

Home Work: Life in the CSF Residential Program

BY MARY SHAFER

When I arrived at the Community Service Foundation's (CSF) foster girls' group home in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, USA, houseparent Linda Anschuetz showed me into the dining room. She motioned me to a chair by the table, around which six pairs of teen-age eyes—alternately curious and suspicious—focused on me. Who was this stranger who'd arrived in the midst of their safe, carefully structured environment, and what did I want?

Linda quickly dispelled any misgivings. She told them I was writing about the program and encouraged everyone to introduce themselves and to make me feel welcome. Most of the girls smiled at me. A few looked shy.



Circles are a safe place to share feelings.

Quickly, one of them offered her name and a friendly, "Hi!" The rest, ranging in age from 14 to 17, continued introductions. I detected a range of personality types, from outgoing to withdrawn.

Linda introduced me to her husband and co-houseparent, Dale. I enjoyed everyone's animated conversation, and was struck by nostalgia for my upbringing. Then, suppertime was often looked forward to as a time of sharing our daily

experiences and re-affirming family ties. It was a chance to remind ourselves of who we were, the fact that we were valued and mattered to someone.

I quickly learned that some of these girls had no such memories to reminisce on. For them, as for many kids in the CSF program, the world—and particularly their homes—are not safe or comforting places, which is part of why they're no longer there.

CSF group homes differ from other residential placements in that they're run according to the tenets of restorative practices: doing things *with* the residents instead of *to* them or *for* them; insisting that they engage in decisions about their futures; demanding accountability for their choices and behavior. The atmosphere in a CSF group home avoids being permissive—high support and low control—or punitive—high control and low support. Rather, it is a restorative atmosphere, providing a highly structured, safe environment for people to express and exchange intense emotion, the sort of atmosphere that has rarely existed in most of the residents' lives.

As everyone finished eating, Linda asked the girls who had homework. Dale wanted to know what the girls' plans were for the evening, and a lively exchange followed. For the most part, Dale already knew the answers: the girls' schedules are largely predetermined by weekly chore assignments. His question was actually a subtle reminder of their responsibilities. I began to see how everything worked as the girls cleared the table.

Linda showed me six write-on/wipe-off fridge magnets. Each girl's name

was on one, beneath which was written a chore, such as "iron" or "load dishwasher." These are general, rotating assignments. Dale and Linda create detailed sheets with specific duties, which they post in each room. Thursday is the day for "thoroughs," a deeper cleaning of areas lightly gone over the rest of the week.

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We chatted about the house routine, which is often anything but. "Structured" doesn't necessarily mean "scheduled." There is a basic schedule, but it's frequently disrupted by the kinds of unplanned emergencies faced by any family: illness, forgotten books or lunches and all the various crises that might be expected in a house full of troubled girls in their most developmentally tumultuous years.

For efficiency, the girls stagger wake-up and shower times, as well as breakfast and taking prescribed medications, which most do. They make lunches, then leave for one of the CSF schools, which all group-home residents attend. This alone is a huge step for many whose lives have often been too chaotic—between abusive, addicted or absent parents, or the youths' own misbehavior—to even think about attending school regularly.

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Once the girls have gone, Linda takes care of errands and grocery shopping or attends one of many required meetings. Dale is either at home, at meetings with Linda, or serving as driver for all the houses, wherever he is needed.

Along with undergoing rigorous screening and extensive orientation, all houseparents—who are paid CSF employees—receive ongoing training and support. (In most CSF residences, one parent is a full-time houseparent, and the other works an outside job.) There are team meetings with caseworkers and relief counselors to go over the girls' progress, houseparent support meetings, and regular training meetings on restorative practices theory and application.

The girls return home around 3 p.m. Bags and pockets are searched for illicit materials, then the girls have a snack, talking and unwinding for a while. Chores are done, then there's time off until dinner. After dinner, everyone pitches in to clean up and make the next day's lunches. The girls play games, read or talk with Linda and Dale until bedtime at 9:30.

The girls don't go upstairs without permission, because some have issues with self-mutilation. There are occasional bed checks for prohibited items. The girls don't like the lack of freedom or privacy, but they know it's done out of concern for them, which is more care than some have ever known.

