

# Teen Adoption's Hard Sell

How do you stop ex-foster kids from ending up in trouble?  
The latest remedy: Recruit new parents for them. If only it were so easy.

By Kendra Hurley  
Photographs by Angela Jimenez

**T**welve-year-old Marisol Torres, a round-faced girl with a pink headband, long black hair and thick bangs, sits primly before a room of nearly 50 people at an orientation in Harlem for adults who are thinking

of becoming adoptive parents. In a few minutes, Marisol will be videotaped as she tries to persuade this audience that someone out there should become her new mother or father.

Her image and her pleas—along with the

fuzzy caption, “Marisol T. turns 13 06/04, would like to learn more about your family, call us”—will soon be broadcast on a cable access show aired in Brooklyn and Long Island. The producer of this program is You Gotta Believe!

a private adoption agency specializing in the curious business of marketing adolescents like Marisol to families. You Gotta Believe! branding includes perky slogans like, "If you adopt a teen, there are no diapers to change!"

To witness this peculiar event, I have brought with me Natasha Santos and Pauline Gordon. Both are 16 and writers for *Represent*, the magazine produced by teens in foster care that I edit. Pauline has just finished taking Marisol off to the side for an interview—hearing Marisol's story of how she aches to leave foster care and find a real family. Now, Pauline and Natasha are impatient for the performance to begin. They're rooting for Marisol.

The cameras roll. At first, Marisol deftly whitelies the complications of her life to a few charming facts. She lives in a group home. She doesn't

Natasha and Pauline look at each other, eyebrows raised. They know that Marisol's display of bravado is risky. Her insouciance could be interpreted as endearing. But it might also be condemned as bratty.

Then everything goes wrong. Asked to describe her day, Marisol answers like a robot. "Go to school," she says, staring dully ahead. "School boring. Bored. Teacher? Hmmm. Can't stand her. Come home. Do my homework. Eat dinner. Good food."

At this, Pamela, a sophisticated-looking and composed older teen flanking Marisol, calmly explains that *she's* never bored at school. Moreover, she loves books and reading. She volunteers in her school's library. She always follows her elders' advice. And unlike the other girls in her group home who listen to hip hop,

know how tall the "girl in white" is. "I'm five-nine," Pamela answers, sounding confused.

Later the woman—who already has some adopted children—says that those kids tease her for being too short. "So I'm not taking anyone taller than me," she says. She's laughing, but she sounds like she means it.

Walter A. Jones III, also in the audience, has no interest in Marisol either. At last week's You Gotta Believe! training, he wore a tie-dyed tee and silver hoop earrings and peered through John Lennon-style sunglasses while flipping through an album of older kids and teens up for adoption.

"I want me twins. Triplets would be better," he explained, pausing periodically at a photo that piqued his interest. Then he earnestly turned to the page describing the child and penned notes in the journal he reserves for tracking kids he might want. "Boys. Boys only," said Walter. "I hate girls."

**After the young man on her left admits that sometimes he "destroys things" to feel better, Marisol follows suit. "I'm always depressed," she blurts, dropping her head. For a split second, silence hangs.**

like exercise. She loves to eat. She loves eating so much, she explains shyly, that she looks forward to dinner all day. Oxtail with rice is among her favorite foods. She'd like an adoptive mother to make that dish for her. And she'd like a family "who loves me, family that will treat me nice."

The audience members murmur appreciatively. Emboldened, Marisol warms up and takes a risk. Asked what she likes about school, she shrugs.

"Nothing," she smirks.

"At all?" urges the moderator, a former foster child herself.

"No."

**Previous page: Twelve-year-old Marisol Torres is in foster care—and going through the stressful process of finding someone to adopt her.**

Pamela says, "I'm really not into that... I know I'm unique."

Further, Pamela's requirements for happiness are far less needy than Marisol's. Pamela doesn't expect a family to love her, she says. Only to appreciate her. At this, Marisol looks flummoxed, like she knows she's messed up.

Then Marisol drops a true lead balloon. After the young man on her left admits that sometimes he "destroys things" to feel better, Marisol follows suit.

"I'm always depressed," she blurts, dropping her head. For a split-second, silence hangs.

"She's *not* always depressed!" interrupts Pamela, trying to rescue Marisol and the moment. But it's too late. The moderator politely smiles and plows on.

