

KEEPING PROMISES

Non-profit Jeremiah's Promise assists young people who have grown out of the foster-care system

San Jose resident Kim Golter was volunteering as a court-appointed special advocate for foster youth when she noticed that once the young people were turned out of the foster-care system at age 18, they were ill-prepared to take on the financial and emotional challenges of the world.

"There was very little in financial support, housing support, and college support," Golter says. "But the greatest problem was the dearth of emotional support."

Each year, approximately 200 young people are released from the foster-care systems of Santa Clara and San Mateo counties when they turn 18. Many quickly fall into lives of poverty. "Homelessness is 50 percent to 60 percent in this area within three weeks of emancipation," Golter says.

Unable to continue watching these youth fall through the cracks, Golter founded the nonprofit Jeremiah's Promise in 2002. She named it after the biblical passage Jeremiah 29:11: " 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you, not harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.' "

Two years later, Golter opened a home in Palo Alto to give five recently emancipated young women housing and support. Last March, Jeremiah's Promise expanded when it moved from Palo Alto to a home in Sunnyvale, which can accommodate six young women.

The girls served are carefully chosen. "We look for kids who are ready to move forward with their lives," Golter explains. "They want to heal their emotional wounds."

To help the young women reach their potential, Jeremiah's Promise provides educational services, psychological counseling, and career counseling. "In the house, we give these young women a solid foundation," she says. "We build their confidence, empower them, and show them their choices."

Community members lead weekly seminars, teaching life skills such as how to resolve conflicts and identify unhealthy relationships. "I think that is what makes Jeremiah's Promise so special," Golter says. "The

involvement of the community that sits alongside these girls—not just the staff or the board—the entire community supports them. That is what these girls are thirsty for."

During their stay, the young women are also paired with an adult mentor who takes an active role in their development. Former resident Vickie Haffner remembers being introduced to her mentor, with whom she shares a love of horses. "Eventually Sandra [Gutknecht] graduated from a mentor position into a mother figure for me," she says.

Haffner, who once was unable to hold a job for more than a few days, has maintained a stable job for more than a year now with the help of Jeremiah's Promise. "I learned the skills I needed to live on my own: being responsible, doing chores, exercising, and healthy eating," she says.

The young women usually live in the home for two years, although they can remain longer, if necessary. After leaving, they continue to receive services, such as psychological counseling, and they are invited back to celebrate birthdays and holidays. "We've become sort of a familial support [system]," Golter says.

So far, 16 young women have graduated from the program. "I've seen them get their dignity back," Golter says. "I've seen them get more alive, more confident, and more outspoken. I've seen them try for higher goals than they ever imagined."

Building on that success, Jeremiah's

Promise plans to open a home in East Palo Alto to accommodate up to 12 young men by 2010. "There is a great need for these services for young men," Golter says. "We already informally mentor some young men. Some of the brothers of the girls living in the Sunnyvale home attend their seminars and holiday celebrations."

The second house's architectural plans and zoning are awaiting approval from the East Palo Alto City Council. Although hopeful for a positive outcome, Golter says, "In the long term, we'd love to be in any community that would like to support us."

Ashley Serra



Residents of Jeremiah's Promise at an ice-cream shop.

For more information on Jeremiah's Promise, visit www.jeremiahspromise.org