

Last-Ditch Stop for the Most Troubled Teens

Maryhurst Takes on Hundreds of Abused and Abandoned Kids in Kentucky

By KETURAH GRAY

May 31, 2006 — On a chilly Kentucky morning, 11-year-old Summer travels to the fifth home in her short but chaotic life.

Her adoptive parents, Sally and Wayne Meyer, are driving her to Maryhurst, a residential treatment facility in Louisville that specializes in caring for some of the state's most vulnerable and troubled girls.

Nervously fidgeting with her bracelets in the back seat of the family car, Summer's calm demeanor belies the aggressive behaviors that the Meyers say make her too dangerous to remain in their home.

Summer grew up in a home which at times had no water or working bathrooms. Bugs infested the house. Cockroaches were so embedded inside the little girl's ears, they had to be surgically removed. Summer says that before she was 6 years old, she started getting sexually abused by men who visited her mother.

But Sally worries about the girl they adopted two years ago, describing an incident when Summer was dancing "as if she was doing a striptease in front of our grandson." She says Summer has made other inappropriate advances on children and adults, using her sexuality — as many children who have been abused — as a form of power, affection and manipulation.

"These children, there's a lot of them out there that need help. And the majority of the children can be saved," Wayne said.

Last Chance for Many Kids

The Meyers see Maryhurst as Summer's last hope.

Founded by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in 1843 and now run by an independent board of directors, Maryhurst provides treatment for severely traumatized children who, like Summer, are most often victims of physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Maryhurst offers nine different programs that address the unique needs of more than 600 children and their families annually. Judy Lambeth, its CEO and president, has served at Maryhurst since 1974. "If we're not successful, no one can be. These are the children that nobody else can handle. They hate themselves so much they can't handle success," she said.

The Euphrasia program, named after Maryhurst's founder Sister Mary Euphrasia, provides treatment for more than 60 severely emotionally disturbed adolescent girls between the ages of 11 to 17 who are wards of the state of Kentucky.

The Euphrasia program focuses solely on girls in Level 5 care, meaning that the girls pose a danger to themselves or others, and require the highest level of care. Their stories put faces on a broken foster-care system.

"Emotionally, they act like they're 8 years old, but they've had a lifetime of tragedy," one therapist said.

Maryhurst offers a final chance for these teenagers to develop the tools necessary to survive and thrive in society.

While children in foster care have on average three different foster-care placements, the girls at Maryhurst have experienced an average of 20 out-of-home placements. They represent some of the 18 percent of children in foster care who live in group homes or institutions.

There are girls like 14-year-old Whitney, whose mother also grew up in foster care. In the last four years, Whitney has lived in five different foster homes and was funnelled into the system when her school reported a long string of absences.

Whitney's cherubic face can't mask the worry she feels about her mother, who is on the run for forging checks and also has a long history of cocaine and marijuana abuse. Mixed with her pile of school papers, Whitney carries a beat-up photo of her and her mother.

"I know she's scared," Whitney said of her mom. "I think what would help is that if she had somebody right beside her."

"She's incredibly attached to her mom, and a lot of it because, in some ways, she's had to parent her mom," counselor Janet Hodge said.

Despite her mother's drug problem, Whitney dabbled in drugs at a young age. Despite her mother's neglect, Whitney takes blame for the family's troubles.

"It was my decision to skip school. It was my decision to do drugs. It was my decision to stay out all night," she said.

Maryhurst's Lambeth says that girls like Whitney can benefit from the highly structured, intensive team approach to treatment and the belief that "if somebody cares for you when you're at your worst — and that's true for all of us — then we know we're loved." In discussing the girls, she said, "When you know their history in the context of meeting them and seeing them, then you see the hope."

Turning 18 and Then What?

Components of the team approach include group living, clinical services, educational classes, medical care, youth ministry and social activities. Upon admission, each girl is assigned a clinical therapist, and receives individual and group therapy according to her needs. On average, girls stay in the residential treatment program for 9 months to a year.

Relationships between the staff and the girls sometimes represent the only family that a girl like 17-year-old Sheronika ever knows.

Sheronika is perilously close to becoming one of the 20,000 children who age out of the system every year. For her, Maryhurst has been a safe respite from a complicated childhood, and she is reluctant to leave.

As the calendar inches closer to her 18th birthday, Sheronika has started to act out more, exhibiting behaviors that are dangerous for herself and her classmates. "When I leave here, I don't think I'll make it, so I don't know what to do," she said.

Sheronika's worries are not unfounded. In a nation where 30 percent of the homeless in America and about 25 percent of those in prison were once in foster care, the odds are against her.

It's the small successes that count, though. Lambeth points to the fact that 80 percent of Maryhurst's girls do not return to a more-restrictive setting such as hospitalization. She acknowledges, though, that "most of them will still need some mental-health services for a long, long time."

A 2005 study by Casey Family Programs, a foster-care foundation, and Harvard Medical School found that 54 percent of young adults formerly in foster care as adolescents had mental-health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.

Lambeth offers a realistic take on the children in foster care who, like Sheronika, are aging out of the system.

"Even though they've gotten a lot of help, it's like putting a 5-year-old in the median of the freeway during traffic time and saying, 'Make your way across without getting hit.' And they can't do it. Those are the children that I pray the most for," she said.

It's not just prayers that she relies on. Maryhurst has an annual budget of \$9 million. Approximately 85 percent of its funding comes from the Kentucky State Cabinet for Health and Family Services. The state pays \$186 per day for girls in the Euphrasia program.

Lambeth is constantly working to come up with additional funds, traveling across the state to promote the program. She and the staff raise an additional \$1 million yearly through grants, contributions, and United Way funding.

Summer Keeps Trying

Like the girls, the staff at Maryhurst live life one day at a time, and it's not always easy. The girls are some of the most-disturbed children in the system — assaults, runaways and court appearances are part of the daily grind. Staff members have been threatened, and the pay isn't high. Some of them work second jobs to make ends meet.

One therapist recently had a chunk of hair ripped out by a girl, and another suffered a concussion after being repeatedly hit in the head. In a system with a high turnover rate for both social workers and therapists, there are some who stay at Maryhurst because they genuinely believe they can help.

"I would want for all of our girls, our kids, to have one adult in their life that they can count on the rest of their lives," Lambeth said.

For Emily Smith, who was a resident at Maryhurst 18 years ago, her counselor Judy was that person. "I reflect back on when I was 15 and youth counselors at that time made such an impact on my life," she said.

After many twists and turns in her own life, Emily became a counselor at Maryhurst. She realized that "coming home" to Maryhurst offered a satisfaction she couldn't find elsewhere.

"This isn't a job for me. This is a love for me," she said.

For these wounded children, it takes that kind of dedication to give them hope. Summer is trying hard at Maryhurst — she strives for perfect scores in school and works on curbing her inappropriate behaviors.

Wayne and Sally Meyer still visit her, but they are struggling with the decision to terminate their parental rights.

Wayne was once a foster child, and in addition to their four biological kids have adopted three children from foster care. But he and Sally say Summer's problems stemming from her sexual abuse may be just too much for them to handle.

"You can't save every child," Wayne says. "All it takes is one child to make one accusation and you've ruined a family."

Summer tries to be brave and says that she may not be ready to return home. Yet, she remains hopeful.

When asked who she would be if she could be anyone in the world, Summer says, "I want to be myself — not anybody else. Just me. ... Because I wanna learn my real self."