

## Woodland Youth Services: The Changing Face of Child Welfare

*Luke Muir*

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*Writer's comment:* I must admit that since I was a foreign student, the need to base this piece around a local institution or person had me stuck for some time. Eventually a friend and previous employee of the Woodland Group Home suggested I might go and take a peek there for inspiration. I was not disappointed. The home has been a refuge for abused children for some fifteen years and has pretty much seen it all. Despite this experience it was clear the institution was under strain. Child abuse is becoming a staggeringly common problem in the USA, and the cases of abuse are increasingly severe. Add to this the squeezing of local and state budgets prompted by the Republican tax cut strategy, and the outlook for homes like this is not grand. However, I arrived to find a dedicated team at Woodland approaching an often thankless job with enthusiasm and continuing success. Indeed, I found one abused teenager even discussing plans for a career in child welfare himself.

—*Luke Muir*

*Instructor's comment:* If you didn't read his introduction above, you probably wouldn't guess that Luke Muir was an exchange student from England. He's got such a grasp on the complexity of the problems that he describes in this piece that you might think he was writing a senior thesis on this subject. Not so. As he mentions above, he initially had no idea what he could make the subject of the profile piece that I assign in my journalism course. But when he decided to write about Woodland Youth Services, he devoted himself to finding out everything he could about the program as well as the larger national issues he describes. The resulting article reads like a fine piece of investigative journalism—memorable characters, great plotlines and important themes.

—*Eric James Schroeder, English Department*

**T**HE STATISTICS ARE FRIGHTENING. In the year 2000, 879,000 children in the USA were the victims of child abuse. This means that a child is abused every ten seconds, and of these, half are under eight. Child abuse causes its victims a wide range of problems that can include emotional, behavioral, psychological, and physical disorders. This is only the beginning, since these problems will in turn affect the children's ability to complete school, find meaningful employment, and generally succeed in a life hindered from the start. Awfully, insofar as abused children are concerned, those who develop problems due to abuse are the lucky ones, since roughly 1200 children die as the direct result of abuse each year. The epic proportions of this social problem are perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the annual cost of child abuse imposed on the American economy is greater than the Gross Domestic Product of many African nations, weighing in at just over a staggering \$94 billion a year!

*Woodland Youth Services* (WYS) is a shelter set up to help just such abused children. One of two homes founded by Ms. Brenda Pate in 1984, the shelter handles the grim day-to-day realities of child abuse and its prevention in Woodland and the surrounding Yolo County. For most of these nineteen years, the shelter has provided secure, temporary accommodation for children for a period of up to thirty days whilst they are relocated into foster care.

This role is now changing away from that of a temporary shelter towards that of a more permanent care center—a *group home*, in which children can spend more time. This change is due to what Pate sees as the temporary shelter's increasing inadequacy at genuinely tackling the issues of child abuse: "The challenges we face are becoming more and more complex; group homes are better able to handle the more difficult problems we are seeing these days." The home's shift in emphasis is an indicator of the changing nature of child welfare as well as the increasingly complex and demanding needs of the children that society fails.

Foster care has previously been seen as the best way of dealing with abused children. This is largely due to the belief that abused children will still be raised in something that approximates a stable family environment, allowing them to prosper. A sound idea in theory, foster care is still the ideal solution for children who have not been seriously disturbed by their experiences. This solution, however, applies to fewer and fewer of the children that Pate comes across.

For many years before she founded Woodland Youth Services, Pate was a foster parent herself. She is thus well aware of the trials of foster care: "The children I saw were increasingly disturbed. They had suffered the results of parental drug abuse, and their own physical and sexual abuse. They're behind in school and have serious social, bonding, and emotional problems. They can have an immense amount of anger in them." As such, these children are often too much for even the most committed foster family: "Foster families would have to put up with being called names, [children] punching holes in walls, throwing chairs." Whilst these are things Pate and her colleagues are prepared to deal with at work, along with other care-workers she terms as "seasoned" professionals, she is understandably adamant, "I don't want that kind of violence in my house."

If any corroboration of her view were needed, an afternoon at the Woodland Youth Services shelter certainly provides it. In a two-hour time frame, insults and two chairs are thrown, and there is one fight between two of the older boys who are quickly restrained by some of the eight staff on call at any one time. "Restraint is for both our safety and theirs," Pate is quick to put in, clearly acutely aware of the fine line that youth services must walk in such matters. Such restraint is not easy, and staff are required to undertake training in order to cope with these demands.

These incidents alone illustrate just how daunting a task the provision of foster care really is. If this were not enough, Pate is quick to emphasize that the bureaucratic regulations that foster parents must abide by do not help matters. Potential foster families are under strict guidelines in their guardianship of these children. Any baby sitter, even if related to the foster parents, must go through a series of checks, and be adequately trained in areas like first aid. Having given numerous such examples, Pate sighs, saying, "there's always another form to be filled out."

