

R.E.M.
'WE'RE NOT A POP GROUP'



ARTS & BOOKS, L1

Lace-lined tweed? It's part of what's cool this fall


STYLE, M6-9

FIRST EDITION

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

SUNDAY

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL



Parkview shuts down Brookwood 10-0

► **ALSO IN SPORTS:** All the results from Friday night's games.



A life of hardships, a second chance

By **CRAIG SCHNEIDER**
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Marcus had a foster mother who beat him with a belt. James was shuffled from foster home to foster home so often he quit unpacking his belongings. Erica lived in the chaos of a

Fulton County shelter with gang activity, fights and beatings. Kendra felt so unloved she tried to drown herself in a bathtub. The four teens, whose full names have been withheld because of state policy, longed to get out of Georgia's foster

care system. They couldn't wait until they reached 18, when they would be on their own. But when 18 came, all of them realized they weren't prepared for the outside world. They lacked education and job skills. They didn't have the basic emotional foundation for

living an adult life. At an age when many teens are planning for college, they had far greater worries. "I was afraid I would be homeless, living under a bridge," Marcus said. "I knew I couldn't make it on my own."

Kendra are among the elders of foster care — young people who have been in the system for years, who belong to no family, whose belongings follow them from home to home in a garbage bag, whose most fervent wish is to stay in one

► Please see **NO FAMILY, A4**

Blacks poised to pack polls

By **ANNA VARELA**
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A surge in voter registration has some African-American leaders predicting high black voter turnout on Nov. 2, even though Georgia is not viewed as a swing state in the presidential race. The Georgia secretary of state's office and local election boards are struggling to keep up with a huge increase in registration paperwork — much of it from African-Americans. From Jan. 1 through Sept. 23, the state registered 332,869 new voters — 34 percent of them African-American, according to data provided by the secretary of state's office. During the last several election cycles, blacks have accounted for only about 25 percent of registered voters in Georgia.

The Rev. Timothy McDonald III, pastor of Atlanta's First Iconium Baptist Church, said blacks are frustrated about the war in Iraq and the sluggish economy, and are still angry over the 2000 election. "I think this go-round we're going to see one of the largest turnouts of new registrants voting," said McDonald, who has preached voter registration from his pulpit, and is working with organized groups including Concerned Black Clergy. "You hear it. You feel it. I think the registration numbers reflect that," McDonald said. Richard Grigsby, director of voting for the Southern Regional Council, a civil rights group based in Atlanta, also

► Please see **BLACKS, A13**



BILLY SMITH II / Staff
Lindsay Olson, born 12 winning seasons ago, and her mom, Vickie Olson, are big fans.

GENERATION

All their lives, these Atlanta teens have known: When October rolls around, Braves are in the playoffs



JOEY NANSO / Staff
Braves fans Lorne Piche and his daughter Kristin Piche of Alpharetta watch the Braves play the Reds. Kristin, who was born in 1991 and has watched the team play since she was 5, has never experienced a losing season.

King's Nobel left Atlanta ambivalent



File
The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s pleasure in his prize was tarnished by an FBI vendetta.

By **JIM AUCHMUTEY**
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The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was half-asleep in a hospital bed when he found out he'd won the Nobel Peace Prize. Exhausted by a heavy speaking schedule and suffering from a respiratory infection, he had been admitted to St. Joseph's Infirmary — then in downtown Atlanta — for several days of rest. On the morning of Oct. 14, 1964, the phone rang and Coretta Scott King gave the good news to her groggy husband. A few minutes later, he dialed her back with a question. "Did you just call me? Or was I dreaming?"

On Friday, the winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize will be announced in Oslo, Norway. A similar announcement 40 years ago left Atlantans awkwardly divided. Some folks celebrated and offered prayers of thanks. Others grumbled and wondered what

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

► **The winner:** Announced in Oslo, Norway, at 11 a.m. Friday (5 a.m. Atlanta time).

► **The nominees:** A record 194, including former Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia, for working to dismantle nuclear weapons left over from the Cold War.

