



Another kind of home for the holidays

By Aida Rogers

There are two villages two miles apart in Columbia, and between them, they're raising about 120 children. While the children at Epworth Children's Home and Carolina Children's Home don't have typical family situations, their villages provide them with just about everything else – food, shelter, clothing, education, health care, and guidance on how to live each day. At Christmas, hard-working staffers and a generous community make sure the children are remembered.



There are presents. Holiday dinners. Decorated trees and cottages. But there's that extra something too, that intrinsic awareness that assures them they're not alone, even if their parents can't take care of them, even if they know they'll never go home again. Here's a peek into these villages at Christmas. Indeed, they are universes unto themselves.

Epworth Children's Home

"After Thanksgiving is when the whole fun begins," says Taylor Perry, 18. Her face brightens talking about it. At Epworth now for almost eight years, Taylor knows that in September she and the other children will compile their wish lists, and many of those wishes will come true on Christmas Day. Cottage Partners – individuals, businesses or groups who've adopted a cottage – will have Christmas parties for the children. Hot chocolate and cookies are served December 7-14, when community members drive through the 32-acre campus to drop off goodies and look at the decorated cottages.

Last Christmas Eve, Taylor and a handful of her "peers," or cottage mates, spent the night in their living room with their "LSS," or Life Skills Specialist. Snug in their pajamas, the girls ate pizza, watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and waited for Christmas. At midnight they opened their presents. Taylor, who loves cats, got some Hello Kitty items, clothes and perfume. It was her best Christmas ever.

But earlier that day, Taylor was panic-stricken. She was spending the holidays with her mother, who disappeared Christmas Eve morning without telling Taylor where she was going. Alone and unfamiliar with the neighborhood, surrounded by people who didn't speak English, in a house with a door that didn't lock, Taylor called Epworth and asked to be picked up. About 15 minutes later, a staff person, following Taylor's description of landmarks in the area, arrived. "I just ran to her," Taylor recalls.

Epworth is Taylor's third children's home. She's also lived with three foster families. Her good grades – she graduated from Dreher High School in May with a 3.3 GPA – helped her win three scholarships. She'll start at Spartanburg Methodist College next semester – she moves Jan. 9, her birthday – to study psychology. After two years, she'll transfer to another college, spending holidays and summers at Epworth. She wants to be a counselor, to help other children and young adults.

The first person in her family to graduate from high school, Taylor is anxious to get to college. Only 2 percent of the foster children who attend college graduate, says Laurie Brandes, Epworth's minister of higher education and youth. Only 20 percent even attempt a college career. Taylor, Brandes notes, will be living in SMC's Honors Dorm. It's exciting for Brandes, who remembers when Taylor first came to Epworth. "She grew into one of the most inspiring students that I have known."

Taylor found inspiration one Sunday in Epworth Memorial, the campus church, about a year after she arrived. "God Loves You" was the title of a sermon Rev. Jim Hunter preached. "I was



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The Gospel

"...For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'"

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'"

Matthew 25:35-40

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Anderson Cottage, Epworth Children's Home

like, 'Here we go again,'" she recalls, explaining she didn't believe in God then. "I just felt like if God loved me and cared for me as much as people said He did, then why would He put me through all this bad stuff?"

But Hunter's message was hopeful. He pointed out that the children at Epworth had already overcome obstacles. "That's the point," Taylor said. "You overcame them. You're not still facing them. You may still live in a children's home or be in DSS, but at the end of the day, God loves and cares for you and that's all that matters. And I was like, 'Wow.'"

Taylor became enthusiastic about Sunday School and church – required at this 116-year-old United Methodist Church-affiliated home. And she began volunteering at the soup kitchen at Washington Street United Methodist Church. Community service is important, Brandes says. "It helps them be in mission without feeling like they're a mission."

While the discovery of God's love strengthens the children, life doesn't get easier, observes Mitzi Schafer, Epworth's development director. "Every day they have to deal with, 'What's going to happen to me next?' 'Who's going to come pick me up?' When a new kid comes in a cottage, 'are we all going to get along?' There's nothing about it that's easy."

