

The Miami Herald

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2005 | 103RD YEAR, NO. 25 | ©2005 THE MIAMI HERALD | FINAL | ONE DOLLAR

FOSTER CARE

Women take to the stage to fulfill dream for girls

■ A group of prominent Miami women will perform the feminist manifesto *The Vagina Monologues* to raise money for Casa Valentina, a home for former foster-care girls.

BY ASHLEY FANTZ
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At age 17, Rodrika is not looking forward to her next birthday.

When she turns 18, no parent will buy her a gift or bake a cake. Instead, her parent will politely cut her allowance to a token stipend and ask her to leave.

That's because Rodrika's parent is the state of Florida, which expects its adult children to fend for themselves, especially if they're not going to college.

Rodrika is among approximately 350 foster kids in Miami-Dade and Broward counties who will exit state care on their 18th birthday this year, according to the Department of Children & Families.

In December, when she turns 18, the state will cut off support checks to her foster mother. She'll have to leave

then, her foster mother has told her, and she has no idea where she'll go.

Many such young adults will spiral toward poverty and homelessness. Girls are particularly vulnerable, many with kids of their own.

"We just knew we had to do something," said Sharon Langer, the director of the Dade County Legal Aid Society. "If these girls don't have a home, they can't get a job, they can't go to school. They don't have a chance."

Langer pulled together a group of attorneys, activists and artists. Over dinner at the home of Miami photographer Sharon Socol, they devised a dream and hatched a plan.

The dream: A comfortable home for eight former foster girls. The plan: Call well-heeled friends for contributions.

Then get on stage and talk about their most intimate female parts.

On Oct. 27 at the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts in Miami, Miami-Dade Commissioners Katy Sorenson and Sally Heyman; model Hunter Reno; Haitian-Ameri-



IF YOU GO

What: *The Vagina Monologues* to benefit Casa Valentina.

When: 8 p.m. Oct. 27.

Where: Gusman Center for the Performing Arts, 174 E. Flagler St., Miami.

Tickets: Prices range from \$25 to \$250.

For more information:
305-274-4772.

can activist Marleine Bastien; Patricia Ireland, the former president of the National Organization for Women, and others will perform a customized version of *The Vagina Monologues*, a play that has become synonymous with feminism since its 1996 off-off-Broadway debut.

"I'm not afraid of the word," laughed Bastien, executive director of Haitian Women of Miami. "I'm ready to put in the effort and to give it my best. All my life I've

worked to promote gender equality to empower women. This is something I felt I should do. And it sounded fun."

Casa Valentina, as it will be called, was born at a dinner party in September 2004. In the months that followed, the women initiated a spectacularly successful e-mail campaign that raised \$148,000 from 148 contributors. Contributions are being collected by the nonprofit Women's Fund of Miami-Dade.

The Valentina advocates are negotiating a reduced-rate lease on a Miami property in a quaint neighborhood within walking distance of a Metro-rail station. Eight young women could move in early next year.

The toughest task ahead for the Casa Valentina group is choosing the eight girls from the dozens who need help.

If Casa Valentina is a success, the women hope to provide more affordable housing to all foster-care girls.

"The goal is that every girl who exits the system have a safe, affordable option," Langer said.