsoft Office, live tech support and a web portal with access to resources like health care and job opportunities, and a digital locker in which youth can save personal documents.

"It's incredibly helpful for these young people and for our program," Porter said. "I had a youth tell me once she wrote a paper on her iPhone because it was the only computer she had."

That's something Georgia is thankful she won't be doing in college—she's already looking forward to finding her own patch of sunshine in which to study on campus.

Georgia entered the foster care system when she was 10, and has a lot of what she calls "system siblings," fellow young people who have been part of the system, too, and are connected by a "very strong and powerful" bond.

"They generally understand what it's like to have to leave everything and move over and over again," she said. A reliable laptop can become a source of stability. It's a way to help foster kids stay organized and remember what they've learned, Georgia said, despite moving from school to school. It allows kids to stay connected with their "system siblings," and provides a way to de-stress.

Cox shared several stories of youth who have stayed in touch with the iFoster team: one young lady was a grocery store bagger without a high school degree, and is now a floral department manager attending college.

"I'm proud of them and their successes and just feel privileged that we get to invest in them," Cox said, choking up. "These kids are worth investing in. If we collectively as a society don't invest in them, then it's our fault when they fail."

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