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YEAH Opens Shelter for Homeless Youth in Berkeley

By Lydia Gans (12-07-07)

For the sixth year in a row YEAH (Youth Emergency Assistance Shelter) has opened their winter shelter for homeless 18- to 24-year-olds—and their pets—at the Lutheran Church of the Cross on University Avenue in Berkeley.

It might have as many as 55 or 60 young people—no one has ever been turned away. If someone appears with nowhere else to go, “we put a mat on the floor and they’re there,” says Sharon Hawkins Leyden, co-founder and co-director of YEAH.

When people come in, they get a number which is put on a chart, and they are given boxes with that number containing blankets, pillow and linens and toiletries which are theirs for the whole time that they’re in the shelter. They can stay in the shelter as many nights as they need to. Pets are allowed in and sleep on the mats with their owners.

“The pets are often an extension of people’s family and you can’t ask them to leave their pets somewhere or get rid of their pets just because they don’t have a house. Sort of feels like a social justice issue,” Leyden says. “So we say pets are really important—they’re really important to housed people, they’re really important to unhoused people.”

Besides providing a bed for the night, YEAH offers a number of programs and activities that go on throughout the year: men’s groups and women’s groups, a youth council to gain leadership skills, workshops and a GED program to prepare the youth for the General Education Diploma test, which is being run and paid for by the First Congregational Church. In the evenings in the shelter there are games, movies, creative writing and poetry groups. Dinner and breakfast are provided; there are showers, laundry and referrals to doctors and community resources. “And,” Leyden says, “they get a community of people.”

It would be hard to underestimate the importance of that community of people, something so many of these youth are lacking. Of the young people coming to the YEAH shelter, many of them are out of the foster-care system. Others have left or

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"We have about 80 percent of our youth come completely unattached. They don't have any support systems," Leyden explains. "We have emergency cards at intake. We ask them who should we contact in case of an emergency and nine out of ten times they say there's no one. Which is stunning! To be 20, 21, and have no one that you could call."

She tells about talking to youth who have tried to kill themselves, "and I say to them, 'Who should we call if you die?' And they'd say, 'No one'. And I'd say 'Who's going to bury you?' and they say 'YEAH.' It's profound isolation with some of these kids. Just profound." By comparison a group of UC Berkeley students asked to name the most important factor contributing to their success unanimously responded "family support."

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"That's why we want to make YEAH not a social service organization ... we want to make it a community. Because if you belong to something, and you feel valuable, and you feel worthwhile, then from that you get a sense of responsibility and from that you get to actually make strides in your life ... But if you don't have that and you feel it doesn't really matter if you're on the planet or not, nobody really cares whether you're on the planet, you do all kinds of [negative] behavior."

The YEAH community encompasses not only the youth who come to the shelter and those who participate in the year- round programs offered there but also the many volunteers.

Leyden talks about the "community volunteers who want to come because they feel like they have something to give. But they also want something too. This is reciprocal. People don't come down here because they're saints, they come down here because they too want to be part of something that's bigger than themselves and their day-to-day struggles. They too want to feel like what they do is important in their communities."

In contrast to other churches, Pastor Sarah Isakson and her congregation at the Lutheran church of the Cross have opened their doors and their hearts to YEAH. Many of the YEAH volunteers are members of the congregation. Pastor Sarah is on the board and participates actively in the program.

What Leyden says YEAH really needs is a building of their own where they can operate full time to provide year-round shelter and comprehensive services in a supportive environment.

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