Much as she loves playing Secret Santa in her cottage, Taylor knows Christmas means more than presents under a tree. "I feel like if you can receive something, you should be able to give something," she asserts. "And not just to friends and family, but homeless people. Give them food or a coat to wear, because they may be cold."

Taylor's generous spirit is typical of Epworth's children, most of whom are victims of neglect and/or abuse. When the Scott Hannon Foundation gives each child a \$100 Walmart gift card at Christmas, about 75 percent of them buy gifts for others, Schafer says. "They might buy only one small thing for themselves."

Carolina Children's Home

There's a quote by Winston Churchill in the dining hall at Carolina Children's Home: "Success is not final, failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts." Such a philosophy is particularly meaningful for children who've endured family trauma so severe they've been removed permanently from their homes.

Many of these children never experienced Christmas until they came to CCH. Or they think Christmas is just about Santa. That's why Chaplain Jeff Becraft thinks decorating the campus church is so special. For about 10 years, Becraft and the residents of a chosen cottage spend an evening hanging wreaths and garlands in Malone Chapel, and putting up a tree and decorating it. Snacks and sodas are part of the festivities, and glow-stick bracelets that light up in the dark. When the sanctuary is fully decorated, Becraft turns out the lights. Then they marvel at what they've done.

"They've taken something and made it more beautiful," Becraft explains. "That's what God does in our lives. He takes the good, the bad and the ugly and does that."

It's important for the children – most are teenagers – to decorate the 1930 chapel themselves, Becraft believes. "This is their home and their chapel and they're part of the action. That's what God does. He invites us to join Him and that's part of the thrill of it."

Carolina Children's Home was founded 105 years ago and is non-denominational. Residents are wards of the state and come from a variety of faiths, so no religious practices are enforced and all religions are respected. Still, spiritual sustenance is helpful, says Dr. Peggy Torrey, CCH executive director and CEO. "It's important to me that the kids know that God can give them the strength that they're never going to find in themselves for some of these incredibly difficult situations that they're in."

Becraft leads Bible studies in cottages and a youth group-style worship service on Sunday afternoons. But he's careful not to force



Epworth children on an outing at an ice skating rink. Above right: Dantzler Cottage decorated for Christmas at Epworth

his beliefs. "When you force yourself, that's manipulation," he says. "That's not love."

Like Epworth's Santa's Angels program, in which children fill out wish lists, CCH has Operation Santa Claus. Residents are astonished to receive exactly what they asked for on Christmas morning, thanks to generous strangers. "I think it gives the children a sense that people care about them, people they don't know and have never seen," says Dawn Todd, director of CCH's residential program. "I think that's where some of the amazement comes."

One former resident, now on her own and successful, volunteered to wrap presents for several years. Elizabeth Caulk, CCH's development consultant, asked her why. "She said, 'You may not believe me, but I still use the pots and pans someone gave me one Christmas.'" Many people want to give CCH residents

something more fun and less utilitarian, Caulk explains. But bed linens and kitchen appliances are important to young adults who haven't had stable childhoods. "It's important to have that type of ownership and those things we take for granted every day."

Staff and students attend the Christmas Eve candlelight service. Last year Jack Easterby, USC's campus director of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, delivered the message. "He told our kids that when Christ entered the world, that news wasn't shared with kings and queens. It was shared with shepherds, the lowest of the low," Caulk remembers. "He didn't come from this well-to-do family. He had so many odds and strikes against Him just by entering the world."

The CCH residents understood what Easterby was saying. "They think their stories are so tragic and sad, but their stories are similar to the Christmas story," Caulk said. "And that made Christ more real to them." **ROC**

Carolina Children's Home (www.carolinachildrenshome.org, 787-2306) and Epworth Children's Home (www.epworthchildrenshome.org, 256-7394) have wish lists too. CCH needs new windows in its recreation building/gym and air conditioning in the gym and Fuller building. Epworth needs new buses to transport children, an updated security system, and wireless networking. Of course, both homes need funding. As Mitzie Schafer, Epworth's development director puts it, "If we can increase funding, we can welcome more children."

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