

The Long Road Home

Guide Shelter in Catonsville helps troubled teens see the light. But will they follow it?

Shortly before noon on a Tuesday, 12-year-old Patrick settles into a cushioned chair and prepares to watch a "Schoolhouse Rock" video with his classmates. The instructional tape will review the multiplication tables for the students.

Just before the video begins, he turns to a counselor and asks, "What's the name of my new P.O.?"

P.O., for parole officer, is common jargon at the Guide Shelter, a 24-hour minimum security facility located off Valley Road in Catonsville on the campus of the Spring Grove Hospital Center.

A rather ordinary-looking home, down to the basketball hoop in the driveway, the shelter houses 10 juvenile males who have committed misdemeanor offenses in Maryland.

At 12, Patrick (names of teens in this story are not their actual names) is the youngest boy at the shelter. He has problems with a sometimes uncontrollable temper, and has been beating up other kids since the age of 5.

He is dressed in a short-sleeved, collared shirt, jeans and white athletic socks.

His shoes and coat, along with those of the other kids at the shelter, have been locked away in a closet as a form of deterrence, making an escape attempt uncomfortable at best.

No one has tried to escape since Program Director Cherry Litsey took over at the shelter just over a year ago. Before then, the shelter averaged up to three runaways a year.

Across the living room, 17-year-old Wayne sits quietly on a sofa. Dressed in jeans and a black motorcycle T-shirt, he removes his socked feet from a table in the center of the room and corrects his posture when asked to do so by counselor Chuck Green.

Wayne doesn't like to feel controlled, and would like to be able to wear his shoes. Though he is among the oldest of the boys at the shelter, his quiet nature often allows him to fade into the background.

His silence masks memories of a "really messed up family life" that had seen him locked in closets and has left scars on his backside.

As "Schoolhouse Rock" begins, a few of the older kids groan and squirm in their seats. For some the tape is a much-needed teaching aide. For the others, it's just a way of killing time before lunch.

Nevertheless, teacher Sandy Sacra is careful not to separate the boys who need the instruction.

"If you pull the ones who need it out they'll be embarrassed," she explains. "that's why they'll do it as a group."

Boys at the shelter receive three-and-a-half hours of academic schooling each day during the week. The lessons are individualized and comparable to what they would be doing in regular school.

A few minutes into the video, Green announces that he needs a volunteer to set up the kitchen for lunch. Nearly all the boys jump at the opportunity.

T.J. one of the more outgoing personalities at the shelter, complains when he's not picked for the chore. "Why can't I do it?" he asks. "My hand was up first."

The question goes unanswered.

Shortly thereafter, Green begins dismissing the boys in pairs so they can wash their hands and get ready for lunch. The room is dismissed from left to right and Green quizzes each child as they head toward the bathroom.

"Four times four?" he queries.

For the most part, the teens are well-versed in the material. By the end of the activity, however, it's clear which boys didn't need to watch the video, and which did.

ANGER AND FEAR

Patrick doesn't fully understand the judicial proceedings he's been through thus far in his life. He knows that he's at Guide

Shelter for charges of assault and destruction of property and has had a history of violent activity.

"I pretty much stopped beating people up in first and second grade," he recalls. "In third grade, it all started back up again. I started getting into bad habits and its been like that ever since. I just get mad and I explode."

Nevertheless, he wants to live with his aunt, where he'd still be able to see his mother and younger siblings. He says he doesn't know his dad.

Patrick can't understand why he's been placed at a shelter rather than put on home arrest as he requested.

"I told my P.O. that I was on medication and could control myself but he still won't send me home," says Patrick. "I don't know how to deal with it. Everybody says it's because I'm 12, but I don't understand half the things that are happening."

Patrick has been in lock-up facilities three times and prefers the Guide Shelter because, "they treat you better here."

Wayne, on the other hand, understands the judicial system pretty well. He's currently at the shelter for two counts of theft and one for destruction of property.

He was first arrested in his early teens and has been through three different placements: two shelters and one lock-up situation.

Like Patrick, he much prefers the shelter atmosphere.

"It's 100% different," says Wayne. "In lock-up, you go outside once every two weeks and there's always a locked door behind you. This is much better."

This is Wayne's second stay at the shelter, the first coming as the result of drug charges. He recalls being "high all day, every day" in the past.

"I probably wouldn't even be here if it weren't for drugs," he estimates. He says his past drug use has included marijuana, acid and crack.

