

Dreams No Longer Deferred

BY SHERRI ALMS

In the quiet of the night, Cindy Justice dreams about a very different life than the one she and her 2-year-old son, Ethan, have experienced thus far...running in fear, dodging nightmares, trying to keep safe.

Her estranged boyfriend has been threatening and intimidating her. He has been doing destructive things such as putting sugar in her gas tank, leaving her stranded with no transportation. When she calls 9-1-1, the police officer who responds to the call tells Justice to move closer to her family—but doesn't arrest or even talk to the obsessed boyfriend. She knows it is only a matter of time before things get worse.

Justice takes the officer's advice and flees to her mother's home. Though her mother continues to support and help her, Justice knows she and Ethan can't stay for long in the small apartment.

Her mother tells her about a program she's heard of in Frankfort, Ky. It is called the Transitional Living Program, and within days, Justice and Ethan find refuge. The facility is not what she expected, but now it is home—and she is safe with Ethan, her dreams no longer deferred.

Structure Can Be Healing

"My first impression of the house wasn't great," Justice, now 26, said laughing. "Having lived on my own, I wasn't used to rules. I was scared to death of men and Ethan was, too. I spent the first week in my room with the door shut and the blinds down."

Gradually, with the support of the Transitional Living Program's caring staff, Justice learned to relax and settle in to her new surroundings. "I remember Michelle, one of the people who worked there, would check on me at night. That always brightened my spir-

its. I realized there was always someone at all times I could go to."

Once Justice grew accustomed to the conditions of the program—adhering to rules, setting goals and making short- and long-range plans—she was able to dream about what the future could look like for her and her son. She dreamed of getting her high school degree, going on to college or job training, securing a job and finding a place—a home—to live where Ethan would feel safe and happy. It wasn't long before the Transitional Living Program helped make all those dreams come true.

24/7 Support and Shoulders

A stay at the Transitional Living Program reflects the care of a loving family. "If a baby is crying at 3 a.m., someone is always there to help the mother," said Claudia Blaylock, director of regional programs. "If she hasn't slept all night, a staff member can watch the baby so she can rest. "If a mother has questions about breastfeeding, diapers, food, whatever, we can find the answer. Even if it's just a shoulder to cry on, there is someone here to provide that shoulder."

The Transitional Living Program is located at the center of five counties in Kentucky, but will accommodate young women from wherever they come from if there is space. These particular counties have a combined pregnancy and birth rate that is higher than the national average. According to Rebekah Mutchler, the program's service coordinator, more than 11 percent of mothers who give birth in these counties are under the age of 20.

Focusing on young single mothers, ages 16 to 21, the Transitional Living Program provides supportive housing and case management services in a secure home-like environment. While living in a safe place, these young



women learn to balance the responsibilities of parenting, work and their education. Program managers help qualified residents sign up for such benefits as food stamps, welfare payments and public housing, as well as helping them establish child support from the baby's father.

There is no typical day for Transitional Living Program residents. "Some of the girls have wanted to go to high school like their peers, though most have gone to a program that offers GEDs," said Blaylock. "Some work part-time and some volunteer. Others don't work while they focus on their children. We have come to realize over the years that we can tailor our approach to what each girl and her child needs and the goals she has set because we keep the program small."

Wide Open Doors

One of the first things young women do after they arrive is to create short- and long-term goals for their lives, which leads to service and training plans while living in the Transitional Living Program house. "We require the girls to get either a GED or a high school diploma," Mutchler said. "We try to push them

toward post-secondary education, but if not that, then definitely to finding sustainable employment.”

For example, one young woman attended high school, worked a part-time job and studied for her nursing assistant certification, all while living at the house and caring for her child. “Her day started at 5:30 a.m., but she did it,” said Mutchler, whose role ranges from big sister and aunt to coach and teacher to the girls who come to the program. Today, this former resident works as a nursing assistant in a local nursing home, lives in her own apartment with her child. She occasionally drops by to let the staff know how she is doing, offering support to old and new residents in the Transitional Living Program.

Other young women come to the program nine months pregnant with very different goals. “For them,” Mutchler explained, “like every new mom, the main focus is on the baby and his or her care. One of our young mothers came from Ohio and gave birth to a baby boy. Today, she is a certified daycare assistant and a happily married wife and mother living in Lexington, Ky.”

In her two and a half months at the house, Justice began to create the life she wanted to live and provide for Ethan. “I got my GED. The program helped me find child care and provided transportation. I got counseling, took classes on parenting and domestic violence.” About halfway through her stay, Justice also found a part-time job—at the Volunteers of America’s office in Frankfort, doing administrative work.

Justice still believes the program’s greatest value is the staff. “Someone was always there to talk to me or to Ethan when we needed to talk. Bekah helped me get legal representation when Ethan’s father tried to get full custody. I didn’t have money for a lawyer, and she found one who worked pro bono. Now, I have full custody.”

“All of the girls, in some form or fashion, are an inspiration,” Mutchler said. “The resiliency you see in these young women

is inspiring. If you respect them for who and where they are, treat them with dignity, their potential is amazing.”

Neighborly Acts of Kindness

Blaylock and Mutchler agree that the program would not succeed without the support of partners, community advocates and volunteers. “The young women in the program can take life-skills and parenting classes from two of our partners: the health department and the Sunshine Center. We send many of our residents to the Thorn Hill Learning Center for their GED classes, and the Center offers child care and other kinds of support, too.”

Lane Lewis, the family literacy coordinator at Thorn Hill, describes the collaboration between the learning center and the Transitional Living Program as exciting. “If my students have stable, structured home lives and come to school for structured school life, they are 99.9 percent more apt to earn GEDs,” she said. “If, as the teacher, I’m talking about the importance of providing boundaries for children, like a bedtime routine, I know that the Transitional Living Program is reinforcing that at the house.”

The program also benefits from neighborly acts of kindness, such as free and discounted counseling from several therapists and stable rent payment courtesy of the house landlord, who hasn’t raised the rent in a very long time. He also says “Yes!” to things like a playground in the backyard. “The mayor recently wrote a

support letter to a funder to say that he, too, is here to be helpful to the program,” Blaylock added.

A Rainbow at the End of the Road

Since its inception in 2002, 42 women have “graduated” from the program. “In many ways, the Transitional Living Program is at the heart of what we do—serving real people with real challenges and offering them real and lasting solutions,” said Jane Burks, president and CEO of Volunteers of America of Kentucky. “Accepting the lifetime challenges of parenthood, being accountable for another young life—these are daunting responsibilities for the young mothers in the program. Our professional and compassionate staff and team of community partners and volunteers work with each person individually to support her in making good choices so that she and her children will live healthy and fulfilling lives.”

Today, Justice is married to a man her son is happy to call “Daddy” and they have even increased the family by one—a beautiful daughter. Justice continues to work part-time at a local Wal-Mart while her husband works full-time for the county. Together they have built a stable, happy family, something Justice didn’t even dream of before coming to the Transitional Living Program.

“I’ve changed a lot,” Justice said smiling. “I’ve grown from my past into a stronger person. I know that there is a rainbow at the end of the road.”

