

A Shelter Story



Rachael at 16

It has been years since I stayed at Youth Services for Oklahoma County's Family Junction Emergency Youth Shelter, but it saved my life.

In 1982, I was a runaway. Cold, hungry, scared and feeling like there was nothing and no one to turn to. The runaway hotline called the Family Junction Emergency Youth Shelter and a worker came to pick me up in the middle of the night. Although I ran away more than once, the staff always took me back in, never saying anything negative, and they were always so patient. Everyone was so helpful, really.

My background is like so many others. I was born in a charity hospital. We were homeless at the time. As kids, my sister and I had to go door to door begging for food. I remember scraping old refried beans out of a pot in the kitchen sink to try to get something to eat. That is true hunger.

As a teen, I did all sorts of unhealthy things, was expelled from schools, ran away, hitchhiked... basically I was on a self destructive path and never thought that I would see the age of 18.

When I left the Family Junction (for the last time), I was just shy of my 16th birthday. Every night at the shelter, I prayed for a "normal family". I was eventually put with a wonderful foster family. It was a long, hard journey growing up, but eventually it did happen.

It takes more than a willingness to change, it takes people who believe that you can. The staff at the Family Junction did, and my foster parents did. There have been tough times along the way, but considering my background and where things were headed, today is full of blessings.

In 1989, I took my last drink. I've been married for 22 years, have 3 wonderful children, and I am studying to be a social worker at New Mexico State University. It is one way to give back what was so freely given, and to reach out to troubled teens; we speak the same language.

Had you not been there when I was a drugged-up teenager on the streets with nowhere to go, who knows what could have happened? It is so important for troubled kids to know that change is possible. Working with the kids can be such a challenge, and there were many times I pushed the Family Junction staff to the limit. I just wanted to let them know that they may never see what effect they have on someone, but the seeds are planted and can take root.

Thank you again,
Rachael Fordham Leaton
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Rachael today

Story and photos received through Youth Services for Oklahoma County's website and are shared with full permission of Ms. Fordham Leaton.