During question-and-answer time, after the taping has finished, no one from the audience addresses Marisol. Instead, one woman wants to

**T**hree years ago, the Administration for Children's Services entered into a contract with You Gotta Believe! The arrangement is part of ACS' ever-intensifying efforts to connect teens with adults who might offer stability to adolescents who are "aging out" of the foster-care system and facing the prospect of life on their own.

This year, ACS began requiring the private foster care agencies it oversees to help every teen link up with adults who—out of the goodness of their hearts—will support these kids after they leave foster care. The link could involve moving a teen out of a group home and into a private foster family. It could mean hooking a kid up with a "mentor." Or it could mean arranging an adoption—even for a 20-year-old. Of all these options, adoption is preferred. As an ACS training manual on the subject explains, "Legal ties do bind."

"Just occasionally we hear of kids who age out of care to the street or shelter system," explains ACS' Deputy Commissioner of Foster Care and Preventive Services, Lisa Parrish, diplomatically. In fact, a 2000 study by the Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc. found that about 17 percent of the "age-outs" at one New York City agency went directly into homeless shelters. In 1999, Covenant House discovered about a third of the young adults in its homeless shelter had once lived in foster care. Parrish says homelessness won't happen "if you have caring adults in your life."

And even if teens resist cozying up to adults, foster care agencies must now urge them to reconsider. Beginning last July, teens could no longer reject the general prospect of adoption—though they could still refuse to be taken

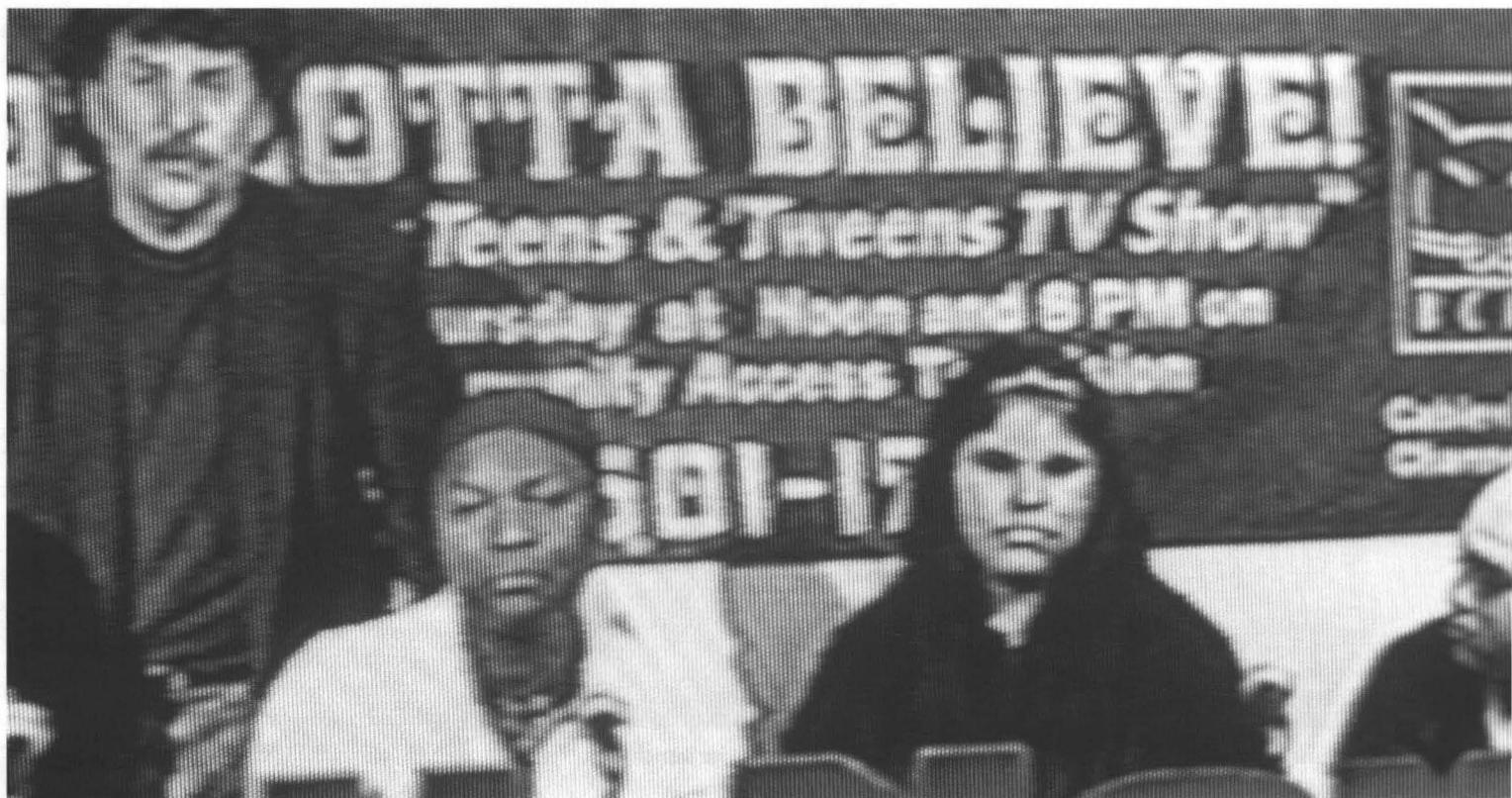
by specific families.

