Leaving the Light On

Preparing foster kids for life on their own

Margo Pierce

Turning on the oven and popping in a frozen pizza for about 20 minutes doesn't seem difficult. The directions on the box are explicit. Some boxes even have a picture of a dial on the stove turned to 350 degrees. So what is there to screw up?

"We walked into this place: 'Something's burning in here,' " says Mark Kroner, describing a visit to a teenager's apartment. "He goes, 'Yeah, I'm making a pizza.' He opened up the oven, and he had a pile of sticks in the oven and this pizza sitting on top of it.

"He grew up in an Appalachian family with no money -- the utilities had been shut off. That's how they cooked, gathering wood in the city. You would never think that you would have to teach someone not to do that."

This kid just did what was normal for him. This is just one of hundreds of funny and amazing, sometimes sad, stories Kroner can tell as director of the Independent Living Program run by Lighthouse Youth Services.

The boy with the pizza is one of the approximately 25,000 kids in some form of child protective services in the United States who will "age out" of the system at 18. The goal of independent living programs is to teach the soon-to-be-adults how to be self-sufficient.

In conjunction with Hamilton County Job and Family Services and Juvenile Court, which has legal custody of kids removed from their parents' care, Lighthouse puts teens who are working or going to school into their own furnished apartment and pays all of their bills -- rent, utilities and an allowance for food and clothes -- as a hands-on method for teaching them how to survive.

"A big part of our job is to help kids understand what they don't know," Kroner says. "We put them out there and we assume they know a lot of things they don't know. Or we'll assume they don't know a lot of things that they do know.

"Not only do kids that grow up in the system not learn what we learned from our parents, but they grew up in a group home where ... they weren't allowed to go into the kitchen. They had a house manager who cooked dinner, so they never used an oven. The kids that grew up in a foster home that say, 'We were never allowed to use the washer and dryer.'

"They come to us at 17 1/2 with no knowledge of the bus system or even money. They've been infantilized by the system, which is made up of lots of good people. But they're not thinking about the reality of these kids being gone at 17 1/2 and 18."

Cooperation works

The child welfare system is designed to take care of and protect children who have been abandoned, neglected, abused and removed from their families. The intention is good, but when you have a county system responsible for caring for children -- in Hamilton County, that number fluctuates daily but hovers around 700 -- the already difficult job of parenting is complicated by

the fact that social workers, caseworkers and judges all have to decide and agree upon what's in a child's best interest.

When it became apparent that abruptly cutting off support to these kids at age 18 was causing serious problems -- homelessness being the most immediate -- Hamilton County created a program that is now a best-practices model emulated all over the country.

From the beginning, Lighthouse Youth Services (lys.org) proposed an approach based on practical knowledge gained from providing youth homeless shelters, at-risk-youth emergency service programs, group homes and foster care families: Spend a year teaching 16-year-olds self-sufficiency in a classroom setting and then move them into their own apartment to live for a year before they're cut loose at 18.

"It's a very frustrating thing to do because we have so many pressures on us to get these kids in and out," Kroner says. "It's like taking a seedling and saying, 'OK, you have to become a tree in six months. Grow!' Some people say, 'Water more, water more.' Some, 'Fertilize more.' It's gonna grow when it's gonna grow."

Getting three different agencies to agree about the best way to facilitate and support that growth while providing a safety net that wouldn't undermine the goal of self-sufficiency was a huge challenge.

"There were a gazillion rocky periods," Kroner says. "When we started, the juvenile court thought this was nuts. We've won them over.

"There was a lot of tension between the courts and the county. There's still a lot of tension about how long these kids can stay ... that's based on deficit realities. But at this point in time you have all three parties sitting down together on a regular basis saying, 'Given the realities, what's the best thing we can do? What do we need to do?'

"It's like two parents saying, 'This kid's gonna take swimming lessons.' The mom wants to keep him out and the dad pushes him in. You have to work those arguments out -- what's the best way to teach this kid how to swim? The first time he goes under, do you reach in and pull him out or say, 'Move your arms, now move your legs?' We've had to work out a lot of these things ... and have this trust amongst all the systems."

