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Foster Youth Graduates from College with Help from SAF and DPHHS

(HELENA) Bozeman resident Katie Yother didn't have the smoothest start in life, and after she "aged out" of Montana's foster care system, she was pretty sure it wouldn't get any easier.

After all, it's difficult for students with even the most stable of families to achieve their dreams of higher education, let alone for foster care youths without that type of support to overcome numerous obstacles to attain their dreams of earning a degree.

Despite that, Yother graduated from Montana State University last year with a bachelor of arts in political science and she currently works at a local bank. In addition, she volunteers her time demonstrating to other foster care youths that the challenges they faced in the past don't need to dictate their futures.

"Go to college!" she encourages Montana foster care youths. "Don't stop or quit until you finish. The key is to follow through, and I now know this from experience."

According to Yother, the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program, sponsored by the Montana Foster Care Independence Program, the Department of Public Health and Human Services, Student Assistance Foundation (SAF) and more, played an integral role in her academic success.

The funds available to foster care youths between the ages of 16 and 21 through the program — up to \$5,000 a year for the cost of attendance at accredited institutions of higher learning and training programs — helped her pay her bills.

"The money helped me move from the dorms, to an apartment off campus, and aided my transition into the Bozeman community," Yother said. "This, and (the ETV program), helped make it possible for me to live on my own and make it in the real world."

According to Rhonda Wodnik, foster care education advocate for SAF, fewer than 10 percent of foster care children who leave the foster care system at the age of 18 pursue higher education. It is the goal of the ETV program to provide these children with the financial means to change that statistic.

Yother, Wodnik said, is the first ETV program participant in Montana to graduate from college.

“Student Assistance Foundation is very proud of the accomplishments of Katie Yother,” she said. “She has overcome adversity in her life to complete a goal that only 3 percent of her peers reach — graduation from college. We are very excited to have our first ETV recipient graduate from college and we wish her the best in her future. And we hope many more foster care youths follow in her footsteps.”

For more information about the ETV program, contact Wodnik at (406) 495-7750. Applications are due on Jan. 15 for spring and summer sessions, and July 15 for the session beginning in the fall.