Child welfare workers agree that adoption and adult connections for teens sound like noble goals. But many doubt that pursuing them is the best use of their caseworkers' limited time and resources. Further, they fear that the policy will raise teens' hopes for family without delivering. And when kids are adopted, that takes them out of the realm of state oversight and into private, unsupervised families. As a result, teens who are adopted may stop receiving services that they need, like therapy. Worse, as the notorious Jackson family case in New Jersey underscores, they

on youth. "It's risky to be putting all your resources in one model and not know what the outcomes are," says Harriet Mauer, Director of Social Service at Good Shepherd Services. Mauer and other members of the Council of Families and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA), which represents the city's private foster care agencies, asked ACS for proof that the adoption and mentoring policy really helps teens leaving care. If ACS could not come up with such evidence, the agencies had other models to offer: Inwood House raises about \$350,000 a year to continue supporting about 65 of its teens once they leave

Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, states receive a bounty for every adoption above the total they achieved the year before. Now, for the first time ever, nearly half of the kids in foster care are adolescents. So for ACS to increase adoption rates, it must try to get teens adopted. Yet it is extraordinarily difficult to find foster homes for teens, never mind adoptive ones.

Meanwhile, child welfare systems almost never get good press unless it's about their adoption efforts—which are right up in the public eye with apple pie and (biological) motherhood. As a result, says Gladys Carrion a



may suffer neglect or abuse.

And there's always the risk—substantial, as it turns out—that the “connection” between the teen and the nurturing adult may go bad, especially if the grown-up's ideas about mentoring and adoption are based more on fantasy than on a realistic grasp of the problems attending such relationships.

It may seem commonsensical that linking teens to caring adults can bolster their chances in life after they leave foster care, but that outcome has not been proven. Few studies have explored the long-term effects of adoption or mentoring

**Pat O'Brien, left, puts teens on TV to help them find new parents. Pamela, Marisol and José explain why they're good kids.**

care; Children's Village pairs boys leaving its residential treatment center with supervised, professional mentors who stay in touch not only out of the goodness of their hearts, but because doing so is their paid job.

ACS has yet to provide the goods, and some child welfare experts have begun wondering whether teen adoption is simply the city's way of abdicating responsibility for its youngsters. After all, adoptions cost the city far less than does keeping a kid in care, and, under the

COFCCA member and the executive director of Inwood House, agencies are afraid to utter a peep against adoption. If they do criticize, she says, “You almost have to preface it with, ‘I believe in adoption, but I understand that it's not a panacea and it's not going to work for every young person....All of us have to devote all this time and energy into writing case plans about the efforts we're making to find adoptive homes for teens, when in reality that's going to be an option for a very small number of teens

in the system. Hello! It's not the real world."

Some child welfare experts warn that agency workers have their own motives for keeping kids in foster care, however. As ACS has pushed a policy of moving teens from group homes to private foster families, which happen to be less expensive, agencies have had to shut down the homes and lay off caseworkers. Losing teens to adoption means even more cuts.

Undeterred by these counterforces, ACS continues trying to persuade agencies that families who want teens really do exist, and finding them is worth the effort. "This isn't just turning the Titanic," admits Alexandra Lowe, ACS' Special Council to the Deputy Commissioner for Foster Care and Preventive

some of the best available for people who do end up adopting.

