

Doing with what we've got

by Carl Foster, Board Vice President

Every year I write that things are great at the LBH and offer opinions on the political and economic climate for service providers and the challenges facing our families. I will repeat that pattern this year, except I have more questions than answers or opinions. Every summer, as part of our training for our college summer staff, we discuss the word *conundrum*. This year all of social services is facing a conundrum and the issues are acute. Fewer grants available. Smaller public grants available. Several family foundations are no longer operating. More people asking for help and the help they need is the expensive basic survival help . . . housing mainly. So the question becomes, "How do you do more with less?"

At the LBH, a number of our parents have lost their jobs. We're helping. Some have lost their homes because they couldn't pay the rent. We're helping but – hello, if there is no increase in affordable housing supply, it isn't going to matter what we do.

In terms of measurable good out-comes for our kids, I am once again proud of what the LBH has done as a single, stand-alone, private agency run by a group of dedicated volunteers without any particular obligations or responsibilities to do anything at all. We just care. Our out-of-school time programs, in particular summer and winter camps, have kept all of our kids in school with good attendance and constantly improving grades, and absolutely no police involvement for any of our kids this year.

This is only impressive if you know the population we serve. We have children who live in the middle of a drug market so notorious that the police have a physical presence there 24 hours a day. We have children who had their own room last year, but now sleep with so many other children they simply hide their faces when we draw family pictures or talk about where we live. On our first neighborhood walk this summer, a 10 year old pointed out the lines of demarcation for the gangs and which areas are the demilitarized zones. These are my terms, not his, and yes I am using terms reserved for military conflicts. We have a child in such serious need for

orthodontia that it's the first thing visitor's notice in a room full of children. However, all of the kids referenced above have good grades and excellent attendance records, and yes, we are going to get that child to an orthodontist.

I could talk forever about the relationship we have with our kids. This year, instead of *my* words see the comments of the college students who worked here this



summer and check out our Facebook page linked to our Website www.littlebluehouse.org. While you are reading those comments, please keep in mind that all of the services are available to our kids after school, along with tutoring and a meal.

Can we change the life of a child even if we can't drive the drug dealers out of the neighborhood, or clean their homes, or find them appropriately attentive parents? Yes – we do it everyday. Sometimes the most valuable thing we do for children is speak to the other adults in their lives. One more thing: All of our kids know they can help themselves to free underwear, socks, soap, and deodorant at LBH anytime

– no questions asked. What does it matter that we have spent double on help-yourself personal items this year?

I was asked to speak at a conference for service providers recently, something I rarely do because I think I could do more good back at my own agency, talking to a child or working with a family rather than commiserating with other agency heads about funding. I was frankly surprised to

hear a number of other providers talking about the need for more government money to fully fund their services.

At LBH we

are not holding our breath on that one. My overriding impression is there is a lot of "referring" going on. I kept wondering who is getting these referrals and why would anyone think those providers receiving the referrals would have more resources than the ones making the referrals?

I actually heard the phrase "doing more with less." I never met anyone who could do more with less. I only know people who can do less with less. Less money plus more need is not a new equation for the LBH.

So what did I tell the conference? I also told them LBH values are not set or changed by the availability of money. A long time ago we decided to help the "help-able," and that's what we do. The details change but the commitment does not. Is this a difficult environment? You bet. It's also a moment like many we have faced before. This is a Grandpa Bingham (my great-grandfather) moment. When I told him I would like to go to college but didn't have the money he said, "You got what cha got boy. Question is . . . what can you do wit it?"

This is the roll-up your sleeves part!



Not your average summer job!

As we did last year, we asked our summer associates to write about their experiences, and here is some of what they said.

Erica

Summer camp at Little Blue House has altered my perception of the world, my future, and children as a whole. When I met the boys in October before camp, my first impression was how adorable they were and how well they took to new people. After summer camp, I look at each boy and see their family, neighborhoods, futures, and their resiliency.

The boys have given me a different perspective of families in impoverished situations. I no longer view society based on class. I see families without resources and the impact it has on innocent children. LBH is such a unique place because it allows us to see the big picture within a smaller scale. Our morning meetings covered the past, present, and future of the organization, which allowed us the privilege of viewing each relationship with a child and every improved behavior as a tiny piece to a larger puzzle.

Reflecting upon my experience this summer is not an easy task, because it is difficult for me to put all of my feelings about the kids into words.

One Friday I took the kids to my campus to play soccer. A pass-

ing friend asked who the kids were. I responded, “These are my boys.” When I thought about my impulsive reaction later, I knew he did not understand and maybe even thought I adopted eight boys over the summer. But I feel as if it is noteworthy how quickly I took ownership of these boys. Within the first week of camp, the boys began to dominate my thoughts.