Members of the Guide Program receive weekly drug education and counseling, which Wayne says has shown him the negative results of substance abuse. He's confident he can overcome his drug problems, but says he's not sure he'll ever give up marijuana completely.

Within a year of being an adult, he says his perspective on crime has changed recently. He's become scared by the prospect of going to jail.

"Constantly being controlled makes you think," Wayne says. "Now that I'm older I see things differently. I don't want to do bad anymore - I'm tired of that lifestyle."

Wayne says the shelter is like a family and he enjoys the individual counseling the program offers.

"They'll sit down and talk to us if we have a problem," he explains. "They'll help us work through it."

One thing he prefers not to discuss with Guide staff members, however, is the abusive nature of his former home life. His parents are divorced and his mother has been remarried several times.

"The staff can't relate to it," he says. "They've all had nice 'Little House on the Prairie' lives."

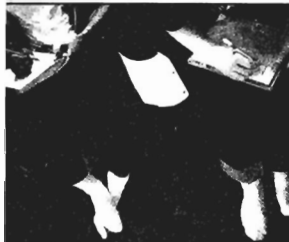
SETTING A POSITIVE EXAMPLE

Employees at the Guide Shelter receive 40 hours of training each year, including first aid, crisis intervention and suicide prevention. The facility employs 21 persons ranging from a social worker and a cook to counselors and relief staff.

The 10-year-old program caters to boys who have been referred to shelter care rather than lock-up by the Department of Juvenile Justice.

Some are sent to the Catonsville Shelter because of a history of truancy, ungovernable behavior or because they've run away enough times that they need supervision. Most, however, come as a result of charges against them - assault, robbery, drug dealing or sex offenses.

In addition to academic schooling, youths work in independent living groups that teach everything from budgeting and conflict resolution to dating and marriage. The boys also learn "job readiness skills," and have regular recreation periods outside the house.



Two counselors are on duty at all times, and those working the midnight to 8 a.m. shift must punch a clock and record status reports every 15 minutes as a part of the shelter's security system.

Green, 22, works the weekday shift at Guide, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. A recent graduate of West Virginia University, he started at the shelter in September. He shares daytime duty with fellow counselor Yolanda Richardson, 30, who has been at the shelter for six years.

Contrary to the teens' perception, neither Richardson nor Green grew up with 'Little House on the Prairie' lives. Both were raised in Baltimore City and say strong mothers helped see them through to a positive lifestyle.

Green was raised by a single mom who worked two jobs and kept him "on the straight and narrow." He had friends who sold drugs, but he was able to keep his own life together by learning to say no and "doing his own thing."

He feels working at Guide gives him a way to show kids a positive way of seeing things.

"Sometimes they don't even believe in themselves and don't care what happens to them," says Green. "They don't actually consider that they have a life they can turn positive and make something good out of it."

Richardson, too, was raised by a single mother, who worked two jobs. Her mother found time to earn a bachelor's degree.

Once a teen-age mom herself, Richardson now has three children, ages 12, 9 and 8 months. She says she "cleaned up my mess," and hopes to serve as a model for others.

"My mom didn't let her circumstances get her down," she insists, "I felt I owed it to her to do the same."

Both counselors know they won't get that message through to most of the boys at Guide, and even the ones who do get it usually understand only after they've left the program.

Of the many challenges they face as counselors, one of the greatest is learning to balance their roles as both a friend and teacher.

"They think they can try you," says Richardson of the Guide teens. "You have to make a stand and let them know, 'we're professionals, but we're not gonna let you take charge and run us out of here.'"

GOING FOR THE GOLD

As lunch ends, the boys start their chores and clean up the house.

Alex is a teen who has earned the shelter's lone designation as a "resident manager" by following rules and respecting his peers and staff. He steps forward to explain the Guide incentive system, which is based on behavior modification.

Residents earn points for cooperating with the staff, while losing points for misbehavior.

Continued good conduct advances the boys through various levels of achievement, starting with an orientation period and eventually, after a month's time, topping out at the gold level.

Incentives range from a higher allowance, reaching a maximum of \$1 a day, to later bed times and even home visits, where allowed.

Alex refers to himself as the "golden child" and explains, "I'm the positive one." At the time, he leads his peers, having spent 13 days on the gold level. The shelter record is 27.

Michael Dabney, a third-year counselor who works the evening shift, explains how the system incorporates "The Wisdom of Better" - if you know better, then you will do better.