ACS also arranges agency classes with adoption guru and trainer Bob Lewis. After running an adoption agency in Massachusetts for twenty years, Lewis wrote the current manual that ACS uses to train its personnel in how to promote teen adoption. His staunch belief that teens can and should be adopted is reflected in the manual, which is replete with child welfare jargon and catch phrases, some of which are dated. (Lewis himself is a master of this melange, as in his vow to "make permanence as intuitive as steak.")

ACS wouldn't tell me how much it pays Lewis or You Gotta Believe! But according to

number of teens that the agencies refer to the organization. During the last three years, agencies have sent You Gotta Believe! about 80 older children they hope will be adopted. The rate of kids referred has nearly doubled since ACS enacted its new policy.

You Gotta Believe's strategies for finding adoptive parents for these teens range from the practical—asking kids which adults they already feel close to—to the frankly desperate. Like church missionaries aiming to touch hearts through exaggerated displays of humility, You Gotta Believe! asks volunteers to bag groceries—and spread the word of the agency while they do it. Volunteers are also encouraged to serve as "parking angels," putting coins in expired meters before tucking agency fliers under offending cars' windshield wipers.

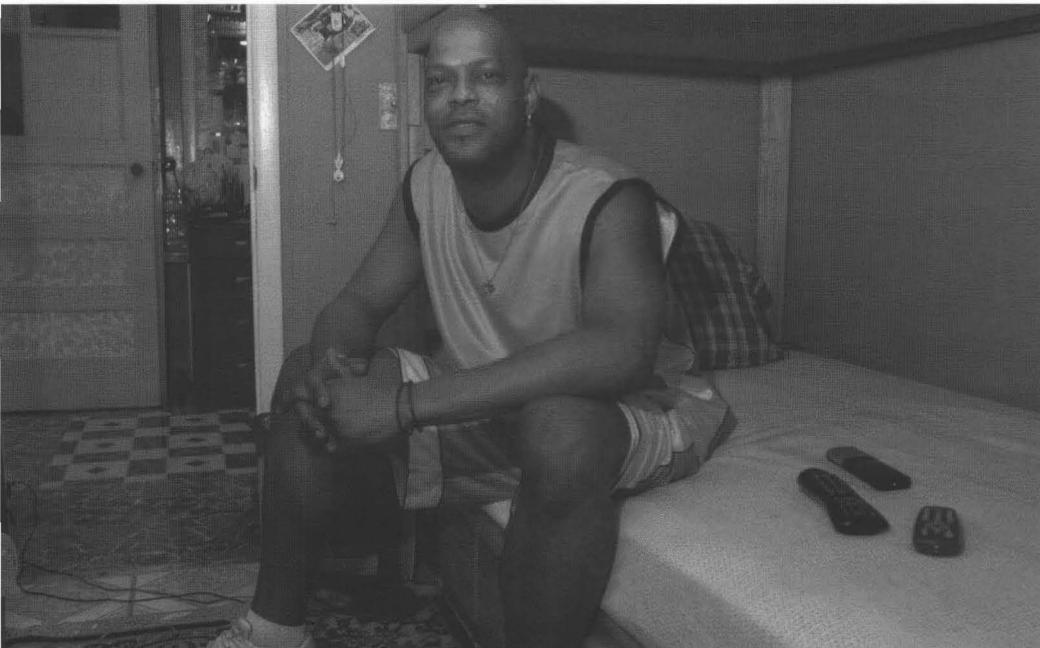
Tonight, You Gotta Believe! director Pat O'Brien hopes that folks in the audience and viewers of their cable-access show will take an interest in the teens, like Marisol, that foster care agencies are parading before them.

**T**he involvement of my writers, Pauline and Natasha, in this event is not merely professional.

Three years ago, at age 13, Pauline was expecting to be adopted by an aunt. Like almost all of the adults in the family, this aunt had a history of mental illness, but she had remained stable for a few years. Then she relapsed. After quitting her job and being hospitalized for schizophrenia, Pauline remembers, her aunt "would roam around the house like a zombie." Pauline's hopes for adoption went down the drain and she became depressed and angry. "I felt betrayed," Pauline wrote.

Natasha's fate was different. A year ago, she did find a new family, one willing to put up with the kind of complications that short-circuit many adoptions of teens. Natasha had spent years in foster care watching *Family Matters* and *The Cosby Show*, imagining that if she were adopted she would live like the kids on TV. Then, Natasha reasoned, she would be free of her childhood—the humiliation of hearing neighbors call her mother a "basehead," her sense of being utterly alone.

