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Editorial notebook: Sac children in need of friends

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The Sacramento Children's Home has changed a lot since it was founded downtown in 1867 to provide "a home, education, and support for the orphan, half-orphan, and destitute children" of the county. In 1905, the Children's Home opened its main campus on Sutterville Road, and on my recent visit, I got a history lesson from Judy Schefer, now celebrating her 40th year working as the volunteer coordinator.

The foundling home known as the "Stork's Nest" is long gone, but cottages and gardens remain. So does the need for volunteers to be friends to children from unstable situations who have changed homes multiple times and don't have the permanent families and lifelong connections that most of us take for granted.

Schefer makes a special pitch for the Special Friends program, which seeks to build one-on-one relationships between a child and a caring adult one hour a week.

Today, the Children's Home has 44 children, staying in cottages that hold eight to 12 kids each. Most children stay for six to eight months on average, some for up to a year and a half. Then it's on to relatives or another foster home – or, in the ideal case, what the children refer to as a "forever home."

Twenty-one volunteers have signed up as "special friends" with the younger kids, ages 6 to 12. Eight volunteers have signed up to work with teens ages 13 to 17. Most of the volunteers are women. Only nine are men. Boys need role models and caring adults, too, and this seems like a promising area for men looking for a volunteer opportunity that can make a difference.

The commitment is one hour a week for a year.

The first visits

The Children's Home offers structure and support that make it easy. For the first three months, the volunteers come to the Children's Home and visit kids who live together in a cottage. They read, help with homework or an experiment, perhaps bring a project to work on, bake cookies, share snacks or a meal, play games, kick around a soccer ball, shoot hoops.

As Schefer notes, the younger kids will gather around you when you enter, and you decide which child needs your time that night. With teens, you inevitably deal with frostiness and bravado. After three or four visits, as Schefer says, you might think, "They don't care; they don't need me."

"Oh, yes they do," she says.

They're just testing you and your reliability. You might not know it, but just by showing up when you say you will or sending a postcard when you're on vacation, you are making a difference. And they know you aren't paid staff; you're there because you want to be.

Then things just sort of work themselves out. The volunteer and a kid match up and become special friends – the beginning of a one-on-one relationship.

Staff help decide when a kid is ready to go off-site with his or her special friend. Then it's up to the volunteer and child to decide their activity – a baseball game, a musical, the library, the zoo, outings that offer enriching experiences. Or just hanging out – listening to music or chatting. It's the time together that counts.

Lives marked by instability

For kids at the Children's Home, instability has marked their lives. Their young lives have been filled with abuse, disappointment, neglect and adults addicted to drugs and alcohol. They've been in and out of foster homes. Some have been in the court system. They don't have a consistent group of people to call friends and family.

Many of these kids come to distrust adults and hesitate to form close relationships with them, fearing they may soon leave. Their experience is that grown-ups move in and out of their lives. So the Special Friend program brings the larger community into the picture.

Stability for the children

Simply sharing special time together – showing up regularly – builds stability and a sense of belonging.

The volunteer is not a substitute parent, a counselor or a disciplinarian. The volunteer is not there to judge or work miracle transformations. The volunteer is simply there to be a friend and to spend time. As Schefer says one volunteer noted, "I'm bringing you me."

The main tasks: Be reliable and patient.

All around us, people are looking for a return to basics, from food to finances to friends. And giving back to community is part of that. The commitment in the Special Friends program is short-term, but most of the volunteers keep in touch long afterward. After the kids move on, the contacts might be once a month or even once every five or six months.

But the lifelong impact and connection remain.

– Pia Lopez

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