Such bureaucracy combines to give the foster system an inherent inflexibility, of which Pate is clearly all too aware: "Say my husband and I had an anniversary and wanted to go away for the weekend; who do we leave to baby-sit?" Pate explains that the vast majority of such cases resulted in her own plans making way for the needs of the foster child. This results in what she terms "foster care burnout." The demands of providing care are overbearing: "Foster families end up simply needing a break."

It is not difficult to see why the children who pass through WYS are in need of so much specialized care. Charlie, one of the boys currently there, has been in and out of the home for the last ten years. He was six when he first arrived. Welfare officers had found him and his sister living in a self-made shack in the back garden. He had simply had enough of the physical and mental abuse he had to put up with at the hands of his parents. On another occasion, Charlie comments he was placed in care “‘cause my sister was raped which wasn’t reported, the house was unfit to live in, my mom was being abusive, stuff like that.” At first, one can’t help but admire the matter-of-fact manner in which he speaks about such painful experiences. As he goes on, however, it becomes clear that “stuff like that,” is pretty much all he knows. It is as normal as a shopping list or brushing his teeth.

Since his first stay at WYS, Charlie has been in and out of the home after numerous failed placements with one family after another. This recidivism was a common problem for WYS: “There were not many families willing to look after these kids in the first place,” Pate says; “eventually we would run out of placements for a particular child.” Lisa Correia, another of the group home staff, agrees: “We were seeing an increasing number of children trapped in the system for long periods of time.” This fragmented care did very little to improve the lot of kids. Correia notes, “They’ve had it up to here; they already have been let down too many times. They begin to feel utterly hopeless.” Both women agree that this was one of the most frustrating elements of their job, since they saw children who desperately needed stability receiving just the opposite.

Some of these frustrations are a thing of the past for WYS, as from December of last year, their role has officially changed. They now take children in on a more indefinite basis, combining accommodation and treatment for a more consolidated period of time. Both Pate and Correia are enthusiastic about this change. Correia explains, “now we have more scope to work on positive issues that will make a difference. We can work on emancipation issues, teaching these kids how to care for themselves. We can introduce them to some of life’s basic normalities, such as a banking account, a job or obtaining a birth certificate.” Foster care is still an ultimate goal, but this is seen as a far longer-term aim once a child has dealt with some of the painful issues that abuse has left them with.

The costs of all this are unsurprisingly very high. WYS’s costs for staff alone are almost \$50,000 a month, and this is only one element of

a total that includes utility bills, food bills and a huge insurance premium. The costs seem undeniably high considering that this is a home that only has the capacity for eight children. In this respect, however, WYS is certainly not unique; childcare is expensive, period.

These costs are put into perspective when one considers the corresponding costs imposed on society if child abuse is not treated. A study for the Michigan Children's Fund, for instance, concluded that the necessary state-wide cost of an effective abuse treatment and prevention program was \$43 million per year. In turn the total cost of child maltreatment in the state was estimated at \$823 million! A child welfare think tank, The National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse, is unambiguous in its conclusion that the available evidence shows that "prevention pays."

This message has clearly failed to influence policy makers on Capital Hill who have slashed state budgets as part of the Republican tax cut strategy. In turn, state legislators have squeezed welfare budgets to cut their own costs. The effects of such cuts will be acutely felt by abused children. Indeed, the budget for Yolo County's Child Welfare Division has been cut from \$5 million in 2002 to just \$250,000 for 2003. Although such cuts will not affect WYS heavily (a large percentage of its funds are from federal rather than state sources), for Pate the impact is clear: "Budget cuts are going to severely impact the things that these kids vitally need, and if authorities don't do what needs to be done now, it will have to happen later." Pate is adamant that "if authorities don't pay now, they will pay later." If both Pate and studies like the one above are to be believed, it seems evident that governments will end up paying a substantially greater amount later. In this light, the cuts in welfare spending taking place are not just harmful in the short term to the 900,000 children abused annually, but also represent bad economic management in the long term for which the American taxpayer will end up paying the bill.

Abused children have an incredibly rough start in life. Their lives would be considerably worse, however, if it were not for the dedication and effort of people like Brenda Pate and Lisa Correia. In a society that often undervalues the type of social work that they provide, these people often give up far more lucrative careers to work in an area that Pate concedes "is far from glamorous." Despite this, her commitment to the children's future is unswerving: "I don't care what they're here for or what they've done; what's important to me is how we can help." Perhaps the biggest indicator of the credit that both women are due

comes from the children themselves, two of whom when asked said that they would eventually like to work with abused children as a career. John, another of the boys who has had repeated stays at WYS says, "If I could get qualified, I'd like to work in a place something like this. I think I could help." Nothing could be further from the usual cycle we hear all too often concerning abused children themselves who go on to abuse. A more shining illustration of the things that Pate has achieved is surely impossible to come by.

*The names given to both of the children quoted in this article have been changed for legal reasons.*