Describing my job to family or friends is often difficult, especially when they ask if I think I will change the lives of all of the kids. I no longer believe we are simply giving kids a respite from their lives. I know we are making a huge impact as well.

When I would speak with the other summer staff, we often joked that no one else

“gets it” when we talk about our summer experience. One weekend this summer, another staff member and I attended a classy affair where everyone discussed their summer jobs. After we explained LBH, some guy tried to argue that we worked at a “glorified day care.” Before this summer I would have laughed and walked away, but we simply couldn’t let that stand. A half hour later he was apologizing and telling us how much he respects our passion for LBH.

One of the most valuable lessons I learned this summer is how to separate passion, emotion, and action. I was able to know each child’s individual story and stick to our agenda to reach the goal of having the kids ready for school by the end of August. I have started thinking about my future as a child advocacy lawyer instead of a psychologist because I want to really make changes in the lives of kids. From the beginning of camp, I witnessed LBH techniques we learned during training week work to change behavior. One child exhibited extreme opposition to cleaning up and pouted whenever he was asked to do something he did not want to. By the end of the camp, he was the first one to raise his hand when I asked for a helper. A former “class clown” at the beginning of the summer is now cooperative and respectful of authority.

My summer experience at LBH proved that these kids have developed the resiliency to adapt and change their behavior based on their perception that they are understood, feel safe, and know we genuinely care about them.

Erica Eveland, 3rd year student CUA



Michelle

I had worked with children for years before coming to the LBH. I already knew that working with kids is always challenging, but at the same time very rewarding. Even though I felt I had plenty of experience coming into the Little Blue House, nothing could prepare me for what I found here.

I actually started before the summer camp, working part time during the spring semester. My first outside activity was during spring break camp, when I took a group of kids to the movies along with the agency director and other staff. I was anxious at first because it seemed like a lot of kids and only a few staff, but I was quickly put at ease by the behavior of the kids. They demonstrated a level of maturity and cooperation that I never would have expected. I began to understand the objective of the Little Blue House, why they always preach structure, socialization, and impulse control.

After spending more time at the LBH, I learned that helping kids is always about the relationship you have with those kids. Because of our relationship, the kids want to please us. They want to follow directions because they want that satisfaction from us. Even though some of them struggle to follow the structure part, they are constantly trying their best.

LBH director Carl Foster told me something that is now engraved in my brain forever: “When kids



act out or misbehave, they are often just reacting to their environment. They are often just asking for help.” They can’t explain what’s wrong or where it hurts – emotionally, but



they sense that you care and their instincts tell them that you can help. Every single child at the LBH has their

own story. Each child possesses individual, defining characteristics and strengths. Every relationship I had with each girl in my group was personal. As curious as I had been to figure out every kid’s background story, I concluded that I didn’t need to know the history of the child. All I really needed to do was make myself available to them. I found that the kids have a lot to say, and as soon as they trust you, they will say it. At the LBH “verbalization” is defined as whether a child talks to you about what is important to them. Verbalization is my favorite part of camp.

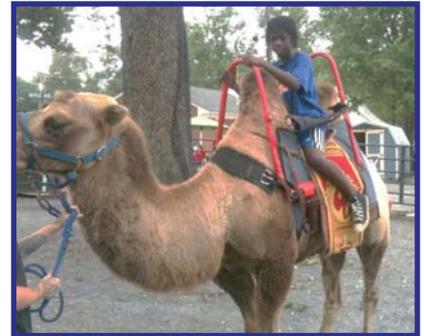
This experience has fueled my ambition. I will continue working with at-risk youth and I look forward to spending more time with the kids who come through the doors Little Blue House. ¶

Michelle “Freckles” Lawlor, junior at CUA

Summer magic with the LBH kids!



Readin', writin', and FUN! Just what summer should be!



Lunch with LBH Board Members



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Carrie

Two of the boys in my group, Ty and Jay, are best friends. They go to different schools and didn't know each other until they met at the Little Blue House. Staff at the LBH tell me that Ty was so quiet and shy before I met him that you could count his words in intervals of weeks, not hours or days, which is why the LBH director Carl



Foster always makes him communicate

verbally, out loud. In fact, that's the rule for all LBH children; no head shaking, no shoulder shrugging or gestures – only direct, verbal communications, with eye contact.

