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FREE December 2010 ecurrent.com



IN THEIR TIME OF NEED

The **Ozone House** fights to keep **high-risk youth** off the streets

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THE OZONE HOUSE

Providing shelter from the storm
Ann Arbor based organization helps
high-risk youth get back on their feet

By Scott Recker

Kicked out on the street in Ann Arbor with no place to go or family to turn to, a 17-year-old girl (who will remain anonymous) found what she thought to be an answer. An older man offered a room in his house for \$50 a month, an unheard of living fee in the city. He looked after her, and she viewed him as a savior. But, when she turned 18, and her independence stipend dried up she was given an ultimatum—either leave the house or start paying rent by performing sexual acts. Choosing to leave, she instead lived in a tent with other kids who were battling homelessness and neglect, which led her to find The Ozone House.

A community-based, non-profit agency founded in 1969, the Ozone House provides shelter, support and therapy to runaway, homeless and high-risk youth and their families. Aiming to help underprivileged kids reach their full potential, the house provides temporary shelter—hoping to reconnect families and find a long-term solution for young people heading down a dangerous path.

“Many of the young kids we see at the Ozone House have been subject to abuse and neglect,” Ex. Director Kate Doyle said. “In a lot of cases it is a safer choice to leave the house than stay.”

The house provides up to 18 months of transitional shelter to young adults who are between 17-20 years old. The youth pay monthly “rent,” which is deposited into a savings account, kept for them, and that they can access after their stay has concluded. But, because the organization cannot

legally separate children from their guardians, kids between the ages of 10-17 can only stay for two weeks. While Doyle said that time period is usually enough to reconnect a family, certain cases take a more complicated turn. If it is clearly not safe for a child to go back home, the Department of Human Services becomes involved—which can be a long and frustrating process. While the state once viewed the Ozone House as a militant-style activist group attempting to stir up problems, the relationship between the two has substantially strengthened.

“They have become more responsive over the years,” Doyle said. “They often listen to us.”

Just because a child is sent home doesn’t mean the Ozone House stops providing them with assistance. The organization encourages children to use the 24-hour crisis hotline, and also teaches methods of staying safe

in violent situations—although the organization believes that a child should not have to perpetually worry about being harmed.

“Our position is that it is not a child’s responsibility to stay safe at home,” Doyle said.

While Ann Arbor is usually viewed as a clean, accepting city, that doesn’t mean every family is the Brady Bunch. Around 98 percent of the Ozone House’s clients report serious family conflicts, with 66 percent fleeing because of physical or sexual abuse and around 40 percent of homeless youth in the United States identifying themselves as gay or lesbian. Having no support structure, and more importantly no one to trust, these kids are just seeking a little shelter from the storm—but it can be a long time before they look in the right place.

An invisible issue

On the West Coast street kids have banded together and formed an efficient system of living. They have found the family they never had—providing love, protection and basic needs for one another. These street kids are visible, and many of them could care less what society thinks. In Ann Arbor the problem is far less

“ Our position is that it is not a child’s responsibility to stay safe at home. ”



obvious. Remember, just because someone is homeless, it does not mean they always sleep on the street. Many of the youth bounce from house to house, diving further into the underground, making them highly vulnerable to adult predators. And, unfortunately, these kids may be in denial that they are, in fact, homeless and need help.

“They may not get to us for years,” Doyle said.

A problematic challenge

It’s not easy for the Ozone House to spread their message and willingness to help. First and foremost, many of these kids are skeptical of care or advice from adults. One young lady was 18 when her parents decided to move, taking all of the family’s possessions and telling her they would be back for her shortly. They never came back. After eight months

at the Ozone House, she finally located her family. It’s not hard to see why there is commonly a trust barrier.

The organization focuses on a grassroots-style campaign to battle against youth homelessness. Twice a week the organization sends out Peer Outreach Workers, teens between the ages of 15-18, many who have faced family hardships themselves, to network with high risk and troubled youth.

“They don’t necessarily meet kids on the street, but they spread the word about Ozone House,” Doyle said.

Building trust

The Peer Outreach Workers attempt to be a friendly face rather than an intimidating figure. They focus on socializing and establishing friendships—breaking the anti-establishment bubble a lot of homeless youth have fallen into because they have been conditioned to feel on the fringe of society.

“To be approached by adults in a van [of outreach workers] may not produce the safest feeling,” Peer Outreach Director Colleen O’Brien said.

Although not many youth shelters use teenagers to network with teenagers, the process has been greatly successful for the Ozone House. The Outreach Workers frequent sporting events, parks and the downtown area, inviting their peers to events and letting them know there is help waiting if they are experiencing a time of need—no strings attached.

Besides housing and therapy, the organization aims to help high-risk youth live more comfortably and realize

a successful future is possible. The Ozone House Drop-in, located in Ypsilanti, provides a safe place for youth to hang out and grab a hot meal on weekdays, along with support opportunities such as networking for gay and lesbian youth and open mic events as a creative outlet.

The Drop-in was established in 1998, and provides between 10-40 young people a day with basic necessities they otherwise would be without. Many claim without the program they would not eat that night.

Running on faith

While it is certainly hard to keep from becoming cynical, Doyle said experiencing amazing life turnarounds, a high level community support and hard-working staff members are more than enough to keep her optimistic in the organization's quest to provide every youth with a fighting chance.

In October the house hosted Kicked Out The Jams Benefit at The Corner Brewery in conjunction with the locally published anthology "Kicked Out," which is a compilation of stories from young people who were disowned because

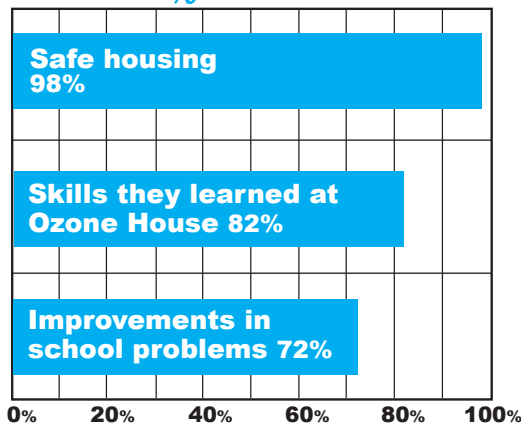
of their sexual orientation. Over 200 people attended, demonstrating an overwhelming spirit. It was an amazing feeling for Doyle, because despite the situation, problem or action which has caused these youths to be down and out, at the end of the day, each of them is only a child who is in desperate need of help.

"The energy was contagious, it was infectious," Doyle said.



The Ozone House's open mic events provide a creative outlet for high-risk youth

12 months after Ozone House, youth have...



This is only the beginning...

These are stories that need to be told, and we plan on diving deeper into the problem. It is time to focus on the kids. They have invited me to hang out at the Drop-in House, so expect a series.
—SR

Why Can't We Be Friends?