

Making the Right Match

One agency's efforts to move hard-to-place teens into foster homes offers lessons for the entire system. By Ann Farmer

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At first glance, The Children's Village looks like a summer camp. This residential home and school for at-risk teenagers is situated within a wooded, upscale neighborhood in Dobbs Ferry, one hour north of Manhattan. A series of speed bumps crisscross the roadway leading to its gatehouse. Beyond lies a sprawling campus with red brick administration buildings, a chapel and dozens of Tudor-style cottages with names like "McAlister" and "Fanshaw." Paved pathways circumvent grassy fields and basketball courts.

Sixteen-year-old Juan is among the 250 teens who live at Children's Village, and one of the approximately 80 currently placed here by New York City's foster care system. He came in 2002, after the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) removed him from his mother's care and he'd bounced from one foster home to another. Here, he lives a structured life that includes daily chores and lining up to wash hands before meals, along with the 15 other young men in his house.

This breezy March day, however, is his last. Clutching his black poetry journal, he explains he has been so excited about moving to a permanent foster home in Parkchester, New York, that he packed his bags days ago. "It's awesome. It feels good," says Juan, his freckled face, which is framed by bouncy red curls, breaking into a smile when he mentions his new foster dad. "The first day I saw him—sometimes you get a feeling that things are good. That's the feeling I got." He even has reason to hope that his new father will adopt him. "My father has already adopted eight other kids," he says.

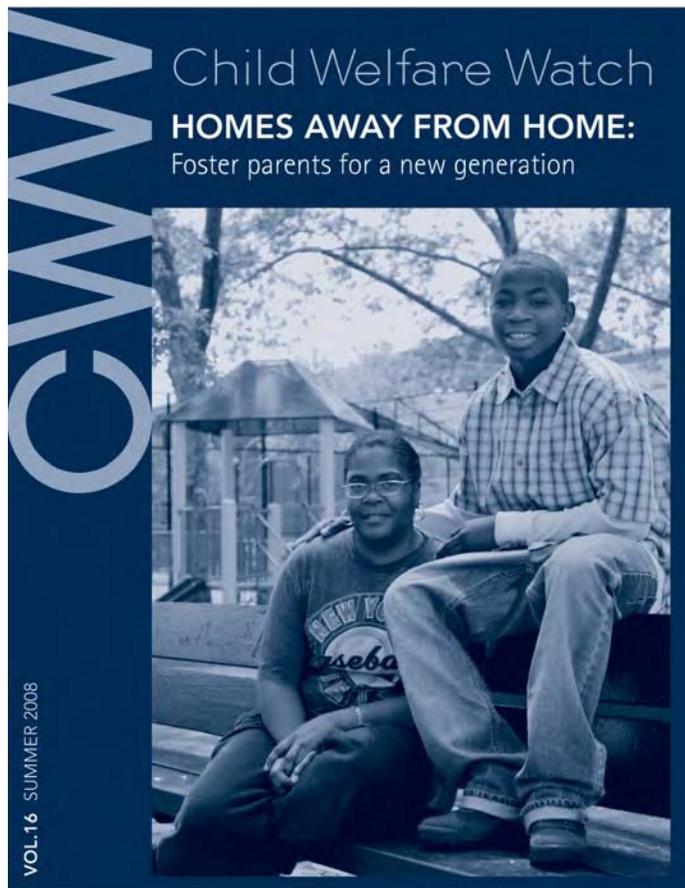
He's seated next to Rianna Berkeley, permanency specialist for Children's

Village and one of the people responsible for finding him this new home. Her fingers are crossed that Juan's departure will mark yet another success story for the agency which, in recent years, has undertaken concerted efforts to move its teen residents out of group care and into foster or pre-adoptive homes.

During the period from 2004 to 2007, Children's Village found stable foster homes for 35 of its longtime teen residents. It did this by closely partnering with another nonprofit, You Gotta Believe!, a Brooklyn-based organization that finds foster parents for older kids. It also assumed a more thoughtful and measured matching strategy and buttressed the placement process with intensive family follow-up support.

In reaching this goal, Children's Village learned some valuable lessons for the foster care system. The process of moving children from a residential facility into a permanent foster or pre-adoptive home is known among social workers as "stepping down." Teens are traditionally much harder to step down than younger children, especially those who've been referred to residential care after several failed foster family placements.