When a new girl comes to the home, she is assigned an "orienter," one of the other residents. Rules and expectations are explained. Though the orienter may have her own take on things, Linda and Dale make sure the newcomer and all the girls understand that rules are for the purpose of protecting and keeping them concentrated on doing their court-mandated personal work, which may include psychological and substance abuse counseling.

Yet, in the middle of all this grown-up necessity, there are moments when kids can still be kids. M, the youngest girl, risked entering Dale and Linda's private living area—off-limits unless invited—to follow another resident, a good-natured yellow Labrador Retriever. She tumbled to the floor, burying her face in the dog's fur. She said it calms her and makes her feel secure. I asked her what it is she likes best about living in the group home.



A houseparent provides support.

"Love," she replied, without hesitation.

It was an auspicious beginning of understanding the unique function served by foster group homes in the larger CSF universe of restorative practices.

Everything about the CSF Residential Program is designed to accomplish a single goal: helping residents work toward the objectives established by them, their families and referral sources in their Individual Service Plans.

Generally, this includes gaining life skills and the socialization to either return home or go out on their own as successful adults. It's not about forcing square pegs into round holes: Each plan is highly tailored to the individual needs of each child, but each one stresses consistency. Participants learn that everything inside the CSF program—schedules, responsibility lists and boundaries—is tailored to help them achieve their goals. Anything that distracts from this work is prohibited.

K, one of the Quakertown residents, told me her personal goals include controlling her anger so she'll be able to go to college in a couple years. An "A" student, she finds the amount of counseling she has access to the best thing about the program. She is also looking forward to being able to face her fears through the work she's doing at school and at home. K feels what she's learning will allow her to move into adulthood without exploding easily into the violent temper outbursts that brought her into the juvenile justice system.

This dovetail between school and life at the group home helps kids like K because the structure of expectations and discipline are consistent. Though their nature is to struggle against the behavioral constraints put on them, most of the kids rise to the challenge of becoming accountable for their own choices.

D, a young man at the boys' group home in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, spoke passionately about his desire to become a pro football player. Aside from this goal being an interest of his own, he also strives for it because it's something his little brother had wanted to do—his little brother, whom D was next to on the sidewalk when he was gunned down in a drive-by shooting.

The pain of the memory flashed vividly across his face. More quietly, D leaned close and told me he writes poetry. He sometimes reads it in a "circle," when everyone's gathered to discuss general topics of importance to the home. It's a place he feels safe enough to share his deepest feelings without fear of ridicule.

He pulled two creased sheets from his pocket and read his poems. One was about his brother, and his voice cracked when he read it. As he finished, there were tears coursing down his cheeks. It was a reminder of how vulnerable these young people are, regardless of the protective fronts they might present.

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I visited the boys' home while they were holding a "group," which brings house members together to make decisions about specific topics. Sometimes these groups include CSF caseworkers, who carry a maximum caseload of 12 kids—usually all the residents of two group homes. The caseworker serves as a link between home and school, keeping staff apprised of what's going on with the kids in both places.

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This particular group was called by houseparent Mary Ann Claypoole, who with husband Jesse runs the Hatfield home. She was joined by caseworker Allyson Kleimenhagen, and the topic was the upcoming summer recreation schedule. Mary Ann, like many of the houseparents, teaches some of these classes. She and Allyson review class offerings, behavior expectations and schedules with the boys. To encourage those who need academic tutoring to pursue that option instead of morning recreation, they assure the boys they'll have afternoons off for fun. Mary Ann says she'll take them to the public swimming pool if they behave well and show respect to everyone.

The structure of the boys' home is much like that of the girls', with school all week and outside jobs for some of the older kids. Fun, family-type activities and shopping fill the weekends. Many of the kids go home over holidays to see their families, but there is always someone at the group homes for those who don't.

Let's face it: most kids have built-in lie detectors. Those in the care of CSF have often seen more than most in their short lives. Many have been lied to more than once by those they depended on to take care of them. To say that quite a few of these children are jaded and cynical is an understatement that would be almost laughable if it weren't so sad.

And yet, what I saw when I visited two of these group homes was not a pack of eye-rolling teen-age delinquents. What I did see were two groups of thoughtful, conscious adolescents trying their best to understand what had gotten them entangled with the criminal justice or child welfare system in the first place, and to figure out what would help them leave it and not come back. For the most part, these kids are genuinely interested in turning their lives around, as opposed to finding someone else to blame for their uncomfortable situations.

