

Runaway Switchboard provides youth with resources without judgment

BY MEGAN MILLARD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

A young man calls 1-800 RUNAWAY because he does not get along with his mom's new boyfriend. He wants to know if there are any places in his area that would provide him with a place to stay for a few months until he goes off to college.

This young man represents just one of the approximately 300 calls every day received by the National Runaway Switchboard (NRS). Located in Chicago, the organization fields calls from all over the United States.

One of the National Runaway Switchboard's volunteers searches for a resource to give the young man as he waits on the other line. While the volunteer searches for facilities in the requested area, often volunteers have no indication of where in the United States callers are located.

"We do not have caller I.D., we don't know (where they are)," said Maureen Blaha, executive director of the NRS.

In fact, the purpose of the NRS is to provide youth with assistance without judgment. "This is a safe place to call," Blaha said.

While it may seem like a problem that doesn't hold much weight, the numbers are overwhelming. According to Blaha and the NRS web site, 1800Runaway.org, between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth run away each year.

"It's really an overwhelming number," Blaha said. "I think of it as a silent crisis."

Blaha said that the statistics highlight a problem that exists throughout the country. While kidnappings and abductions may seem like a major issue, Blaha said that the number is miniscule compared to the number of youth who run away.

According to Blaha, often people are under the impression that kids who run away are troubled, being labeled as "bad kids." She said most often the youth are running away from bad situations.

Many of the calls fielded by the NRS have

to do with family dynamics, much like the situation of the young man mentioned above. There may be a divorce in the family or youth struggling to get along with stepparents. Additionally, calls may be tied to a youth feeling as though they have disappointed a parent. In cases with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) youth, there are some parents who do not accept the sexual orientation of the child.

Another factor to be considered is whether or not the youth was thrown out of the home or left willingly. NRS 2010 statistics collected for a Why They Run report showed that almost half (48 percent) of youth described being kicked out of their home, while 30 percent said they ran away. The remaining 22 percent described their situation as being a combination of both.

Blaha said that certain situations could lead a youth to believe they could make it on their own, and then realize it is not easy.

"It's very unsafe on the streets," she said.

On March 23, the NRS launched its Live Chat service, which serves to provide assistance to youth via the web.

NRS volunteers discuss options for youth, but also take calls from adults. A situation that NRS has found themselves dealing with in the past is when a youth calls and asks the NRS volunteer to inform her family member he or she is all right. Parents can sometimes be desperate in obtaining information that the NRS often does not have, such as the whereabouts of their child.

While Blaha said the NRS tries to reunite families when possible, it does not force such meetings. It only offers resources for youth in crisis and sometimes serves as a messenger between the two. For example, the youth can call and leave a message for a parent, should the parent choose to call. A parent can also leave a message for a youth if a youth decides to call.

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A Crumb is Drawn Aside

Jay Thiemeyer

a crumb is drawn aside
and reminded that there are times
when to forget, when to remember,
what grandeur put me here and why
those times are wasted on judgments usually
found early on to be wrong-
sometimes the mistake takes longer-
to first realize, then accept. To ignore the real:
is it worth it? I wonder, mull it over
too long. I lose
the value of segregating what I believe is good
from bad
The weight is indicated in how preoccupied I am
in condemning myself or exalting myself...
what's wrong with this brief idle moment I'm in? THIS
moment

I have fought against so long-
what's wrong with being left alone to be free and
silent?

it's always, it seems, too often unfitting to judge
who's a crumb or who's on top
only time can judge
and its advice is 'don't judge'-
what's the need? Why fight futility? Or dreams?
Who benefits? Crumbs add up, serve as their own
provision

though I recognize the need for both
good days and bad, what's forever
wrong, or right,

but why curse and toss things without hope?
Why rush having the last word or showing my
crumbly side?

at odd ends and crumbs

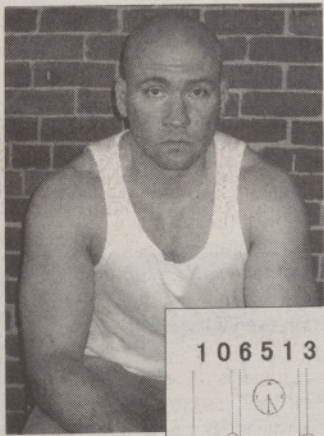
may well be where I am today,
and if not, then

the next
or- I may find myself happy, in the saddle and
headlong
into the day following.

So many days pass too quickly and
start too late

and end so utterly
against my expectations,
a truism I can take or leave alone-
so why let my better judgment prove me a fool?
crumb, take heed.

your time may already have passed
just let things be for now



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