



## FRIENDS OF THE CHILDREN

Simon is thirteen years old and recently moved to his eighth foster home in the last three years. When Simon was five years old he was removed from his mother's care. Simon's Mom loved him very much but struggled with an addiction that led her into prostitution and made it impossible for her to provide the care that Simon required. Simon was initially placed with his grandmother who cared for him for several years before her own health, and Simon's increasingly difficult behavior, made it necessary to move him. He moved through the homes of several other relatives before beginning his foster care experience. Each placement ended with complaints of Simon's uncontrollable impulsivity, aggression and pervasive negativity.



It hasn't been easy. Simon has repeatedly tested Mike to see if he would reject him just as every other adult had done. He has cursed at him, told him to go away, bolted from his car, verbally assaulted him, and refused to accompany him on outings. Through out these rebuffs, Mike keeps showing up, calling, scheduling activities and visits, neither forcing himself on Simon, nor retreating. It's still up and down. Mike never knows if he will encounter the Simon who heaps insults upon him or the Simon who is fun to be with, open and appreciative, articulate, affectionate, and funny. As Simon enters adolescence, the rejecting messages are increasing in frequency and vehemence, but Mike refuses to disappear.

When Simon was six, two events occurred that would influence the course his life would take. First, he had his initial contact with the mental health system. He was given the first of many diagnoses that would follow him through multiple treatment and educational settings. Initially he was seen as having ADHD and was given medication to control his impulsivity and inattention. As subsequent psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers assessed and treated Simon, he collected a laundry list of labels and opinions about what was best for him. At various times he was diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Effects, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Reactive Attachment Disorder, Alcohol Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder, Major Depression, as well as various learning disabilities. Each change in diagnosis brought with it a change in treatment plan and medication and, frequently, a change of placement. The second event that occurred when Simon was six was that he was selected for participation in Friends of the Children and met his Friend, Mike. At the time, Mike was twenty-five years old and beginning his career as a professional mentor to Simon and seven other first grade boys. Now, seven years later, through multiple placements, treatment providers, and schools, Mike remains the one constant in Simon's life.

Recently there have been encouraging signs. Simon has been working, for over a year, with a therapist he really likes, and his current medications are helping. In the past year he reestablished contact with his Mom, who is still struggling with addiction. Rather than idealizing her, Simon is now able to recognize what he can realistically expect from her. Simon likes his new foster dad a lot, although that doesn't mean that he's not testing him. The foster parents, the therapist, the child welfare worker and the Friend are all meeting regularly as a team to talk about how they might best collaborate in Simon's interest. And, surprisingly, Simon has actually taken the risk of making a few phone calls to Mike asking when they can schedule some activities. There is still much uncertainty about Simon's future; however, one thing is certain. Wherever Simon goes, Mike will be walking beside him.

### What does a Friend do?

*Friends of the Children* was founded in 1993 by Portland businessman Duncan Campbell. Having survived, and triumphed over, his own rough and tumble childhood in a tough neighborhood in Northeast Portland, with parents

who were not able to meet his needs due to their own difficulties, Duncan asked himself a simple question: "If I could do one thing to make a difference in a child's life, what would that be?" The answer to that question, simple yet profound, has now impacted the lives of over 270 children in Portland, alone, with new *Friends of the Children* chapters springing up around the country.

When Duncan sought to answer his question he consulted with experts who directed his attention to the research in childhood resiliency. What one thing could make the most difference? Provide a child with a long-term, stable relationship with a healthy, caring, consistent adult. *Friends of the Children* accomplishes this seemingly impossible task by employing mentors, called *Friends*, who are paid a professional salary plus benefits, to establish and maintain relationships with high-risk children for twelve years or more.

