



OPEN HOUSES
Diane Tomasi and Carla Braveman join the staff and legion of volunteers who bring comfort to those nearing the end of life at Big Bend Hospice. The Longley family (at left) creates a family atmosphere for the adolescents at Boys Town.

SILVER ANNIVERSERIES OF SERVICE

by Nathan Spicer

This year, two of Tallahassee's most well-respected philanthropic organizations are celebrating 25 years of service to our area. Both Boys Town North Florida and Big Bend Hospice have advanced from humble beginnings with small budgets into well-established organizations providing vital services throughout the region.

Boys Town has its heart set on helping children who have lost a good quality of life due to unfortunate circumstances. They're not sick, but their home lives have left them longing for a better situation, one more able to help them advance and succeed as they mature.

A HOME FOR ADOLESCENTS IN NEED

One would suppose that a house occupied by six boys, two parents and a little girl would inevitably contain discarded wrappers from Baby Ruth bars, baseballs in corners and dirty clothes on every bed – none of which would be made, of course. Six boys would be a handful for any couple.

But for Wayne and Aiysha Longley, the boys are not burdensome. Not one stray magazine is lying around or one plate

left in the sink – even the video games are thoughtfully arranged. Professional cleaners play no part; the couple and the boys who live with them – residents of Boys Town North Florida (the little girl is their 3-year-old daughter, Daria) – are totally responsible for the home's organization. According to the Boys Town national Web site (boystown.org), the nonprofit, non-sectarian organization began 90 years ago in Nebraska under the direction of Father Edward Flannigan. Now it provides direct care to more than 51,000 children and assists 1.4 million more through its youth and health care programs in a dozen states and Washington, D.C.

The organization began here – it was the first site that opened outside of the original Boys Town – in 1983 with one home and six children. Today, the local Boys Town campus spreads across 10 acres of land in northwestern Tallahassee, with a total of five therapeutic family homes – three houses dedicated to boys and two for girls.

"We're full, always full," says the organization's development director, Dena Strickland. Her work with Boys Town began 15 years ago when she volunteered

to coordinate a Christmas Classic golf tournament to raise funds and immediately recognized the organization's potential. She started working with Boys Town part time and eventually become a full-time employee.

At Boys Town, services go beyond the treatment homes for adolescents and include treatment foster care, traditional foster care and a national crisis and referral hotline (800-448-3000). The annual budget locally is \$2.4 million, with about 60 percent of the funding coming from state government, according to Strickland.

The remainder is funded through private donations and fundraising events. In addition, "pizza parties, barbecues, Thanksgiving meals – all are enjoyed by our children ... thanks to our great donors," Strickland says.

The Longleys are family teachers in the Boys Town program. Basically, they act as surrogate parents for less-fortunate children who were frequently abused and neglected. In their previous lives, drug dealers lingered outside their front doors; teachers gave up on them; parents either didn't care or weren't able to fix the problems. Often, parents were the root

of the problem. On average, the boys got bounced from home to home seven times before landing with the Longleys.

Boys Town does not accept applicants without hesitation, however. Each child hoping to belong must compose an explanatory essay detailing his or her reason for wanting to live there, and, if accepted, must sign a contract.

That shows dedication to the organization. Children arrive at Boys Town with some harsh, antisocial attitudes and behaviors that helped them learn and survive. While those approaches may have protected them in the past, here, they only create barriers. Yet the Longleys show the kids that not all people have their own selfish intentions lingering behind seemingly altruistic actions. Some people help because they care, and that's most important.

The Longleys care, without question, but they also have no tolerance for bad behavior.

"You have to be hard on them because the world will be two times harder," says Wayne Longley.

The Longleys are preparing their charges for the real world – whether or not the kids realize it – and their parenting methods are so sound that friends call and ask for advice. To hone those parenting skills, they spent two weeks at the Boys Town headquarters in Nebraska. There, they received instruction that prepared them for the kind of work they'd soon experience. Relating to children who grew up without anyone to whom they can relate no doubt poses large obstacles for parents attempting to truly unlock buried emotions – ones pressed so far down, their scars have hid them for years. But the Longleys continue their pursuit. Those barriers do not remain intact for long.