► **Who decides:** A five-member committee appointed by the Norwegian Parliament.

► **More info:** nobelprize.org

► Please see **NOBEL, A5**

By **MICHELLE HISKEY**
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If Atlanta has a baseball horoscope, Lindsay Olson of Roswell was born under its most fortunate sign. She came into the world Oct. 22, 1991, and was a mere 9 hours old when she blinked her tiny blue eyes at a television in West Paces Hospital's maternity ward. The Atlanta Braves had just wrapped up their thrilling first World Series game, a 5-4 victory over the Minnesota Twins in 12 innings. Lindsay arrived the same time as a baseball dynasty. She has celebrated every birthday with a division title — 15 of them in a row by the Braves, a feat unmatched in pro sports. She's part of "Generation W," a group of young

teenagers who've never lived in Losersville. Each fall, this group marks baseball on its October calendar. Their Braves were never their parents' Braves. For them, a losing baseball season belongs in a universe without Harry Potter, iPods or Britney Spears. "It's like they've always known CDs and computers and the Internet," said Vickie Olson, 48, Lindsay's mom. "And they've always known the tomahawk chop. They never knew that we didn't do that before that year." That year was 1991 A.D. — *After Dreadfulness* — the end of seven consecutive losing seasons. Until then, the Braves had losing records in 17 of their 25 years in Atlanta. Lindsay has heard again and again how bad major

► Please see **TEENS, A10**

IN SPORTS

The Bobby Cox way



What makes Bobby Cox such a successful manager? We asked people inside and outside the game — from former players to Atlanta business leaders.

THE PLAYOFFS

► Much is still uncertain about the Braves' postseason schedule. It could begin Tuesday or Wednesday. One certainty: It will begin in Atlanta.

► The Braves will play one of five teams: Houston, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco or San Diego.

RedYellowBlack
Blue

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THE ELDERS OF FOSTER CARE

No family: Kids struggle to make a life

► Continued from A1

unemployed. In Georgia, 174 youths 18 or older remain in foster care by choice. They can stay in state care until age 21.

These four teens are like other young people who have been in the system for years, who belong to no family, whose belongings follow them from home to home in a garbage bag, whose most fervent wish is to stay in one place for more than a few months. Their stories reveal a foster care system that sometimes hurts the children whom it is supposed to help.

The four also take part in "independent living" programs sponsored by the state, meant to make sure foster kids don't spiral into failure. They're offered workshops in life skills, including money management, job hunting and health care. Teens can start the classes at 14, while they're living in foster homes. After leaving the system, they can still take the classes. And other help is offered, including college assistance.

In the past year, about 2,800 foster youths participated in such programs. That's 70 percent of those eligible, according to the state Division of Family and Children Services.

Georgia started the independent living programs in 1989, three years after the federal government pushed the concept. The need was clear.

Studies show that nationally, one in four children who "age out" of foster care becomes homeless, at least temporarily. Half don't graduate from high school. One in four young men ends up in prison, according to research compiled by an advocacy group called the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. "Their outcomes are horrendous," said Lesley Grady of the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, a nonprofit that funds groups helping foster kids.

Grady, along with several child welfare experts, fears that the next big wave of homeless people will be teenagers who age out of the foster care system. Many of the children of the crack epidemic that exploded in the mid-1980s are coming of age now, she said. "It's already happening."

Some foster children, wrenched from households of abuse and neglect and drugs, find peace in the system, hooking up with a good foster parent and caring caseworker. And they go on to satisfying, productive adult lives.

Then there are the troubled ones.

These are the children who get shifted from foster home to foster home, falling behind in their education. Without a long-term parental role model, they often lack the basic life skills that parents naturally pass on to children, such as applying for a driver's license, getting a student loan, opening a checking account. And they often have the emotional problems that come with a childhood of instability.

Difficult cases

Marcus, James and Kendra, all 18, and Erica, 19, are tough cases. They've spent years in foster care, and the strain has left them with emotional scars, and, in some instances, criminal records.

