

The boy carrying a secret riding the People Mover

A 14-year-old boy stood at a bus stop in Muldoon at 5:45 a.m. Monday, waiting on the Number 3. He shivered in his hooded sweat-shirt, staring down the block. The bus ride is part of a secret, something his friends in his honors classes at West High don't know, something his teachers may not know either.

The boy is homeless.

He lives with his mother and three siblings — including a sister with cerebral palsy — in a small room at Safe Harbor Inn, a shelter for families in Muldoon. They have been waiting for a government housing voucher since July 2009.

At last count there were more than 1,200 homeless kids attending Anchorage schools.

**JULIA
O'MALLEY**



Five-hundred fifty of them are in high school. It's common for a homeless family, especially a large one, to wait more than a year to find permanent housing they can afford. The problem has grown worse in the last few years in Anchorage, affordable housing advocates say,

as rents have increased and more families living on the financial edge have become homeless.

The boy is tall and slim. I asked him earlier if I could interview him on the hour-long trip to school. When I met him in the shelter Monday, he shook my hand, but we didn't make eye contact. As we waited for the bus, I asked him why he gets up early to ride to West.

"I want to be a doctor," he said.

The bus pulled up and the doors opened, spilling out heat.

The boy is a freshman. But when he is older, he told me after we sat down, he hopes to

See Back Page, O'MALLEY

O'MALLEY: Teenager rides People Mover to school, carrying secret

Continued from A-1

get into a special program at West called International Baccalaureate. He thinks it will help him get into a good college. He has his future mapped out already. He'll go to University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. After that, Johns Hopkins Medical School.

"I want to get a job, and then I want to buy a house, get married, have a kid," he said.

I asked how his family ended up in the shelter. Things for his family started to slide when he was in junior high, he said. He doesn't know the details; he just knows they had trouble paying rent.

His mother contacted me because she wanted me to write about their family's struggle to find housing. She told me that three years ago things were stable, though she and her husband weren't getting along. She had been working at Providence Alaska Medical Center doing hospital admissions and managing equipment. But things with her husband turned violent, and she left him. The decision wasn't easy because she knew it would make her children's lives less stable, she said. And then the boy got sick with a brain infection and

had to go to the hospital. And between the divorce and his illness, she used up all her leave.

"(Her employers) said I could come back when I got my life together," she said.

"I still haven't gotten my life back together." She never thought their stay in the shelter would go so long, she said.

After a while, they lost their house. And then they moved to the shelter. I asked the boy if he is mad about his mom leaving his dad and all the things that came after. He shrugged.

"I feel like I would have done the same," he said.

The bus started to fill up with people heading to work. The boy loves basketball; he said, in particular Kevin Garnett, who plays for the Boston Celtics. Sometimes he stays and plays basketball after school. His favorite subject in school is geometry. His least favorite is English. But he has to do well in both.

"If I'm going to go (to West) and try to be in this program, I want to succeed and do well," he told me. "I don't want to have F's. There'd be no point."

I asked where he studies. He said he tries to get his homework done after school at the

Boys and Girls Club. His family lives in a space the size of a hotel room. Things can get hectic with his brothers and sisters.

"Sometimes you just need a break, and sometimes I just feel like I can't get one," he said.

The boy sleeps on a small sofa. Sometimes his younger siblings share the bed with his mom. Sometimes one of them sleeps on the floor. For dinner, they often eat microwave meals. For breakfast and lunch, he eats at school. He feels for his mom.

"Being (at the shelter) really stresses her out," he said. "I always feel really bad if I do something wrong."

The bus rolled through the University-Medical District, stopping in front of Providence Hospital.

"I want to come back and work there," he said, looking out the window at the glowing medical complex.

I asked him why he wants to be a doctor. He spent a lot of time in hospitals with his illnesses and his siblings', he said. It's bright and clean there, he said.

"It's so calming, and, like, everybody's

friendly," he said.

Another kid got on. The boy got quiet. The kid goes to West too.

I promised the boy's mother that I wouldn't use his name if I wrote about him. She didn't want him teased or pitied. She wants school to be normal for him.

I asked him what if someone at school figures out that he is the kid in this column? He thought about it.

"I don't have a problem if they knew that I live where I do," he said. "I don't know how I could change it."

The bus stopped on Minnesota Boulevard, and we got off into the cold. We walked around West to the front door of the school and stood there for a minute.

"Have a nice day," the boy told me and shook my hand.

I watched him turn and walk into West High. The warm light from the classrooms glowed in the dark.

Julia O'Malley writes a regular column. Read her blog at ada.com/jomalley, find her on Facebook or get her Twitter updates at www.twitter.com/ada_jomalley.