

Nazareth Home's gala marks 10 years of helping region children



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EAST CHICAGO | State child advocates said Mikey shouldn't go home with his young mother from the hospital where he was born last month, and the judge agreed.

While his mother attends court-mandated counseling and parenting classes in preparation for a possible reunion, Mikey is meeting the world at Nazareth Home, a temporary residence for abused or abandoned children with critical medical needs.

"He's a real sweetheart," said Mary Paquin, a veteran volunteer "cuddler," as she rocked the sleeping Mikey (not his real name) in Nazareth Home's expansive playroom on a recent afternoon. Mikey's real identity is being concealed for his protection.

More than 160 children, from newborns to toddlers, have lived in the home since its founding by the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ in 1993. Now the home is reaching another milestone — the 10th anniversary of its major funding source, the Nazareth Home Gala.

Referred to the facility by the Department of Child Services, young wards of the state from throughout Lake County receive 24-hour medical and emotional care from staff, interns and volunteers at the facility, located on a quiet street near St. Catherine Hospital in East Chicago.

"DCS offers a lot of support for parents," said Jean Bowman, foster mother and director of Nazareth Home. "There are classes and qualifications required for reunification, and usually a child stays with us less than a year."

Children have supervised visits with their parents during that period, Bowman said. During the past year, six of her charges have returned to life with their mothers and fathers, she said.

Bowman assumed the mantle of Nazareth Home director in 2011 from Sister Barbara Kuper, who retired after 18 years of service as foster mother.

Pictures of children who once lived at Nazareth Home line the walls of the three-bedroom facility, where as many as six children stay at a time — along with Bowman and her daughter.

Every child receives a memory scrapbook chronicling his or her time at Nazareth Home, Bowman said. And each August, a reunion picnic brings together former residents and their families.

Eight staff members, both full and part time, make sure meals are cooked and clothes are washed, bolstered by five students fulfilling Purdue University Calumet internships and 50 volunteers.

"We have wonderful volunteers," Bowman said. "It really helps to have the extra hands."

Volunteers follow a regular schedule, providing some stability for the children.

Mary Paquin said she was introduced to Nazareth Home by the nuns of the Poor Handmaids order at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Hammond.

A volunteer "cuddler" for six years, she began working at the home following her retirement after 30 years with the Hammond schools.

"They're such good kids," she said. "And here they're well-fed, they get medical attention and somebody to hold them."

Though Ancilla Systems Inc. administers the bookkeeping, Nazareth Home survives on donations, both from individuals and the Olga C. and William H. Brinkman Fund.

The home's sole fundraising event is the annual Nazareth Home Gala, held at the Hammond Federal Courthouse, said Joyce Koch, planning committee co-chairwoman. All money received goes straight to Nazareth Home.

Now in its 10th year, the Oct. 18 gala features live and silent auctions, celebrity chefs, gourmet catering and an evening to mingle with Nazareth Home supporters — a who's who list of leading Northwest Indiana leaders.

The third Thursday of each October was proclaimed last year by East Chicago Mayor Anthony Copeland as Nazareth Home Day.

"I didn't know what I was getting into," Bowman said. "But my heart really belongs with these kids."

For your information

10th annual Nazareth Home Gala

Time: 5:30 to 8:30 p.m.

Date: Oct. 18

Location: Hammond Federal Courthouse, 5400 Federal Plaza

Tickets: \$75 each

For more information about Nazareth Home and the gala, visit www.NazarethHome.com or call (219) 947-8562.