

Teen fosters a giving spirit

Union senior's own experience fuels drive to help kids in foster care

TO GET INVOLVED

If you'd like to contribute to Misty Ashdown's donation drive, contact Union High School Culminating Project Coordinator Connie Hennessey at 360-604-6250.

By **JORDAN J. FRASIER**
Columbian staff writer

Misty Ashdown hasn't had the easiest path to her last year of high school. After entering foster care at age 11, she has overcome an adolescence of unstable circumstances to reach a point of helping others.

The Union High School senior has lived with three foster families since entering the system. In that time, Ashdown learned to never rely on other people for much — a mind-set she said softened the adjustment of entering new families and the reality

of never having the same lifestyle as her peers.

That personal experience inspired Ashdown's culminating project that focuses on the needs of foster youths.

"I thought since I've been through the system I know what it's like, and I want to help people," Ashdown said.

The culminating project is a graduation requirement that includes a research essay, 15 hours of community service and a presentation. Those components are completed during a

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Misty Ashdown, a senior at Union High School, is organizing a drive to donate clothing and necessities to foster teens.

"When kids first go into foster care, they're not going into the home saying, 'Hey, Mom and Dad!' It's people you don't know and you've got to get to know them."

Misty Ashdown

Aged out of the foster care system at 18

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student's junior and senior years.

"A lot of kids will choose the big national issues as their project topics," said Connie Hennessey, who coordinates the projects at Union High School. "Then others will choose things, like Misty did, that are much closer to home."

Through her project, Ashdown hopes people will learn how to see foster children as regular kids.

"People don't understand what foster kids go through and how they can relate to them," Ashdown said.

One of the biggest misconceptions about foster youth is that their circumstances are the result of their own actions. In fact, she said, these kids are born into an environment that doesn't fit their needs.

"It was pretty scary," Ashdown said. "It's scary for every foster kid because you get taken away from your parents, and that hits hard."

Ashdown was depressed when she first entered the system.

"When kids first go into foster care, they're not going into the home saying, 'Hey, Mom and Dad!'" Ashdown said. "It's people you don't know

and you've got to get to know them."

Another difficult adjustment is knowing you don't have someone to buy you new clothes or a new toothbrush, unlike kids with parents, she said.

Ashdown said the ability to meet her needs was restricted by tightening government budgets and whatever type of environment she found in a foster home.

That's why for her senior project, she organized a drive to collect items most needed by current foster youths and donate them to the YWCA, which can distribute them as needed.

Being a foster care child made it hard for Ashdown to make friends and succeed in school. She said sometimes she wasn't allowed to hang out with friends because of rules in her foster home. And inviting a friend over was like opening to the first page of her personal story.

She said introducing someone to her foster mother automatically raised questions. So Ashdown had to become comfortable with sharing her history.

By her third foster home, Ashdown found a supportive environment that let her be more herself. She still keeps in weekly contact with the family.

Last fall, Ashdown left the foster system after her 18th birthday and today lives in her own apartment. She's working

to support herself while going to high school.

After graduation Ashdown plans to attend Clark College and Washington State University Vancouver. Ultimately she hopes to become a pediatric nurse.

Hennessey said stories and projects like Ashdown's bring an important perspective to the Union community.

"Without the exposure," Hennessey said, "you don't realize that Misty, sitting next to you in class, is a foster child, who has been through such a different experience."

It's exactly that experience, Hennessey thinks, that develops into giving.

"Kids like Misty, who have had the least, are often the most giving."

Ashdown's goal is to supply foster youth age 13 to 21 with new or gently used clothing, school supplies and toiletries — three things Ashdown said she would have loved to have received. She is also accepting monetary donations to put toward these items.

For Ashdown, the project is a chance to exercise her giving spirit.

"I have what I need," Ashdown said. "This is my chance to pay it forward."

Ashdown said it's difficult to run a donation drive based solely on the generosity of the Union campus, so she's hoping for community support.