When they signed themselves back into state care at 18, the teens were placed in three therapeutic residences in DeKalb County run by CHRIS Kids, a nonprofit foster care service that specializes in kids with emotional issues.

These teenagers receive free room and board, medical care, life skills training and help with educational costs, including college.

At CHRIS Kids — the name stands for Children



Now a college student, 19-year-old Erica hopes eventually to have a family and teach her children "what I was never taught" growing up in a series of foster homes. By choice, she currently lives in a group home to learn coping skills for adult life.

Have Rights in Society — the teens learn little by little to make it on their own.

Kendra and Erica are roommates in the girls' group home, a one-story house with its rules posted at the doorway: "If you sleep on it make it up, if you wear it hang it up. If it hazards feed it. If it cries love it."

There are many rules. Every Friday, Erica and Kendra go shopping for music and DVD movies. They have to sign out and get back in at the house, which has 24-hour supervision.

Erica started college this fall, hoping to become a nurse. She hopes eventually to have a family so she can teach her kids "what I was never taught."

She's like a big sister to Kendra, helping her through the problems of high school life.

In turn, Kendra is the style maven, helping Erica pick out clothes and shoes. "I have no other family," said Kendra.

One topic, though, is off-limits: their pasts. That's part of moving on, they say — leaving it all behind.

Kendra came into foster care at age 14. By then she had already been abandoned by her crack-using mother and was surfing the homes of relatives. She stayed with an aunt for a while, but felt nobody liked her there. When the placement became too much, Kendra climbed a tree and jumped, trying to kill herself. Foster care has been a life on the move, as she was shuttled to more than a dozen homes. Much of it was her fault, she admits.

"If things didn't go my way, they didn't go nobody's way at all," she said.

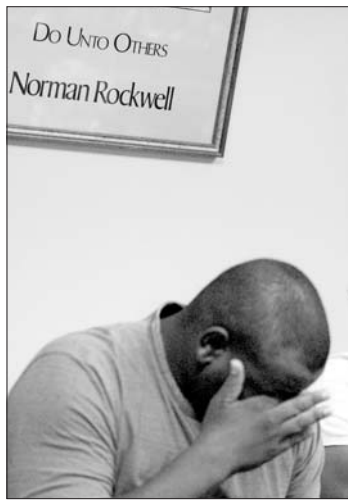
She wouldn't let one of her foster mothers cook. She threw all the food on the floor. One time she threw hot water at her foster mother. "I was not somebody to be yelled at," she said. Eventually she grew so despondent she filled up the bathtub and tried to drown herself.

At 16, Kendra held a kitchen knife to the throat of another girl in her foster home, threatening to slice her throat. The girl had called her a name. The incident cost Kendra three months in a juvenile detention facility.

But when she reached 18, the prospect of facing the world alone scared her. "It hit me," Kendra said.



The daughter of a crack user, Kendra (left), 18, once tried to drown herself. Now she hopes to attend beauty college. James (right), 18, lived in more than 20 foster homes, finally realizing he wouldn't be adopted.



With no place to go, Marcus, a high school senior, decided to stay in foster care while he finishes his education. "I was afraid I would be homeless, living under a bridge," he says.

"You need to wake up."

Today, she is a high school senior planning to attend beauty college.

'Thinking it's my fault'

Erica is trying to break a tragic cycle in her family. She is the third generation of women to grow up in foster care. Her mother had her at age 16 and left when she was an infant.

Erica has spent most of her life in foster care. By the time she was 10, she had already been in and out of nine foster homes, she said. Many times she was moved without even knowing why. "They just kept moving me," she said, "and I'm thinking it's my fault." By the time she reached the Fulton County emergency children's shelter at about age 10, she was acting out, big time. "I was angry at a lot of people in my life. I was angry at my mother," she said. "I felt people were just taking pieces of me. I didn't have any control over myself." The Fulton County shelter had so many problems —

"That," he said, "was like heaven."

