

Kinderhaven forges bonds with abused, neglected Bonner County children

Kinderhaven director **Phyllis Horvath** has seen firsthand the devastating effects that drug use, abuse and neglect can have on children growing up in Bonner County families.

While many families consider their children a success if they get into a prestigious college, win a state championship or perform at a higher level than others in their grade level, Horvath measures success a little differently.

The least-favored child in a family of six who was teased and picked on by his mother and siblings finally tells a Kinderhaven staff member he hates her – a breakthrough for a boy too afraid to speak crossly for fear of repercussions.

A 10-year-old sexually abused by her stepfather and blamed by her mother for causing it learns to snuggle.

An 8-year-old who has never been to school accepts the challenges of her teacher and tutor and advances past her peers after several months of hard work.

“When children finally feel safe and comfortable they begin to relax into themselves,” said Horvath, who has been at Kinderhaven for three years and has a background as a professional counselor and manager. “They don’t know who they are until then and it starts to reveal itself to them.”

Kinderhaven is a shelter for children who have been removed from their homes but are not yet assigned to foster care. The average stay is six to eight months, but some have stayed up to two years.

Kinderhaven has received grants from ICF for more than 10 years and will be recognized as ICF’s Featured Nonprofit at the Regional Luncheon in Coeur d’Alene on Aug. 26.

The shelter opened its doors in 1996. Prior to that, kids removed from families had to go to juvenile detention or jail until a foster family could be found to help them. Kinderhaven moved into its current facility, which was built as a home for developmentally disabled adults, 10 years ago.

The older, ranch-style home features a “teen room” den where older children can hang out, a large living room with a flat screen tv for Friday movie nights, and a laundry room where a commercial washing machine can handle laundry for the up to 16 kids who can be at Kinderhaven.

Maintaining a home-like atmosphere is crucial at Kinderhaven, which is open 24/7. After school, everyone has a snack and works on homework. The all-female staff prepares meals and everyone sits at the dining room table and eats together. Children are given chores depending on their ages.

“If our children can form an attachment to one of us it’s healthy and gives them the experience of being valued,” Horvath said. “We’re getting them ready to have a successful experience in a permanent home.”

Horvath said Kinderhaven has a core group of supporters, including local businesses that host fundraisers. The shelter often receives tickets to community events like the Festival at Sandpoint.

Recreational activities are important at Kinderhaven and Horvath said she and her staff take advantage of free or inexpensive activities like kite flying, climbing on the backyard play equipment and shooting hoops. Occasionally donors will provide free passes to movie theaters or Silverwood amusement park.

“The community is really responsive here, and I have the hardest working board of directors I’ve ever known,” she said. “We try to instill a sense of gratitude in our kids for what they receive and have them participate in fundraisers to help others.”