

Why I'm so very proud of us!

by Carl Foster, Board Vice President

This November the doors of the LBH will have been open for 20 continuous years. The history of our original mission of providing a residence for abandoned infants is a story well told. Far less known is what we have done since those early days, and how the environment in which we operate has changed – including circumstances that have lead to so many agencies that started when we did and since then, not being around anymore. Our initial work was largely government-funded. But that all changed when we continued to ask the question, “Why do our client families need our help?”

The short answer was – with other factors – “drugs.”

Because our services are based entirely on the best available science and not the often unsuccessful methods the usual funding sources were willing to support, we found we had to continue without government funding. Along

with our partners, we designed and carried out a very unique residential program for moms on drugs with small children. We couldn't sustain it without a lot of help, but I am proud of the fact that we did the right thing for the right reason.

In the years since we began housing children, we have changed everything. Since January 17, 1997, the LBH has had no

paid professional management. We have continued our tradition of designing new ways of delivering social services. We just do all of the work ourselves – for free. We do everything you would expect

a social service agency to do and more. However, when the windows are dirty it's a member of the board washes them. More than just names on the letterhead, our board members and other volunteers vacuum, drive kids home, and write personal checks to buy

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We couldn't have done it without them!

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furniture when **our families** find permanent housing. When all of the public moneys for rent support or utilizes are tapped out, it is often a **personal check** that prevents families from becoming homeless or keeps the utilities on.

LBH became a **licensed child placing agency** specifically to put one last option on the table when all others failed. When there is no real choice, we can say, “Ok, we’ll take the child home to the **LBH**.”

In this phase of our existence

We continue to do all of the administrative work and a large part of the direct client service ourselves for no pay. But, we also continue to innovate. We have abandoned both the concept of and the word “program.” A program starts “here” and ends “there.” With a program, in week one you do this, and in week two you do that. That’s not how we roll. We believe in **transformation**. A child from a multi-generational welfare family *can* become self-sufficient and middle class without playing basketball. That belief is absolutely necessary for me to get out of bed every single day and go to **Irving Street** and work for **my kids**. In place of programs we have “platforms.”

To us platforms are like **amebas**. We have no real shape or structure, but constantly change shape in pursuit of the **main goal** we have for **our families** – **self-sufficiency**. This is not a “program” because everything we do is family-by-family, based on whether or not

mom still has a dream for herself.

If **mom** has stopped dreaming, we can’t do much about her future, and neither can anyone else. As if it were an idea completely new to them, some of **our moms** are surprised to hear the options available to their children are based on the decisions **the kids** make for **themselves**.

The way we handle **welfare issues** is not dramatically different from any other agency; but the way we handle issues of **well-being** is. We are not Pollyannaish. We know many of

our moms will never be self-sufficient, but there is no reason their children can’t be. Since we put in place our “**parent platform**,” instead of a closed end pro-



gram, the services we provide to **our parents** have been only partially funded by different **public grants**, including the **Community Based Partnership Initiative**, **IDEA Program for 0-3 kids**, **CYITC**, a grant for children with special needs from the **Health Department**, and the **Income Maintenance segment of DCHS**. I am confident the issuers of each of these grants can tell you in great detail how they are different, but the **services** we provide to families are so comprehensive that we met the requirements of all of these grants without changing anything we do.

Our kids are likely to live their lives the way they live now, just like the children of professionals are likely to themselves become professionals. Kids are influenced by what

they see and hear growing up. The LBH is filled with the things the kids see on television and think they will never hold in their hands. We show them different things. We show them different people. We take them different places. We are not afraid of the challenge that comes with allowing **our kids** to care about us. We are not trying to inspire **our kids**. They are already inspired. **Our kids** already know what they want. We spend our time teaching them how to get it.

During the summer, the behavior and adjustments of our kids are measured and documented every day. On a recent **field trip to a local university** to see a **professor** who was a kindergarten classmate of mine – giving the campers a chance to ask questions about me as a child – one of **our kids** said he wanted to go to **college** because they have **grass**. This same kid, when we walked through his neighborhood, pointed out where all the “**gangers**” are. I was aware that the whole time we were in that neighborhood we were being watched.

No kid should grow up in that environment, but we honestly believe **that children** can still achieve. By the way, we are the only people who believe that about this particular child. His **school social worker** referred him to us because she said he has an anger management problem. Really? I think the problem is a playground in his neighborhood that the kids won't go near because, “People be smokin' over there,” as he said. That same school social worker told me last spring that this child doesn't listen to anyone. **He listens to us!**

We can't change the neighborhoods or the schools in our neighborhoods. That's some-

one else's job. We can help steer our kids to the better schools and provide the support to help them stay there. We can make sure our kids never stop dreaming and never believe their lives are limited to what's around them.