Natasha is a thoughtful, studious young woman with glasses and a love of words that no one in her class understands—"parasitic," which she uses to describe how too many foster parents view their charges, is now among her favorites. Natasha was smart enough to excel at becoming the perfect foster child. She got good grades, minded her manners, and maintained a



**Walter Jones III wants to adopt teens, but like many parents, he's picky. Jones' goal: twins or triplets—and boys only.**

Services. "It's turning 50 Titanics."

To push the effort, ACS urges agencies to refer teens and preadolescents to You Gotta Believe! The non-profit, which is based in a storefront office in Coney Island, is run by Brooklyn native and former social worker Pat O'Brien. Besides trying to find adoptive homes for older children, he conducts training sessions for adults who are considering adopting or have already done so. At the sessions, he warns his audiences that reversing an adoption because the child misbehaves is just as bad as child abuse. If that sounds dramatic, child welfare advocates nevertheless praise O'Brien's classes as

the city's contracts office, You Gotta Believe! has received \$527,000 from ACS since 1997, with almost the entire amount given out since 2001—the year that ACS began to promote teen adoptions. The contract office does not have copies of Lewis' dealings with ACS, apparently because he is subcontracted by an entity with another name. But like You Gotta Believe!, Lewis has profited from private agencies' exasperation over their new mandates. Since 2001, Lewis has lectured to five thousand child welfare workers on the importance of getting teens adopted. And You Gotta Believe! has seen a marked increase in the

cheery demeanor. When she was 12, she asked her foster mother to adopt her. "OK," her foster mother said, so "nonchalantly" that Natasha didn't believe her.

But soon after, Natasha's law guardian told her she really would be adopted. Natasha asked her foster mother for confirmation. "She said, 'Yeah, if that's what you want,'" Natasha remembers. Natasha was disappointed. "I thought it'd be more dramatic like, 'We're planning to adopt you! Bring out the champagne!' But she's a very quiet person. She's not into the poetic charm of the situation."

That was Natasha's first indication that her fantasies of family might be very different from the prosaic task of becoming somebody's daughter.

In the next few months, her behavior began to change. She brought pornographic pictures to school and stole small change from her foster home. She did it partly as a test, to see if her foster mother would throw her out if she misbehaved, as she had Natasha's older sister soon after Natasha moved into the home. Indeed, nearly half of all teen adoptions fail before or soon after the adoption is finalized. Adoptions of teen girls are especially likely to go bad.

But Natasha was also struggling with the inevitable—the realization that even after joining a family, the pain of her past might endure. "I had always thought about getting adopted in this naïve way," she remembers. "I thought all my past memories wouldn't matter, they would be irrelevant, but now I still have to deal with them. And I thought I would have a complete change of personality. But it wasn't that. It was still me, which in a way sucks."

As her adoption neared, Natasha grew depressed. On the day the proceeding was to be finalized in court, she dawdled getting dressed, spending what felt like hours putting on sheer brown stockings. "If you don't want to do this we don't have to," said Natasha's foster mother, fed up. In the courtroom, Natasha's cheeks burned. "It was so embarrassing for me," she remembers, "just the formality of it." She went home to live with her newly adopted family, but continued feeling disappointed that nothing seemed different.

During the months that followed, memories of her first family, and especially her biological mother who was now in the hospital, dying, began haunting her. Natasha's grades plummeted. She failed two classes. When her new mother took her biological daughter to college, Natasha broke everything in sight. Some days she would come into the office at

*Represent* and sit in her editor's cubicle sobbing.

Natasha rarely discussed her feelings with her adoptive mother, who somehow understood anyway. Unlike so many new adoptive parents of teens who act out, she kept Natasha. And when the *Represent* writers reconvened the fall after she'd been adopted, Natasha proudly told them all about her exciting day in court. She never mentioned the anger, sadness, and confusion. "It was the best day of my life," she said, beaming. And she meant it.

**I**n the six years I have edited *Represent*, Natasha is the only writer I have known to be adopted as a teen. However, during the past few years more and more of my writers

adoptions to today's rate of about a quarter of the total. Even so, last year, less than 6 percent of ACS' charges that age were adopted.