Most teens at Children's Village, for instance, struggle with mental illness or severe emotional disturbances such as depression, fear and anger, for which they receive counseling, drug therapy



and other services thanks to the agency's mental health program and 24-hour staff.

In 2004, Children's Village identified 69 teen residents, ranging in age from 13 to 20, all of whom had been in residential care for at least five years and were, more or less, poised to age out of the system without ever leaving care. The staff redoubled its efforts to find foster homes for these young people. "It was all about believing we could do this," says Mona Swanson, Children's Village's chief operating officer.

To launch the operation, the agency used funds raised by its board of directors and from the New York-based Robin Hood Foundation to hire a permanency specialist. Later, it hired an additional permanency specialist, using funds received from ACS in 2006 for the purpose of strengthening New York City's foster family network. One new initiative was to attempt to match the teens with people they already knew and with whom they felt a special connection, such as an aunt, uncle or former foster parent. "It's easier and more natural to create a permanency situation with

someone the child knows,” says Swanson, describing how they asked the teens themselves for suggestions and pored over the records of each one, searching for leads.

The staff also researched each teen’s interests and background, including their clinical documents and evaluations, to determine what type of family situation would be the best fit. Any information gleaned was passed on to You Gotta Believe!, which had independently received a four-year federal grant to find homes for 100 older kids in residential care, including those at Children’s Village.

“We wanted young people stepping down to homes with parents that were making a lifetime commitment to them, rather than providing them a temporary home,” says Pat O’Brien, founder and executive director of You Gotta Believe!

Both organizations employed a range of matchmaking tactics. Children’s Village presented some of its foster teens in the role of panelists for educational seminars and orientations geared to prospective foster parents. “We got a lot of matches that way,” says Stephen McCall, a permanency specialist advocate with You Gotta Believe! who acted as the point person for Children’s Village’s recruitment needs.

But the most effective recruiting strategy was simply talking to the kids about anyone in their past or in their current sphere of connections with whom they might like to live. “I kept talking to the kids about who they know and who they’re close to,” says McCall, who met with all the teens from Children’s Village. “Talking to them is very useful.”

One important lesson learned by Children’s Village staff was to not rush into any matches prematurely. “Some people criticize us for taking so long,” says Berkeley, describing a methodical matching process that often took six to 12 months, beginning with supervised visits on campus, then community visits and, finally, home visits. This

allowed the teenager and prospective parents ample opportunity to assess whether the match felt right.

They tried to provide prospective parents with everything they might need to make a well-informed decision. Even then, some matches failed and the search had to begin again. “Some people have no clue what they’re getting into,” says Swanson. “We look for backbone, for people who are able to set limits and not take things personally, and know how it is to live with a teen.”

Throughout the endeavor, Children’s Village teens participated in individual and group counseling sessions to discuss whatever feelings came up for them, including issues of trust and abandonment. “It’s important to talk about expectations,” says Berkeley, describing how some foster kids are so bruised from failed placements that they give up hope. “They need to be convinced,” she says.

Juan, for instance, lived in five foster homes before coming to Children’s Village. Asked why those placements didn’t work out, he puts his head between his hands and explains that he still felt bonded to his natural family. “I’m used to my family,” he says. Of his foster families, he says, “They didn’t understand what I had gone through.” However, after his mother died of cancer in 2001, Juan experienced a change of heart. “I decided I needed love and attention like anybody else does,” he says.

But like many foster kids who feel

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trapped in group care settings, he would run away from Children’s Village, which prolonged efforts to find him a home. He once went on the lam in Brooklyn, hiding from the police and earning pocket change by handing out political flyers. “We do stupid things,” Juan shrugs.

After his last return to Children’s Village, Juan was placed in the pool of 69 teen step-down candidates. His foster father was found last year through an adoption agency, although Juan’s transfer didn’t occur until March. He credits Berkeley with helping him face his problems instead of running away from them. “She listens. A lot of people like to talk and don’t listen,” he says. “She hasn’t given up on me. She pushed and pushed to help me get my goals, to get adopted, to have a kind family.”

