

And finally.

WITH LYN RIDDLE



On what it really means to be a hero

There's nothing fancy about the way Generations Group Homes looks, but it is magical nonetheless.

Boys, abused and victimized by others, arrive at the southern Greenville County facility after committing some sort of sexual act against someone else. It is their second chance. For many the only other choice would have been juvenile jail.

Often they come in shackled, wearing a jumpsuit and carrying a plastic bag with a toothbrush inside. They are 13 to 17 years old.

The boys enter a regimented life of chores and responsibilities and consequences when they fall short. They go to school. They dress up in slacks, shirts and ties for field trips. They sleep in dorms and more often than not cover their twin beds with comforters bearing the name of their favorite sports teams. They have birthday parties, many for the first time. Musical chairs is the No. 1 attraction at the fall festival.

In short, they get to have the sort of lives they should have had before.

And that largely is because the staff at Generations has managed to create something special among co-workers. They're not just colleagues, but an extended family, caring for as many as 46 boys at a time.

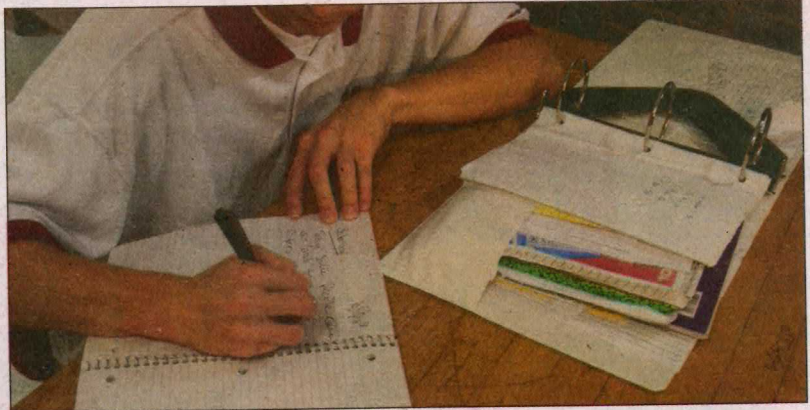
They show respect, one to the other. They care when concerns outside of work bear down. They stand in for one another when necessary.

"We have each other," said Charlene Jones, the child care services director.

And that's vital because this is not easy work. It's messy.

Boys come in angry. They throw desks. They curse. They refuse to participate.

But then the magic happens.



Dave Wilder/Contributing photographer

They notice a staff member cares, maybe it's their counselor, but it might also be the cook. They see the other boys following the rules, getting privileges. They make a connection with an adult, often the first they've had in their lives.

With sexual abuse, the problem has little to do with sex and everything to do with power. The boys felt powerless in their victimization and they acted out.

At Generations, they become part of a group, something bigger than themselves, and that basic human need to belong is met.

"Kids will go to any group that accepts them," said Kathleen Reynolds, the chief executive officer. "That's why gangs are so prevalent."

Reynolds founded Generations in 1991 as a tribute to her younger sister who was raped on a date. The trajectory of her sister's life changed immediately. Reynolds wanted to make sure others had a different choice.

The nature of the program changed in 1999 when Reynolds questioned whether they needed to restrain the boys as often as they did. She discovered Cornell University had developed therapeutic

crisis intervention, which begins with preventing a conflict from developing in the first place and then offers tools to de-escalate those that do.

"Instead of rule enforcer, we're teachers," said Brian Clark, the facility director.

He said they break through the walls the boys have erected to protect themselves through mutual respect, investing in them with sensitivity and by simply being available. That means noticing when someone is having a bad day or a tough time with homework. That means stopping and taking the time to talk.

It is offering a gentle yet firm hand.

And then comes more magic. Once a boy realizes what happened to him is not his fault, that he is a worthy individual, the desire to act out in that way vanishes.

And here's how they know. They surveyed all the boys who had come through the program in the past five years – about 400. They discovered 98 percent had not had another sexual offense and 92 percent had no offense at all. And they counted traffic tickets as offenses.

In the education building there is a wall of heroes that lists the names of boys who finish the tough program before their sentence is up. It also lists the names of donors.

There should be another list: staff members. Heroes all.



THE NON-PROFIT Generations Group Homes is raising money to build a \$2 million, 30-bed medical facility.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, go to www.generationsgroup.com or contact Roseanne Brown at Roseanne@GenerationsGroup.com.

If you have a story that will inspire, challenge or amuse.