

Lending a hand to runaway and homeless youths



BARB GUY

Behind our house, past the back yard proper, is a space that was called a dog run when we bought our place. We were excited, but our giant Labrador, Bob Barker, wouldn't have anything to do with it.

It was fenced to be invisible from the yard, paved with tiny, poking gravel, and overrun with goat-head stickers, so Bob was right to think of it as jail, even though my husband, Chris, contributed an enormous, beautifully constructed homemade dog house.

About six years ago, long after Bob's passing, Chris and I were immersed in our busy lives, managing work and elder care and ignoring remote portions of our yard when the adorable grandmother next door mentioned something was going on with our dog house. (I'm

sorry to say that she had a better vantage point than we did.)

Upon inspection, apparently a homeless girl or one in hiding was living in or using the old dog house - and the anonymity of the hidden area.

Stashed inside the dog house were items announcing a teenage life in turmoil. Gingerly, then curiously, then snoopily, we pulled everything out for inspection: A bottle of peroxide hair dye. A bag of clothes. Some empty soda cans. A few books. A letter from her mom, which we read, which may have mentioned a baby. Some costume jewelry. A flier from a methadone clinic.

We were intrigued by the mystery, and with each piece of the puzzle we became more concerned for the girl, but what to do?

We put her belongings back. Inside, we talked at length about the girl and our confused hearts grew heavy. In the end, we made a care package and delivered it to the dog house. It contained some food, a little money, some more books and a note expressing concern for her, inviting a conversation, and promising not to turn her in.

She must have cleared out immediately. She never made contact with us, and we have no

idea what happened to her. I am sure we did not do the right thing.

There are people to call if a girl turns up in your dog house; we just couldn't imagine it then. And Utah kids find themselves on their own all the time.

Sometimes it's a lifetime of trouble - being born into a homeless family or to mentally ill or imprisoned parents. Sometimes it's aging out of foster care. But I have also seen "good families" viciously, permanently excise children from their lives for being gay. And we all know stories of "good church leaders" and "good teachers" who have ruined children.

Any kid can end up in need.

The Homeless Youth Resource Center can help. Jeff St. Romain is responsible for the center; it's part of his multifaceted job as president and CEO of Volunteers of America, Utah. He says, "We help kids 16 to 22 years of age. Some of them refer to themselves as throw-away kids. They're kind of lost."

Like the girl in Bob Barker's house, they're under the radar and they probably want to stay that way. Jeff's staff of young professionals finds kids in trouble and offers what they need most - a no-pressure drop-in center where they can be out

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of the weather, do laundry, arrange to receive mail, and spend social time with other young people.

Jeff says, "As they develop trust, a case manager will begin to work with them around what their goals are. It's all about moving them from the street." Case managers can then help with medical care, education and employment.

At the center, a bulletin board flutters with successes: photos of apartments, announcements of full-time jobs, wedding pictures, grades.

November is National Homeless Youth Awareness Month. An open-house will be held at 655 S. State St. on Tuesday from noon to 2 p.m. Distinguished speakers will be there and Jeff will be seeking volunteers, goods, and money.

If you worry about some of the kids you see walking around, or if, like me, you've ever felt you should have done more for one specific kid, you might want to drop in.

BARB GUY is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.