

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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truelife



PHOTOS: LEONARD ORTIZ, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Lauri Burns, center, who runs the nonprofit The Teen Project, is shown with six of the foster girls who are currently living or have in the past lived in Burns' Mission Viejo foster home. Pictured, left to right, Shannon Buhrmaster, 30, Yvonne McDonald, 20, Kaylee Woods, 19, Lauri Burns, Chelsea Roberts, 17, Sarah Brar, 22, and Ashley Moody, 18, who doesn't live at the home but is being placed in a Teen Project home.

Embracing the group

Abuse survivor Lauri Burns finds that she can expand her outreach to teens by leading a nonprofit organization.

By LAURI BURNS
SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

I was born in New York and grew up in a middle-class Jewish home on Long Island. Although my family looked normal on the outside, there was abuse from as far back as I could remember. My understanding of God as a small child was that he was punishing me for something I did in a past life.

My introduction to intravenous drugs was a welcome reprieve to block the memories. At 18, I was released from the juvenile justice



Burns plays with McDonald's son, Skler Springer. As a teenager, Burns was a homeless drug addict with a child.

TRUE LIFE: A foster parent and more

system and became pregnant. By 19, with no where to go, a drug habit and a child, I began working the streets to survive. On Jan. 5, 1987, at the age of 23, I was picked up and driven to a wooded area and beaten brutally by two men with a gun. I was left on a canyon road for dead.

Within 24 hours, I was in a recovery home. It was in that home that I spoke of my abuse for the first time. When my counselor said, "Lauri, you never have to use (drugs) again," I knew what she meant.

Upon my release from the rehab, I started a meeting at my home for single moms struggling with drug addiction. One evening a new woman showed up and told me she'd been living in a crack house with her 12-year-old daughter and needed help. Little Shannon was delivered to my door the next day, and her mom went to a recovery home. Her mother never returned to resume custody.

Not knowing what to do, I applied to be Shannon's foster mom. When officials reviewed my records, they smiled and told me to come back in seven years and suggested I drop Shannon at the children's home. Knowing what it felt like to be left behind, I could not do that. I applied for guardianship and I won.

By 1996, I had bought our first home in Rancho Santa Margarita. It was at this time that I received a call from a single mom who was alleged to be abusing her 4-year-old son and, afraid she might kill him, she asked me for help. In an attempt to help her son, and having forgotten what happened last time, I applied to be a foster mom.

This time, when they called me from Social Services, the answer was different. They told me no one ever comes back when they say seven years. They approved my application.

Two days before Christmas, I got another call. "Is this Lauri? We have you on the list of foster moms, and we have a 15-year-old-girl here with no mother..."

They had me on a list? I could go and pick up anybody's kid? I rushed down there!

Now, 11 years later, I have bought a bigger home. My home keeps growing, and (Social Services) keep on bringing me more children. Each time they call, it is like Christmas!

I often think of how I thought God hated me as a child, and I realize now that he loved me so much he blessed me with everything I need to help these children. Out of the deepest, darkest memories there is a healing power.

I am clear on the fact that over 21 years ago, my life was saved for a larger purpose. I take the kids whom no one else wants – the drug addicts, self-injurious, and those with behavior



LEONARD ORTIZ, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Sarah Brar, 22, right, listens to Yvonne McDonald's story at the home of Lauri Burns in Mission Viejo. Burns' nonprofit organization recently bought a home in Lake Forest at which six females can live.

problems. My experience allows me to see past the actions. When people meet my girls they often say, "They seem so normal." And they are. They just need love.

When my friends and co-workers say "Lauri, you do so much," I cringe. The system kids were the first family I ever bonded with. My home is filled with family, just like everyone else's.

My (biological) daughter, Summer, who was 4 when I got sober, recently graduated from Columbia School of Social Work and will dedicate her life to helping children with autism. We are truly blessed.

Last year, while I was serving on the Foster Care Advisory board, it was brought to my attention that most kids leaving the system are homeless. They leave with no money, cars, parents, phones – they just walk out.

I went home and starting researching, and I was devastated to find these statistics about foster children who turn 18:

- 65 percent emancipate without a place to live.
- Although 70 percent express a desire to go to college, less than 3 percent go.
- An estimated 20,000 to 25,000 are homeless in California.

• More than 1 in 5 who arrived at shelters came directly from foster care.

I had to do something.

When I wasn't at work or at home with the kids, I was talking about it. I started telling my story, and the story of our kids, every chance I could.

In September 2007, I started a nonprofit organization, The Teen Project. I went to the bank with \$400 in donations. I was so excited that people cared. But I never could have imagined how much they cared.

Now, one year later, we have built a strong team of caring volunteers and we are all talking about it everywhere we go. We have raised more than \$250,000 in donations. In August, we bought our first home (in Lake Forest) for six teen girls, and we will support them through college. We have an online database to provide homeless youths with immediate access to shelter. And in 2009 we will initiate an outreach program to help youths still living on the streets. We will bring them bus cards, food cards and phone cards.

The Teen Project is a parent to the parentless. With God's help, we will bring them all home.