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Published January 27, 2016

Youth Homes Celebrates 50 Years of Service

By Adam Blake



Youth Homes staff at their annual summer barbecue Photos provided

profound shame, anger, and loss they feel and create some life goals," McCullough said.

This year Youth Homes celebrates its 50th anniversary, the last 23 helmed by McCullough. In that time the organization has transformed from "dead broke" with a "spotty reputation" to financially stable and highly regarded. Most important however are success rates of the clients who come through Youth Homes. "We're fiercely committed to real tangible, measurable, time bound outcomes," McCullough said. The outcomes are positive: 70-75 percent of clients leave Youth Homes according to their treatment plan; 82 percent graduate from high school (outperforming California public school graduation rates); and 42 percent of their Aftercare program participants are in college or vocational school.

Residents of Youth Homes spend up to 90 days at the short-term shelters and no more than a year at the long-term ones. "It's a very short time to try and turn around a lifetime of family abuse and system inadequacy," McCullough acknowledged. To accomplish as much as possible in such a short time frame, Youth Homes implements a variety of programs to help their clients achieve long-term success. These include 24-hour care, therapeutic behavioral services, a mentoring program and a garden summer job program, among others.

McCullough, set to retire at the end of 2016, reflected upon several key turning points in the organization's history. He remembers getting their first mental health contract in 2002, revamping the organization's fundraising approach, and most recently earning national accreditation in 2014. At the end of the day, however, he attributes the organization's sustained success to an extremely dedicated and highly skilled force of staff and volunteers.

The unwavering dedication to quality care became evident when I toured the homes myself. McCullough first took me to an all-girls long-term shelter in Concord called Andersen house. What struck me most was the homey atmosphere with inviting living spaces, colorfully decorated bedrooms, and friendly adults. "I wish you have seen the Christmas tree we had up," exclaimed the house supervisor showing me around.

As I sat down with Youth Homes CEO Stuart McCullough in his office he warned me that I was about to enter a world much different than my own. He painted a picture of a teenager who has grown up in a troubled, often abusive home, is then removed by the court as a teenager, and dropped into the foster care system where his/her world is turned upside down. Many find themselves struggling in this system, running away and getting bounced from home to home. "These are the kids we get," says McCullough

The organization of 100 employees oversees four homes: one in Lafayette, two in Concord, and one in Pleasant Hill. As the latest in a line of good doers, Youth Home's views its first job as to help the kids understand they are in the clutches of adults that know what they're doing. "In a short time were going to help them heal some of the

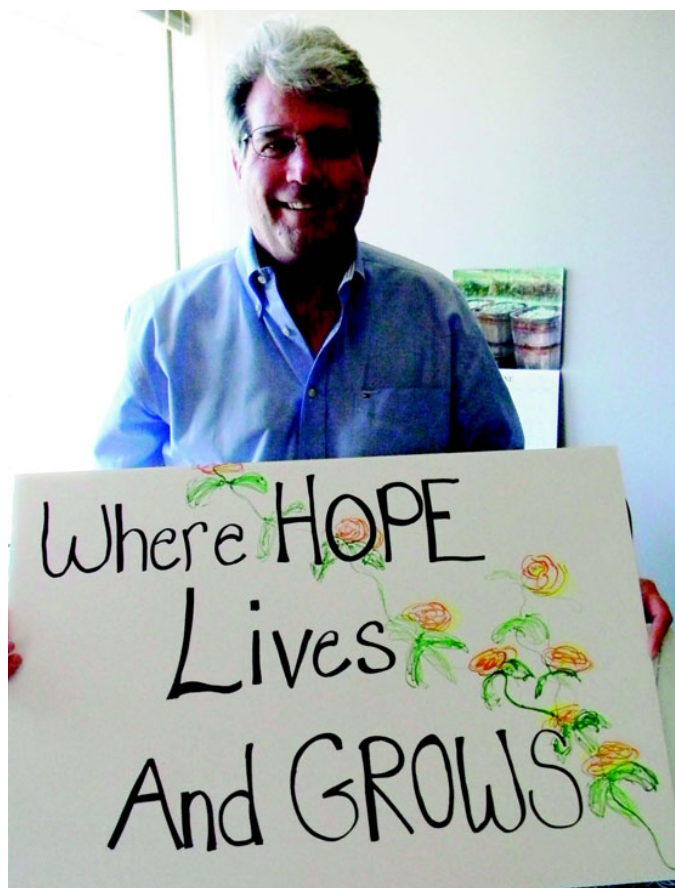
As the girls trickled in from school I returned to the dining room where McCullough was chatting with the girls, trying to convince one that she should be saving more of the money she earns for college. After we left he tells me one of them had recently gone back to her parent's home and returned to the shelter with a tattoo. "She said she's getting back on track just now, though I loved it," he said glancing back at the house.

Next we headed to one of the short-term shelters called "East Bay." The children here cycle in and out frequently, the most recent one arriving one week prior on Christmas Day. In the living room I noticed a white board with all the resident's names and next to it their "level," which is determined by behavior and describes their privileges. McCullough offered a sincere congratulations to a girl we talked to on "gold" who proceeded to show me around the house starting with the dining room. "Even if we don't eat, everyone must stay there for at least 10 minutes every night," she explained.

On the drive back McCullough recalled a story when he took his then teenage daughter on a short drive into an impoverished neighborhood instead of their routine Sunday brunch. He described her shock at the abject poverty she observed from the car window. "This is 15 minutes from our door and it is a world completely different from our own," he remembered saying.

Before going our separate ways he flipped open to a page in a book he had handed me earlier titled "A Framework for Understanding Poverty." He opened to a couple sections he suggested I read, part of his determination for me to gain a nominal understanding of the issues these kids face.

Driving home I reflected on the different homes, faces, and stories. While undeniably a chilling experience, I remembered a comment he made earlier how he felt there was a "vortex of good stuff going on" at Youth Homes. In the daunting world of foster care, this organization pushes forward with an unremitting desire to learn, improve, and make a difference only 15 minutes from our doors.



Youth Homes CEO Stuart McCullough

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