From day one Ty and Jay caught my eye. I could see they shared that all-important but indescrib-

able bond that all best friends have. I wanted to know them as individuals and as friends, but both boys were so incredibly quiet and reserved. They changed quickly during camp. Over

the summer they even seemed to have flourished. I think I helped bring them out of their shells. They became two of the most talkative and energetic members of the boys group.

Every day of camp I could rely on getting countless hugs from both boys, and I could count on hearing about everything they did since the last time I saw them.



Ty is so smart and shows so much confidence. Older staff seemed surprised by that. He provided me with random

science facts and once wrote, "I am a genius and really funny while playing a game of *Who am I?*"

Jay has a smile that makes hearts melt, and anyone who sees his smile is powerless not to smile right along with him. He has a gift for storytelling and could always make me laugh.

When they are together they have so much fun and so much energy that it was sometimes



hard to keep up. If you spend time with them, they will make your day better. I for one hope the hugs never stop coming!

Carrie, American University grad student

Nick

After spending only a few weeks at the **Little Blue House** I am convinced it is an organization that changes the lives of kids for the best. It teaches responsibility, discipline, and structure. The program is designed to give the kids a future, but in the short-term, they have a place they can go where they know they are welcomed, safe, and loved.

All of the of **LBH** kids are special in his or her own way, but I was immediately drawn to **William**. I felt very connected to him because I think he's a truly amazing kid. He's extremely intelligent and a leader for the other kids to look up to. He's always bright and warm. At camp he always listened and was always the first to volunteer.

I'll give you another always. He's always puts a smile on your face! If he got in trouble – which was rare – he got very upset with himself and started to tear up. I asked him why he was crying one time and he said because he didn't want to disappoint the staff and because he knows he needs to

be a good example for the younger boys. He is very mature for his age.

I don't know **William's** future – or my own. But I do know that this incredible experience at **LBH** has changed my life in many ways. Every

day I went to **LBH** thinking, "What am I going to do today that helps my kids." Even at those times when I was

tired or frustrated, at the end of the day I was still smiling.

I was also impressed by the hard work and long hours of **agency director Carl Foster**. From what I can see, without him there would be no **LBH**. He literally works every-day for no money.



Mr. Nick "I'll be there in a minute" Sylvester

Natasha

When I first came to the Little Blue House it was for the Open House Memorial Day Party. I was still recovering from mono and brought my parents along so they could experience where I would be working. I remember feeling overwhelmed and out of the loop as the other college students moved easily and comfortably around the tables, children, and familiar faces of parents and co-workers. I began to really look forward to the summer and beginning to become a part of the family of the Little Blue House.

During training I began to help with the Monday after school program. I will never forget the first time I saw some of the girls at the Open House and then again when I went to Tubman Elementary School to pick them up. Everyone was fluently and casually speaking Spanish with fellow staffer Julia. It was definitely something my seven years of French could not keep up with. I then experienced Julia drive one of “The Beasts” (15 passenger van) without a single look of doubt upon her face and watched her sweep the kids into the house and let them relax. We attempted to have the girls speak only English, which proved to be difficult. I noticed one child,



Hailey, sat very quietly in the corner of the room and just watch the rest of us.

Several things have changed since that first Monday at the Little Blue House. One of the most significant changes I saw was not within myself, but within Hailey. She barely spoke the first couple of days I interacted with her. If she did speak, it would be one or two words, and she would usually give up on what she was trying to say. But day-by-day Hailey began to move from the corner of the room to the side, then progressed to the middle, and then became attached to my side. She began to use “please” and “thank you,” and started to ask for things correctly. She started to talk to me and say, “Miss Matasha, look what I can do!”

as she navigated her body through the ball pit and the monkey bars at the LBH. She then began to turn to me and say, “No one will play with me,” and I asked her to talk to the other girls and ask them to play. At first she would not and would just go back to playing in solitude. However, she slowly began to play with the other girls. She even began to move from staying inside while the other girls were on the water slide, to sitting on the stairs, to sliding down the slide backwards every single chance she got!

Hailey absolutely flourished through this program and being a part of my group. She played perfectly with her peers in her group and followed every single direction I gave without fail. She is still her shy self in certain aspects, but she definitely came out of her shell more than I could have ever expected. She became one of my favorites, and I cherish the times she fell asleep on my lap, while holding my hand, in the car on the way home from an adventure. I am so incredibly proud of her and look forward to continuing being a part of her progress as she wades through oceans, despite being stung by jelly fish, and learns how to swim while holding my hands in a huge pool; and perhaps teaching her the “N” sound so she can pronounce “Natasha” instead of “Matasha.”

Natasha Bavalor, 3rd year student American University