"Our children for the most part don't know the better because they've never been taught that," says Dabney, himself the father of a 6-year-old daughter. "You can't expect a child to clean up a kitchen or behave in public if he hasn't been taught that."

Just as Alex gives his explanation of the shelter's policies, the gold level leader board is updated to reveal that he narrowly trails another resident.

The announcement brings about a fair amount of teasing from the boys.

The teasing among teens is good natured, as it is often throughout the day. But that's not always the case. Over the past year, three youths have been removed from the shelter for aggression towards a peer.

Sacra, who has spent five years as Guide's academic teacher, is careful not to create the opportunity for teasing in the classroom. She says the boys are very guarded about their level of achievement, especially if it's not up to the others'.

A former Anne Arundel County substitute teacher, Sacra's been attacked on three different occasions during her time at the shelter, but has never been hurt.

"I haven't been scared here in quite a while," she says, noting that she can call the boys' parole officers at any time. "Although they have some problems, because they live upstairs it's easier



to control."

In the incentive program, Sacra can award their work and give points for behaving properly. She has a number of incentives programs of her own, including various honor roll certificates and the "Snickers challenge" for learning multiplication tables.

"You wouldn't think it would matter that much to kids who have stolen cars and that sort of thing, but it does work," says Sacra.

As she hands out honor roll certificates in the early afternoon, the incentive value is obvious. Alex proudly displays his certificates, while Patrick asks for one of his own.

After learning that he hasn't been at the shelter long enough to earn the reward, he asks sheepishly, "Can't you just pretend?"

TRYING TO BE PERFECT

In the afternoon the boys have an educational program until 4 p.m. On this day, they work on revising an essay they wrote in reaction to a movie about gangs in Los Angeles.

Periodically, Wayne asks how to spell certain words - such as "violence" and "influence" - and states, "I'm trying to be 100% perfect. ... This is for a grade."

He has his GED but still works hard on assignments. That's often not the case at the shelter. Some boys who have their diploma don't feel the need to do more work.

Wayne occasionally interrupts his train of thought to ask questions of a visitor. "Were you scared coming over here?" "Is there a lot of controversy about this place?"

After he hands in the paper, Richardson critiques his work, noting the mistakes to be fixed.

"I ain't writing it again," Wayne shoots back.

Some of his peers flash glances in his direction, letting him know to knock it off. The actions are reflective of an atmosphere Cheryl Litsey likes to see at the shelter.

"Once you get a positive culture going, new kids work right into that," the director explains.

Wayne declares, "It looks like my goal of going through here without losing a point is about to be shattered."

He offers no further argument and loses no points for the mild outburst. A week later he'll lose his first set of points - minus five for not eating dinner. "If I had known I would've lost points, I at least would've had a couple bites," he claims later.

As T.J. gets feedback on his paper, he disputes which terms count as slang. When Richardson concedes on one of the terms, he celebrates a small victory.

"She wouldn't listen to me because I'm only 15, about to be 16," gloats T.J. "She's twenty-something."

DOWN THE STRETCH

Cheryl Litsey says 90% of the kids at the Guide Shelter have a goal of going home. Youths will stay from 30 to 90 days at the facility, and face a number of possibilities after they leave, including drug treatment, placement in group homes or foster care.

Patrick hopes to go home but realizes that the decision is out of his hands. He guesses that he'll wind up back at the shelter after his court date.

"Hopefully, I'll live with my aunt, but I don't know," he says. "I haven't met my new P.O. yet."

Wayne outlines three possibilities for himself: living with his father in Frederick County, his mother in Florida, or being sent to lock-up for a year or more. He gives himself a 30% chance of going home.

Nevertheless, he feels confident that he'll get a job and straighten his life out whenever he gets the chance. He calls himself a "jack of all trades and a master of none."

Litsey says the best part of the job is hearing that a kid who left the program is doing well. The hardest part, however, is having to send a kid away from the shelter because the program isn't working for them.

"We try to work with a child for as long as possible before I call and say, 'This just isn't working,' she comments. "It's not an easy thing to say, 'Come get this kid for lock-up, he can't live in a minimum security environment.'"

Another stumbling block, she says, is the public's perception of the boys. She says community fears can cost the boys opportunities for community service.

"There is this perceived picture of what a juvenile delinquent does or looks like," says Litsey. "A lot of the kids are just normal kids who got caught doing the same thing plenty of other kids are doing as well."

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