In Portland, *Friends* currently accepts children from three public elementary schools in the city's most vulnerable neighborhoods. First grade teachers are asked to evaluate their incoming students for risk and resiliency factors. Those children identified as most at risk are then observed over a period of weeks and, after careful consultation between *Friends* staff and school personnel, a group of children are selected for participation. Meetings are scheduled with families to explain the program, answer questions, and to make two key points:

1. This is a long-term commitment that will continue at least until the child graduates from high school.
2. We are not interested in replacing parents or suggesting that a child needs this program because the parents are inadequate. Partnership with the family is essential to the success of this venture, and we provide parents and guardians with the time and the opportunity for discussion in order to make an informed choice.

Each professional *Friend* has eight children and spends, on average, four to five hours per week with each child. What do *Friends* do? They aren't teachers but they sometimes teach. They aren't counselors but they sometimes counsel. They aren't coaches but they sometimes coach. They aren't parents but they always nurture and sometimes set limits. They are *friends*. They do what friends do. They talk. They do fun activities. They go places. They hang out, they support, they argue, they fight, they hug. When asked what *Friends* do, Duncan quotes the "Three Bs," the cornerstone of the program: "Be with the children, Be yourself, and Be with each other." *Friends* are not therapists. They do not treat. Most *Friends* are only marginally concerned with any

possible diagnosis their child may have been given. The focus is on relationship in the context of normal (and normalizing) experience. When kids screw up, as they inevitably will, it is just one step backwards in a journey of a million steps. We don't try to fix kids. We relate to them as the complete person they can become.

## Evaluation

*Friends of the Children* continually tracks the progress and well-being of its youth. *Friends* contracts with Northwest Professional Consortium, Inc., an independent research firm, to perform an annual evaluation of behavioral and emotional indicators for all children. Parents and *Friends* complete a Child Assessment Checklist each year and children do a self-assessment at the same time. Examination of the data indicates overall stability of the ratings with steady improvements in self-esteem, communication skills, and impulsive behaviors. Given the vulnerability of the population, and the focus on prevention, while it is too early to say that kids are improving, we can conclude that we are keeping them from getting worse.

Teachers complete a TOCAR (Teacher Observation of Classroom Adaptation-Revised) at the beginning and end of each school year. Last year, these scores showed slight, but not statistically significant improvement over the course of the school year. Nevertheless, for our children, the stability that these scores represent demonstrates the preventative effect that we hope to achieve.

In addition, *Friends* is currently awaiting a decision on funding for a longitudinal study to be conducted by Public/Private Ventures that would evaluate long-term mentoring as an early intervention strategy with emphasis on prevention by comparing program children with a comparison group of children without mentors. The true effectiveness of *Friends* can only be determined over the long-term.

## Ten Reasons

Why does *Friends of the Children* work? We have identified ten factors that seem to be the key ingredients to success:

1. **The one-on-one relationship.** A loving relationship with a positive adult role model can literally save a child's life.

2. **The long-term commitment.** There are no quick fixes, no miracles. We're in this for the long haul, first grade through high school, through all the ups and downs.
3. **Serving vulnerable children.** We work with the children who are most at risk of school failure, delinquency, abuse, teen pregnancy, depression and substance abuse.
4. **Paid professionals.** Our mentors are paid professionals who are hired for the relationship skills.
5. **Positive expectations.** Our children will succeed—we believe in them and they grow to believe in themselves.
6. **Manageable numbers.** Each *Friend* works with no more than eight children.
7. **Experiences = Opportunities.** We help children reach their unique potential by exposing them to a wide range of experiences and allowing them to explore their talents and interests.
8. **Early intervention.** We begin working with children at age six when their minds and hearts are open.
9. **Comprehensive approach.** We provide links to the child's total environment— family, school, and community. We tap into many resources, accessing mental health, substance abuse, and health care services as well as addressing basic needs.
10. **Evaluation-based.** We are committed to ongoing evaluation by independent researchers to assess if children are achieving significant outcomes.

