

CHICAGO TRIBUNE HOLIDAY GIVING

CHARITIES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Girls driven from homes find safe haven

When family stress sends teens into the street, The Harbour provides shelter and nurturing

By Richard Wronski
Tribune staff reporter

Jennifer Mendoza, by her own account, was trouble as a teenager. There were fights with her mother, drugs and drinking, skipping school and being "wild and crazy."

At 17, she was living on the streets or with friends—anywhere but home.

"I was just a rebel," Mendoza said of her adolescent years in Park Ridge.

Mendoza had run-ins with authorities, but it took her a helpful police officer to get her on the right path.

He brought her to The Harbour Inc., a Park Ridge-based social service agency that provides emergency shelter and transitional living programs for adolescent girls in the north and northwest suburbs.

Today, Mendoza, 34, is a success story. She has a job at a software company in Chicago, her own apartment with her 4-year-old son and has recently finished work on a criminal justice de-

gree at Harper College in Palatine. Her goal: to be a police officer.

"I have my own place, my own car," Mendoza said. "I take care of my son. I'm a working mom back in school. The Harbour drilled into me [the need] to finish up school."

The Harbour is a beneficiary of Chicago Tribune Holiday Giving, a campaign of Chicago Tribune Charities, a McCormick Tribune Foundation fund.

The Harbour traces its beginnings to 1983, when a teenage girl was locked out of her home in Wilmersite by her father, who had sexually abused her.

At the time, the only option for police was to take the girl to the Andy Home, now known as the Cook County Temporary Juvenile Detention Center.

Social workers and youth advocates were outraged, said Rauld Gurian, The Harbour's executive director. "This girl was twice victimized," she said.

The incident spurred community members to form the social service agency, which began providing emergency housing to adolescent girls in 1975.

The organization now provides three programs to assist homeless, runaway abused and neglected adolescent girls and women ages 12 to 25.

With a \$2 million annual budget and a staff of 38, The Harbour has about 40 clients at a time. In 2005 the group's shelter program placed 18 girls in safe environments, 85 percent with family members, officials said.

A follow-up check found 88 percent of these girls remained in their homes after placement there



Trey Joseph Nafali, 4, decorates a Christmas tree with his mother, Jennifer Mendoza, who credits The Harbour for her stable life.

Tribune photo by Milton G. Brown

Chicago Tribune Holiday Giving

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months later.

"The goal is to ensure that homeless girls are safe, receive necessary services, can continue schooling and be discharged to a safe environment, preferably with family.

In addition to the shelter, the group also provides transitional living programs for girls 16 to 18.

Younger girls are placed in a supervised living situation and attend school. Older clients are helped to make the move into their own apartments.

The issues that face adoles-

Parents set [the youths] up to run away.

Sometimes the rules are so onerous that a child can't and isn't going to adapt to them.

—Rauld Gurian, executive director of The Harbour

cent girls out of their homes tend to focus on family stress, Gurian said. It can start with trouble in school, an unacceptable boyfriend, sexual abuse by a family member, or drug or alcohol use.

Gurian blames "family isolation" as a key social ill. Often times, simple parents don't have the resources—family friends, even neighbors—to help in a crisis.

"No one is aware there's a problem. There's a lot of shame," Gurian said.

On any day in the U.S., 800,000 women are in 10,000 homeless

rooms on the streets.

Of the ranks of homeless girls, 70 to 80 percent of them will end up prostituting themselves, she said.

Homeless teens tend to fall into four categories, Gurian said: runaways, throwaways, lock-outs and push-outs.

"Parents set [the youths] up to run away," Gurian said. "Sometimes the rules are so onerous that a child can't and isn't going to adapt to them."

The organization attempts to work collaboratively, hooking family members up with a variety of agencies to resolve conflicts and stresses.

Mendoza was never able to reconcile her family situation. Her mother moved out of state, so Mendoza remained in the transitional living program, years she called some of the best of her life.

"It's a beacon of success," Mendoza said. "I've referred a couple of girls to The Harbour. I've even donated money when I can. Everything I have is because of The Harbour."

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