

VISITS... FLORENCE CRITTENTON HOME

Helena, Montana
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Visit by Judith E. Bessette, EdD, May 20, 2008

In an unassuming one-story building on a quiet, residential neighborhood in Helena, Montana, some truly amazing work focused on attachment and bonding is happening with pregnant and parenting teens. Sixteen girls and several babies live in a therapeutic, relationship-based milieu designed to ensure that each girl has – or is working toward – a positive, trusting relationship with one or more caring adults. Establishing and nurturing the bond between the teens and the adults helps each girl form a strong attachment to her baby.

The Florence Crittenton Home (FCH) teaches the girls living skills, since life with baby – or the first few months after choosing adoption as a parenting choice – is complicated and demanding. FCH also addresses the mental health needs of the girls and any chemical dependency issues the girls may have. Girls continue

their education while at FCH – either at the local high school, through GED classes or classes beyond high school at a local college or online.

Recently, I spent several hours visiting staff, talking with the girls and even had the chance to play peek-a-boo with one of the youngest residents of FCH. It was a wonderful experience.

My visit began in Executive Director Barbara Burton's office. Burton has a background in fundraising and business, and is pursuing an advanced degree in non-profit management. Pam Ponich, MS, LCPC, Clinical Director, and Liz Flynn, Director of Marketing, joined us. Knowing something about homes for unwed mothers in days gone by, I was eager to know how this organization had developed their current emphasis on attachment and bonding.

Burton, who has been at FCH for almost ten years, told me that about seven years ago, the agency hired a Master's level therapist with specialized background and training in attachment work with mothers and their newborns. About the same time, somewhat serendipitously, new members of the Board of Directors began talking about the benefits of including some of the basic tenets of attachment theory to the program.

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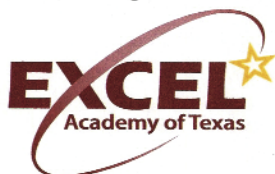
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Jim FitzGerald, CEO at Intermountain Children's Home in Helena, a current board member and a past President of the Board of Directors at FCH, told me, "Crittenton is a nurturing program providing cutting edge clinical services to pregnant and parenting adolescents in a structured setting."

Specialized therapy gives each mother-to-be the opportunity to explore her own attachment history and consider how it might relate to her ability to bond with her baby. Each girl has individual as well as group therapy around these issues.

FCH uses videotaping as a teaching tool. Using split-screen technology, the new moms can watch themselves on DVDs, carrying out various activities and watching how their babies react. I watched one young mom in her first filming – following instructions she had been given to the letter, but with little or no feeling. I was then able to see the same mom, doing the same activity several months later – and it was obvious that she had fallen in love with her baby in the intervening months. Their bond was palpable...even through the TV screen.

Each girl has her own room, which is designed to house her baby, too. There are eight such rooms in the center of the building, along with a kitchen, the day center, a living room and some offices. On each end of the building, there are living areas for four girls – complete with a kitchens and a common area. These areas have an apartment-like feel while providing the safety and staff interaction of the rooms in the central living area.

One young woman I met was baking cookies while her four-month old napped. She told me that an educational consultant had helped her family find FCH. She'd been there for over a year and in that time, finished high school while learning how to care for her baby. She talked about the classes and therapy at FCH and about how much they had helped her. She also said that she had learned a great deal from the other girls in the program and had come to think of them as part of her family.

At the end of the summer, she's moving back to the Midwest and will be living with her brother, his wife and their new baby. Her brother and his wife have played an active role in the family therapy FCH offers.

This young woman has been accepted at a community college back home and will study nursing – because, as she told me "Nurses are in demand these days and hospitals have been at the fore-front of offering on-site daycare." She feels like she knows how to evaluate good child care because she has had the opportunity to observe the childcare center at FCH, which serves the

children of clients, staff and even a few children from the community. The plan is that she and her sister-in-law will share childcare responsibilities while she is in school. She also wanted me to know that when her life is more stable and her daughter is older, she will do more to pursue her dream of becoming a baker.

While many of the girls at FCH come from Montana and the Pacific Northwest – and are often paid for by state or local governments – an increasing number of girls are private pay clients. More than one girl has come to Crittenton upon discovering she is pregnant at her wilderness physical.

For you history buffs...in 1883, the first of what grew to 76 Crittenton Homes in the US and abroad was founded by pharmacist and self-made millionaire, Charles Crittenton. Intended to serve “lost women and wayward girls” the homes were named after Crittenton’s daughter who had died from scarlet fever. The Helena facility opened in 1896.

Today, the remaining 20 + Crittenton organizations and the newly reorganized National Crittenton Foundation (offering the independent Crittenton facilities across the country opportunities to collaborate in many important ways) have indeed *come along way, baby*.

While remaining true to their mission to serve pregnant and parenting young mothers, agencies across the country today talk about safety, hope and opportunity...about healthy babies, nurturing mothers, education and jobs – even about services for the expectant father and programs designed to bring him into the circle of the family.

While incorporating the entire attribute mentioned above, FCH or Florence Crittenton of Montana is unique in its application of attachment and bonding theory each and every day with its program participants. The Helena program certainly lives up to its motto — *changing the future...two lives at a time*.

In the words of Barbara Burton, “A teen pregnancy provides a unique opportunity for growth and change. We can help two generations, a teen mom and her baby, form healthy attachments. Through clinical intervention now, we can prevent a lifetime of difficulties...in fact, two lifetimes.”

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