It often takes years to arrange an adoption, and the process typically starts long before the teen years. That means that the odds of getting adopted are even slimmer for a child who first enters foster care during adolescence: only one in 250, says Fred Wulczyn, a consultant for the Administration for Children's Services. Even if ACS doubled those chances, Wulczyn points out, the likelihood of adoption for these children would remain less than 1 percent.

Child welfare experts worry that overeagerness to free teens from their biological parents so they can be adopted will create significantly



**Represent!** writer Pauline Gordon (left) wasn't adopted, but her colleague Natasha Santos was.

have been asked to consider adoption, though a willing family rarely exists. Many of my writers roll their eyes at the notion that teens can actually get adopted.

They have good reason to be skeptical. Adolescent adoptions are so rare that in 2001, of all national adoptions from foster care, 70 percent were of kids 10 and younger—and most adoptees were younger than five years old. Only 16 percent of adoptions were of kids between 11 and 15; just 2 percent were of kids 16 and older. Since the mid-1990s, ACS has increased the adoption rate of foster children ages 12 and older from under 18 percent of

more "legal orphans," the term given to kids with no legal ties to their birth parents and no adoptive family. Between 1998 and 2001, says Richard Wexler, about 92,000 more kids became legal orphans when their parents' rights got terminated than were adopted.

And agencies fear that for teens who've already been effectively abandoned by their biological families, pushing them toward adoption without actual homes available sets them up for severe disappointment. "I can't tell someone to be a dancer if they can't dance," says Inwood House's Carrion. "I can't tell someone to get adopted if there aren't homes.

It's this false kind of hope for young people."

Carrion's worry is reasonable. I have had writers who continued believing they might be adopted right up to the date they left foster care.

Each time my former writer Charlene took a trip with her group home—to the movies or an amusement park—she was instructed by her social worker to write an essay about the event, to place in the album families peruse to learn about kids available for adoption. For six years, Charlene complied, right up to her twenty-first birthday. Essay after essay made no difference.

In one of the last pieces she wrote for *Represent*, Charlene was disillusioned and bitter. "This idea to get kids adopted may work better for young babies," she noted, "but it is a cruel experience for me to go through because I am older and more aware of what's going on around me."

Yet the thick ACS manual that trains foster care agencies to connect teens with adults—it's over 200 pages—addresses the risk of disap-

whether that connection led to an actual adoption—except for O'Brien of You Gotta Believe! Last year, he used the funding he received from ACS to effect 18 placements. While that number might sound trifling, it's still a half dozen more than the 12 that ACS required as a minimum.

ACS, Lewis and COFCCA all suggested I speak with Good Shepherd Services, an agency they said had embraced the new policy with results. But Good Shepherd personnel told me that in that agency's last three years of promoting teen adoptions, only 20 of the nearly 450 adolescents they work with had been adopted. The only teen adopted from their congregate care program was adopted by an agency staff member—a highly controversial undertaking, and not only because it creates competition among the youth. Agencies are supposed to help birth parents reunify with their kids, not adopt the kids themselves.

The ACS training manual hardly acknowl-

don't find that match? Then you just linger around, never to be claimed."

Natalie, who is one of the only 3 percent of white teens in New York City's foster care system, twice had the opportunity to be adopted as an adolescent. The thought upset her, and not only because without her permission Natalie's social worker "took pictures of me and put them in a book as if I were a product they were trying to sell."

The first childless couple who stepped forward lived upstate. They courted Natalie with expensive gifts and dinners. She rarely wore jewelry, but they gave her a 14-karat gold chain with a real sapphire and earrings to match. They wanted to take her to Maine for the summer. Natalie had never been out of the tri-state area.

"The whole thing made me feel strange," Natalie wrote in her story "Could I Be Another Mother's Daughter?" "I felt like they were trying to buy me."

Natalie's social worker urged her to accept their offer. Natalie felt unsure. She feared moving away from the friends who knew her from when her mother was still alive. She was also afraid of no longer having a social worker assigned to her case. What if she were abused or neglected in her new home? And if she stayed in foster care, the state would pay for Natalie's college education. She could not be sure the couple upstate would do that.

But mostly, Natalie thought it was too late for her to become someone else's idea of a daughter. "I felt I had to be the way they expected me to be or else they wouldn't like or accept me," she wrote.

Indeed, for teens at the age when they're forging identities separate from adults, it can be hard to fuse with a new family. And a teen's acting out threatens a parent far more than a younger child's. Experts estimate that anywhere from 15 to 20 percent of children placed in adopted homes return to foster care before the adoption is completed. For teens, that number is significantly higher.