'This is how'

A collaborative relationship between the county, courts and a private agency such as Lighthouse is what it takes to make sure the kids get what they need, according to Kroner. Cincinnati's program has been around for 25 years.

"It could very easily be a blame game when something does go wrong," he says. "We got kids that will do some outrageous things. They'll commit crimes. Nobody's going to point the finger and say, 'It's your fault that this happened.' Everybody goes, 'It's really unfortunate that this kid took this opportunity and chose to do that.'

"With 70 kids, 69 of them take their allowance and buy food, a bus card, get their laundry done. The next one goes out and buys a bag of pot and a handgun. Before we know it, he's locked up for possession of a handgun and marijuana, and we're going, 'Wow! That was fast; he really

screwed up quickly.' And his parents are calling us every five minutes saying, 'You've got to bail him out.'

" 'What are you talking about? He's got two felony charges; he should sit there and think about what he's done. We were paying all his bills and he goes out and does that.' You can see why this kid's like that. His parents probably spent time in jail."

The paradox is that these kids are just like every other teenager -- anxious about leaving school, unsure about their future and hormonal -- but they have the added issues of mental health problems stemming from their childhood, no parents to offer guidance or serve as a safety-net and limited life skills.

The Independent Living Program appears simple, but its concepts are difficult for kids to grasp. The kids are given a budget and they have to live within it; if they run out of food and money, they have to figure out how to handle the situation. Over the course of the six- to 12-month period, the kids gradually begin to take over paying their bills.

"American kids are super-sophisticated in this area but they don't know anything about this area; they will know how to use a computer and every electronic gismo and not understand that the apartment they're moving into belongs to somebody who's trying to make money off them," Kroner says. "When they break something, they have to pay for it.

"One of my staff just came in and said one of our kids is getting a lot of complaints about loud music. They don't understand that, right on the other side of this wall, there's somebody else. They're just oblivious to the world around them.

"We're saying to them, 'Do you realize two months from now you're going to be out of this program, you're going to be on your own?' It's 'Excuse me, let me finish this game first.' They don't know what that means. A lot of them grew up in families that were always dependent upon public aid. The thing is that system has been dismantled."

After an assessment to determine the teen's skill level, she's invited to take a series of 13 four-hour classes on everything from community resources and transportation to time management and apartment maintenance. Classes are held every Saturday during the school year and on weekdays during the summer.

"Anybody 16 or older is required to take them," says Bobette Arnold, independent living coordinator for Hamilton County. "I don't go out on Saturday morning and pull them in by their ear, but I am pretty persuasive. Nobody can make you do anything you don't want to do. There's a lot of kids that are blowing me off, but a vast majority come to the classes."

Some teens are eventually ordered by the court to participate if they refuse to go to the classes voluntarily. But that's rare, according to Arnold.

"It never ceases to amaze me," she says. "You'll have a 16-year-old kid who you just thought was not paying any attention at all come out with this question that's something you or I as an adult would ask."

Arnold has a team of people who teach the classes and she attends them all, but her title changes to the "muscle and mouth" because when she's in the classroom her role is to help.

"They're teenagers," she says. "Angst is running rampant in the room. I'm the bouncer. Teenagers fight -- it happens. Ninety-eight percent of the time we're fine. I know 'em real well because I have spent 65 hours with them, so it's much easier for me to calm you down."

After class it's up to the group home managers and foster parents to work with the kids to make sure the information and skills are applied.

"I'm going to go over budgeting for four or five hours," Arnold says. "We're going to give 'em the basics: This is how you budget, this is how you save money here. Day-to-day living is with that caregiver. 'You had $100. Where the hell is it now?' is with that caregiver.

"You can sit in a classroom forever, and I can teach you all kinds of things, but until you actually get out there and doing it you don't get it. That's true with all of us -- not just our kids. Until you do something you don't quite understand how bad it is."

