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## Creating A Village To Foster A Child

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EASTHAMPTON, Mass.

AS a psychotherapist, Wendy Gannett thought she was well equipped to adopt children from the foster care system. "I worked with troubled kids and I saw the horrors," she said. "I knew firsthand how trying it was."

But two years ago when she took in a 7-year-old boy named Alex, things quickly got away from her. He had been sexually abused and deprived of food, would turn defiant and even violent, and was so afraid of starving that Ms. Gannett let him sleep with his lunchbox. After a few months his younger sisters, Tanisha and Meraliz, joined them because Ms. Gannett said Alex "wasn't going to be whole without them."

Caring for all three made Ms. Gannett feel completely overwhelmed, she said. She quit her job to focus on the children and is living on food stamps and payments from the foster care system. Her friends "freaked out -- they couldn't handle the intensity of the kids," she said. "I started going to church suppers where I said, I have these three kids. Who will help me?"

Then, last December, Ms. Gannett, 40, moved the family from their home in nearby Northampton, Mass., to an unusual community here called Treehouse. Opened in June of 2006, it was designed to bring together families like hers with each other and with older adults who would act, in the words of its founder, Judy Cockerton, as "honorary grandparents." Soon, Rosa Young, 63, who had just arrived from Michigan, and Alan Spanier, a 73-year-old former Manhattanite, were babysitting for the children and picking them up from school. And Anna Kirwan, 58, from Sunderland, Mass., was helping out in the morning.

Treehouse is a planned intergenerational community, created in the hope that a close-knit support network can prevent children from bouncing from one foster home to another and give them tools to succeed. So far, there are few such communities. But the concept, pioneered in 1994 by Hope Meadows, at a former military base in Rantoul, Ill., is catching on. Hope Meadows plans to replicate in about 18 states, with the help of \$7.7 million from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, said Ted Chen, a program director for the foundation. Other nonprofit organizations are planning similar projects in California, Connecticut and North Carolina.

"It seems to have the capacity of working a lot better than a caseworker visiting two times a month," said Tom Berkshire, a former chief of staff for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, who observed Hope Meadows closely. "The issues that foster kids have -- this deals with a lot of them. The issue of graduating out of the system at 18, the issue of having role models to follow, the issue of 'I know where I belong.'"

Ms. Cockerton believes the model may also have more widespread effects. "We're really trying to inspire the nation to think very differently about the 800,000 children in foster care," she said. It also aims to allow older adults to remain purposeful and avoid the isolation of old age.

Not that Treehouse is a utopia. Early tension with the local school system has not completely dissipated. One child left because things did not work out with a foster family, and not all the older residents have assumed the grandparent role. Still, Harry Spence, who until last May was commissioner of the state's Department of Social Services, said Treehouse, which has a waiting list of 45 older adults and 15 families, is a "crucial

experiment" that could also generate ideas about how to help foster children in conventional neighborhoods.

Those ideas could include Treehouse's animal therapy and gardening programs, or its methods of helping parents make decisions, said Sarah Greenblatt, director of the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice, a Treehouse consultant.

Ms. Cockerton, 56, a former teacher and toy shop owner, said the project was inspired by her experience of adopting a child from foster care in 1999. Foster children and adoptive families she met felt stigmatized or "invisible," she said, because people viewed the children as damaged.

Treehouse, a \$15.9 million project, was built on a meadow near Springfield and Holyoke, two cities with large populations of foster children. Ms. Cockerton's nonprofit Treehouse Foundation and the developer, Beacon Communities Development, got help from federal and state tax credits, said Pamela Goodman, president of Beacon Communities. The community's 12 family homes and 48 homes for "elders," as older residents are called -- a ratio that Treehouse considered workable -- are arranged in clusters, designed to resemble "dollhouses with their entries turned slightly so that every person who leaves their home has the opportunity to engage with someone," Ms. Cockerton said.

The residents -- currently 52 elders and 18 parents with 34 children -- have diverse motivations for being here. Carmen Hickley, 46, said she came for safety, to escape "the man I married who was starting to mess with one of my children." She has three biological children and four children who adopted after they were removed in 1998 from a home in which one boy was burned, tied up and had two teeth removed with pliers. In their Springfield neighborhood, she said, the children "weren't allowed to ride their bicycles where I couldn't see them, but now they can."

Pam Lumpkin, 35, who has two biological children and a 12-year-old foster daughter, chose Treehouse because in her previous neighborhoods "there weren't any other foster kids. Neighbors were always worried about how they were going to behave and whether they were going to break into their house."

And Mary and Jack D'Amato wanted help raising Selena, 14, and Sarah, 12, sisters who were each previously in 24 different foster homes. "We've had crisis intervention teams in our house, we've been in family therapy," said Ms. D'Amato, who is 48.

"Our hearts just went out to these kids," said Mr. D'Amato, 53. "We couldn't believe that they had been through so much abuse. But we realized we were only two people and we need to work as many."

