

Dave Newhouse: A child's port in the storm

By Dave Newhouse
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Posted: 08/04/2011 12:00:00 AM PDT

Updated: 08/05/2011 02:44:48 PM PDT

A child. A mere child. Born into a world of mystery. A life so new, so formless and so helpless. For a child is unable to handpick his or her parents.

It could be Scott Peterson or Casey Anthony.

Or, perhaps, a mother on crack, a father in jail, a grandmother on her second round of child rearing. Before the child can make adult decisions, he or she could be in foster care, or mentally conflicted, or sexually abused or exploited.

A cruel beginning, but Westcoast Children's Clinic embraces these disadvantaged children who are desperately needing a reintroduction to life in a safe environment. There to rescue them is Oakland-based WCC.

"There's no children's group like us in the East Bay that links training, research and mental-health service," said Stacey Katz, the clinic's executive director. "People come from Japan, Germany and Boston to study us. We're the only people in the world to do therapeutic collaborative assessment with foster kids."

The clinic's credo is "helping children discover who they are and what they can become." That undertaking requires a multifaceted yet calming approach.

"For almost every circumstance they encounter," said Katz, "there hasn't been a place that said they're important. From family violence to community to their school, they are on the end of everything that goes wrong."

The clinic transforms wrong into right.

Launched in 1979 by the Wright Institute of Berkeley,

specifically Rosemary Bowers, in a church basement, the clinic's intent was to train professionals in child therapy. Initially, interns did the bulk of the work with a skeleton staff.

Today, the private nonprofit occupies the second floor of a building in the Fruitvale district, with a full-time staff of 120, and a total staff of 170, funded largely by Medical.

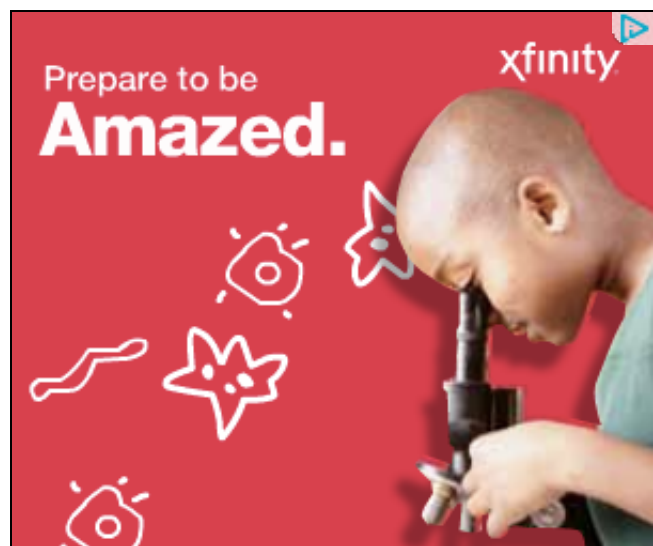
Foster kids comprise 65 percent of Westcoast Children's Clinic cases. The other 35 percent are at-risk, low-income youth. All together, they range in age from babies up to 21 years.

Individual assessment isn't done overnight. The clinic takes up to three days and longer to ensure that there is proper evaluation from every conceivable aspect.

Lisa Greenberg, who like Katz holds a doctorate in clinical psychology, is an assessment specialist at the clinic. She makes a comprehensive psychological, emotional, academic, cognitive, traumatic and attention-related behavioral study on each individual.

The study aims "to see what's actually going on with this child," she explained. "And here's a trajectory to help this child establish his highest level of independence. Then we make recommendations to guide him."

Work imitates life. A mother of two, Greenberg has a son who has "issues."



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"What compels me and gratifies me the most," she said, " is the fact that there are resources out there, and possibilities out there, to raise their level of communication and interaction. One of the successes of this program for me is the 'aha' moment, when a child begins to see."

Katz is also a mother of two.

"We're trying to fill a gap that we don't see being filled anywhere else," she said.

What kind of gap?

"Like abused kids being sold for sex, which is an epidemic in Oakland," she said. "There are a lot of advocacies and case workers, but we've become, in the last year, the only mental health provider for those girls (locally)."

The clinic has provided 500,000 hours of counseling and therapy to more than 9,000 youngsters. Breaking it down, 65 percent are African-American, 15 percent Latino, 10 percent white, 5 percent Asian, and 5 percent other ethnicities.

Often the hardest work is persuading kids to walk through the clinic's doors.

"With everything they've been through," said Katz, "they have the hope, or the belief, that they can have a better relationship with an adult -- a stranger -- than they've had with any other adult who's let them down.

"That, in of itself, is a success."

And success breeds success at Westcoast Children's Clinic -- a troubled youth's best ally.

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