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Art reflects lives in foster care

A juvenile court judge moved by "Voices for Change" requested the exhibit -- born of foster children -- be displayed in the New River Valley.

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PULASKI -- Juvenile Court Judge H. Lee Chitwood saw "Voices for Change" during a court improvement program in 2009 at the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center.

It made an impression. The exhibit features art -- writing, art and photography -- from foster youth "making the transition from Virginia's foster care system to the adult world."

Chitwood asked Judy Ison, director of the Fine Arts Center of the New River Valley, to see if she could find a way to bring the exhibit to Pulaski. It is now featured in the center's main gallery on Main Street.

Chitwood said the exhibit is important to Pulaski County because the county has a high foster care population -- with an average of 60 to 70 youth in foster care each month.

"Drugs and alcohol are the primary reason," he said. "Violence, not going to school and neglect are symptoms of the underlying problem."

The exhibit shows the resiliency and strength of these young people, Chitwood said.

"Despite everything they have gone through they still have hope," he stated. "Every child wants to be reunited with their family."

Ison said some viewers have been moved to tears by what they saw and read.

An excerpt from an essay, entitled "Butterfly, Fly Away" by a 14-year-old girl from Manassas and second-place winner in its category, sets the mood of the show:

"I am Erica, am 14 years old and about to become a sophomore in high school. I came into care as an infant, something I have in common with my biological mom. From then on, I was a traveling kid, home again, gone again, over and over. I did not question this, it was just life as I knew it. At age 9, my mom's rights were terminated and I was placed in "permanent" foster care. I was probably not the daughter they expected but my "permanent" foster parents stuck by me just the same. I was (and probably still am a little bit) oppositional, reckless, rebellious, self-centered, obnoxious, ill-mannered, disorganized, pretentious and a bit of a brat

When I think about my life, I am reminded of the chorus to my latest favorite song that goes, "Caterpillar in the tree. How you wonder who you'll be / Can't go far but you can always dream. Wish you may and wish you might / don't worry / Hold on tight, I promise you there will come a day / Butterfly fly away."

One of the pieces of featured artwork is a picture of a mountain titled "Mountain of the Future." The word FREEDOM! proclaims the artist's goals.

"I really enjoy art and I think I'm good at it," wrote Daniel, age 18, of Winchester, who created the painting. "My poster tells about my life in the future. It works like a long road going up a mountain from the bottom to the top. It shows different problems and successes I may face."

Chitwood said there are a number ways individuals can help children in foster care.

One is to volunteer to work with the Pulaski County Partnership Coalition to try to help the courts have a drug free community. Chitwood said the community needs more foster parents so youth can stay in the community. Foster parents must be at least 18 years old and pass a criminal background and child protective check, he explained.

Another way of helping is to volunteer as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). These volunteers are assigned a child by the court. They advocate for the child, filing a written report and appearing in court every time the court must review the foster care case.

Other things include informally mentoring a child. Teachers, pastors, coaches and grandparents often fill this roll.

"Voices for Change," is sponsored by the Virginia Poverty Law Center, Voices for Virginia's Children and Faces of Virginia Families.