James' story is not uncommon among foster children. Many complain of moving from foster home to foster home. A survey of group homes by the Georgia Association of Homes and Services for Children found that children had an average of four placements, said Normer Adams, executive director of the advocacy group.

Too often, Adams said, a child causing trouble in a foster home is simply shifted to another without any counseling or consideration of whether the new foster parents can handle the youth's particular problems.

In addition, many foster parents burn out and quit. Last year the state recruited about 1,000 new homes — but about 1,000 others closed. Currently there are about 4,000 homes and 16,000 children in the system. Many foster parents say they do not receive enough money from the state or support in handling the kids, Adams said.

State officials say they are taking action. This year, the state began categorizing foster homes according to their ability to care for children with different needs. Officials say they are also trying harder to place children with relatives.

Brought into foster care when he was 10, James talks about the years he spent hoping to be adopted. Then came about two years, when James picked up that age-old truth that children in the system learn the hard way: He was no longer, as foster kids say, adoption material. "Nobody wants a teenager," James said.

Crisis moments

Marcus' mother died of AIDS when he was about 7 and, with no counseling or therapy, he was placed directly into foster care. His mother's death troubled him for years.

"I don't think the foster facilities were equipped to deal with the issues I had. I needed a mother figure," Marcus said. "Some didn't give me any."

Four years passed before he was placed in a treatment facility. By then he was talking about killing himself so he could be with his mother.

For each of these four young people, there were key moments of crisis when they did not receive proper

counseling and support, said Kathy Colbenson, the head of CHRIS Kids.

The shifting from one foster home to another, from one caseworker to another, also damaged them, she said.

"Coming back to people you know makes a difference. Thinking there's someone in your corner makes a difference," Colbenson said.

Still, not all their experiences in foster care were bad. Marcus remembers a trip to New York where he walked on the floor of the stock exchange. He warmly recalls a caseworker he had for six years, and he is really connecting with his current caseworker, saying, "I opened up to her like I never opened up to anyone."

James thanks DFCS for getting him away from an abusive, drinking, drug-binging father, and he clearly sees the good in the situation he's in now. "I'm going to go to college. I don't know if I could pay for that," said the young man, who wants to be a veterinarian.

Troubled system

State child welfare officials acknowledge that the foster care system has troubles, including a dire shortage of caseworkers and foster parents.

A New York advocacy group, Children's Rights Inc., is suing to force the state to improve conditions. A study by the group shows that more than 20 percent of foster children in Fulton and DeKalb counties have been abused, neglected or otherwise mistreated by their foster parents.

"Clearly, kids are not safe in these foster homes," said Ira Lustbader, associate director of Children's Rights Inc.

Georgia officials have started a campaign to recruit 1,000 more foster families. This year, Gov. Sonny Perdue, himself a former foster parent, signed the Foster Parents Bill of Rights, intended to improve communication between foster parents and the state.

In June, the arrest of a Gwinnett County man on charges that he molested his three foster children prompted tougher screening of prospective foster parents.

Marcus said he was abused by his first foster parents.

They made him sleep on the floor and disciplined him with a belt. "A lot of the time I felt like running away," he said. A teacher saw the belt marks when Marcus was wearing a tank top and he was moved to another home.

His experiences gave him unique insight into the system. And he makes this suggestion from his vantage point: Before a child is placed with a foster parent, the two should meet and make sure they're compatible. That didn't occur with him, often with disappointing results. "The more they knew about me, they started backing away," he said.

These days, Marcus thinks twice about all his actions in foster care. If trouble happens here, it's not as though he can just move on to another foster home, he said.

Recently, Marcus, a high school senior who hopes to enter the medical field, stayed home from school because his arm hurt. But during the day he wanted to sign out and go to the store.

House manager Sammy Reed told him no. If he was staying home from school, he was staying home, period.

Marcus bristled, telling him, "I'm grown and I can do whatever I want."

Reed responded, "If you leave, you will have consequences to deal with."

Marcus sulked, but decided to stay. "I had to deal with it," he said. "I could leave the program and have nowhere to go, or stay and deal with my issues."