Foster home-ec

Emancipated in August 2006, Canon Hopey took over the lease on the apartment Lighthouse gave him the year before. He's grateful for the practical training he received at the end of his nine years in the foster-care system.

"Budgeting," Hopey laughs. "Oh my God, that's got to be the biggest one. They actually had a thing that helped you with the budget. There was a budget book to keep up. You have an expense book, and you write down everything that you got to pay and how much will you have at the end of your activity. Go over your grocery list, go over your bills, put all that in and see what you have left."

The class in time management has also proven helpful. When he left the program, Hopey was holding down two jobs, going to Cincinnati State Technical College and spending time with his 18-month-old daughter. Describing his life as "like having four jobs," he has to be very organized.

"Being the person I am, if I don't have anything else to do, I'll sit there and write up an agenda," he says. "I have this, this, this. I have to pay my rent, get a money order for that. Get a money order for Duke, for Cincinnati Bell.

"I go over my agenda every day: 'OK, I did this today.' I check it and sign it and know that I did that on that day at that time. Between two jobs, I can still get that in. I take my agenda to work so when I'm at my job or between those two jobs I say 'I did this in between those two jobs. I got to mark that off,' so I won't be trying to do something I already did."

When Hopey first moved to Clifton, his agenda included finding a grocery store and coin-laundry on the bus line -- he doesn't have a car -- and a place to get quarters on Sunday, when he can do his wash. It's been difficult, but Hopey says he's OK with that.

"You get used to being on your own, carrying on your own business, making your own appointments, doing things when you're supposed to do it," he says.

For every success story like Hopey, there are many others who are struggling or fail. One of the most important aspects of this program, according to Arnold, is how you define success.

"(A) girl who was very bi-polar -- on medication she's fine, but off medication she's not so fine -- graduated from college, had a full-time job the whole time. There's a lot of success stories. The definition of success is what the rest of the world says is success. Sometimes our success is they didn't do anything fancy; they didn't go to college, but they have a job and they're self-sufficient."

Just Do This: 25 Steps to Self-Sufficiency, the workbook given to all kids entering independent living classes, defines self-sufficiency as "taking full responsibility for yourself financially, emotionally and physically. When you pay all your own bills with money that you have earned and you are getting your needs met without taking from or harming others, then you are self-sufficient."

The key to achieving that goal is up the kids, according to Kroner, but the kids need the support of a solid, consistent infrastructure.

"We've probably had more failures than successes, but you have to look at that over the long term," he says. "If there are no self-sufficient 18-year-olds in America (and) if our kids aren't self-sufficient at 18, is that a failure -- or just normal?

"We have kids that leave us that aren't anywhere near ready to be on their own, and it's frustrating. They really should be in the system until they're 21, at least. The time frame is totally unrealistic. Everybody knows that, but the county is basically saying, 'Look, we've got X number of dollars and a lot of kids coming in. We've got a choice of taking this 6-year-old kid in or giving this 18-year-old another six months.' We understand that."

That means making the most of every dollar. With a budget the ranges between $1.5 million and $2 million annually, Lighthouse depends heavily on donations of cash and furniture from private individuals, bulk-purchasing agreements with furniture stores and a network of landlords willing to take the risk of renting to teenagers.

'Predatory parents'

In what's called a "scattered site model," independent living participants live in one-bedroom apartments all over the city. Some live close to work, and others live close to school. In addition to avoiding the high cost of overhead for maintaining apartment buildings, Lighthouse has learned that kids learn faster when there isn't anyone else to blame for their mistakes, such as roommates or friends who are their neighbors.

Finding apartments was a problem in the beginning, but Kroner says some prefer to have Lighthouse sign the lease until a teenager takes over because the caseworkers are ever-present.