It is hard to say just how many finalized adoptions ultimately fail. There is a dearth of research on the subject. Part of this is logistical—when kids get adopted, their birth certificates change as do their Medicaid numbers, which agencies use to track them. But Leroy Pelton, a professor of social work at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas, doubts the lack of information is accidental. "I don't think people have looked hard enough at this problem, because it's sort of a myth they want to maintain that the kids who go into adoption live

**"I felt like they were trying to buy me,"  
says Natalie of the childless  
couple that courted her with  
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"The whole thing made me feel strange."**

pointment only twice, both times brushing it aside it with New Age-y chatter.

One section labeled "Staff Barriers" to adoption recognizes that "caring professionals do not wish to cause more pain for a child who has already suffered multiple losses, or to unreasonably raise the child's expectations." This barrier, the manual demurs, is nothing more than a personal bias that staff must overcome in order to get teens adopted. And even if the kids never reach that goal, the mere "hope" of being adopted is a "positive, transformative force" that "conveys its own healing and strength, its own connection," according to the manual. "There may even be magic in that hope.... When there's some reason to believe that a family is possible, it is."

In the interviews I conducted with advocates of the new ACS policy, I heard story after story of hopeful teens who had "connected" with adults who might adopt them. But no one could say

edges the danger of creating more rejection for already distrustful teens. But it puts considerable effort into teaching agencies to "unpack the no," which means convincing a teen wary of adoption to reconsider. Lewis even trains law guardians, who represent teens' interest in court, to challenge clients' resistance to adoption.

"The least acceptable reason for not pursuing an adoption/permanent family plan is an adolescent's own ambivalence or negativity," the manual asserts. After all, "The initial reaction of most adolescents in care to any idea is negative."

When I ask *Represent* writers to articulate their uncertainty about adoption, their ambivalence is far more nuanced than the manual suggests.

"Every six months the girls in my group home are given a document which asks if they would like to be adopted," Aquellah Mahdi, 16, wrote. "The paper makes you feel so damn sick. You're like a lost piece in a puzzle, and you have to find a new match. But what if you

happily ever after," he says. "And that's certainly not true when we talk about teens."

"No one knows how well these kids are doing, and we see a lot of them coming back" into care, says Mauer of Good Shepherd Services.

Natalie's concerns that a new family might not accept her for herself were, on a subconscious level, fueled by a very legitimate concern: Two years after rejecting adoption, Natalie realized she was gay.

**A**t the You Gotta Believe! training, Walter A. Jones III, tonight sporting a spiffy beige jogging suit, rises from his seat to

meet in an alternate universe of happily ever after. Minutes later Walter will tell me he's still holding out for boy twins or triplets. But for now, Pauline, Natasha, and I are carried away. When You Gotta Believe! director O'Brien asks us to talk about our magazine on film, we blush, arrange our hair, take seats before the camera.

In front of the green banner listing the You Gotta Believe! phone number, O'Brien—who seems unconvinced that Pauline doesn't want to make her own case for adoption—asks what I can tell viewers about my young writers. "Well, they're wonderful!" I gush, then feel silly. My

