

Troubled past, iffy present, but upbeat for her future

FRED DICKEY THE WAY WE ARE

When I see this young woman's big smile, I renounce all my frowns because my woes don't deserve them. Dealing with her history and problems would make my self-confidence resign the job.

If you walk into the MiraCosta College bookstore, you might encounter a student clerk named Lahana Velez. She is petite and perky. She gives the impression that if she doesn't help you, it will ruin her day. You might think she's the beau ideal college student.

She wishes it were so.

Lahana is 24 years old, and as of Friday, she was couch-surfing at friends' places or sleeping in her 1990 Toyota Camry. She has aged out of the studio provided to her as a student who has come out of foster care.

(An aside: The exorbitant cost of even the cheapest housing is an education-killer for young people like Lahana, on their own with no money. Lahana says she's flat broke almost all the time.)

A thought must rattle around in her brain: Homeless again. Will it never stop?

Homelessness returns at a time when Lahana is having a serious discussion about her future with her mirror. She says she hasn't smoked dope for six months, and she's openly questioning whether her boyfriend of five years is really a self-improvement relationship.

Lahana's life has been a short trip long on unhappiness.

"My father robbed four armored trucks with his friends. He was in jail from when I was 4 years old to about 18.

"He's out, the last I heard. I think he's somewhere in Texas. I've also heard rumors he went back to jail."

She thinks her mother is living the street life in Oakland. She has not seen her for four

years.

Her six siblings are scattered and mostly out of touch.

Her boyfriend ... well, she says he's got a background in sales — of marijuana.

Enough? That should be sufficient to wipe a smile off anyone's lips and the joy out of their heart.

But not hers. "I'm alive. I'm healthy. I got all my fingers and toes. I'm going to school, getting good grades."

This young lady has whistled past more than one graveyard. She's got bounce-back.

It started in San Jose at age 4 when she and her sister and five brothers became wards of the state and placed in foster care.

"My mom would always drop me and my siblings off at my grandma's house, then she would go on the streets and do whatever she was doing."

What was she doing?

"Heroin and meth and gang-banging, and probably selling drugs, and probably selling herself."

Her eyes suddenly fill. Tears roll out as she recalls when they came for her.

"I remember us outside playing. We were just throwing little rocks at each other. I remember these cars pulled up, and the policemen got out.

"I remember my grandma letting them in the house and packing our stuff. She said the police were going to take us away. She said she couldn't take care of me anymore.

"Then I started crying. I don't remember her crying."

The kids were split up. Lahana and a brother were sent to a grandfather in Riverside County — not as family members, but as foster-care children so he would be paid the going rate, Lahana assumes. She had never met the grandfather.

She lived under her grandfather's regimen until age 16. She says he was very strict and she was rebellious. Not a combination for domestic bliss.

"I was only allowed to go to school, and that was it. My grandpa didn't let me hang out with friends, didn't let me talk on the phone. Girls are to have long hair, he said. You can't wear shorts or make-up.

“I had a lot of chores, like mowing the lawn, sweeping the pool, picking up the dog poop, doing the dishes, dusting the house, vacuuming and I think — oh, and the windows, cleaning the windows and stuff outside, and washing the car.”

When Lahana was 16, she says, an uncle was released from prison and came to live with them. It did not go well for Lahana. “My uncle slapped my butt and said things that frightened me.”

Did you tell your grandfather?

Her response is a familiar one in the syndrome of child abuse. “My grandpa never would have believed me. He would have said, ‘Oh, you’re lying. You’re always causing problems. You’re just trouble everywhere you go.’”

She ran away. She says her uncle’s conduct pushed her out the door, but one suspects she had her bags mentally packed anyway.

After two months of living with friends, she ended up in a “safe home” for runaways from which her grandfather retrieved her. But nothing had really changed.

(She says she’s now on good terms with her grandfather.)

Lahana was finally placed in the home of a Marine brother based at Camp Pendleton. She graduated from Oceanside High School, and when her brother’s marriage became troubled, she was on her own.

Suddenly she’s 18 with no place to go, no money and no one particularly interested in her welfare. You guessed it: She met her present guy soon after high school ... on a bus.

So, Lahana, you decided to get a college education. Why? There’s nothing in your background to make that a goal.

“Yeah, true. I’m the first in my family to graduate from high school. College seemed like a weird world.”

Then why didn’t you turn your back on college and say, “OK, I’ll go do something that’ll make me ‘somebody.’ I’ll hit the streets. People will tell me they love me and how beautiful I am and they’ll give me money.” Didn’t that enter your mind?

“Oh, yeah. All the time.”

So how did you deal with it?