McCall also played a tremendously important role in the broader step-down project. “He lent a lot of credibility to the process,” says Swanson. “They saw a cool black man who was determined to help them.”

One Children’s Village teen McCall helped was Victor, who had been removed from his mother’s care at age 9

because of her substance abuse and mental health issues. By the time McCall caught up with him in 2004, Victor was 16 and embittered by a trail of failed foster home placements. “He was disrespectful and out of control,” says McCall. “He had given up. He thought he’d age out of the system. He was like, ‘What are you going to do for me?’”

McCall asked him to name three people he would like to live with. Victor could only name two. One of them he had no contact information for. The other was his godmother, Angie, a New York City police officer. McCall called Angie, who was single with no children. She said, “I would love to take him but I’m living with my mom.” McCall asked to meet anyway. He explained to her that if they didn’t find Victor a home, he’d be out on his own at age 21 with no family support. “I was honest with her. I told her he’d been rejected a lot. But to get out of there, he’ll take a chance,” says McCall.

Angie got an apartment and agreed to take the agency’s 10-week parental training and licensing course titled “Adopting Older Children and Youths” (A-OKAY), which follows a prescribed curriculum created by ACS and includes information specific to foster parenting an older child. She also completed 16 hours of therapeutic training, which teaches foster parents how to set clear expectations for teens who present special challenges.

Many of these teens are so wounded by abuse, neglect and rejection that they tend to act out, doing things like talking back, lying, staying out late and running away, which can put considerable strain on foster families. The classes were led by two social workers who were also foster parents. “You’ve got to hear their real firsthand experience,” Angie says, adding that foster teens were also brought in for some sessions so that “you could hear their side of it too.”

But even with this extensive preparation, Angie experienced rough patches after Victor moved in with her about one

year after the process began. “He was good for about two weeks. No, maybe a week and a half,” says Angie, describing how Victor quickly started missing curfew. He also resisted doing chores. One time Victor called her “crazy.” “I don’t stand for that,” says Angie, who got McCall to come over at 11 p.m. to help them work it out.

“Being a parent is difficult,” she says. “But being a foster parent is more difficult. It is just more work. You’re dealing with other people’s children. The foster child views the foster parents as, ‘You’re not my parent.’ They can be disrespectful. You have to get the child motivated. You have to get the trust of the child. And you have to get the child to do something with their life.”

In a break with tradition, Children’s Village also opened up the foster and adoption process to its own staff. “That was difficult for us,” says Swanson. “We had a strict policy about staff not overstepping their boundaries with the children.”

A handful of staff members expressed interest and enrolled in the parental skills training and licensing process. Two of them took teens into their homes. In one case, it worked out. In the other, the boy was disruptive. “He did what a lot do,” says Swanson. “He tested the limits and presented some pretty challenging behavior.” He started talking back to his foster mom and, when he took a physical stance that felt intimidating to her, she returned him to the campus.

The flip side to Children’s Village’s successful placement of 35 teens are the 34 others who were neither matched nor placed, or who returned to the agency because their new family settings didn’t work out. Six teens placed during the period from 2004 to 2007 returned to campus because of disruptive behavior. “One threatened to set a fire,” says Swanson. Eleven others had to move at least once before settling in to what appeared to be a successful family match by the end of 2007. One teen, who’d been successfully placed in a family along with his brother, had to be hospitalized

for psychiatric treatment after stabbing his brother with a kitchen knife during an argument over cereal.

His foster parents were so committed to him, though, that they welcomed him back into their family. Some of the 34 teens who weren’t placed had such severe behavioral and mental health issues that family recruitment efforts were never even attempted. Sixteen never became available for the new permanency efforts because they were either hospitalized, ran away, became incarcerated or aged out of the foster care system, or because their social workers did not refer them.

Many foster care agency leaders believe that some teens are better off staying within the stability of group homes and residential treatment centers—especially those with needs requiring a level of care and attention that only 24-hour staff can provide. “No one size fits all,” says Jim Purcell, CEO of the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, a statewide association of foster care agencies. While he offers great praise for Children’s Village’s placement initiatives, he adds a word of caution. “To me, the jury is out as to whether the needs of these kids can be met.”

