

SOS Children's Village one-of-a-kind in Canada

BY ERIN SPERLING

The idea of a traditional family has been changing with the times. A mother is sometimes a dad; brothers and sisters may be halves or steps. At the SOS Children's Village in Margareville, Nova Scotia, this diversity is celebrated and used to enhance the lives of children. It is where family doesn't have to mean a biological connection, but does mean a caring relationship.

SOS, a home for distressed children and families, has been open since 1983, serving the needs of those who have nowhere else to turn. The village, located about 2 hours from Halifax on the Bay of Fundy, was the first of its kind in North America. Thus far, it is the only facility of its kind established in Canada, although one is being developed in Surrey, BC.

Wendy Chappell has been the director of the facility since the early nineties. She is responsible for three programs within the village and creating a connection between SOS and the community of Margareville. She understands the special attention needed by the residents of the village. "Most of the youth coming into

our care come from distressed backgrounds. They arrive here typically with quite a number of issues [that] they need to look at and work on. [They] sometimes have a lot of emotional [and] behavioral problems when they first arrive and often a lot of...learning disadvantages. We typically work hard with them and work really closely with the schools," said Chappell.

The programs provided by the Children's Village are for both permanent and temporary residents. There are nine permanent residents, and seven children currently in the monthly respite program. There is also a Prevention Program for families, in which there are currently four families for a total of fifteen people. There are eleven beds available for permanent residents.

"The longest that anyone has been here to this point is just short of thirteen years, and he had been the

first child placed here in 1983 when it opened. He left here at age 20," said Chappell.

"Technically, they move out of our village when they move out of the care system, because they are all under the care of Child Welfare. Some of them remain in care until they are 19 and some until they are

that — an average day for any kid.

"I go to school. I come home and I usually do my homework as soon as I get home because we have a study hour from four to five," said Peraud. "Once a week, at least in my house, we do cooking [because we all take turns]. And we have chores, everyone has a different chore everyday. We do that and whatever you want to do at night time for an activity, you can go ahead and do it."

There are three children living in his house, himself and two girls aged nine and fifteen.

"I consider them my sisters, but they're not my biological sisters," he stated.

They live in a regular house, with a kitchen, a bedroom each and a house mother who is hired to care for them.

There are two other permanent residence houses in the village. The children from each house interact with one another, as well as their house brothers and sisters.

"We are all pretty close, basically we are all brothers and sisters around here. It's pretty good. It's like a little subdivision," Peraud said.

However, he says that the instability of people coming and going is sometimes difficult.

"It does get hard [when a new kid comes] but usually we are pretty good about that. In three years I've seen people come and go. It takes a little time to get used to the person, getting to know them, but otherwise it's not too bad," he said.

In terms of his own future, Peraud

is optimistic.

"I'm hoping to graduate and afterwards, I am looking into going to law school. That's one of the goals I have right now but that could change," he said.

Chappell says that although few of the children who have lived in the village go on to post-secondary education, there are opportunities available.

"Our national office in Ottawa does have an education fund which would help somewhat with expenses — not fully, but somewhat. We do try to push [post-secondary education], that's for sure.

"We have certainly had lots of very bright kids. I have two seventeen-year-olds who are straight-A students and one who is fluently trilingual, so I am really encouraging them. But they also don't know that the world of university is out there," said Chappell.

"We are trying to set up a relationship between [the Phi Delta Theta fraternity] and the village and one of our ideas was to have our youth go in and spend a day with one of the frat boys, going around campus, going to class with them, really starting to get some exposure to a university setting because then it becomes a reality for them. If you don't have that exposure in your life ever, it's not as real. Your options seem more limited," Chappell said.

One of the major obstacles that Chappell faces is making technology, such as computers, available for the children.

"Access to technology is really very important to students. I think it is really important because I don't think anyone is going to be getting many jobs if they aren't at least computer literate. We have travelled many roads trying to come up with [the funding] and have hit brick walls all over the place. Used computers would be really appreciated down here — we don't need new stuff," she said.

Jason Charette is a Commerce student at Dalhousie who agrees.

Charette is doing his co-op work term with the SOS Children's Village. He spent the first month of his work term living at the village before returning to Halifax to drum up awareness and support for the children.

"As a student [at Dal], I can't imagine not being able to use [a computer] everyday," he said.

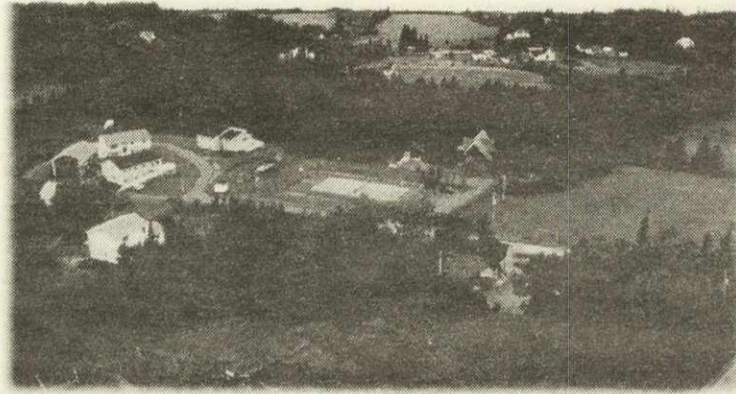
As both Chappell and Charette believe, without exposure to the technology that other people take for granted, these kids are somehow missing out on other things as well.

"These kids are so isolated. The office has a computer with internet [access], just one. They only have five hours [on the internet per] month. Once they start using e-mail for business, five hours gets used up in a month pretty fast, so the kids have no access to computers at all.

"They keep asking when the computers are coming in," said Charette.

Despite the lack of computer access, the SOS Children's Village offers kids a safe and special home when they have nowhere else to go.

"It is a unique place for kids to go," said Charette. "Instead of going to a house, they go to the village. And they take kids from all over the province."



21. It depends on a number of factors.

"The really different thing we do is keep the kids connected after they go out of the care system. If they [are] in a group home or something like that, and they [have] hit their nineteenth birthday, they're out of care [and] there is typically no longer a connection," she said.

"We try to simulate a family, to reconstitute some sort of a family setting for them."


And some kids really do call it home.

Steve Peraud is a 17-year-old resident of the Children's Village. He has been there for a little over three years now. He seems happy with what it has to offer him.

"It's great up here. There is quite a bit of stuff to do. [There's] peace and quiet. There's a lot of sports activities I can do...I mean, we are pretty creative up here," he said.

An average day for the kids at the Children's Village appears to be just

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