## Outcomes

What are the outcomes we seek? We have to think long-term. Our first cohort of first graders is now entering the tenth grade. Upon completion of the program we expect our children to have achieved six goals:

- A strong sense of positive identity and personal vision for the future.
- Life skills necessary to be a contributing member of our community.
- Social and emotional competence necessary to form and maintain relationships, demonstrate interpersonal responsibility, practice teamwork, and function in diverse social settings.
- A strong work ethic with the motivation to achieve and persevere.
- A value of lifelong learning and curiosity.

## Where are we?

*Friends of the Children* originated in Portland, Oregon with Duncan Campbell's vision. The Portland office now serves over 260 children with 34 *Friends*. This fall we will add additional children and 4 new *Friends*. *Friends* has been replicated in eight additional cities around the country with branches in Seattle; San Francisco; Cincinnati; New York; Washington, DC; Klamath Falls, OR; and Chester, PA/Wilmington, DE. The next year will see a regional initiative throughout Oregon and new branches in Chicago and Minneapolis. As of June, 2002, *Friends of the Children* will be serving over 600 kids nationwide.

## A Clinician's Story

I have worked in the field of child and family mental health for over thirty years. During that time I have worked in inpatient, outpatient, residential, and home-based services. I have seen promising treatment approaches come and go. I have seen the latest trend be replaced with the next latest trend. I have seen managed care in all its iterations and have seen how it has systematically reduced the amount of time that clinicians can spend with children and families. I have heard much talk about strength based services with precious little follow through. I have seen treatment approaches fail as often as they succeed. I have seen good clinicians burn out due to unmanageable caseloads. I have seen millions of dollars spent with negligible results.

After thirty years I was left with two inescapable conclusions. First, when treatment worked it was because someone took the time to establish a relationship with the child and family. Second, when children prevail over dire circumstances it is due to their strengths, not their deficits. When I heard about *Friends of the Children*, my first thought was "Of course. Why didn't I think of that?" I knew after thirty years that it all came down to this: Provide the child with an abiding relationship that focuses on, and develops, his or her strengths. Of course, some children need more, but without this foundation, positive outcomes are far less likely. *Friends of the Children* is doing more to help children, and doing it more simply and inexpensively, than any other child-serving organization I have ever encountered. After thirty years, I feel as if I have finally arrived home.

## Cost

*Friends of the Children* focuses on prevention rather than rehabilitation. The staggering costs of rehabilitation have been widely circulated. The National Center for Juvenile Justice found the average cost of rehabilitating one youth to be between \$1.7 and \$2.3 million of which \$1.3 to \$1.5 million is the cost of incarceration. The social costs are incalculable.

The cost for one child for one year in *Friends* is \$7,000. Multiply that by twelve years, and you get \$84,000; a lot of money, but consider the alternative.

At *Friends of the Children* we are in the business of shaping lives, rekindling spirits, and building stronger communities. We accomplish this by believing in children and being a *Friend* to the best parts of them for a long, long time. Somewhere along the way, they start to believe in themselves, and the best parts of them become who they are. And when that happens, the ripples go on forever.

**Steve Berman, M.S.W., M.B.A., L.C.S.W.,** is the program manager for Portland Friends of the Children. He has over thirty years experience in the field of child, adolescent, and family services. [sberman@friendstochildren.org](mailto:sberman@friendstochildren.org)

## Friends of the Children: A Friend's Story

I love her with my words and silence, my smiles and cheers, my concern and joy. I love her with my life, my marriage, my parenting, my friendship, myself.

To be a *Friend* is to be a coach, cheerleader, counselor, and even a gardener. I plant the seeds of truth, love, and grace. I water them with years of commitment and deep appreciation and watch them grow.

I met Tasha when she was 12—talented and beautiful as she is now, but afraid to share her hopes, dreams, even simple desires. And Tasha was quiet, too. I did not expect the silence we sat through together for months, in the car and at the dining table. I wondered if she liked me, if she'd ever want to talk to me.