Some finger pointing is to be expected, and I did see some. The difference between the environment provided by a CSF home and the larger society is how such behavior is treated. Outside, you might find a gamut of reactions. Inside CSF, there's no question what will happen: Someone—anyone—including the youth's peers, can and will challenge it. This will take place no matter the location or situation, and it will be done immediately and appropriately.

This kind of calling out is referred to in the parlance of restorative practices as "responsible concern." It is expected that anyone witnessing dangerous or prohibited behavior will encourage their fellow resident or student to own the behavior and seek guidance for it, or seek it for them if they're not strong enough.

Everyone involved knows what to expect in these situations, and it's the need for this kind of consistency that was the genesis of the CSF Residential Program.

After more than a decade of building CSF, co-founders Ted and Susan Wachtel recognized that CSF alternative school students who resided in unstable homes needed a way to stay connected to CSF 24 hours a day. The Wachtels realized that much of the progress made by some students in the secure structure of the schools was being undone by chaotic home environments. The Wachtels knew they needed to apply restorative practices to every facet of the kids' lives, which led to the formation of an experimental CSF foster group home in Warrington, Pennsylvania, in 1987.



Dinnertime strengthens family bonds every night.

The effort has since grown to include 16 homes, nine for boys and seven for girls. Residential Program Director Rev Rhodes explained that gender separation is safer and less distracting for the residents, protecting them from their own or another's temptations. This is tremendously important, given some of their backgrounds as sexual abuse victims.

With charters based on the established tenets of restorative practices and evolving through some trial-and-error efforts, the program has succeeded beyond what anyone could have expected.

Youths are court-ordered to enter the CSF Residential Program, but during the intake interview they are fully informed about how the program works and given a choice whether to make a commitment to it. (If a youth decides not to enter the

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program, the court may send them somewhere else.) The agreement is reached with the youth, not imposed upon him or her. Once a youth has committed to the program—for a specified period of time, based on court recommendations—he or she moves into one of the CSF group homes.

I saw these youths making a real effort to understand the root of their behavioral problems, and found them unexpectedly articulate in discussing them through the vocabulary of restorative practices.

The youths then receive a constant and reliable stream of positive messages and immediate behavioral reinforcement through interaction with houseparents, counselors and peers. In the words of one resident, such an arrangement allows the youths to “eat, breathe and sleep restorative practices” around the clock, providing the most conducive atmosphere for long-term success.

When I spoke with the kids, my reporter’s skeptical mind looked for some sign of the mocking disrespect I had found so prevalent when I worked as an undercover deputy sheriff in a Midwestern U.S. vice squad. In that milieu, the kids I came in contact with were usually at the beginning of their acquaintance with the legal system. Many were cocky, full of false bravado born of a gross underestimation of the trouble they were in.

My experience with CSF residents was entirely different. I saw these young women and men accepting that they were in serious jeopardy of screwing up their entire lives. I saw them making a real effort to understand the root of their behavioral problems, and found them unexpectedly

articulate in discussing them through the vocabulary of restorative practices. I saw how the program harnesses the power of language to create reality.

I was struck by another revelation that must amaze kids used to adults modeling a “do as I say, not as I do” attitude: Not only is this self-examination and public revelation prevalent among the kids, it is also apparent among counselors, houseparents and school staff.

Throughout my visits and interviews, I witnessed a willingness on the part of all CSF participants to take an honest, critical look at their own behavior. All the staff I interviewed were unbelievably open about their backgrounds, which all seemed to include serious struggles of their own. It became clear that their dedication was born of the compassion of common experience.

This realization sparked the first of many times throughout the process of researching this article when I said to myself, “This is incredible! These people are so real, and honest. Why is this fantastic method only practiced at CSF, after people have gotten in trouble with the law? Why aren’t we all living restorative practices every day?”

I can’t say I found the answers, but I did find something valuable.

Since the tragedy of September 11, 2001, I had been looking for something to feel hopeful about. In a world that increasingly devalues children and denies doing so, I have found an honest attempt to face our society’s self-delusion and say, “No more.” My heart has responded to a place that the children our society has deemed least desirable can call “home.”

And if that’s not something hopeful...check your pulse. ☉