Diana’s Story

Adoption specialists speak of two traumas faced by most foster children, the first trauma of losing a parent(s) and the second trauma of losing a sibling. Diana suffered both of these traumas at the age of eight. Today Diana is 17 and resides at PCHAS’ Transitional Living home in Columbia. She gives us a glimpse of her past and present and her plans for the future.

Nine years ago, Diana's mother gave birth to a boy with medical problems, and the hospital discovered she was using marijuana. The single mother lost custody of both children when she was convicted and incarcerated. The baby was adopted and Diana was placed with a foster family. Diana has tried to stay in touch with her brother, but his adoptive parents discourage any contact, so she hasn’t seen him in four years.

Not surprisingly, Diana resented being placed with a foster family. “We had a house,” she says, “and had food. I went to school every day and was never abused. But they sent my mom away.” Now out of prison, Diana’s mother is trying to put her life together, while Diana herself must remain in an alternative care program.

Diana has lived in three cities. Over four years, she changed schools five times. Staff members in the Transitional Living program understand that frequent moves and the trauma of family separation have affected Diana’s ability to trust people. (Her advice to someone entering foster care is, “Don’t get used to any place. Everything is temporary.”) They listen when she feels depressed or angry, and say she is gradually building healthy relationships.

Residents in our Transitional Living are young women aging out of foster care and learning skills to live independently. They attend support groups and, like many teenagers, have chores. They take turns cooking dinner, practicing a skill they will need as adults.

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Diana
The children in our care are not that different from yours and mine. They spend their teen years turning in school assignments, finding and keeping part-time jobs, and figuring out transportation. Managing these tasks is good preparation for adulthood.

Children aging out of foster care, though, do not have the safety net that most children have. They cannot move back to their parents’ place when the rent is overdue. There is no adult to co-sign for a student loan or buy groceries when payday is still a week away.

How do children recover from life’s disappointments? Is a healthy self-reliance something we are born with? Our clients, and our staff, face the question of resilience every day. Again and again, we find that resilience can be taught.

This issue of Bridge shares stories of children and families who are not just surviving but also thriving. From mentoring to managing foster care cases, from counseling to residential treatment, all of the PCHAS programs develop resilience in children and families.

Diana

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Diana has a part-time job as a server at Waffle House. She uses public transportation – a skill she learned in the Transitional Living program -- but sometimes a staff member gives her a ride to work. Although she has no family to co-sign for a car loan, Diana has earned a driver’s permit and set her sights on another milestone, a driver’s license.

Given that she has changed schools a total of eight times, the stability of the PCHAS program is essential to her future success. It has provided her with enough supervision and emotional support to study at one high school for her junior year. About 40% of children in the foster care system do not graduate from high school, but Diana expects to continue at this school and graduate in 2018.

For the next year, she will be glad to have PCHAS as her home.
Learning to drive is a rite of passage, a major step toward self-sufficiency. The girls at Ashley House, the Transitional Living program in Springfield, are as eager as any teenager to reach this milestone.

When all ten residents wanted to take the written test for a driving permit, the staff recommended forming a study group. Piper, though, said, “I can do it on my own. I’ll just take the test until I pass.” She took the test and failed -- twice.

It is hard to ask for help, and harder for those who have been let down by life. “Piper is like a lot of our clients,” explained Alisa Griffiths, the director of Ashley House. “She is so insecure about her abilities that she doesn’t want to ask for help. She tries to go solo and becomes frustrated if she doesn’t do well.”

To prove a point, three staff members took the written test. Then they shared their scores, which were adequate but not remarkable, with Piper. “Well, maybe I should study the book, a little,” Piper said, and even agreed to collaborate on study sessions. In a few weeks, all ten Ashley House girls earned their permits.

Bridge | Bridging the gap for children and families in need
Teaching Resilience

Reflections by a Therapeutic Mentor

Recently I read an article, *Eight Things to Remember about Child Development*. It was published by Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child and addressed resiliency in the face of adversity. I kept thinking of one particular mentee, Paco, who was eight when I started working with him.

Paco’s father abruptly disappeared from his life when he was deported to Mexico, where he remains banned from the U.S. for life. The sudden separation was very traumatic for little Paco. Everything in his life was going along fine, and then all of a sudden his father was just gone for good.