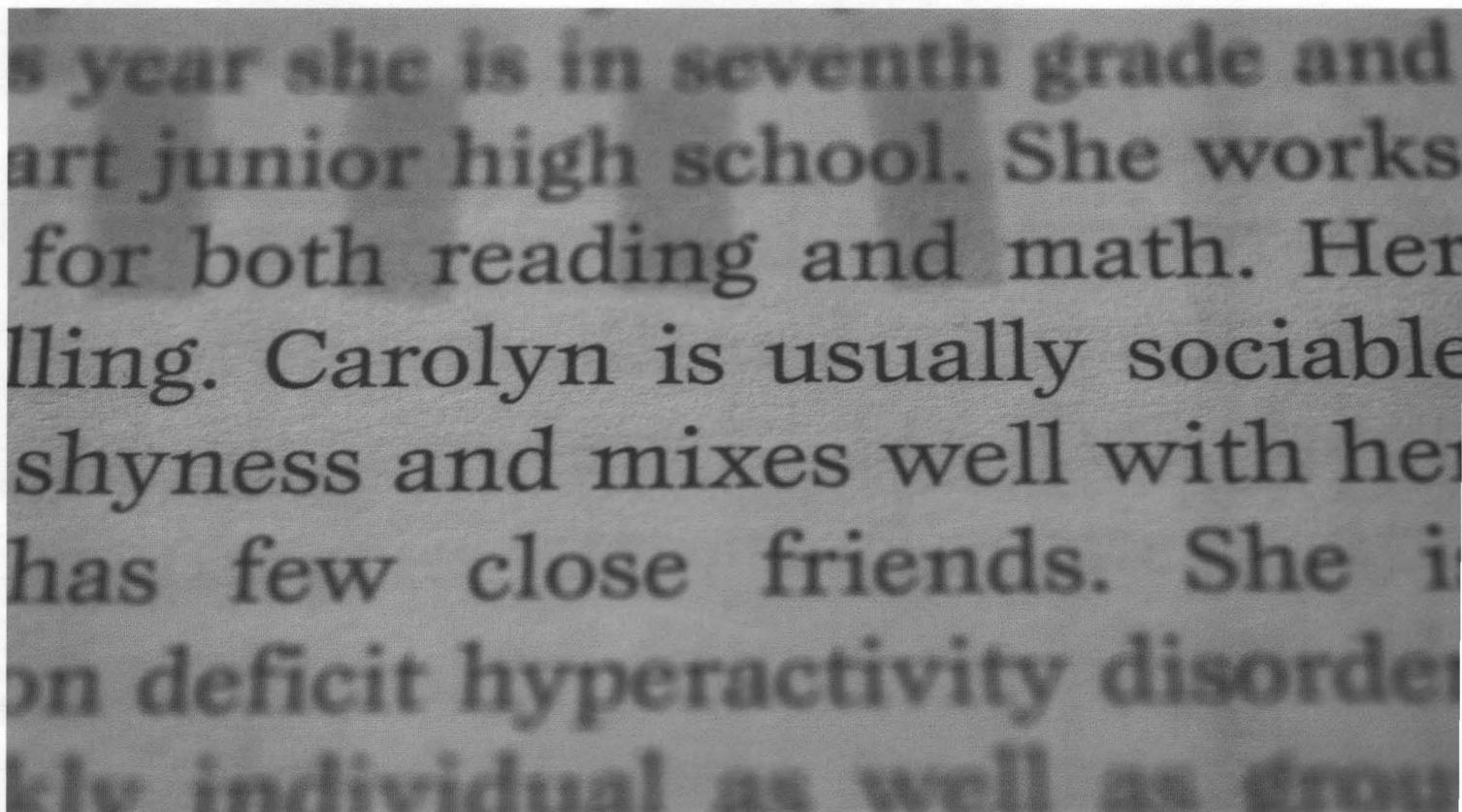
extra perk, he adds, 25 to 40 percent are "matched" with someone in the audience. Most matches, he later concedes, fail to lead to adoption (that's often because the teens' foster care agencies are leery of the qualifications or intentions of the interested adults).

Earlier, Pauline, who is still grappling with the fact that her aunt won't be adopting her, not this year, not next year, not ever, pulled Marisol aside. "Do you really feel you'll get adopted because of tonight?" Pauline wanted to know.

"Yes," Marisol said.

"How do you know?" Pauline asked.

"My social worker said I would."



address a young woman in foster care who wants to become a model and actress.

Would you want a single father to adopt you? Walter asks with theatrical intensity. To love you forever? To support you in your dreams and ambitions?

"Yes," answers the teen without hesitation. Her eyes lock with Walter's. It is a magical moment, electrifying. Like phone numbers exchanged bar-side, never to be dialed, it intoxicates with possibility, this strange intersection where fantasies of teens and adults

**To entice adults to adopt, You Gotta Believe! distributes books with photos and word portraits of teenagers seeking homes.**

heart swells when Pauline shows off her reporting prowess by remembering why we're really there. Point blank, she asks O'Brien if he might be setting kids up for disappointment and humiliation by showing them aching for families on TV.

O'Brien is unruffled. The teens aren't there to get adopted, he calmly explains. They are filmed as paid consultants who receive \$25 for their time spent talking about foster care. As an

"Well, how will you feel if you never find family?" Pauline delicately ventured.

Looking at Pauline like she was crazy, Marisol had a ready answer:

"I'll get adopted if I behave." •

*Kendra Hurley is an editor at New York City-based Represent!, a magazine produced by and for teens in foster care.*