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news BY MELISSA BEARNS



MELISSA BEARNS

Kevin Feeney, counseling and testing specialist with HIV Alliance and Teresa Simons, teaching assistant at the New Roads School chat at the drop-in center.

A Little Man's Story

When you're living on the street, you need more than antibiotics.

It was January and the rain had been falling non-stop for weeks. Outside the New Roads drop-in center for homeless kids on 7th Avenue in Eugene, people raced for their cars, huddling under umbrellas, pulling the hoods of waterproof jackets up over their heads. Inside New Roads the air was damp with the smell of wet clothes, the windows foggy. A group of teens surfed the Internet, arguing about which site to visit next, while a young girl used the phone to make calls to friends.

At one of the tables sat a 13-year-old boy with floppy blonde hair and blue eyes, his feet resting on a skateboard. His nickname among his "street family" is Little Man. As he sat quietly, shivering and burning up with a 101-degree fever, the New Roads staff was frantically trying to track down his parents. They needed a legal guardian to give consent so the on-site family nurse practitioner could treat the teen for the pneumonia that was consuming his body.

It was just hours before the center was going to close. Time was running out. Little Man had been staying at Station 7, a temporary emergency overnight shelter for kids up to 18. The staff at Station 7 was begging him to come back, and had even made a few temporary exceptions to the rules to make it possible for him to do so. But Little Man said he was tired of lying around in bed and didn't want to spend another night at Station 7. "I was in the Station 7 sick bed for four days," Little Man told Cindy Ingram, a county staff member whose office is in the New Roads drop-in center. "All I did was sleep and eat."

But instead of getting over his bronchial infection while he had a bed and food, he had come down with pneumonia. Finally, one of his friends at Station 7 convinced him to come to the clinic at New Roads and see the family nurse practitioner, Shannon. "I have a street family, ya know?" Little Man said. "They care about me more than my real family. They made me go to the clinic at New Roads and get checked out."

Shannon and a medical assistant staff the clinic, examine the kids and treat them for everything from infections and strep throat to STDs and skin conditions. But she couldn't

give Little Man the antibiotics he so desperately needed because he was under 15. To treat him, and any other kid his age or younger, she needed permission from one of his parents.

But his parents were nowhere to be found. Little Man didn't know where his mom was and said his dad "can't even take care of himself." The word on the street was that his mom was at the Mission, but the staff at New Roads couldn't track her down there. With help from other staff at affiliated programs, the New Roads staff finally located the teen's dad and got permission to treat Little Man.

But he still needed a place to stay out of the pouring rain, somewhere warm and dry, so his body could heal. Little Man's father told him to hang out at New Roads, saying he'd call back and tell him if it was OK for him to come stay at his place.

"He was so excited," Ingram said. "It was like, here he was, so sick, and he thought his parents were going to rescue him."

But the boy's dad never called back. With the New Roads Center about to close, the staff again tried to find Little Man's mother. They found her at The Mission, and she somehow came up with money for a hotel room for her son. Little Man stayed in the hotel for a week until he got better, without the help of antibiotics.

After all that, Little Man refused to take the antibiotics Shannon prescribed him. "It's an interesting point," Ingram said. "You can lead a horse to water but you can't shove antibiotics down his throat."

New Roads is part of the Safe & Sound partnership, which includes more than a dozen different organizations working together to help homeless kids in Lane County. In 2005 the Safe & Sound partner organizations provided food, shelter, medical care and behavioral health services to more than 2,500 runaway and homeless youth in and around Eugene.

Like many social service programs, the Safe & Sound partner programs have had major cuts in funding over the last few years. Donations help fill the gaps and are used to pay for everything from sutures to sandwiches, Band-Aids to beds. For more information on how you can help out, contact 868-2084. **EW**