

Daily Herald

Big Picture . Local Focus

A second chance

Young men, caught between childhood and adulthood, find help in getting off the streets, learning the basic life skills they need to survive

BY AMY BOEREMA
Daily Herald Staff Writer

Posted Sunday, October 22, 2006

For three weeks this summer, Ted Catalan felt nothing.

He had no job. He watched TV all day and barely ate.

He left the house only to drink, smoke pot or steal pills from stores.

He had just graduated from Palatine High School, but Ted felt no excitement for the next phase of his life. He felt no hope.

"I was just extremely numb," Ted says now. "My mind was closed off to everything."

His mom had just found out he and his identical twin, Isaac, then 18, were gay.

After a heated argument on June 19, Isaac left home, urging Ted to do the same. For three weeks, Ted stayed at a relative's, Isaac at a friend's.

Through a counselor, the twins were connected with a transitional housing program operated by Naperville's NCO Youth & Family Services - and their lives slowly began to show signs of turning around.

On July 6, they moved into separate units in the same Woodridge apartment building.

NCO's housing program, for men 18 to 21, is unique in the Western suburbs, social service leaders say. The group also operates a smaller one in Batavia.

On-site case managers teach independent living skills such as how to open bank accounts,



Marcelle Bright/mbright@dailyherald.com
Twins Isaac and Ted Catalan, 19, take a walk between classes at College of DuPage. The brothers, who once were homeless, are enrolled in a transitional housing program that teaches them independent living skills.

interview for jobs and enroll in school.

The program provides mental health and substance abuse counseling, and teaches skills ranging from parenting and anger management to writing resumes and using credit cards.

The twins are part of what some service leaders call "the forgotten group" because, at 18, they are legally considered adults by the Department of Children and Family Services.

But members of that group often don't have the skills to function on their own, says Debbie Carr, NCO housing and placement coordinator.

As the number of homeless youths increases in the suburbs, leaders say, so does the need for this type of service.

With the help of case workers, therapists and each other, Isaac and Ted have started to discover a future they once were unsure they had.

"It's giving us a second chance," Isaac says. "It's a chance to do something more."

A fresh start

When he grows up, Ted says, he doesn't know what he wants to do. Maybe act. Or dance. Or sing. But he knows he wants to be rich.

These days, four months after being homeless, both he and Isaac dream big because they can.

They have a place to sleep. They have jobs at Kohl's. They're full-time students at College of DuPage.

They have a plan for the future - they'll earn an associate's degree, then transfer to Columbia College or University of Illinois-Chicago.

Their transition wasn't easy. A week after arriving in Woodridge, the twins wanted to quit. They weren't used to structure, to following rules or attending meetings. They missed their friends.

Eventually, they settled in. Ten years from now, Isaac says, he'll describe this time in his life as a "necessary one" of discovery.

That's what NCO officials had in mind when they created the voluntary transitional housing program in Woodridge in 2002.

They had come into contact with many males in their late teens and early 20s who lacked independent living skills and fell prey to substance abuse or had trouble holding jobs, Carr says.

The men's backgrounds vary. Some have endured drug addictions and physical abuse, some have been in jail. Many have parents who have their own domestic violence or substance abuse issues, Carr says.

NCO's Batavia program, started in 2000, holds four men. The Woodridge program can hold 10. Both offer on-site clinical help every day, Carr says.

Boys are referred by police and probation officers, teachers and social service agencies throughout the suburbs.

Once accepted, after pre-screenings and assessments, they're provided with fully furnished apartments, which they share with a roommate. They're connected with county services, including medical aid and food stamps. A doctor who serves as an NCO board member gives free physical exams.

Then they work with case managers to set financial, interpersonal, job, school and, if needed, substance abuse recovery goals.

The required stay is four months, though the average is six months to a year.

Apartments are regularly checked for cleanliness. Participants have curfews. They meet with case managers several times weekly, individually and in groups.

Carr hopes to soon start a similar program for girls, in a different Woodridge apartment building. Funding is always a challenge, housing leaders say, but the need is there.

In 2005, more than 8,000 homeless youths lived in the suburbs and northern Illinois, and more than 25,000 throughout the state.

The numbers typically include only youths who found beds in shelters or housing programs, says Kathryn Nelson of the DuPage Federation on Human Services Reform.

"In terms of finding youth that don't have a bed, it's a different ballpark," she says. "We don't know how many are couch-surfing."

The low point

Isaac told his mom he was gay because he "couldn't live a lie."

She was shocked. A deeply religious woman, she told him this couldn't happen, not to her family, he says.

Their mother declined to be interviewed for this story.

"I never saw her cry that hard or get that angry before," Isaac recalls.

After 20 minutes, he had to leave. She never formally kicked the boys out but started to pack some of Isaac's stuff.

"I felt it was not a safe environment because of her shock," Isaac says.

Ted stayed at a cousin's home in Wheeling, Isaac at a friend's in Palatine. It was the first time they had been apart.

The twins moved to Palatine from Evanston when they were about 12. They're the youngest of six children, the rest of whom are much older.

Their parents divorced when they were 5, so the twins and their mom were the only ones at home for parts of their childhood.

Growing up, the twins say they knew they were different from other boys - they always bonded more with females and noticed things like the details on boys' clothes.