Nonetheless, many of the teens who moved from Children’s Village had once been thought to have such mental, emotional and behavioral issues that they could not succeed in family settings. So what did it take to make this change in their lives?

Providing sufficient family support and steady follow-up care are arguably the most important components to making these matches stick, according to the agency’s leadership. First of all, almost every matched teen from Children’s Village was immediately entered into the city’s Therapeutic Foster Boarding Home Program, which provides greater than average foster care support, including a larger stipend for foster parents. A team is set up for each teen, composed of a social worker, a behavioral specialist, a psychologist and psychiatrist.

The teens are supposed to receive weekly

visits from their assigned social worker and behavioral specialist, who “advocate for them, support and counsel them, and provide respite for the family,” says Swanson. The parents can also receive family counseling.

You Gotta Believe! provided extensive follow-up support in the form of shadow workers skilled at family intervention who made themselves available any time of the day or night to help resolve crises. McCall also holds monthly support group meetings where foster parents can meet, swap stories and mentor one another. Because of the effectiveness of these programs, You Gotta Believe! recently received a contract from ACS to continue its work with Children’s Village and other agencies.

“I can tell you this, if it weren’t for Stephen my foster son would have gone back a long time ago,” says Karen Zimmerman, a foster mom who has McCall as her shadow worker. “His phone is open 24 hours,” she says. “Sometimes I feel bad. It’s the weekend and [Stephen] needs to be with his family. But I need to vent.”

Zimmerman, a single mom with three grown kids who works as a clerk for Beth Israel Medical Center, brought Emmitt into her home last summer from Children’s Village when he was 17. Her plan was to eventually adopt him. “When he first came, he was great. He was wonderful,” Zimmerman says. However, after Emmitt returned to high school in the fall, he started slipping. “All of a sudden, now, he gets high. He’s been arrested for stealing a bike,” she says. Now she has doubts about adopting him. She’s even harbored thoughts of sending him back to Children’s Village for a period of time. “You don’t want to give up on him,” she says. “But it’s rough, it’s hard.”

Being a foster and adoptive father himself, McCall is able to draw on personal experiences when counseling foster and pre-adoptive parents. “They may think they need to give up. But they just need someone to talk to,” he says.

Zimmerman and other foster parents say they have benefited greatly from support groups. “A lot of those parents, they are in the same situation,” she says, describing the monthly sessions as a good opportunity to get things off her chest. The foster parents also receive coaching from the agency’s social workers. Rianna Berkeley says she has observed many parents like Zimmerman, who have already successfully raised children but still experience a steep learning curve after bringing a foster teen with complex needs into their home. Berkeley coaches Zimmerman on matters like setting limits and adhering to a clear, consistent pattern.

When it comes to telling parents how to mete out punishment, Berkeley says, “We don’t tie anyone’s hands, but we do make suggestions,” explaining that the agency opposes any corporal punishment or physical or verbal abuse. And, she adds, “We don’t use our agency as a consequence.” Children’s Village might bring a teen back for safety reasons or to provide a respite, but not as punishment. Ultimately, Berkeley believes that Zimmerman and Emmitt can make it. “It’s a work in progress,” she says. “There are challenges. But both are in for the long haul, which is important.”

Jeremy Kohomban, president and chief executive officer of Children’s Village, says the agency has gained invaluable knowledge from its initiatives to step down these particularly hard-to-place teens. “We took a cohort of kids that the system had given up on. That’s why we’ve learned so much,” he says. The enormous difficulty of this endeavor, he

points out, is demonstrated by the fact that the agency was only able to place 50 percent of the teens, despite its determination to place more. “But our position is, 50 percent is better than zero.”

He and his staff have concluded that with well-planned support systems, individualized follow-up and the other resources that come with the state’s Therapeutic Foster Boarding Home Program, it will indeed be possible to step down more teens who have spent long years in institutional care— and the lessons may just as well apply to older teens entering foster care for the first time.

“We learned that it’s never too late for a youngster to have a family,” says Kohomban. “There are families out there who will step up to create a home for youngsters even when that youngster does not seem ideal for that setting.”

Just as critical, he adds, was for his own organization to modify and revise its practices, assumptions and habits. “As important as anything, we learned that some of the greatest changes required were not with the child or the family, but with the organization.