

They might have nowhere to go Thursday, or somewhere that feels safe but is only temporary.

Young people who've known the hardship of living without family and who've been challenged to find strength despite a shaky foundation found communion yesterday at a meal that came four days before the holiday but embodied its spirit.

Thanksgiving is about family. It's about grace and gratitude.

For **foster** children and young adults who've moved beyond their temporary homes, family in its conventional sense can be elusive.

About 100 people from across the state, many of whom are in **foster care** or recently "aged out," as they say, gathered yesterday afternoon at Agudas Achim, a Bexley synagogue.

Thanks to the kindnesses of others and the dogged advocacy of former **foster** child Lisa Dickson, they found camaraderie and **Thanksgiving**.

Dickson, who lives in Westerville, founded the Ohio chapter of **Foster Care Alumni of America**. She's 36 and has a family of her own, but she remembers the feeling of isolation that could accompany the holidays, particularly when she was a young adult.

"There wasn't a family to come back to; there weren't those roots," Dickson said.

"For a lot of people, the holidays can be the loneliest part."

In and of itself, being a **foster** child can be lonely, said Alex McFarland, who is 19 and president of the group's youth advisory board. He said it's worse when those outside the situation misunderstand.

"A lot of people have the image that we've done something wrong, when more than likely somebody's done something wrong to us," said McFarland, who lives in a suburb of Dayton.

The **dinner** was the third-annual -- the first in Columbus -- and was made possible because of a \$1,000 donation from Capital University's student government that paid for food. The synagogue gave its space free, said Gabriel Koshinsky, vice president of student government and president of the Jewish Student Union.

The meal yesterday offered an opportunity to meet new people and learn about opportunities for **foster** children. It also gave guests the chance to reclaim the sense of belonging.

Dre Williams, who is 18 and lives in a **foster** home, and Kadeem Monroe, who is 19 and on his own, came to Columbus with a group from Stark County.

"I don't know how many days I felt like I was the only **foster** child in the world," Monroe said.

People who aren't part of the system don't understand the challenges or the emotional burdens or even how **foster care** works, the two said.

Williams said he wishes more good people would embrace children who can no longer live with their families, and that fewer people would invite **foster** children into their homes primarily for the money.

He's now living with Jodi Wilson, who has been a **foster** mom to 14 kids over 17 years. She maintains ties with many of them, and has a warm rapport with Williams.

"These kids are alone, or I believe they feel alone," said Wilson, who also works as supervisor of Stark County's independent-living program.

Bringing them together as a family of sorts is important, Wilson said.

"They have a common language, common experiences," she said.

"I'm 52, and I still talk to my mother every day. They don't have that."

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