"Now we have landlords calling us up," he says. "There are certainly landlords that will never rent to us again, but for every one of those there are three that will rent to us again and again and again. They tell us, 'Your kids are no different from the general public, and you have 24-hour pagers. I can't tell a 45-year-old crack addict that I'm going to call his mom. I can call you guys and tell you the kid's stereo is too loud, and you'll come over and take the stereo away. I'd rather rent to you than UC students.' "

Keeping a sense of humor is essential; and when it comes to housing, Kroner has plenty of funny stories. One is about a kid named Laura in 1987.

"(Laura) called us up in a panic one night and said she came home from working at Kings Island at midnight," Kroner says. "(She) walked into her apartment, turned on her light and her 80-year-old landlady was sitting on her couch: 'Where have you been sweetie?' She keyed into her apartment, had the lights turned out and fell asleep on her couch. We had to call the landlady's kids, who are my age and say, 'We think granny's getting a little senile here, because she was in our kid's apartment.' "

That "kid" from 1987 is Laura Watson, now a married foster mother who has taken in eight kids over 12 years and was an early graduate of the Lighthouse program.

"After growing up in an institution I realized how much more valuable it would be to grow up in a family," Watson says. "There's a lot you miss out on. I wanted to make sure that, if there was a way to stop one kid from going into an institution and putting them in a family life, that would be our goal."

After being moved into and out of foster homes every 90 days -- an old policy that has been abandoned -- Watson opted to live in an orphanage. She got herself to and from the School for the Creative and Performing Arts, worked, bought her own car and put herself through college. A conventional success story, Watson could be the poster mom for the Independent Living Program.

"I only take Hamilton County children," she says. "Hamilton County is very committed to making sure their children get what they need. Hamilton County wants these children to succeed. There are some different county agencies that don't want to pay for the program, so they try very hard to talk the children out of it, and that's a shame. They say they offer independent living themselves, but it's not the same, not that wrap-around service where these kids get everything they need."

Those services frequently include helping kids overcome unforeseen obstacles.

"They want to be self-sufficient," Kroner says. "They either don't know how, or they come across these roadblocks. We have these kids that ... get an apartment and they go down to get the utilities turned on and they say, 'You owe us $800.' Their relatives have used their social security numbers to get phones or utilities. We have to get notarized letters and prove when their mom ran up that bill they were 14 years old -- it couldn't have been them."

More than just an irritation, the parents and other family members who forced the kids from their own homes and into the child welfare system sometimes track them down and use them. Unprepared to handle the conflict between caring for their parents, maintaining healthy boundaries and protecting themselves under such a difficult and emotional situation, Lighthouse caseworkers serve as a kid's only line of defense.

"If you would do a survey of the kids, they would say the parents are incarcerated, deceased, mentally ill, chemically dependent, they have no idea where they are or they have problems that have surpassed their kids," Kroner says. "Dysfunctional with a capital D. A lot of effort has gone into keeping these kids with their families, and it's just been concluded that it's not meant to be.

We have a lot of predatory parents -- parents who prostituted their daughters when they became teenagers. We have kids that will say, 'I don't want my mom or my dad to know where I live or they'll come over and clean me out.'

"I remember getting a call from this landlord saying, 'You need to come over. There's this really rough-looking woman where your kid used to be, and there's guys coming in every half hour. We think she's prostituting.' Went over and, sure enough, this woman opens the door. I said, 'My name is Mark Kroner, I'm with Lighthouse Youth Services. This apartment's leased in our name, and I don't know who you are. I'm going to give you five minutes to get out of here before I call the police.' I hear all this noise in the back, and this guy comes flying out of the room, putting his clothes on.

"The young lady who (lived) there called us two weeks later crying, saying, 'I was so ashamed. My mom knocked on my door around midnight and asked, 'Can I stay here?' I let her in, and the next thing I knew there were guys coming. I got out of there because I was afraid. I was so ashamed to call you and tell you that she took it over. I'm all right, I'm staying with friends.'

"We said, 'Come on back. Your mom's gone now.'

"You realize this particular youth is the only person in their entire family system that has a stable place to stay. We'll help get a place for your dad ... your mom, but they can't stay here."

All that and mental illness, too

Even with all this support, some kids simply can't make it. In some cases, the kids just walk away from their apartments and are never seen again. Who would do that?

