

Creating a sense of home: Local couple offers nurturing environment for children in need



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For Penny Vincelli, the idea to open a home for children in need didn't spawn from a particularly tormented childhood, nor was it inspired by childhood memories akin to a Norman Rockwell painting.

It is the product of a long commitment of giving back to those in need and a vision of something better for kids who are struggling in the absence of a normal family life.

Penny's drive to realize the vision of a children's home in Helena has been steadfast, infectious, and supported whole-heartedly by Steve Vincelli, her husband of 38 years.

The final steps are underway and soon The Little Children's Home will start accepting children.

On a recent frigid afternoon in Helena, Penny walked through the 100-year-old farmhouse that will serve as the home and spoke of the children who would be embraced by the family environment she hopes to create there.

The room where stuffed teddy bears currently line a reading nook with a glorious view of Mount Helena would be perfect for a little girl (or maybe two), she said.

She pointed out the thoughtfully planned closets that will provide appropriate space for siblings sharing a room. She noted the historic features like stained glass, chandeliers and heating pipes still intact.

She then thanked the carpenter for working on a Saturday while he put his boots on before heading out into the snow. Vincelli's warm and welcoming spirit is mirrored by the atmosphere of this historic home.

While the amenities of the house are important, they are merely the brick and mortar -- the sense of home comes from the mission to provide a safe, stable and long-term environment for children in need of care primarily in the tri-county area.

First in Montana

The Little Children's Home model is different from the group homes, residential treatment facilities or foster care placement efforts in Montana. Vincelli says there is nothing like it this side of the Mississippi.

It's a nonprofit organization based in a private, traditional family home serving up to eight children, and is funded without using public dollars.

The search for "house parents" is one of the final steps before opening up. The parents are a key part in Vincelli's vision for the Little Children's Home to become the place where the children are physically, spiritually and emotionally nurtured by dedicated parents.

Similar models have found success elsewhere, like at WinShape Homes based in Atlanta, Georgia.

WinShape Homes, established by Chick-fil-A Founder S. Truett Cathy and his wife Jeannette in 1987, "provides children who are victims of circumstance with a secure family environments in which to grow and mature."

Vincelli has visited there and other locations where this model seems to be working.

Addressing a need

"I believe society has the responsibility to take care of children who can't take care of themselves," she said.

The Little Children's Home will generally admit children with mild to moderate emotional and/or behavioral problems such as depression, anxiety, school conduct problems, academic underachievement, poor social skills or anger management. But it's not a therapeutic environment for children with extreme forms of physical, mental or emotional disabilities. It's not foster care placement or an adoption agency.

It's a home with committed "house parents" and siblings -- some may be biological and others not -- following Christian values. Space in the home will be provided at no cost to the children who live there or their families. It's a home where these children will reside until they go to college, the military or the workforce. But Vincelli will set aside one room for those who return on school break or on leave from the military, because children who have lived there will never "age-out."

Referrals will typically come from churches, other children's programs, judges or grandparents who need assistance.

Penny says it's quite evident that the need is great in Montana.

In 2011, 2.7 million grandparents in the U.S. were responsible for their grandchildren. That's nearly 8,000 grandparents in Montana facing another round of child-rearing and sometimes lacking resources, energy or desire to be a primary guardian. Census data indicates that number continues to increase.

The number of children in foster care in Montana is the highest it's been in more than a decade, according to the Department of Public Health and Human Services. Advocates for abused and neglected children in the tri-county area say the number of new cases filed this past year is the highest it's ever been, putting a strain on the caseworkers, the court system and stretching foster families thin.

Funding starts with the founders

Vincelli certainly isn't afraid to open her checkbook to bring this dream to life. She and Steve purchased the large ranch home for the effort with no intention of earning a paycheck. In fact, the only paid staff beyond the necessary part-time social worker is the house parents who will make a good wage with living necessities and health insurance provided. Relief parents will be used for days off and breaks for the house parents, but Penny is hopeful these will be volunteers.

Vincelli said The Little Children's Home is committed to being privately-funded and a non-governmental child care provider. The projected estimated annual budget is \$167,986. Those funds come through voluntary donations from individuals, corporations, foundations and churches. Also, Steve's Cafe on Montana Avenue recently started serving dinners on Friday and Saturday nights with all the proceeds going toward the home.

Catering to success

Steve's Cafe is a neighborhood eatery in three locations (two in Helena and one in Meridian, Idaho). But these are merely Steve Vincelli's most recent endeavors. After working in the development of restaurant concepts corporately, he opened his first establishment in 1999 -- The Montana City Grill and Saloon.

Eyeing retirement, he sold the successful restaurant a decade later, but soon was feeling unsatisfied. Steve's Cafe on Custer Avenue took off with a bang. It consistently was so busy that the couple opened a sister cafe on the other side of the railroad tracks. The business has earned "Best Breakfast in Helena" in Independent Record polls every year since opening.

Kay Matthews and Corky Johnson are regulars at Steve's Cafe.

"It's the best food in Helena," Matthews said. "Whatever you order tastes good, the staff is trained, polite, friendly and make you feel at home."

The local couple happily expanded their visits past breakfasts and lunch to enjoy evening meals to support The Little Children's Home.

Deb Whitcomb and Terry Healow started eating dinner there once a week ever since the restaurant started serving dinners. Whitcomb said the food is fantastic and they are supportive of the mission (she is on the board for the home).

"Penny has had this mission in mind for a long time," Whitcomb said. "It's contagious and so believable."

Penny's drive

Penny has always wanted to open a children's home with the hope of giving young people in crisis a safe haven. She knows that research shows the sense of security a child finds at a home base is foundational for success in life. Characteristics of this home-base environment include warmth, emotional availability, stimulation, family cohesion and that day-to-day rhythm.

That's exactly the environment Penny hopes to create, and her enthusiasm is infectious.

Terry Tollakson, a Helena therapist, affirms these sentiments.

“A child that has a stable relationship with adults will be very likely to have a healthy attachment, which promotes successful positive self worth and is essential,” she said. “As a result, future relationships for the child will be healthier. The probability of mental health issues that are negative for the child will be lessened. Consistency, predictably and stability with an adult is a powerful recipe for a child’s success.”

Holly Kaleczyc met the Vincellis while she worked as the director of the Friendship Center. Steve and Penny often volunteered for events to benefit the temporary residence and crisis center primarily for women victimized by domestic or sexual abuse.

“They want to fill this gap the best way possible,” Kaleczyc said, adding that she is consistently impressed with their patience when roadblocks are met.

Kaleczyc, who has committed her career to social service and social justice, didn’t know them well when she agreed to help with the project. Right away Kaleczyc was moved by Penny’s commitment and willingness to see it through.

“She is patient and her heart, soul and mind are driven to providing safe and stable relationships for children,” Kaleczyc said. “She’s not just blowing wind. You meet with her and after a short time you know she is going to make it happen. This is going to work out because she will make the best of any situation. It’s just the power of goodness in her. When you are on the road with Penny, you know it will work out.”

More info

The Little Children’s Home will provide a stable, long-term home for children who are in crisis and need a safe and nurturing environment. The final steps are in motion and soon children will reside there. An open house is planned for later this month, and anyone interested should contact Steve or Penny Vincelli. For more information about the home visit <http://thelittlechildrenhome.org>.