“I don’t know. I just felt like school was the only way I was going to be able to show my

family that I can do it, and that was my only revenge. Like, I'm going to school, and even though you guys didn't believe in me, I'm doing it, and when I graduate maybe I'll invite you."

The people you hung with, what did they say?

"They kind of just didn't believe me, or say, 'Oh, you just say that now, but tomorrow you're going to be like, oh, I'm going to go find a full-time job or start selling drugs or selling my body with my friends to get money.'"

Some of them were doing that?

"Oh, yeah. A lot of my friends do that."

Did your boyfriend also enroll in college?

"No. He was still trying to find work and stuff, and selling drugs and all that."

(In an interview, the boyfriend admits to having sold drugs.)

You say you'll get your associate degree in another year. Well, you started at 19 and you're 24 now, so that's five years.

"I went to MiraCosta for a semester and then I stopped going for two years. Then I tried again. Something just told me to go back to school. I felt like I was using my time for myself instead of going out there and selling drugs and partying and trying to steal from people or getting into fights."

She lived on the wild side for a couple of years, including having a gun pointed at her head at age 20 when she became an involuntary part of her boyfriend's "business dispute."

"There was a guy standing on my porch pointing a gun right at me. I swear, time stopped. I really thought like, 'Wow! Am I really about to die right now over something dumb? My family's going to hear about this and they're just going to be like, oh.'"

Still, after all that, she is there the first day, standing in line, buying her books and heading for the library.

Something inside Lahana overrides the baser inclinations instilled in her from childhood.

She keeps showing up.

She is sitting across from me at a table, smiling, as usual. I ask her: Lahana, I want you

to pretend I'm your mother. Now, talk to her.

She stares at me for a moment, then slowly starts talking: "I feel angry and sad because you were never really ... you didn't teach me how to ride my first bike, or teach me how to braid my hair, or how to make friends, or just paint my nails, or have a girl party, or talk to me about boys, or even go to the movie theater and see, like, a chick flick or something. I feel like you made me an angry person."

Lahana's hands are flitting nervously, her voice thickens and her eyes fill.

"I just feel when I'm with, like, normal people, and, like, normal families, I feel kind of left out, like it's my fault, like I wasn't good enough for you to be off drugs. You decided to choose that over us kids because you gave up. You gave up on me. You gave up on my sister and my brothers. It hurts, you know?"

She is weeping.

"I love you. I just feel like, mom, you missed out on a lot. You missed out on me growing up. You missed out on me graduating high school, maturing from a little girl to an adult. Things like that you can't ever get back, mom.

"I don't want to pretend that everything's OK, because it's not OK and it will never be OK. I feel like you owe me so much, and no matter what you do or how many times you might try to reach out to me, it'll never be enough because that part of me growing up and getting made fun of because people were, like, 'Oh, where's your mom?' and 'Where's your dad?' and 'Why do you live with your grandpa?'

"When you're young like that, it stays with you. It sticks with you growing up. I just have to remind myself I didn't do anything wrong, you know?"

"I just wish that you would have stayed off of drugs and gang-banging and thinking that those awful people were family or that they cared about you, because they didn't care about you, mom. They just used you to go deliver drugs or for you to sleep around with them.

"I don't want to be like you. I want to be everything except you. I want to be great so that you could say, you know, 'My daughter is actually graduating college, has a good life for herself, and she did it all on her own.'

"I try to hold things inside till I can't anymore, and I just try to smile all the time and make jokes 'cause I don't want to be sad all the time. And I don't want to feel, 'Oh, this world is so cold' or, 'I'm the only one here and no one's helping me.' But I know there's other people out there who probably have it way worse than me, you know, mom?"

It will not be a surprise to learn that Lahana would like to become a counselor — to help children who are going through what she once did.

We often agonize over why “good” kids go bad, but give paltry thought to why “bad” kids go good. The latter is harder work.

There are two things that can knock down girls as surely as a heavyweight’s punch: pregnancy and the wrong guys.

Lahana has avoided pregnancy.

She is a bubbly little woman with a personality that, if bottled, would bring big bucks on eBay.

However, she has spurned the cheap compliments and the fast bucks. Instead, she conjugates verbs.

She works at a low-paying bookstore job, faces being homeless — again — by maybe having to sleep in her old car. But Lahana shows up for class, does her homework and dreams of a life with all the trimmings, such as family love and a future that stretches beyond the next tank of gas.

Please tell us where that drive comes from, Lahana. We need to know more about it.

You keep smiling, but I don’t know how.

Fred Dickey’s home page is freddickey.net. He believes every life is an adventure and welcomes ideas at freddickey1@gmail.com