I watched Tasha as she made discoveries on her own, in her mind and heart. She was often quiet and humble about these discoveries. I had envisioned I would be the teacher of these major life lessons, actively instructing and guiding at each point of choice. Instead, often I simply stood beside her as I saw these truths emerging from deep within. Tasha listened as God spoke to her about who she was and is, sometimes using my voice, but often using the voice of Tasha's own experience.

I have come to understand that Tasha and I speak a language just for us—a language of the small and quietly subtle. Animals. Young children. Ancient Egypt. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Poetry. Tasha and I share a love of writing, great literature, and foods from around the world. Sometimes we laugh together so much my jaw hurts; other times we sit in silence, savoring the present.

I proudly stand as Tasha's support. She is now 15, a sophomore in high school and a talented student and athlete. When she swings the bat with graceful confidence or artfully dribbles past a defender, I sit in the stands with a mother's kind of pride, snapping pictures, beaming, and talking about her talents to whoever will listen.

Regardless of what goes unsaid in our subtle language, I know Tasha sees me as a safe place to be. . .purely herself—athlete, joker, intellectual, animal-lover.

Tasha and the other unique and inspiring young women I spend my days with as a *Friend* have changed my life. These relationships are as distinct as the girls themselves, and I experience a different delight in all of them.

In Tasha, I see a complicated young woman of contradictions, continually growing and becoming. She is strong and wise, mature and silly, confident and questioning. With tremendous joy, I reflect on the girl she has been, dream about the woman she will one day become and overflow with the fullness of seeing Tasha become her, now.

**Ashley Larkin** has been a mentor with Friends of the Children in Portland, Oregon for three years. She is a graduate of the University of Portland and enjoys writing, art, camping, and hiking.

## Friends of the Children: Tasha's Story

Being in *Friends of the Children* is a lot of fun. In the program we do lots of exciting activities and enjoy ourselves. Some of the events I liked were Pamper Day and when the Speaker of the House came to speak to us. The children who are involved in *Friends of the Children* are very grateful.

A *Friend* to me is someone who is caring and would take time out of his or her day to help me. That is what my friend does for me. She helps me out with schoolwork when I do not understand, or just because I need help. My *Friend* is Ashley, and we do lots of fun things, like going shopping, trying foods from different cultures, seeing movies, and mostly going to my sporting events like softball and basketball. Ashley also helps me with my writing skills so I can become a better writer.

I'm very thankful to have such a great *Friend* who is there to help me out when I need it. Ashley also helped me through tough times when my grandmother passed away. I was very thankful that she and many other friends were so caring to help me not feel afraid of what would happen in the long run.

My friendship with Ashley has changed so much since I have gotten older. I feel that we understand each other better and that when she talks to me I know her point of view. When I first met Ashley, I was shy, and I still am, but not around my good friend, Ashley, any more. I'm very delighted to have gotten to know Ashley and become her friend.

Being in *Friends of the Children* means a lot to me. It is a great organization for children and teenagers who have been in the program since they were six years old. Most children in *Friends* will say it is a great organization to be involved in. Being in *Friends* has helped me out in many different ways, from writing and homework to meeting new people, from my age of 15 to the youngest age in the program, six. *Friends of the Children* also has helped me become a better decision maker and role model. I am so appreciative to be in such a great program.

To be dedicated to children and teens is optional. But the *Friends* in *Friends of the Children* work with us because they care about us and what we do with our lives. They work with us, teach us, trust us, and want to be our friends. It takes a lot of respect to gain our trust. That is why I think *Friends of the Children* is such a great organization for kids like me. I am one of the many proud children in *Friends*, and I am grateful.

**Natasha Corradine** is a sophomore at Benson High School in Portland, Oregon. She plays basketball and is on two select softball teams. As a freshman, Natasha played on Benson's varsity softball team and earned Second Team All League Honors. Natasha enjoys writing, spending time with friends, and playing with her pet ferret, Weasel.