

Kids in crisis can now rest a little easier

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In the past two years, Dottie Berger-MacKinnon and DeDe Grundel have become intimately familiar with the ceiling tiles in their respective bedrooms.

That's what happens when you lie awake in the middle of the night worrying about putting together a \$5-million emergency assessment shelter for children removed from their homes due to crisis.

Berger-MacKinnon, chair of Kids Charity of Tampa Bay, would awake at 3 a.m. and send Grundel, the charity's executive director, an e-mail. To her surprise, she would get an immediate response because Grundel also was wide awake.

Today, Kids Charity officially breaks ground on A Kid's Place at 1715 Lithia-Pinecrest Road in Brandon. I recently spoke to Grundel and Berger-MacKinnon, one of the founders of Joshua House abuse shelter in Tampa, over breakfast at the Brunchery.

Pull up a chair and join us. What happens now that we don't have an emergency shelter for foster children?

DOTTIE: The Child Protection Team from the Sheriff's Office accepts kids. This past month, they picked up three families of either four or five kids each.

They can't find a foster home that will take the whole family, so they split up the kids.

They're traumatized because they're removed from their families and now they're traumatized more because they've split the kids up. With this new facility, the Child Protection Team will bring them to this site, keep them together as a family — it won't matter how many kids there are.

What will happen when the children arrive?

DOTTIE: They will have 72 hours to do a medical exam and they will have 30 days to do an assessment. An assessment means they will find some place, a relative, a foster home — so when they leave this place, they have a final destination. They aren't going to go from there to there to there. It's not a shelter, it's an assessment center.

So you said initially that you didn't want to do this?

DOTTIE: For a year and a half, Judge Martha Cook, who had the foster kids in her court, asked me, "Dottie, would you please just do something like this?" I didn't want to do it because it's a lot of work. But then I thought: When we did it with Joshua House, we were just some citizens who wanted to do the right thing. We didn't really know what we were doing. Now we know what we're doing.

Is there a particular reason you chose Brandon?

DOTTIE: First of all, I know Brandon. This was my district when I was a county commissioner, and I thought, "There's nothing like this in Brandon." I thought the people in Brandon would come out and support this. Community-based care means the community takes care of its kids.

DEDE: Another aspect is that more than 50 percent of the foster children brought in are from Brandon and south of Brandon. We all just kind of went, "Boy, did we choose the right place." It wasn't the reason we chose the place. What else do you need?

DOTTIE: I think we need at least \$1-million, plus we need to buy furniture, so we probably need \$2-million. So we're continuing to do fundraising. I think it's pretty remarkable that we've raised the money we have and we haven't even put the first shovel into the ground. A lot of people want to see that it's actually going to happen.

DEDE: I think the other remarkable thing is that, even though we've taken on this huge project as Kids Charity Tampa Bay, we have not compromised the services that we originally set ourselves up to do — provide support for all foster care kids in Tampa Bay. We still have the back-to-school backpack drive. We still do our holiday toy drive.

Have you had to address the concerns of the people in Brandon?

DOTTIE: When you deal with kids, there's this unknown. They think that these are going to be runaway kids, these are going to be threatening kids. They aren't. These are kids who have never been in trouble with the law. These are kids who have been abused and been removed.

DEDE: We really need to reassure them more because they're getting different messages. When we originated, it was going to be focused on the youngest kids. When we got into it, we realized that the state does not allow a home to be licensed only for toddlers and babies. Plus, we didn't want to split the siblings up. They're pulled out of violent, risky situations, and questionable homes. When they're brought there, they just need to be treated with love and care.

DESSERT: A postscript from Ernest

The program for kids who arrive at the shelter was developed by a task force that included every local agency involved with child welfare.

A number of individuals and groups have stepped up to contribute to the facility. One of the five homes on the grounds will be named for the LazyDays Partnership Foundation because of its \$400,000 donation, and another will memorialize the late son of Joe Sullivan, who also contributed \$400,000.

Other contributors include Sandy MacKinnon (Dottie's husband), Don and Erika Wallace and Gene McNichol, who all contributed \$250,000; and the Community Foundation of Brandon, which donated \$100,000. A Kid's Place charity also got a wealth of in-kind donations from the construction industry including Precise Construction, Sunbelt Rentals, Professional Services Industries, BCH Mechanical and Edge Architecture.

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