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Foster home a sanctuary for neglected children

By PHILLIP VALYS

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The first night for foster mom Zaida Estrada was the most difficult.

She prepared a heaping plate of barbecue chicken and macaroni and cheese at 6 p.m. The bus transporting her six new foster children was late, so Zaida, very worried, continued reheating the dinner on the hour until 10 p.m. rolled around. The kids finally arrived at Children's Harbor, starving and eyes stained with dried tears. They spotted the chicken and pounced on it.

This was a month ago. These days, Estrada has slowly nurtured a relationship with the kids, taking them shopping occasionally, and during evenings will huddle them around the TV to watch a Disney movie. But it hasn't been without its share of rocky moments. Two of the six children, a brother and sister, still wander the foster home depressed because their biological parents haven't visited yet.

"They're distant right now," said Estrada, 44, who is a single woman without children. "They haven't accepted yet that they'll be separated from their parents for awhile."

Children's Harbor is a far-flung, secluded parcel of four foster homes in northwest Pines that gives sanctuary to 34 under-18 children who've been neglected, abused or abandoned by their biological parents. To be eligible for the foster home, the state must issue a court order releasing the children to Child Protective Services, said Children's Harbor CEO Sue Glasscock.

"These kids have been traumatized and are taken away from the only life they know," Glasscock said. "It can be as distressing as kids going without water and electricity for prolonged periods of time to parents flatly saying, 'You have diabetes but I can't help you right now.'"

School teachers are usually the first to notice something awry. Signs of distraction, underperforming in classes and welts on the arm often raise red flags, and they'll report it to the principal and then the Broward Sheriff's Office. If BSO inspects the child's home and spots unhealthy living conditions, they can be removed by court order.

ChildNet, a Broward-based agency, then contracts with the state to house these children temporarily until they've located a foster home. Since single children are easier to place in traditional foster homes, Children's Harbor only accepts sibling groups of two or more, Glasscock added.

"Siblings are far more difficult for placement," Glasscock said. "Children should be comfortable in their new homes, and it helps them to adjust when they see other siblings."

Once the siblings arrive, some are awe-struck by the enormity of their bedrooms, the clean walls and plush furniture, the tooth and hairbrushes stacked neatly inside their bathrooms and the clean clothes laying atop their beds, she added. Their jaws drop at the massive playground area outside, which was donated to Children's Harbor in June 2007 by Home Depot.

Children's Harbor also devotes one of their buildings to teenage girls who become pregnant while in foster care. This maternity ward, which currently houses five teens, is visited by therapists and doctors for regular checkups.

Another building handles family intervention, where a battery of counselors and psychiatrists get involved with families so besieged with financial trouble they can't nurture their children. In these cases, Children's Harbor might pay for their past-due utility bills.

"If Mom is depressed because of her job, for example, we might give her anti-depressants," Glasscock said. "Our goal here is to increase parenting skills and stopping intergenerational abuse."

House parent Tammi Belle and her husband, Errol, saw firsthand how amazed the group of four siblings were when they arrived last November. They'd been deprived of electricity and running water for awhile before ChildNet took them into custody.

"They saw it was such a homey environment here," said Belle, 35. "Now they're well-adjusted and feel comfortable calling me 'mom' and my husband 'dad.'"

Belle's own children, Amani, 9, and Erika, 8, also live with her six foster kids. A brother and sister just arrived in June.

"I liked that my kids welcomed the other kids like family and become humbled themselves," Belle said. "We go to church services together, go shopping, go on outings. They fit right in, like the *Brady Bunch*."

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