When at 16 they admitted to each other they were gay, it was a relief, they say, and cemented their best-friend bond.

While Isaac told his mom he was gay, she heard about Ted through the grapevine, Ted says. The day before the twins moved to Woodridge, she met Ted at a McDonald's and asked him if he was. He said yes.

The boys say they understand their mom's reaction - she fears what she doesn't understand.

"We had a lifetime to figure it out," Ted says. "She only had a few seconds."

When the twins were apart, they talked each day. Both suffered from depression and had daylong crying bouts. Both also were anorexic, though for different reasons.

"I wanted to punish myself," Isaac says. "I hated myself for causing my mom pain."

Meanwhile, many days, Ted had no energy to even leave the house. Once, he was so hungry he binged on crackers and steak sauce.

They were the only ones who understood the other's pain. Ted was numb. Isaac felt the world was moving in slow motion. He wondered if this was all life would ever offer him, if this was as good as it got.

A friend suggested counseling, and through that, the boys found NCO.

Creating resumes

On a Monday night, the twins and two others gather at a table next to a large fish tank in Apt. 1, program headquarters.

It's the weekly life skills meeting, a 12-week curriculum where they learn about credit cards, insurance, hygiene issues and legal aid.

Tonight, they learn to create resumes. Case manager Val Maty says it should include contact information, skills, education and the job they're seeking.

If you want to be a KFC cashier, she asks, what skills can you offer?

"The more details you can give, the better," she says.

The group debates how detailed they can get. Should knowing how to use a fax machine be included?

"If you're applying to work in a junkyard, they're not going to look at that," says Jacob Hurwitz, 20, another client.

Jacob asks how to include a weird skill, like knowing how to milk a cow. Val suggests turning it into a farm skill, like "assisting in milk production."

"No, I would not say 'squeeze the milk from the cow,'æ" Val says, overhearing a wisecrack.

She asks the men to create an objective by picking a job they want and offering skills. Jacob picks being a vehicle services technician, where he can exhibit his "exceptional motor skills."

"Will they know what motor means?" Val asks.

"I can put at the end 'no pun intended,'æ" Jacob offers.

Ted writes that he wants to manage a dance studio, but his goal is unclear, muddled by too many phrases.

"It's too long, Ted," Val says. "Employers don't have time to read all that."

Val and the group help him tighten it. After each boy has gone, the twins reread theirs.

"I like mine," announces Isaac, who wants an advertising, design or illustration internship.

"I do, too," says Ted.

Success and turnover

Once as kids, Ted slammed his finger in a car door and it wouldn't stop bleeding. He called Isaac, who helped him take care of it.

Isaac's older, by nine minutes. He's take-charge and knows how to get things done, Ted says. Isaac decided they would leave home and decided they would enter transitional housing.

Ted lives more in the moment. He doesn't always think things through, Isaac says. He worries about Ted a lot.

But both have grown tremendously since arriving, case manager Latechia Sturkey says. Within two weeks, they filled out financial aid forms, found jobs and enrolled in school.

"They definitely had motivation to be independent when they came in," Sturkey says.

They're the only full-time students with part-time jobs, she says. They're also the program's first openly gay residents.

"Not everyone agrees with their sexual identity, and they have grown to become more comfortable with who they are and expressing that to others who have concerns," Sturkey says.

Not every resident makes as much progress. Last year, 21 men were admitted into the program, Carr says. Two returned to the streets. Ten were considered successes - they gained living skills they didn't have before. The rest were referred to substance abuse or mental health facilities or halfway homes that specialize in handling specific problems.

The program's structure is difficult for some to follow, Sturkey says. Some participants have been discharged for repeatedly disobeying rules or having police contact.

"The group dynamics are sensitive," Sturkey says. "If nine residents see one not following rules, eventually they'll get upset and you'll have a house full of residents doing what they want. It'll be chaos."

Learning to swim

Ted has a category full of unknowns.

Under it fall things he's still cloudy about, things that have no resolution.

Like what kind of job he wants. Or his feelings about religion, now that he's openly gay. Or how his future relationship will be with his mom.

The twins talk with her about once a week. There's still confusion on her end, they say, but she has done research on homosexuality and is making an effort to stay in touch.

On Oct. 4, the twins turned 19. Their mom dropped off pans of spaghetti and garlic bread - their favorite - and individual birthday cakes with their names.

"I love her to death, even if we don't agree on things," Ted says.

Besides teaching them pride in their Hispanic culture, their mom taught them to dream big, to never limit themselves. It's a lesson they take to heart each day.

"She always said when one door closes, another opens," Isaac says.

Besides these unknowns, though, there's stuff that's becoming clearer. For the first time, Ted, the tagalong twin, is doing things on his own. He set up his own savings account and now has about \$400 in it. He took charge of looking up bus routes and schedules.

He feels, he says, like a dog learning to swim - testing the waters by going in a little deeper each time.

"I'm getting thrown out there, but in a stable environment," he says.

That confidence has given him the ability to set his hopes high for the future. The twins don't ask anymore if this is all life will offer. They know there's more.

When their stay is over, they say they'll be ready for "real life."

"And," Isaac says, "we'll live happily ever after."

[dailyherald.com](http://www.dailyherald.com)