



November 2004

Dear Friend:

As many of you know, WestCoast Children's Clinic turned 25 this year. We celebrated with an evening at the Oakland Museum that brought together alumni, staff, clinical supervisors, board members and individual donors who have stuck with us since our inception. Throughout the evening we were reminded of our roots as a training institution and the prevailing desire to provide long term therapy to children and families who otherwise couldn't afford it. In the service of that mission, we have trained hundreds of therapists (many of whom practice locally) and provided countless hours of therapy and assessments to thousands of children and families. By conventional wisdom, WestCoast should not have survived, but it has through a combination of perseverance and grace. Somehow we continue to come together, in the various constituencies that form WestCoast, and share what we know about being human while working with children and families who, more often than not, live in circumstances that are inhumane.

The children we see at WestCoast live in places we would rather not be, their nightmares come at all hours of the day, and their monsters are real. They live in an X rated world, and keep secrets that are hard to say out loud, "I have no shoes that fit me", "I day dream about being killed," ... "my father stole my sex". And for those who are foster youth, (which is 80-90 percent of our client population) they grow up in a system, which serves as a battleground for abiding national conflicts over poverty, race, gender, and equality. It is a system rife with unacknowledged contradictions in policy between punishing the poor, on the one hand, and a commitment to help all needy children, on the other. One teenager described living in foster care as being a disposable child, who lives no where for very long, and makes up some different kind of self depending on whose house he's living in now. To add insult to injury, after living in conditions that are unimaginable to most of us, foster kids are kicked out of the system at 18, or sometimes 19, in contrast to most children who keep receiving concrete parental support until well into their 30's, in addition to the invisible but immeasurable sense of belonging they leave home with.

For our children, for one hour or more, week after week, our therapists become the link for them, between the gaps in their histories, and themselves. It is their job to help them make sense of, or construct some meaning out of the circumstances they find themselves in. And their job to take and hold onto the whole child: the dreams and the despair.

It is in spite of many obstacles that children and families make the journey through our doors, and into our waiting room in the hopes that something good will happen to them. In all our training and hours of supervision, there is no adequate preparation for some of the questions that are raised in our therapy rooms; questions like, "When can I

go back home?" "Who is my father?" "Why did they give me up?" Or moments when a boy tells his therapist about being taken away in a police car, and remembers watching his mother howl through the windows as he is driven away. And he says to his therapist, in his five-year-old way of trying to make it all right, "How would she know how to be a mom to a monster...no one ever taught her about that."

And through our psychological assessments, we are brought into the world of our clients through the stories they tell and the pictures they draw:

An 11 year old told this story in response to a seemingly neutral picture card used in testing,

This is about a boy who thought heaven was good and the devil was bad, but he switched them around because his parents always told him heaven was bad, and the devil was good. And then he started acting up, and acting up, until his parents gave him up to a foster home, and when he was 21 he went to jail and said, "I am going to kill myself to get away from me"... and when he went to heaven god said" why do you do all these bad things"?

It is in the face of a story like this, and the ongoing assaults endured that our client's resilience remains such a source of inspiration and hope. And we notice our own impact, as the children begin to build resources toward better endings.... this nine year old girl describes a drawing of herself like this:

That's a girl, She is Happy. Her name is Sharena. I'll make her a brain. She has a little brain. Empty at first, but every time she goes to school, she got more brain, little by little. She practiced it, practiced it, and practiced it, until finally she got all filled up. She know how to spell. She wants to be a teacher".

For all of us that work at WestCoast, we are grateful for, and inspired by the support we have received during the past 25 years. Were it not for you, we wouldn't be here. Your contributions and your presence remain an important part of the WestCoast tradition: developing a sense of on-going community and growing membership dedicated to fulfilling our mission. It also reminds us that we are not alone in our efforts to bring more peace into the lives of our children.

With sincere thanks, and may we all look forward to peace in the New Year.

Stacey Anne Katz, Psy.D.