I am proud that.

A teacher from a local charter school went on an activity with us and shared, “I admire the relationship you have with your kids.” They are *her kids* too. She's a good teacher. But **our relationship with the kids is different.**

Of all the things I am proud of, I am most proud of this – when the public sector said it didn't have any money for our summer camp (they've never paid even half of the actual cost anyway) our board sprang into action, and this summer we did the whole camp, without limitations, with **private money** that was not even on the table two months before it was scheduled to start. Right now we are

working on exactly the same kind of funding for our **after-school platform.**



The cur-

rent funding environment is ugly. Everything has changed in the last 18 months. Even though the need is increasing, some agencies aren't surviving. But us – not one member of **our board** has even blinked. They all say, “We can do this.” And I say, “Yes, we can.”

I am damned proud of us.

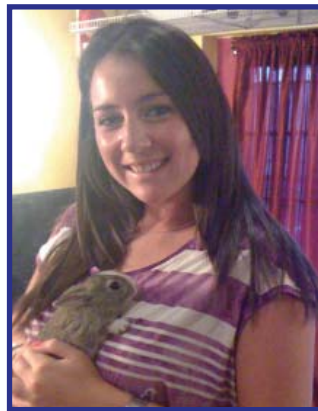
Not your average summer job!

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

Michelle

My biggest challenge this summer was a new child who did not understand the rules, structure, and purpose of the Little Blue House. He is an undeveloped teenager with one of the most interesting personalities I have ever met. Personally, I cannot understand going through all the hardship that this child has, at such a young age, and still able to smile and have fun day-after-day. He comes from an awful background and was put into a foster home days before he was sent to the LBH. He has never been taught responsibility, manners, or societal rules. I do not believe anyone has ever said, "I love you," to him.

This child does not know when he'll have to go pack his suitcase and move again. He does not know if he'll be living with his brothers the following week. He is constantly in fight mode. He always needs a comeback, and always needs to defend himself. Every day I saw him I asked myself how he's developed into who he is. How can a kid be motivated when no one has showed him how? Marcus is supposed to be a kid. He should be curious, excited, and interested in things. However, on a daily basis he has to



deal with adults who hound him with questions. He has to deal with insecurity and utter confusion. He has to deal with who's going to adopt him next.

The children at the LBH have a promising future. The relationships developed with the staff are beneficial to the children's development. An eleven-year old had once asked me why I still work at the LBH. I reminded him of all the positive features and replied, "In a nutshell, I know I can see you walk across your high school stage on graduation day with your acceptance letter to your favorite college." To this day when I ask to

see if his homework is complete, he replies, "I did my homework, don't worry, you'll see me walk across the stage."

At the Little Blue House our goal is to educate at-risk children and prepare them for higher levels of learning. In order to meet this goal, our daily routine includes a three part scaling system through which we monitor our children's behavior. We provide them with a stable environment, where they can develop confidently. We watch their socialization, listen to their verbalization, and monitor their impulse control. We strive for their best, and they bring out the best in us.

I have no doubt in my mind that this place has changed the lives of children. Marcus is a child who can benefit from what the LBH has to offer.

Michelle "Freckles", Grad Student at CUA

Katie

Working at the Little Blue House this summer has made me rethink how I want to spend the rest of my life. I always knew I wanted to work with children, but coming to work with at-risk and foster children has impacted me more than I could have ever imagined.

Every morning for **summer camp**, we picked the kids up in **The Beasts** (15 passenger vans). And almost every morning, each child came running up to us with a big smile on his or her face. It amazes me that these kids who see so much and who have been through more than most people, can be so happy. It didn't take me more than a day to see why they were happy. At the **LBH** the kids are treated differently than they are anywhere else. Each child had a special relationship with each of the **staff members**, and many times this is more of a relationship than they have ever had before. The way we did things, the way we spoke to the kids, and the lessons we taught them are different than they would learn anywhere else. While we had fun each and every day (kids wouldn't keep coming back if we didn't!), **every child learned responsibility, etiquette, and the way to act in the real world** while they were at the **LBH**. We took them to **lunch with business people** not only for the great food,



but also for them to see how people act in the **professional world**. We took them to **college campuses** to show them that if they can control their impulses, they one day can attend a university. We had the kids vacuum, wash dishes, and clean the house at the end of each day, not only so we keep the mice away, but to teach them responsibility.