Since arriving in April, they have encountered "a new set of problems and a new set of joys," said Mr. D'Amato. The girls have made new friendships, he said, "but with that came, how do they behave in those friendships? But the kids are happier with these kinds of challenges."

Some residents may have been attracted by the income-based rents, which range from \$511 (the lowest rent for a one-bedroom) to \$1,015 (the highest rate for a 5-bedroom). Donna Robinson, 60, said she wanted to leave her "mold-infested rat hole" in Huntington, Mass.

But Mr. Spanier, a retired New York photographer who teaches the children photography and kite-flying, said he came to be involved in something positive. Ms. Young was drawn to the idea of "being extended family for foster families."

Still, living in such a closely intertwined community and merging generations from varied backgrounds is "not an easy thing to do," said Gary Anderson, dean of Michigan State University's school of social work.

Indeed, Treehouse has had its share of disappointments in its first year. To gain support of Easthampton residents and ease the impact on local schools of children likely to need extra help, Treehouse financed

several school programs, including after-school activities and a writer-in-residence. But just as the community was opening, Treehouse announced that money had run out.

"We discovered their word didn't mean what we thought it did," said Deborah N. Carter, the Easthampton schools superintendent. "It jaundices your view a little bit."

Ms. Cockerton said she felt "such shame" about the situation.

In January, Edgar L. Selavka, a foster parent and preschool teacher, was arrested on charges of possessing child pornography. There was no evidence that children at Treehouse were involved, but Mr. Selavka and his wife, with a 7-year-old daughter and a 3-year-old foster daughter, were asked to leave, and residents were shaken.

Several residents said Treehouse's straightforward handling of the incident bolstered the community. Still, Robin Weingarten, Treehouse's child and family program coordinator, said some residents may "feel set back in their ability to trust."

One child's departure in June underscored the fragility of foster family relationships, even with community support.

And not all elders have volunteered to help children or been successful in developing relationships with them. While Hope Meadows, the Illinois community, requires its older residents to volunteer at least six hours a week (and requires that one parent stay home with the children, paying them a salary to do so), Treehouse rejected the idea of similar requirements, said Kerry Homstead, the community facilitator, because "I don't think most people are attracted to something because they have to do it."

"We have some folks who jump right in," Ms. Cockerton said. "We have a group of people who dip in and out. Then we have other people who are still standing behind their curtains and peeking out because they're not sure how to behave." Elizabeth Poudrier, 73, said, "When I first got here, I shied away. Then it dawned on me that we were all in the same boat, and I came out of that shell."

Elders get training in using restraint when hugging or touching abused children, and in "how not to take children's behavior personally," Ms. Homstead said. "Nobody is being matched or encouraged to hook up with children until we have some sense of readiness."

Bringing together children with traumatic backgrounds has advantages. Nathan Flannery, 13, one of four adopted siblings, is not alone in finding it easy to get along with some children, "because they've been through some of the same things." But it can also create combustible combinations. "There are certain kids you don't want to spend too much time together," said Carolyn Burns, the executive director of Berkshire Children and Families, the social service agency here. "And people always have to be vigilant because something can trigger some reaction."

Recently Sarah, one of the D'Amatos' foster daughters, kicked Ms. Lumpkin's 12-year-old son, Kenny, at the community center. She stormed off, and someone called Ms. D'Amato, who tried, with other mothers, to persuade Sarah to apologize.

"Even if somebody makes you mad, you can't kick or hit them," Ms. Lumpkin said.

"It was an accident," Sarah said.

"No, it wasn't," Ms. Lumpkin said.

Ms. Hickley added: "You want to have a lot of friends, you got to have a good attitude."

Despite such episodes, Ms. D'Amato said, Sarah is "healing in little ways," spending more time on activities like drawing pictures.

"I like it here," Sarah said. "We have a community." Meaningful connections have clearly been made.

Ms. Kirwan teaches writing workshops, where both Selena and Ms. D'Amato, have written cathartic stories about violence and abuse. The D'Amato girls serve elders breakfast at a Saturday cafe here, and call Ms. Poudrier "Nana." Ms. Young and Mr. Spanier calm Ms. Gannett's children with singing and conversation.

Ryan Flannery, 9, Nathan's brother, withdrew after moving here, said his mother, Christine, 43. The Flannerys, who have two biological children (a third died as a toddler), moved to Treehouse because they wanted their children "to have more connections," Ms. Flannery said. But it turned out that there were more preteens and teens than children Ryan's age. And some of the programs they were expecting were not yet in place.

"It just seemed like nothing worked," said Ms. Flannery, who began home-schooling Ryan.

But Ryan liked visiting Ms. Kirwan's tchotchke-filled home and letting her cats climb on him. And Ms. Robinson invited him to garden, paint birdhouses and read to her dog. (Ryan has a little trouble reading, Ms. Robinson explained, "and dogs are nonjudgmental.")

For her part, Ms. Robinson said, "Ryan brings out the kid in me. I'm over there with a butterfly net, hobbling around with a cane."

"This is a different world," she said. "There's life here."