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Beating the odds

Five years ago Perry Jackson was a youthful offender police were ready to send away. Today his goal-focused life is a foster care success story.

By Ed Fletcher - Bee Staff Writer

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Spend five minutes in a room with Perry Jackson and he'll make you a believer:

That he will play professional football.

That he will finish college.

That he will be a success.

Five years ago would have been a different story. You wouldn't have believed it. Even Jackson wouldn't have dreamed it.

The 18-year-old will be the first to tell you that he was a menace -- the kid teachers sent to the hallway.

He was the youth offender police were ready to send away. And he was a foster child so conflicted, confused and angry about his upbringing -- in and out of foster care -- that nobody could reach him.

Until Angela Campbell came along.

By his own account, with Campbell's help, Jackson went from being a kid with little hope to a young man convinced he will continue his climb from "the lowest of lows to the highest of highs."

It's worth celebrating Jackson's goal-focused life given the struggles of foster kids in California -- and how few of them find success after aging out of the system at 18.

On Monday, Jackson is expected to graduate from Elk Grove's Laguna Creek High School. Last week, he participated in the Independent Living Program's high school celebration, with about 200 Sacramento County foster youths. The federally funded program aims to ease the transition of young people who have outgrown child protective services.

Most kids leaving the foster care system are not prepared for life on their own: half are unemployed, a third become homeless and one in five ends up in jail, according to child welfare advocates.

But Jackson? "He is one of those kids who amazingly beat the odds," said Amina Merritt, who was Jackson's legal representative while he was in foster care.

"I'm the type of person who believes you can have everything you want," Jackson said. "I refuse to go back down to the bottom. I'm going to be a millionaire."

He's exploring a handful of business ideas and said he believes wealth would allow him to help others dealing with the effects of troubled childhoods.

Over the years, Campbell has found plenty of room in her home and in her heart for kids without homes. Her household now includes: her husband, Cherrius Johnson; Perry, who calls her mom; an adopted 17-year-old daughter, Victoria; birth daughter Carmen Vickers, 13; and a 3-year-old adopted son, Jordan. Other foster children have grown and gone.

Carmen Vickers said having to share her mom with other children might be odd for others but is normal for her. "It's just regular. It's just more kids," she said.

Angela Campbell, 45, said she was 30 and single when she decide to adopt. If God hadn't blessed her with a family, why wait, she reasoned.

That's when her adopted daughter, then 14 months old, entered her life. "She said, 'Hi, Mommy,' and kept talking after that," Campbell said, of their first meeting.

Campbell said it is hard not to open her home and heart to another "if there is a room."

"There are so many kids that need help," she said.

Despite the foster and adoptive parent training she received, Campbell said at times she felt under-prepared and overwhelmed.

Jackson didn't find his own stability quickly. Early in life he shuffled between his grandmother's and his birth mother's homes.

"As Perry was growing up, he's seen a lot," Nekay Jackson, his birth mother, said in a telephone interview from her Texas residence. She was 17 when her son was born.

Her son entered the foster care system at age 11. He bounced around a handful of foster homes, including a brief stay with Campbell, before going to live with an aunt.

Jackson talks frankly about those times: his violent temper, the violent nightmares, being robbed, chases at gunpoint, and a judge threatening to charge him with attempted murder after he kicked a kid in the temple.

At one stop, he said he remembers sitting in class and having "no idea what we were doing."

"I was going down," he said. "All my friends were getting killed."

He went back into the foster system and soon decided he wanted to live with the woman he now calls mom. "When I moved here I knew it was time to change," he said.

When Jackson was 15, his father, who lives in Sacramento, was ready to re-enter his life, but Perry said no, preferring the stability of Campbell's home.

And while he says he was ready for calm, the rough waters would continue. The teen was set to visit his grandmother in Louisiana along with several other siblings, but Campbell scuttled the plan, worrying he would not come back.

The weekend took a tragic turn. Jackson's grandmother, great-grandmother and three siblings all died in a car crash during the cross-country trip.

The teen mourned his loss for months. He built a shrine to his lost relatives in his room.

"This big 6-foot boy, I'm rocking him like this every night," Campbell said, moving back and forth in the easy chair as she tells the story.

A willingness to change didn't make his anger go away. Fights were frequent, including an incident involving a teacher.

At one point, Campbell had to fight to keep Jackson in the Elk Grove school district. But after another incident occurred she sent him away, throwing up her arms in frustration as her family questioned her judgment for welcoming him in the first place. But it didn't last.

"What if he was my birth kid?" asked Campbell. "You just don't throw kids away because they act out."

Campbell's steady influence helped. Finding football helped even more.

As a defensive end his senior year, he led the team in sacks with 10 and was second in tackles. He was named first team All Delta and second team All Metro. His leadership on the field earned him a scholarship to the University of Nevada in Las Vegas.

Coach Ryan Gomes witnessed the transformation.

"His story is a phenomenal one, where he's been and where he's going," said Gomes, who talks frequently with the teenager about football and life.

Jackson's slow start in school left him short of the college preparatory classes needed to go directly to Nevada.

But the new, upbeat Jackson views that as a blessing -- allowing him to ease into adulthood at a comfortable pace.

He'll live with Campbell for a couple more years, attend American River College and learn a new football position (outside linebacker), he said.

"You need that good, firm shelter. You need to see other adults who are making the right decision," Jackson said. "I'm just a young person trying to make some good decisions."

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Angela Campbell holds Jordan Johnson, her 3-year-old adopted son. When Perry Jackson's relatives died in a car crash, she spent many hours holding him, too. Over the years, she has taken in many foster children and has seen them grow and move on. Sacramento Bee/Carl Costas



Perry Jackson, left, watches as Victoria, 17, helps Jordan, 3, put on a Spider-Man outfit. Angela Campbell was a foster mom to Victoria and Jordan before adopting them. Campbell's daughter Carmen Vickers, 13, says she's used to living with many kids. Sacramento Bee/Carl Costas