I was really struck by these findings in the article:

> …(Y)oung children can also benefit significantly from relationships with other responsive caregivers outside the family…. It is the reliable presence of at least one supportive relationship and multiple opportunities for developing effective coping skills that are the essential building blocks for strengthening the capacity to do well in the face of significant adversity.

That’s what Therapeutic Mentoring is all about. Paco has supportive relationships with his mother and grandmother, but now he has one with me as well. And I focus much of our time on coping skills. I don’t judge his behavior or criticize it — I’m just supportive.

The study found that children “can be helped substantially if reliable and nurturing relationships with supportive caregivers are established as soon as possible.” This is an important aspect of Therapeutic Mentoring.

Early intervention prevents a downward spiral into poverty, substance abuse or crime. In Paco’s case, we met soon after his father had to leave his life. So I’m hoping that was early enough to make a difference.

Already, after a few months, there is a noticeable change when I get Paco away from his family, especially his two brothers. He is calmer and more in control of his behavior. He makes better choices and shows better judgment.

Still, I worry about him. He has a long way to go in life. Will he continue to find ways to deal with difficulties? The article offered this encouragement:

> We remain capable of learning ways to work around earlier impacts well into the adult years.

A chart (below) from the Harvard study demonstrates that it is much easier to change behavior at younger ages.

Rather than wait until a family breaks apart and children are in foster care, it is wise to help children cope with trauma as early as possible. After all, the article states, resilience requires relationships, not rugged individualism.

- Richard Wooldridge

Therapeutic Mentors work part-time with at-risk youth in Boone County, Lincoln County and St. Louis County. A bachelor’s degree is required and work experience with children is preferred. If you are interested in learning more, call (314) 785-0180 or visit http://missouri.pchas.org.
We looked like a wholesome family. My father was a career military man. But he was violent and verbally abusive at home. He and my mother were both hard-core alcoholics. So the opportunity I have now, to give back to kids going through what I went through, is one of the greatest blessings God has allowed me to have.

I first recognized how bad my family situation was when we moved to Germany for my father’s work. One day, my father beat my mother so badly that she wound up in the hospital. I remember seeing her face still black and blue with bruises. I was just starting middle school.

The beatings never let up on Mom and the five boys. I remember lying in bed many nights, not wanting to go to sleep, because it was likely that my father would pull one of us out of bed in the middle of the night. He would beat us for something he thought we had done wrong at school or home. This went on for four years in Germany.

Due to his drinking and family issues, my father was forced to retire from the military in 1972. He sent the family back to the U.S. He stayed in Germany with the 21-year-old maid. My two older brothers left home immediately and I became the eldest child in the house. We lived in subsidized housing and received food stamps to make ends meet. Mom was still drinking a quart of gin a day. She couldn’t hold a job for a week. After a few months, my aunt and uncle, who had eight children, moved us (five more children) into their house.

My mother managed to stay sober for a short time, so we reunited in another low-rent home. But by the fall of my senior year in high school, her drinking was so bad that she was unable to keep a job at all. I had a job as a produce clerk at a grocery store, and at times my wages were the only income we had. I was responsible for four brothers and sisters, the youngest being two years old.

In October of my senior year, it was too much to handle. I went to my counselor at school, Miss Hale, and told her about the situation. We contacted Missouri Family Services and had all of us placed into foster homes. I was considered “too old” for a foster home, so I lived in a seminary.

Fortunately, Mom began attending AA meetings and became sober, and I returned home after three months. I reported to a social worker every week on the condition of the house and my mother. My brothers returned home and then, after a year in foster care, my sisters came home, too. Our mother has been sober ever since.

Without a doubt, I have been blessed by God with the life I have had. I would not have become who I am today if I had not gone through the turmoil of that final year of school. Because of my experience, I have dedicated my time and energy to help other children who have struggled as I have. I am honored to speak to my church’s Mission Committee about PCHAS, and when the agency holds a fundraising luncheon, I pull out my list of contacts and fill a table. Throughout my entire childhood, these are the people I was looking for: people who care about children and are committed to helping them through the worst of difficult times.

- Keith Whittemore

Keith was the only one of seven siblings to graduate from high school. Later he joined the Navy, earned a college degree and had a career in engineering and sales. Now retired, he volunteers on the PCHAS Board of Trustees and is our Ambassador at Bonhomme Presbyterian Church.
One of the hidden figures in Missouri’s history is Margaret Leggat Butler. As a wealthy widow, she funded the orphanage that became our Farmington Children’s Home and what is now our Residential Treatment Center. She never had children, but she provided a home for children who were orphaned or abandoned. At one time 145 children lived there. They were able to attend school, enjoy three meals a day, and grow up feeling safe and loved.

