

Plan helps foster children finance college education

By VALERIE HILL-MORGAN
Staff Writer

The walls in Kurt Varricchio's bedroom tell the story: Dozens of plaques proclaim his recent academic work, but gashes underneath the plaques reveal his troubled past.

Varricchio, who has been in the state's foster-care system since he was 9 years old, once regularly skipped school, burglarized houses and picked fights. In fits of frustration he would use a baseball bat to beat on the walls in his foster family's house.

Today, the 17-year-old Plantation High School senior is a model for other troubled foster-care children struggling to succeed. Varricchio earns straight A's, serves as treasurer of the senior class and participates in campus drama and chorus productions.

"I think I've learned to channel all that frustration that I had into some-

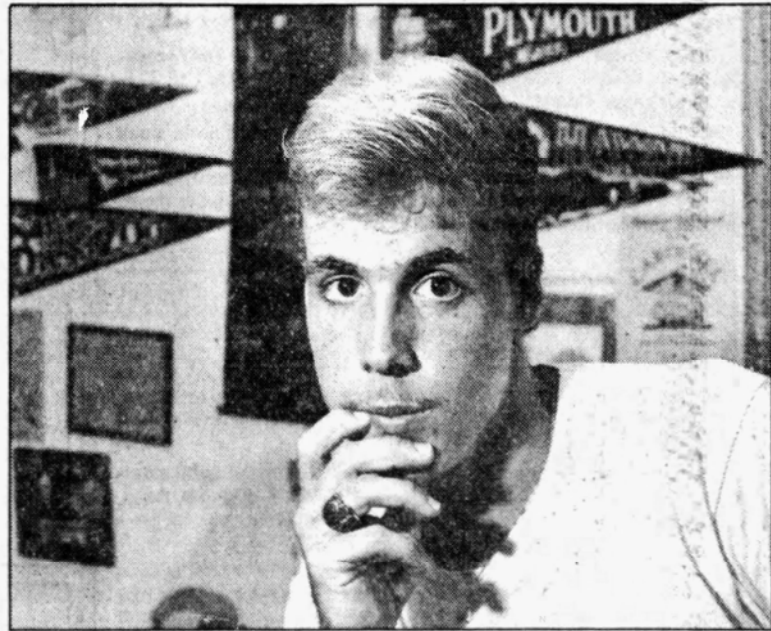
thing positive," he said.

This fall, Varricchio will attend Florida State University in Tallahassee. He is one of about 30 foster children statewide who are eligible this year for financial assistance under a 10-month-old state law designed to help students too old for foster care get a college education.

The law "is a godsend to many children in foster care," said Linda Chelette, a Tallahassee supervisor of the state's foster-care program. "It paves the way for these kids to get the skills they need to become independent while ensuring they have the same assistance as younger children in foster care."

To be eligible for the aid, students 18 and older must have at least a 2.0 grade-point average on a 4.0 scale. They also must be accepted by a Florida college or vocational school.

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Staff photo/RICH MAHAN

Plantation High senior Kurt Varricchio will attend Florida State University with help from a state law.

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Program provides college financing for foster children

Under the law, the state will spend on each student the equivalent of what it would pay a foster family for a child's room and board — between \$322 and \$352 a month.

About 10 students statewide have enrolled in colleges or vocational schools since the law took effect in July, Chelette said. Of the 30 students expected to enroll this year, six are from District 10, which covers Broward County, and five are from District 9, which includes Palm Beach County.

As of September, 1,224 of the state's 7,284 children in foster care were 16 and 17 years old, Chelette said.

State officials said they thought the number of participants was low because too few teen-agers in foster care recognize the value of a college education.

"A lot of these children have come from dysfunctional families and for them, school isn't a priori-

ty," said Mary Bosco, a foster-care program specialist in West Palm Beach.

"You're talking about teenagers who don't know if they're going to have a place to sleep the next day."

Bosco said she thought the state's offer to pay for vocational and technical training would be accepted by more children in foster care as more of them heard about the program.

"I think that many of them will see this type of education as being more realistic because they will be learning a skill they can use for life," Bosco said.

Before the law was passed, children in foster care had nowhere to go once they turned 18, Chelette said.

"They couldn't go back home and they were ineligible for foster care. They were basically left on their own," she said.

Varricchio, however, is one of the lucky ones.

Foster parents Joe and Sandy Evancho said they felt they had established a lifelong relationship with Varricchio, who has been in their custody since he was 11.

"He doesn't have our last name, but we love him as a son," Sandy

Evancho said. "We couldn't just say, 'OK, you've finished high school. So long.'"

The Evanchos said they have been saving money for Varricchio to go to college for the past five years.

"We figured that, with good grades, he would also be eligible for academic scholarships," Sandy Evancho said. "We wanted him to understand that he gets out of life what he puts into it."

Varricchio said he appreciated his foster parents' efforts.

"I feel like my foster home is really what gave me a second chance at life," he said.

While finishing high school, Varricchio is putting his experiences in foster care to good use by volunteering at Kids Crusaders, a local organization that helps abused and neglected children.

And when he is not volunteering, he is scouting for professional acting opportunities. He recently landed a bit part in a soon-to-be-released action movie called *Thunderboat Row*.

Varricchio offered a simple explanation for his busy schedule.

"I want to be the best that I can be," he said. "I'm going to keep trying to be No. 1."