



The TEEN Whisperer

Dozens of former foster girls have found a safe home—plus plenty of love and guidance—thanks to **LAURI BURNS**, mother of the parentless.

*By Shirley J. Velasquez
Photography by Laura Doss*

Nestled along the grassy edges of a park, a southwestern-style house cuts an elegant figure in the tree-filled neighborhood of Lake Forest, in Southern California. The home belongs to Lauri Burns, and the first time she walked into it, her eyes filled with tears. But Lauri never planned to live in the newly renovated six-bedroom abode. Instead, she built the “Teen House” for the many foster daughters she has sheltered since 1996.

At 49, Lauri is a technology executive at a Fortune 100 company, a published author, a public speaker and a “grandma” to 10 children, all while parenting 39 foster girls. Most recently, she has emerged as one of the country’s leading foster kids’ rights activists. Through her foundation, The Teen Project (TTP), Lauri helps “America’s forgotten kids” find homes and turn

Want to help Lauri fight teen homelessness? Donations and inquiries can be made at theteenproject.com.

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away from the likelihood of a life of addiction, prostitution and jail.

Lauri's preternatural ability to communicate with troubled teens comes from her own childhood experience. She seemed to have it all growing up in an affluent Long Island, New York, suburb. But behind closed doors, Lauri lived a nightmare. On a regular basis she endured severe beatings at the hands of her father that only worsened as the years passed. At age 14, Lauri ran away for the first of many times. Her mother (who lived in California) arranged to have her put in a group residence, where she joined other wayward teens. Unbelievable as it may seem to those who know her today, she burglarized homes in order to get high with money from the stolen goods, ended up in juvenile hall and was removed from her parents' guardianship. At 16, as a ward of the court, Lauri entered another group facility where foster kids lived under constant supervision. Finally, at 23, Lauri became sober and slowly turned her life around.

Now she is helping other teens do the same. For the past 16 years, she has taken in many of Orange County's toughest girls. And though she had invited her 18th foster child into her personal home by 2006, she still felt she could do more. So that March she accepted an invitation from the County Supervisors' office to guest-sit on its Foster Care Advisory Board. "Foster care" is an umbrella term for different types of living situations for children who are under a state's care. The court places most kids in either a foster home, where youth live in a family's house, or in a group facility for those

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Nearly 450,000 kids are in the foster care system in the U.S., and according to a 2010 Human Rights Watch report, at least 20% of kids who "age out" each year in California will become homeless.



Clockwise from left: Ashley Moody, Rose Hernandez, Mindy Hoang, China Wilkerson, Sandy Phan, Ana Rosetti, Lauri Burns and Janelle Garcia

who require stricter supervision from a trained staff in a controlled setting. After sharing her ideas on how to improve services, she heard two social workers discussing the cases of three kids who had "emancipated"—aged out of the system when they turned 18—and subsequently gone missing. For all the foster parenting Lauri had done, she knew very little about the grim realities teens faced across the nation after emancipation, a word she had not even heard before. "I rushed home, turned on my computer and was devastated to learn that 65% of foster children in California were being released to the streets on their 18th birthday with nowhere to live," she says. Shockingly, it was sometimes the social workers themselves who dropped off kids at homeless shelters.

Lauri decided to start a community where former foster kids could live, heal and go to college until they were ready to become self-supporting adults. But she realized she first needed to start a foundation to raise awareness about the connection between foster care and teen homelessness. Her idea

spread rapidly through word of mouth, and support for the project came from friends, community members and neighbors. By September 2007, she had 20 volunteers and \$400 in small donations to establish the nonprofit.

After Lauri raised \$180,000 through grants and private donations within 10 months, the first order of business was to build the Teen House, a transitional home for kids aging out of foster care. She found a modest home in Lake Forest and got contractors to refurbish it. Two weeks before the grand opening in March 2010, Lauri walked in and was struck by what she saw: dark wood floors, custom-tiled bathrooms, appliances and themed rooms for each of the six bedrooms, most of it from donors. "You could feel the love the moment you walked in," she remembers. Lauri estimates 40% of the total refurbishing cost was donated, and the remainder was highly discounted.

Lauri affectionately refers to the young women who live in her Mission Viejo personal home or the nearby Teen House as "my girls." All are survivors of physical, sexual or emotional abuse who were put into state custody. Lauri usually seeks them out, five for each home, by sending emails to social workers, child advocates and teachers.

TAKE SHELTER

Desperately looking for a shelter in Texas, a homeless youth found the Teen Project's website and emailed Lauri. When she asked for his number to explain the directions to a facility, he said he was in a public library and didn't have a phone. Email was the only way to reach him. "That's when it hit me—homeless kids were going to local libraries for free Internet access," Lauri says. To address this situation, she created Protection and Direction (theteenproject.com/shelterlocator), an online database with a listing of 17,500 shelters around the country. In March 2010 she went one step further and launched the Short Code texting program. Kids anywhere in the nation can text the word "shelter," "sober" or "abused" along with their zip code to 99000, and within 30 seconds they will receive information on the shelter closest to them.

The girls can live at the house for up to two years and save money to move out. Once they're on their own, TTP fills their apartment with donated furniture. They can stay involved in the aftercare program indefinitely.

Chelsea, 21, remembers the day she moved into the peaceful home in August 2006. It was "waaay" different from what she had endured on a daily basis at foster care: screaming kids and reprimanding administrators and guards. "There is no drama here," Chelsea says. "If there's a problem, Lauri talks about it and doesn't freak out. She just knows how to handle things because she can see the bigger picture." That's why everyone calls her the Teen Whisperer.

Though she has never formally adopted any of the girls, Lauri is committed to parenting them for the rest of their lives. While most teens get lots of guidance from their parents, foster kids have limited one-on-one contact

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with a caring adult. "These kids have more responsibilities than your ordinary teen," Lauri says. "But in my home, I take care of the big stuff like giving them structure and love." To boost the girls' self-confidence, Lauri gives them a platform to express their opinions and ideas during family meetings, held regularly at both houses, in which they learn how to communicate and negotiate needs.

She has taken all her kids on supermarket runs to shop for healthy food, accompanied them to fill out job applications, role-played in mock interviews and even popped the hood of the car to demonstrate an oil change. She also enrolls them in first aid and CPR training. Regular foster children, on the other hand, have few if any adults to consistently help them with everyday tasks.

Lauri does not live at the Teen House, so she hires a "house mom" to guide the residents. She also depends upon a cadre of volunteers to share their expertise with the teens. Every Sunday a volunteer goes to the facility to offer tutoring and teach skills such as cooking and financial planning. TTP helps the girls pay for college by drawing funding from a variety of sources. But the linchpin of all the programs is the rule mandating sobriety. "Ninety-nine percent of our kids are genetically predisposed to substance abuse," says Lauri. "We take kids to recovery meetings and hold a weekly 12-step meeting at home to teach them how to respond to environments where there are drugs and alcohol."

Looking back on all the lives she's touched, Lauri knows that her love has helped lots of broken kids to blossom. "It's powerful to watch the girls as they build their future," she says. "They keep me alive." ●



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