That Home became Presbyterian Children’s Homes and Services (PCHAS). Through a range of programs across the state, we transform the lives of more than 2,000 children – and their families -- each year. Many of the children in our care are at high risk for homelessness, addiction, and incarceration.

These children, too, are hidden figures. More than 40% of children in foster care will not graduate from high school. And they will age out of the system at 18. Our Transitional Living homes provide both emotional and practical support for some of them, who will soon be on their own. Your support empowers these children to finish school and build a bright future. It also allows us to counsel families in crisis and break the cycle of trauma.

As Mother’s Day and Father’s Day approach, think of the children in our care. Will you make a gift in honor of your mother or your father? Perhaps you will remember a favorite teacher or special friend. How can you acknowledge a hidden figure? How can you inspire one?

Tributes received before May 7 for Mother’s Day can be recognized by a card we send to your honoree before May 14. June 10 is the deadline for a card to reach your honoree by Father’s Day, June 18. Please include the address of the honoree.

The “In-Kind” Question

Callers often ask the staff about making in-kind contributions, not only at Christmas time but also throughout the year.

Generally, monetary gifts go further than material gifts in two ways: 1) The agency can buy goods in bulk and 2) purchases by the agency are tax-exempt.

For example, Neosho Presbyterian Church sent us gift cards that could be used throughout the year. PCHAS used some of these cards for a young woman who had run away from home and lost all of her personal belongings. The agency also received a gift from Olsson Associates, which allowed PCHAS to purchase kitchen utensils, pots, pans, and dishes for our residential programs.

Presbyterian Children’s Homes and Services relies heavily on the generosity of our community to support children with the best care and brightest future possible. If you have questions about how you or your organization can make a difference for the children in our care, please phone or e-mail the Development Officer in your area.
In Their Own Words

The therapists in the Family Solutions for Kids (FSK) program may have desks at the Presbyterian Children’s Homes and Services’ administration office, but their real work happens at a client’s home. Last year PCHAS served hundreds of children with intensive in-home therapy to help families cope with divorce, illness and other crises.

Instead of holding appointments in an office, an FSK therapist meets with a family in their own home, three to four hours per week, for an average of 12 weeks. Before reaching the 12th week, the participants make an “aftercare” plan, which helps the family maintain its progress and identify other resources in their community. The program has a hotline that families can call during evenings and weekends. It also includes follow-up calls to the family after six months and again after one year.

One parent commented, “I probably wouldn’t be able to get my daughter into an office location because of her defiance. Emily responded better to the therapist, I think, because she was on Emily’s ‘turf.’ I didn’t have to bring other siblings along, either.”

In a follow-up survey, another client wrote, “My case therapist was amazing in getting a support system in place, helping to calm me and focus me during a very stressful time. She was great to work with. I’m not sure what we would have done without her help and knowledge.”

Other comments from participants include:

“For me the home setting was needed because I have no car. Our therapist was kind, friendly, and sweet to my child.”

and

“She gave me lots of ideas and clear examples of what to do or say in certain situations. She was very professional, non-judgmental and easy to talk to. I love that sessions were not limited to only one hour.”

Family Solutions for Kids is a collaborative program with another agency, Every Child’s Hope (ECH). Services are free to families in St. Louis County and Jefferson County. ECH handles intake evaluations for both agencies at (314) 504-1935.
Presbyterian Children’s Homes and Services of Missouri is a 501(c)3 charitable organization. All gifts are tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law. We do not render professional tax advice.

If you are receiving duplicate mailings, wish to make a change of address or no longer wish to be included on our mailing list, please contact our headquarters at 800.383.8147.

For email delivery of this newsletter, write to moinfo@pchas.org.

Hope for the Children luncheons are scheduled in three locations across the state. These powerful, uplifting events introduce new and continuing friends of PCHAS and co-workers to the stories – struggles and successes – of children who have been abused, neglected or abandoned. Mark your calendar now and reserve a table by contacting your nearest development officer.

**Wednesday, September 13**
Ramada Oasis Hotel, Springfield, MO

**Wednesday, October 4 (new date)**
First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, MO

**Thursday, October 19**
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood (St. Louis)