

SECOND CHANCES STORIES OF HOPE

Young mother makes use of Covenant House's program

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When Jessica Hall had a child at age 15, she decided she needed to work toward a better life — for herself and her son.

"I was terrified that I was never going to finish high school, never amount to anything," said Hall, now 18 and living in Oakland Park with her son Damien.

At first, she attended the Seagull School Center, an alternative school in Fort Lauderdale for teen parents.

She went to school every day, eventually got a job and saved enough money to buy a used car.

Her determination to succeed paid dividends. She earned a high school diploma, was the valedictorian of her 2007 class and served as senior class

president, president of the Business Professionals of America Club and the president of the Human Relations Club.

Out of hundreds of job applicants, she received one of eight full-time internships with the Broward County Risk Management Agency by writing an essay and impressing the judges in an interview.

When she needed a place to live, Hall turned to the Covenant House, which serves runaway and homeless youth.

"I dreaded going there," Hall said. "I went at night, and I was scared. I thought 'What am I doing here?'" "I saw how the staff wanted to help, and I sensed in them a way for me to go further."

Hall lived there with her son for a



Jessica Hall has been offered a full-time position with Broward County starting in June.

month and then progressed to the Rights of Passage Dove Community. The program prepares young people for independent living and helps them learn and practice life skills.

"I made my own family here," Hall said. "I finally felt I belonged somewhere."

Hall next moved to Rights of Passage Apartment Living, where she and her son live in a two-bedroom

apartment, partially subsidized by Covenant House with a HUD grant. She receives ongoing counseling and case management.

"Covenant House Florida gives runaway and homeless youth opportunities to move on to healthy and productive futures," said James M. Gress, executive director. "The youths who enter and stay in our shelter are here by their choice, not by mandate or placement, and we involve them in making choices about their next steps throughout their stay with us."

Based on her performance in her Broward County job, Hall has been offered a permanent position with a pay increase and benefits in June as an office support specialist.

With some stability in her life, she

said she wants to attend Broward Community College and work toward a business degree from Nova Southeastern University.

She said that she will have to work hard to reach her goals but says she is prepared to do whatever it takes.

"I may feel alone at times, but I keep on, knowing where there is a will, there is a way," Hall said.

For information about Covenant House Florida, go to www.covenanthousefl.org or call 954-561-5559.

Do you have a recent story of hope? Have you overcome adversity in raising a family, been involved in a rescue or beaten the odds medically? Contact Freida Frisaro at ffrisaro@sun-sentinel.com or call 954-385-7926.