"Somebody who is schizophrenic, somebody who's bi-polar, somebody who's never had anybody in their life they could trust," Arnold says. "Somebody who was raped by their father at 5 that's who walks way.

"Let's say you get these kids at 12 or 13. They are so incredibly damaged at that point that you do everything you can, but they're just too damaged and you can't dig through all that. God knows what they've been through. I can't heal their mental illness."

Children in the custody of Job and Family Services (hcjfs.hamilton-co.org/Buttons/about_us.htm) have access to counseling, medication and other services once a social worker has identified the need. But having access and taking advantage of those resources are two different things.

"You're bipolar, we give you therapy and here's your medication -- and at that moment they may totally understand that," Arnold says. "Bi-polars are notorious for, 'I'm feeling real good right now, I don't need this.' But if they stop taking their medication ..."

Lighthouse caseworkers constantly struggle with helping kids manage their mental health issues. With up to 100 kids spread across 12 to 14 caseworkers and college interns usually working toward a master's degree in social work, it's a lot to juggle.

"A significant percentage of our kids have mental health issues," Kroner says. "When kids enter adolescence, they're not sure what's mental illness and what's normal adolescence, so we have to

help sort this out: Is this budding schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder or is this just a kid having bad stretch of time? If you read about borderline personality disorder and you read about adolescence, there are a lot of similarities as far as experimentation, crises and drama. They're dealing with rejection, separation from their family, plus the future that looks really kind of tough.

"A lot of our kids have symptoms of depression, but if you and I were in their situation, we would be depressed. Most do not have a grasp of their mental illness. They don't understand it. They self-medicate like a lot of people on our planet. They drink a lot or do drugs to feel better or not fly off the handle."

The average age of complete financial independence is 26, Kroner says. That means families and parents are giving their kids support, whether that's in the form of a check or letting kids move back home. The children of baby-boomers are now being called "baby-boomerangers" because 60 percent move back home after graduating college.

Even with a solid family infrastructure, middle class kids aren't making it on their own, so expecting 18-year-olds' -- for whom "two minutes from now does not exist" -- self sufficiency seems an impossible goal, according to Kroner.

'A fighting chance'

To date approximately 1,600 teens have gone through the Lighthouse Independent Living Program, and there are a lot of successes. Kroner believes this is because the approach is realistic and supportive.

Like all public programs, it could use more money, more caseworkers and more time with the kids, but Kroner also makes it clear that Cincinnati has the best of the best in place already.

"Everything we're doing is compared to nothing," he says. "You go to another state and none of this exists. When the kids turn 18, in many states, they're out on their own. Our kids, at least, have somebody saying, 'We're going to give you a chance to live in this apartment and learn what it takes.' If you go to other cities, the kids go from the foster home or the group home to the adult homeless shelter -- that's what created the independent living movement."

Even though everyone agrees self-sufficiency training is essential for all kids in the system, independent living isn't a one-size-fits-all way to deliver those skills.

"How would you like to, at 18, be forced out onto the street?" Watson asks. "I've been there, it's a scary feeling. Right now we have one 18 year old -- he's going to stay. At age 45, I may tell him he's got to go."

Watson, Arnold and Kroner express frustration over the stereotypical view of kids who are in the custody of the state. That is exactly why they're involved is supporting and promoting independent living.

"I think people have a picture in their head of foster kids; they put them somewhere along with delinquents and the scum of the earth without realizing that foster kids got here not on their own choosing," Arnold says. "Somebody else did to them or didn't do for them, and that's why they're here.

"These are just kids -- sometimes with a lot more issues, but they're just kids. We're trying to give them what a parent should give them. Obviously we're not going to do that good a job because the county's not going to do as good a job as a parent would. But we're trying to give them as much as possible so that when they get out of there we don't see them in jail and we don't seem them in the system in any way.

"What I'm fighting for is to give them a fighting chance, because up to this point in their lives most of them have not had anything near a fighting chance."

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