

Shelter parents open homes, hearts

And abused children find family refuge

By CAROLINE PETRICH
Of the Emerald

Evelyn Slaven must push her "children" outside and order them to play; sometimes they obediently stay outside. When they do stay outside, they walk aimlessly about the yard, ignoring the elaborate swingset.

Slaven only shakes her head; she can do little to improve their spirits.

To the unsuspecting eye, Slaven and her "sidekick" Patti Johnson seem like ordinary housewives.

Their looks belie their real profession: shelter parents.

Both women work in the Children's Services Division to help abused children in Lane County. After a CSD caseworker discovers a case of abuse that demands intervention, or the child's removal from the home, the caseworker calls Slaven.

Slaven cares for children ages six to 12. Johnson

supervises teenagers who have become involved in incestuous relations. The shelter families receive a daily reimbursement from CSD.

Each family can accommodate up to six kids in their West Eugene homes. In fact, Johnson says she's bored if she houses less than four. Slaven stresses they are not one of the 300 foster parents in Lane County. They, along with four other families, act as shelter-evaluation parents, who keep abuse victims for up to 60 days.

Slaven serves as a perfect example. During that time, she carefully notes behavior, personality and peccadillos in a report for CSD. If needed, CSD uses her observations to find a suitable foster home.

But cold observation is not her style; Slaven often evolves into a surrogate mother, nursing colds, playing games, cooking, cleaning and counseling.

Sometimes her temporary charges react negatively to her loving ways and that doesn't surprise her.

The "behavior problems stem from abuse," she says.

"The only attention they get is negative attention," and they fight sudden positive notice.

Of course, the sudden move to a strange, new environment sends some kids into depression, Slaven says. The worst abused seem the most upset. She notes that one boy cried for three days.

"They have to go through a certain amount of grieving," she says. "They're so scared; they don't know what's going on."

"The caseworker tells them as much as (they) can," says Slaven. "To them, a few days sounds like an eternity."

"An adult would be scared."

Not only must the uprooted children deal with Slaven and her family, they face counseling with the CSD caseworker, three hearings at Skipworth Juvenile Court, emotional phone calls from their parents, as well as school.

After a day at Skipworth, Slaven says a child either abstains from food or "eats everything in sight." Oftentimes they return guilt-ridden.

"It's terrible; they carry all the guilt," Johnson says of her experience with teenage girls who were sexually molested by their fathers. "She's afraid her dad's going to go to jail and it's



Graphic by Max DeRungs

all her fault."

Almost every child that passes under Johnson's and Slaven's scrutiny share the same desire: they want to go back home, even if it means more abuse.

"The idea is to always get the child back," Slaven says, explaining that nine times out of ten, the child is reunited. Johnson adds, however, that sometimes they never return home.

Slaven, a shelter parent for three years, and Johnson, a one-year veteran, say shelter-

parenting, despite the constant demands, reaps admiration and many personal rewards.

"That's half the reason we do it; we like to be admired," Johnson says with a hearty laugh. "We need a lot of support. You have to have a sidekick."

"We'll call each other in the middle of the night if we have to," Slaven adds, smiling at Johnson.

Still, seeing a distraught child begin to have fun warms their hearts the most.



umbrella /əm-ˈbrel-ə, esp South ˈam-/n [It ombrella, umbra] 4: Something which covers or embraces a broad range of elements or factors (Webster's Dictionary)

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