One of my kids asked me one afternoon, "Are you tired every day after camp because of us, Miss Katie?" I had to think about it for a second. My immediate response would have been, "Of course!" But that's exactly what he was expecting. Many people have walked in and out of these kid's lives because they were too much to handle, but at the **LBH** it is different. I explained to him that while some days I was more exhausted than others, I would never be too tired to not come back the next day. I didn't choose the job because I thought it would be easy. I chose it because I thought it would be worth it.

It's amazing how much I thought about these kids after I dropped them off every day, and how much I thought about them on the weekends. I can positively say that these children had a bigger impact on me than anyone I have ever met in my entire life, and I can only hope that I made even half of that kind of impact on their lives.

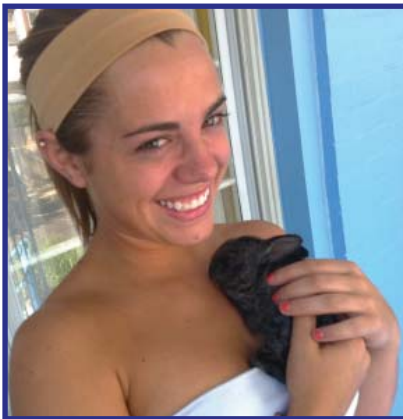
Katie, Senior at Catholic University

Maggie

Throughout my summer camp experience at LBH there was **one amazing child** who kept me at the edge of my seat, all the time. His name is **Taylor**. I never knew what he was thinking. I never knew what he might say. This fascinated me in more ways than one.

The **Little Blue House** has taught me a variety of things including **patience, compassion, and a love for children who need it more than anything**. Most importantly though, I have learned to look deeper into each and every one of the children that I cared for day-to-day.

Taylor is a perfect example of this. He is an exceptional person and has such an exuberant personality. When he feels it is necessary, he will light up any room with his wit and will cheer you up with a simple **hug** and a **compliment**. He taught me to let the little stuff slide. You may ask how and why an eight year-old boy has been able to teach me this. It's because **Taylor** is in a larger **group of boys** that has



a tendency to complain easily and whine at a consistent rate – but not **Taylor**. He lets the small stuff slide and goes with the flow. He will at times quite silently slip into a place where you wonder what he is thinking and what is going on in his head. At those times he will for sure give you a blank stare. But unlike most eight year olds I know, he is putting together one hefty intelligent thought that will surprise you to the max. The question is, when is that thought going to be introduced to you?

Taylor, beyond doubt, is an **exceptional child** with an amazing personality that I will never forget. I would find myself settling into blank stares while I tried to put together in my head what I thought he might be thinking when he last gave me one of his far-off looks. This was an interesting summer working with **Taylor**. I learned from him more and more each day!

Margaret "Maggie", Senior at Catholic University

Burke

Everytime I think of what it is the **Little Blue House** does I am reminded of a person I met there just earlier this year. He was someone who used to confuse me – whenever we went out somewhere with him he would almost always put up a fit somewhere along the way, recede into a shell, and stop listening to any directions he was given. He would occasionally start acting out as well, and one of my first thoughts was that he just didn't want to listen to anyone and wouldn't be open to meeting new people.

Yet, in the few short weeks I knew him I grew to understand him and see him as the person he really is. I watched him come into himself more and more as we spent time with him, realizing that he wasn't acting out because he was upset or angry, but because no one simply showed



him what he could do or learn when he put himself out into the world. I found him asking more questions by the day and I was simply amazed by the way he was learning about how to be himself

just from being with the other kids. One day I watched him as he started to act in his old ways and was heading towards having a fit because he was afraid of doing something on his own. However I then caught his realization that it was OK to trust himself and that he can do just about anything he puts his mind to. From there on he did just fine, and I think about how it was only earlier this year that I saw him as a completely different person.

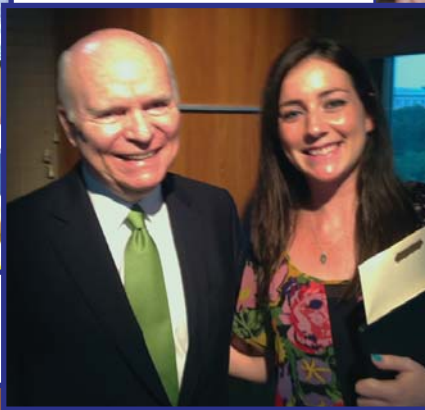
He is one of the nicest, most fun-loving kids I've met, and I hope that in the near future he will be able to share what a great kid he is with other people too.

Burke, Senior at Florida International University

Summer magic with the LBH kids . . .



... outdoors and in!



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