Once the parents and children overcome their hesitance and take the first steps on a long, difficult path to a happier life, the Longleys' perseverance takes shape.

In the case of Edmond, those shapes came in the form of the first letters of the alphabet. Edmond, who "never had success in school," according to Wayne Longley, "now he gets As and Bs and one C ... We live for those success stories."

THE 'UPLIFTING' WORK OF DEALING WITH DYING

Diane Tomasi, community relations director for Big Bend Hospice in Tal-

lahassee, smiles as she considers which aspect of her work makes her the most passionate: "The opportunity to come into family's lives at the most poignant times," she says, as well as getting to "witness remarkable human beings."

Working in a hospice where one handles illness and death every day would seem depressing, but "it's very uplifting," Tomasi says. "It reminds you of the sanctity and preciousness of life."

Hospice President and CEO Carla Braveman has similar feelings about her profession. "It's a calling," she says.

According to the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, hospice care began in medieval times, when travelers sought a restful place during long journeys.

Centuries later, at a Yale University lecture in 1963, Dame Cicely Saunders introduced the concept of specialized care for those nearing the end of life.

The concept came to Tallahassee in 1983 when a group of volunteers created Big Bend Hospice (bigbendhospice.org) as a way to better serve those struggling to cope with the sickness and the mental and spiritual struggles associated with imminent death. Today, Big Bend Hospice serves an eight-county area (Franklin, Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon, Liberty, Madison, Taylor and Wakulla) and operates a home-like facility offering on-site care. "Our Hospice House has 12 'bedrooms' which stay filled most of the time with a waiting list," Tomasi says. Patients don't stay permanently, but for short-term pain and symptom management. "Our goal is to return them home," she says, which could be a private home, nursing home or other facility.

Big Bend Hospice currently has 297 full- and part-time employees who work with more than 350 families each day. Last year, Big Bend Hospice served 1,532 families.

Hospice does not serve just those directly facing death, but anyone influenced by that passing. The employees and volunteers of Big Bend Hospice realize the need for comfort for both the sick and their family and friends, and have developed strategies for assisting both groups. Help comes in many different forms at Big Bend Hospice, from the primary care doctor to counselors, music therapists, chaplains, nurses and health aides. This team visits patients wherever they are needed: hospitals, nursing homes, or the

patients' homes. They even visit homeless shelters when necessary.

The organization is a group of about 400 extensively trained volunteers. They visit patients to do any number of requisite tasks, many of which seem somewhat insignificant but are wonderfully convenient for patients. Sometimes that task simply involves holding a hand or reading a story – just being there is a comfort.

That kind of comfort is the main goal of Big Bend Hospice. Hospice care becomes involved when "the medical community has said ... there are no more treatments we can provide," Tomasi says. "Basically (the situation) can't change ... there is no cure for the illness. But what we can do is make sure you are as comfortable as possible so that life becomes worth living again."

The Hospice House grounds instill a deeper sense of calm and comfort. Thanks to contributions from the community, Big Bend has cultivated a beautiful, tranquil setting. One man, who eventually became a patient, donated a stone Sisyphus figure; another volunteer tends a flower garden near the front of the house; a local sculptor erected a fountain in the shape of a tree, modeled after Big Bend's oak tree symbol; a large, stained-glass window casts multi-colored light over a serene setting known as the Meditation Room, and a similar window looks over the kitchen.

Like the grounds, patients' rooms differ greatly from a traditional hospital or doctor's office. The rooms have nightstands, soft beds, desks – even stuffed armchairs. The intent is to create a "home" atmosphere. Just because patients are staying in a hospice does not mean their environment must be – cold, antiseptic and disconnected. Instead, warmth radiates from every corner.

The warm and comfortable philosophy applies to medical treatment as well. "Everyone deserves to be free of pain," Tomasi says.

Big Bend Hospice is, after all, a place of peace. If someone feels pain, the doctors will alleviate enough discomfort so the patient can relax. The staff's ultimate goal is to ensure people near the end of life can keep hope alive – hope that their last days will be meaningful. Not only meaningful to them, but to their family and friends as well.

As Big Bend Hospice CEO Braveman says, "Hospice isn't about the dying, it's about the living."