

New Life Children's Treatment Center A Shining Light for Girls in World of Darkness



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By J. Louise Larson The Herald-Zeitung | 0 comments

NEW BRAUNFELS — But for the barbed-wire along the Guadalupe, New Life Children's Center could be mistaken for a summer camp. However, while it comes with the recreational capacities adolescent girls need to have fun, the center serves a much more important purpose.

A psychiatric residential facility in a safe setting for girls who have experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse, New Life provides intensive and specialized treatment and individualized care plans for girls bearing deep wounds from years when they should have been sheltered and nurtured. Take the case of "Lana," who, at the tender age of 12, was removed from her home after Child Protective Services officials discovered her drug-addicted mother had pimped the pre-teen out from age 7 to support her mother's habit. Because of the abuse she had suffered, Lana was depressed and suicidal, and had been placed in several foster homes and psychiatric hospitals before she was admitted to New Life Children's Center. "When she was first admitted, Lana often cut herself. She told her New Life therapist that she preferred the pain of the cuts to the emotional pain she felt when she thought about the abuse she had suffered in her life," said a NLCC spokeswoman. After several months of intensive therapy and counseling, Lana began to turn her life around. She discovered her own talent for art. For the first time, she thought about college. "New Life saved my life," she said in a testimonial on the facility's website. "Before I came here, I didn't care if I lived or died. I never laughed and now I laugh all the time. I can't say 'thanks' enough to the wonderful supporters of New Life and the staff and volunteers at New Life for making a difference in my life."

Another resident needed help getting a tattoo removed — a "tatt" across her back that read, "Daddy's Whore." There's hope even for youth with that kind of damage, said CEO Dr. Gary Henry. "Scars remind us where we've been — they don't dictate where we're going," he said. Somewhere between 90 and 100 percent of the girls from Texas and neighboring states at the center have been removed from their families with

the help of either CPS or juvenile probation. A small percentage of the participants are “private pay” patients from around the country. With the help of a new cottage, the facility can now accommodate 80 girls, up from its previous capacity of 60. The cottages are clean and neat — and devoid of anything that can be used as a weapon in a misguided attempt to gauge out psychic pain. Items with sharp edges — even tin cans — are not welcome at the facility, as many of the girls have issues with “cutting,” or physically mutilating their bodies. Rage is not uncommon for the facility’s residents, who between the normal trauma of growing up and the extreme trauma of their upbringing may find themselves two years behind in academic development. “Some of them act out. This may be the first place they’ve felt loved, safe and secure,” Henry said.

The Canyon Lake setting is very complete. The residents have their own beauty shop, where professional stylists with a heart for troubled girls lend their skills to help the girls feel good about their appearance. There is a chapel. The girls also participate in 4-H projects, like the stately Longhorn that watches placidly as visitors approach.

And there is also an award-winning charter school on-site, with small class sizes for individualized attention. The school helps girls catch up academically and prepare for college and careers — and keeps them from having to try to fit into a larger social milieu when they are in survival mode. A cadre of 350 volunteers help, including retirees in the Canyon Lake area, like the former teachers that shepherd the girls’ academic progress, and groups like Women in Business, and the Comal County Master Gardeners, who built a garden area with benches for sitting. There’s “Chick Time” with a group of women volunteers, often accompanied by their daughters (ages 12 and up). Fun presentations help the girls learn skills young women often learn at home. There are etiquette classes, “glamor shots” photography, help developing resumes and job interview skills. A recreational specialist leads the girls in everything from golf to disc baseball. “We’re very supported by the community,” said volunteer coordinator Lisa Brown. Many of the residents qualify, at least technically, as “special education” because of either emotional or learning disability. “Bags of Hope” are colorful quilted welcome bags — with handles short enough that a distressed girl can’t hurt herself with it — filled with toiletries, snacks, games and other welcoming items. They are issued printed sheets, shoes and teen-friendly uniforms.

A number of church women’s guilds provide handmade quilts for the girls; the girls themselves are involved in projects to help others — like the colorful, hand-crocheted infant hats made for homeless shelters and crisis pregnancy centers. A “point store” filled with donated goodies allows girls to “buy” items with points accumulated through a behavior management points system. “It’s about making good choices,” Brown said. New Life is neither quick fix nor permanent solution. The average stay is eight months, or until they have completed their treatment plan, which is tailored for each girl.

“We don’t cure anything here — we teach them to cope, and we teach them that it’s not their fault. We try to break the cycle so they won’t do what their mother or father did,” Henry said.

Generally, from the center, the girls will go into a foster home or group home, or be adopted. Guilds and groups donate the proceeds from shows and events to the organization. The Americana Jam in Gruene raised more than \$55,000 this year for the facility. Valero has an executive golf tournament each year that raised more than \$60,000 for the organization. “We’re so fortunate so many people know about us and support us,” Brown said. Volunteer opportunities with the organization include ambassadors to advocate by promoting the organization to groups and churches; arts, music and drama; coaching; committee member, event planner/volunteer, college-age internships, landscaping, librarian, maintenance and seasonal volunteer. They also need one-on-one mentors and spiritual mentors.

“Work one-on-one with one of our children by spending one hour or more per week with them playing games, doing crafts, reading, enjoying dinner in the cafeteria, or just hanging out. Our kids love their mentors and see obtaining a mentor as a special treat — we see mentorship as a catalyst for positive growth and behavioral improvement,” Brown said. Tutors are needed as well.

“Work with one or several of our kids to improve their academic performance and encourage them to keep at their studies. Many skills needing nurturing on remedial level others are just needing improvement. An hour a week can make a difference in the educational progress of a young person,” she said.

To volunteer, contact Lisa Brown at lisa.brown@lss.org or (830)964-4390.

For information, visit www.newlifechildrenscenter.org.