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Treasures of Youth Vanish in Custody of a State Agency Intended to Protect Them

By EMILY RAMSHAW

Crystal Martinez's possessions are more precious than the average teenager's. The 18-year-old, who as a child was abused and neglected by her biological family, has not had a permanent home since entering foster care at 7.



Crystal Martinez had to leave most of her mementos with Texas Child Protective Services. All but the few now with her in her Austin home have been lost.

When she was sent to a San Antonio residential treatment center in July 2009, she had to leave almost everything she owned — books, stuffed animals and mementos jammed into boxes and shopping bags — with Texas Child Protective Services.

But when she went to claim them six months later, Ms. Martinez made a heartbreaking discovery: Most of what she had stored was gone.

Despite her repeated pleas to the agency over the past year, only a fraction of her belongings have been recovered — and the child-protective agency tells her it cannot locate the rest.

“They were supposed to take care of me and my things,” said Ms. Martinez, who left foster care last month and is now finishing high school in Pflugerville, a suburb of Austin.

Child-welfare advocates say this is a common occurrence among children bouncing from placement to placement. If children cannot take their belongings with them, caseworkers are supposed to store the items in their offices until they are claimed. But, the advocates say, those possessions are often misplaced, given to the wrong child or even stolen.

“It’s something you hear about a lot,” said Mary Christine Reed, a lawyer and director of the Texas Foster Youth Justice Project. “When you have the lack of stability in your life, the lack of control you have in foster care, you would hope these kids would be able to hang onto some of these other things.”

Officials at the child-protective agency say that with some 30,000 children moving through the system, it is inevitable that personal items are going to be misplaced, but that is no excuse. “Children should not be made to feel that individual caseworkers don’t care about their personal items and that C.P.S. doesn’t care,” said Patrick Crimmins, a spokesman with the Department of Family and Protective Services.

Ms. Martinez said she called repeatedly trying to reclaim her belongings. In March, when she met with her caseworker to plan her exit from foster care, she brought up the missing items again, to no avail.

After Ms. Reed got involved in Ms. Martinez’s case last spring, agency officials tracked down two half-boxes of her belongings — far short of what she had left with them.

Ms. Martinez’s belongings represent times in her life when people were good to her.

There is the trench coat lined with fur that her former foster father bought her for a trip to Washington, D.C. There is Mr. Cinnamon, the teddy bear she received from a former foster mother as a Christmas gift. There are the professional art supplies a caring caseworker gave her so she could explore her talent. There are the hymnals she sang from, and the diaries she scribbled in during hard years spent bouncing from foster homes to residential treatment centers.

Ms. Martinez keeps a five-page list of missing items, handwritten in excruciating detail.

“Those are things I’ve kept to help me remember my childhood memories,” she said.

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