

# Taking the extra steps for foster youth in Venice

BY VINCE ECHAVARIA

Jordin Jovanovich no longer has to worry about where she'll spend the night after having been amongst the homeless population in Venice the past three months.

The soon-to-be 21-year-old jumped at the opportunity to follow a longstanding dream to live in California after having lived in and out of foster care in Minnesota as a teenager and becoming homeless at 18. But upon arriving in Southern California with no financial or family support, Jovanovich found herself continuing to live on the street.

Sleeping outside on the Venice Boardwalk, she experienced firsthand the dangers that the homeless can face and the fear of possibly getting kicked out of the area.

"I was in a huge rush to get off the street because of that. It's getting worse and worse down there," she said.

Jovanovich got the assistance she was hoping for when representatives of the Teen Project offered to give her housing and other support at one of its homes in Orange County. The volunteer centric organization works with youths who have exited foster care to reunite them with their families or facilitate placing them in safe homes.

According to the Teen Project, foster care ends at the age of 18, when care services abruptly end and teens are oftentimes forced to leave their home with no money or place

to live. Many leave care with no plans for college or a job, as the foster parents are not obligated to prepare them, and without the ability to reenter care.

Approximately 25,000 teens are freed from the foster care system each year, and due to lack of support and other struggles, many become homeless, end up in jail or in the welfare system, according to the Teen Project. The organization aims to pick up where the laws fall short by giving the young adults, some who may have come from abusive homes, the opportunity to better their lives.

"It's unbelievable that in America abused kids are being pushed out on the streets," Teen Project co-founder Lauri Burns said, noting how many teens who are emancipated from the foster system may be living on the street or in shelters. "We finish the job that foster care should've finished by picking up where the laws fell short and finishing the job."

Thanks to the aid provided by Teen Project, Jovanovich says she now has a warm place to come back to every night that has food and where she can focus on applying for colleges and finding work. Teen Project representatives have also helped her schedule interviews for college and obtain proper identification.

"I think it's so amazing," she said of the project's help. "I don't

know how I would be able to survive without this program."

The Teen Project is hoping to make a difference in the lives of other former foster youths like Jovanovich with the opening of its new PAD (Protection and Direction) drop-in center in Venice. An opening ceremony for the facility is scheduled from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Friday, Feb. 10 at 76 Market St., near the boardwalk.

While homeless adults and youths can receive food and temporary services at local social service facilities, those resources can actually enable them to remain homeless in Venice, Burns, a Mission Viejo resident, said. The PAD drop-in will focus on sending the young adults home to safe relatives, transitional housing or a partnering agency that will help them stabilize and begin a new life.

Volunteers at the facility can refer the youths to thousands of shelters across the country and work to connect them with resources so they don't have to sleep at places like the boardwalk.

"Teen Project is about finding them homes," Burns said. "We're not in the mindset that we will take care of them so they can live on the beach."

The facility features lounge areas, a kitchen, computer stations and a therapy room but does not have bedrooms or sleep areas.

Teen Project chose to open a



LAURI BURNS, center, pictured with some of the girls who have lived at Teen Project's home in Orange County, founded the volunteer centric organization to provide assistance to teens exiting foster care. Teen Project will open a drop-in outreach center in Venice Feb. 10.

(Photo by Leonard Ortiz, *The Orange County Register*)

drop-in center in Venice due to an influx of homeless youth that have been living in the community. New enforcement of a park curfew law on the boardwalk has made such a service center even more important because homeless young adults are being pushed out of the park and onto streets, Burns noted.

Burns knows the struggles that some foster teens have faced, having been physically abused by her father as a child and grown up in the juvenile dependency system

where she was a probation youth. As a teenager, she dealt with a drug addiction and homelessness, and later engaged in prostitution.

"I got involved in dangerous behavior because the only form of control was to live on the edge," she said.

Burns eventually changed her life for the better after entering a recovery home and meeting successful people on her path. Over the years she has been a foster mother to 41 young adults, whom she calls the "second biggest gift in my life" behind her daughter, and she initiated the Teen Project to help improve the lives of teens exiting foster care.

The PAD drop-in center was a pro-bono project completed with a team of eight designers and assistants who sought donations from various businesses for furniture and other materials. Led by Vanessa De Vargas, the design team included Marilynn Taylor, Allan Dallatorre, Charmean Neithart, Kelly Edwards, Mollie Ranize, Typhanie Peterson and Winston Carney.

De Vargas said the goal of the design was to make the center not only a safe and clean environment, but a welcoming and fun place for the youngsters to hang out while seeking assistance.

The Venice resident said she was happy to be involved in a project dedicated to enhancing the lives of foster teens.

"For me, being involved with something that has to do with kids and young adults is dear to my heart," De Vargas said.

Jovanovich recalled feeling a "rush of relief" when learning of how Teen Project stepped up to help, and she is grateful of the new doors it has opened for her future.

"I feel like everything that has happened in my life has led to me being here," she said.

**Donate Your Boat**

**THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE CHARITIES**

Get **CASH** for your Boat, Car or RV  
And a **TAX DEDUCTION** for the Balance

Help Your Choice Charity and Help Yourself

It's Simple, Smart and Charitable

Call for details  
**888.463.5353**

[www.peopleschoicecharities.org](http://www.peopleschoicecharities.org)

PCC is a Local 501 (c) 3 Non Profit Tax Exempt Organization based in Southern CA

**Stone Paving & Veneer**

**Flagstone**  
**Wall Rock**  
**Tile**

**Bluestone**  
**Sandstone**  
**Slate**  
**Basalt**

**BOURGET FLAGSTONE CO.**  
1810 Colorado Blvd. Santa Monica  
310-829-4010  
[www.bourgetbros.com](http://www.bourgetbros.com)

## Whitehall Spirit ROWING CLUB of Marina del Rey

**\$25 Opening Special!** Receive incredible reduced pricing. Sign up online for an Opening 1 Hour Introductory Lesson with one of our staff for just \$25.00

After your lesson decide if you want to continue. Say YES and you'll be able to row as you go and receive invitations to special events, activities and more! NO Annual or Monthly Fees!

NO commitment! ONLY pay for the time you use your boat! Packages ranging from \$10.00 to \$20.00 an hour! Additionally if you would like to continue with lessons from one of our Professional

instructors they are available for all skill levels at \$55.00 an hour. All you need to do is use our simple on line booking system and we will have your boat ready for you at the dock!



• All Ages, No Experience Necessary

• Exercise all major muscles  
• Burn 800 calories per hour

**310-822-7600**  
**Whitehalldelrey.com**

**MAKE THE OCEAN YOUR TREADMILL**