



NORTHFIELD

Wednesday House offers kids a welcome home

Addition to Spaulding Academy serves as instructive and supportive transitional housing

By ROBERTA BAKER
Laconia Daily Sun

For the seven children ages 6 to 16 who moved in on Monday, Wednesday House is not just a home away from home – it's a home instead of home.

For KC, age 15, of Concord, it is an opportunity to be independent, cook for himself, do laundry and manage his free time and school work, and an opportunity to sample what adult life will hold.

"I'd like to be more independent. I was thinking this would give me some more living skills," said KC, wearing a green Choose Love sweatshirt as he unpacked stuffed animals from his teen years and childhood, including a striped llama and other sentimental favorites. He assessed his new room, with sea-green walls, a desk facing a window overlooking snowy fields, and a built-in bunk bed. "If I get bored of one bed, I can switch to another," he said.

It's a happy and instructive transition.

Wednesday House, a white clapboard house with a barn on 12.8 acres of meadow and woods, is the latest addition to Spaulding Academy & Family Services in Northfield, which for 150 years has helped youngsters in crisis and those who need a high level of care. Since it began in 1871, as New Hampshire Orphans Home and School for Industry, Spaulding has branched out to care for and educate children with neurological and behavioral disorders and serious emotional challenges. Two years ago it started taking a trickle of mainstream kids who had to be relocated for their own safety, and needed someplace to live while awaiting permanent homes.

With this new building and program, which will provide a transitional residence for kids waiting for foster care or to return to their families at home, Spaulding is filling a gap that continues to be a challenge statewide. The number of New Hampshire children in need of foster families keeps growing, while there is an ongoing shortage of families ready and available to take them – an imbalance made more pressing during COVID, resulting in more children that need an oasis.

For KC and the six others who will live in the main building at Wednesday House, this step in life's journey can be a game changer.

"A lot of kids come here for personal reasons or behavioral reasons. Personally, I think little kids are the most important to this world. I don't judge them when they have outbursts. Maybe they've had something they're upset about," said KC, who hopes one day to be a child counselor, psychologist or pediatrician. "Maybe they didn't get enough attention."

KC said he likes looking out for the little ones. "Respect goes both ways. If you don't respect them, they grow up with disrespect and they don't know respect," he said as he opened a folder of mementos of love and caring: a dog-eared photo of himself and his sister, what looked like a letter of encouragement from another student, and a photocopied award ribbon from one of the little ones. "It's a personal award to thank me for being safe and not unsafe," said KC, who will live semi-independently in Wednesday House's adjacent apartment, with a resident staff member.

For the 50 children who



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currently live at Spaulding Academy and Family Services, formerly known as the Spaulding Youth Center, the school and on-campus housing provides a therapeutic and family environment that can offer one-on-one care and coaching as needed. Wednesday House is Spaulding's first foray into providing transitional living for children who have experienced family trauma.

"We're grateful to Spaulding for developing this new program, which will allow young people the opportunity to stay connected with their home schools and communities, while DCYF continues to work toward finding permanency for the children living in Wednesday House," said Joseph Ribsam, director of the Division for Children, Youth and Families at the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services. "DCYF is always looking for more foster parents, particularly those willing to serve adolescents, sibling groups and children with special needs."

Wednesday House is a supportive and instructive home base for youngsters who have no other place to live, often because drugs and alcohol misuse by their parents has re-

sulted in neglect and mistreatment.

The first residents have come from Concord, Manchester, Belmont, Tilton, Northfield and Sanbornton. They continue to receive education from their individual school districts during COVID by Zoom. Other than requiring a safe and stable home, with responsible adult mentors in place, and counseling for the trauma they have witnessed or experienced, they are much like other kids their age who go to school, play with friends and participate in sports, according to Spaulding staff. Their handicap is lack of a dependable family or home.

"These kids literally have no place to go," said Todd Emmons, president and CEO of Spaulding Academy and Family Services. "There are some days here when I'm in tears. We're excited to be able to do this. We're helping these kids transition to their next stop," which is typically foster care.

During COVID, the children complete remote learning in two Spaulding conference rooms that have been converted into classrooms, where five staff members assist them with online classes, homework and computer issues. For some, it's anxiety-provoking to be on camera

during Zoom. In non-pandemic times, they get a ride from staff or a bus to their community schools, where they also participate in after-school activities.

Spaulding is a wraparound environment, one that includes outdoor education, physical education and free time outside – which means sledding, cross country skiing and making snowmen during winter. On warm days, the kids ride their bikes around the 500-acre campus, play kickball in the gym, or unwind on the playground. Through the Echo Program in outdoor education, they hike, go canoeing and do Ropes, Rocks and Rims, which includes a ropes course, rock wall climbing, and hiking. Movie nights and arts and crafts are staples.

At Wednesday House, four staff during the day and two at night fill the role of parents – making sure the residents brush their teeth, get to bed on time and are up in the morning for school, eat a healthy breakfast, and have snacks to take to school on the main campus, a short walk by trail through the woods. For Valentine's Day, they decorated hearts to give to staff and each other.

"The people who work here are like their family," said Amanda Champagne, executive director of Spaulding Family Services, who has worked there for 20 years. The children make friends with staff and peers and often stay in touch after they graduate. "The connections are lifelong and life-changing," Champagne said.

"Right now, they're navigating COVID together. They're in one area so they can help each other out, and are like a little family themselves," she said. The children continue to visit their own family members by Skype.

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support at Spaulding, they can be children without unsettling pressures to fill adult roles at home. "We make deals to get their teeth brushed and pajamas on, all the things you do with little kids. Their faces are lit up and they're smiling," Champagne said.

Skill-building for independence starts when they arrive. They learn budgeting, how to cook, how to advocate for their own needs and, later, how to drive, manage a bank account and apply for a job or college.

This spring, residents of Wednesday House will get chickens – one for each child – that they will name and care for as pets, while doing chores and collecting eggs.

For some this is a novel opportunity to have a personal space in a house that resembles a ski lodge or a vacation home, with a comfy central living room and surrounding bedrooms with windows that open on winter splendor.

"One of the young ladies was over-the-moon about decorating her own room," said Champagne. "She was asking for opinions. To see the look on her face was priceless."

The kids arrived by van on Monday afternoon, a parka-clad troop of mostly elementary schoolers – some with few belongings, a blanket or a favorite stuffed animal – excited about entering a house just for them.

"It's just the look on their faces," Champagne said about the rewards of working at Spaulding. "To see them happy and healthy and learning is priceless."

For information about how to become a foster family, go to nheasy.nh.gov/dcyf/#/ or call 603-271-4711.

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With snow coming down outside, Wes Cannon welcomes a resident to Wednesday House, a new transitional home for youngsters that opened Monday in Northfield. Cannon is the house manager. (Courtesy photo) Courtesy



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Source: [Wednesday House offers kids a welcome home \(concordmonitor.com\)](http://concordmonitor.com)