

Runaways, homeless youth often fleeing hostile home life

.



Posted: Friday, November 20, 2015 6:15 am

By Lauren Slavin 812-331-4376 | lslavin@heraldt.com | [8 comments](#)

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is part of a weekly series that will highlight the work of the 25 local nonprofits funded by the United Way of Monroe County. United Way is in the midst of its annual campaign, which has a fundraising goal of \$1.3 million. Find out more at monroeunitedway.org.

If family members tell you enough times that you're worthless, Alex Doane said, you start to believe them.

Home felt more like a prison to Doane, who while living with grandparents would sneak out of the house to stay with friends in an attempt to escape physical, emotional and sexual abuse by family members who were never charged for those offenses.

Doane's friends knew Doane was gay. But the Bloomfield teen's family taunted the effeminate youth as if they could "bully the gay out of me," said Doane, now a 23-year-old living in Bloomington.

"I was just walking on eggshells all the time," Doane said. "As a teenager, I didn't really have any confidence. The only thing I had confidence in was art and photography."

Doane was willing to give up that creative outlet to escape the pain. After graduating from high school and being thrown out of the house, Doane sold a digital single-lens reflex camera to buy opiates such as fentanyl, a prescription painkiller.

"Stuff that made me numb," Doane said. "I spent every dime I had on drugs and partying, trying to forget."

Nowhere to go

There are more than 1 million homeless youth in the United States, the Congressional Research Service reported in 2013, and between 1 million and 1.7 million runaway youth and youth who have been thrown out of their homes.

This year, the Youth Services Bureau of Monroe County has served 103 youth who identified as homeless or runaways, and sometimes both. November is National Runaway Prevention Month, and the county is attempting to shine a brighter light on the issue for by illuminating the Monroe County Courthouse with green lights.

"Most people are aware of the homelessness issue with adults," said Vanessa Schmidt, Safe Place and shelter outreach coordinator for the Youth Services Bureau of Monroe County. "But people don't really realize there's a whole other population under 18 years old experiencing the exact same thing."

In the 2013-14 school year, the Indiana Department of Education reported that there were 16,233 homeless students in the Hoosier state, a rate of 16 homeless youth for every 1,000 students in Monroe County.

A high percentage of these youth are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer/questioning, or do not identify with one sexual identity or gender expression. While 7 to 8 percent of youth overall identify as LGBTQ, more than 30 percent of homeless youth do, according to the 2015 LGBTQ Youth Provider Survey.

“The reason why they are homeless is because family is unaccepting of them,” said Alysia Fornal, executive director of the nonprofit transitional youth housing agency Stepping Stones. “They’re being kicked out of their home because their family can’t empathize with their child.”

The loss of family, as well as finances, housing and other resources, is traumatizing, Fornal said. The young adults referred to Stepping Stones, a United Way agency, often have serious unmet medical and mental health needs.

Starting to heal

At age 19, Doane weighed 275 pounds. After spending nine months selling belongings for drug money and sleeping wherever a couch was available, Doane’s resources had been exhausted and friendships had been pushed to the limits.

While searching online for youth shelters and services, Doane came across Stepping Stones, where nine youth ages 16 to 21 can live for up to two years while working toward education or employment goals.

Stepping Stones residents spend at least three hours every week learning employment and life skills such as financial management. According to the United Way statistics, 89 percent of teens living at Stepping Stones reported growing their life skills while residents of the program, and all Stepping Stones youth reported improved physical and mental health.

“It’s just unfortunate there aren’t many other programs like us in the state,” Fornal said.

“It’s becoming pretty regular that we have about 30 young people on our waiting list at any time.”

Fornal was Doane’s independent living coach at Stepping Stones, and over the year Doane was a resident, she connected Doane to job opportunities, health care and counseling.

“That is really what started healing me,” Doane said.

Doane knows that the healing process isn't over. Still working several jobs to make ends meet, Doane has lost more than 100 pounds through diet and exercise.

Most important, Doane said, is a new group of friends to provide the support that family never did.

"They've shown me what love is," Doane said. "They've shown me that people can love you unconditionally, even if you have flaws."

'Safe place'

National Runaway Prevention Month is just one month to highlight the year-round work of organizations such as Stepping Stones and the Youth Services Bureau, Schmidt said. She and Fornal are continuing to compile resources in the hope that youth in Monroe County and southern Indiana like Doane can be connected to help before situations become dire.

For those who are in trouble, Schmidt said the first place to start is anywhere you can find a black-and-yellow "Safe Place" sign.

These are places where young adults can enter and find a trusted adult to connect them to help in a moment of crisis.

"We don't want them trying to solve those situations on their own," Schmidt said. "Our hope is maybe they can get to a gas station down the street that is a Safe Place site."

Donation impact to United Way

- \$2/week provides a teen on the verge of homelessness with basic hygiene supplies when they move into a safe transitional shelter program.
- \$4/week supplies 10 healthy, nutritious family-style weekly meals for a group of teens living in a transitional shelter.
- \$10/week provides teens on the verge of homelessness with a week of independent living support to help them finish high school, attain employment and work on the skills to obtain stable housing.

Resources

Binkley House Youth Shelter: 812-349-2507.

National Runaway Safeline: 1-800-RUNAWAY.

- Print comments

eEdition
Your news, unfolded.

CLICK HERE
to see today's
newspaper pages

JOIN HTO Begin your online subscription or
activate complimentary access.