



Driskill
Villages of Hope's director says her heart 'was not alive' when she worked for an ad company.

Program's director guides foster kids into adulthood

She's strict but supportive at Villages of Hope.

By BILL DIPAULO
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Linsey Driskill, working with a prestigious advertising firm and a four-year marketing degree under her belt, was on her way to a successful career.

But it wasn't the career the rapid-fire-talking Atlanta native wanted. A high school volunteer trip to build a church in the Dominican Republic stamped in her heart the desire to help those in need. And going against her heart, the 30-year-old said, is one thing she can't do.

"I can't look at people who are hurting and walk away,"

said Driskill, the new director of Villages of Hope, which helps young adults aging out of foster care. "When there is something I am meant to do, I'm going to do it."

Since taking the Villages of Hope job, Driskill has earned a reputation as a no-nonsense leader. But she's also ready to help residents update their résumés or work through a problem, said Jeffrey, an 18-year-old resident who asked that his last name not be used. Jeffrey lives with another man in one of the three duplexes in the Burma Circle

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complex near Palm Beach Gardens. Like the other eight residents, he works and pays a sliding scale of his salary, up to \$300, for monthly rent.

"She's strict. She wants us to be good people," said Jeffrey, who works at Checkers and the Florida Department of Children and Families. The soft-spoken Boynton Beach native wants to be a DCF counselor once he saves enough money to move out.

Villages of Hope is on 1.2 acres in an unincorporated pocket south of Northlake Boulevard, about a quarter-mile east of Interstate 95.

Two years ago it was just a group of abandoned buildings. Local volunteers and businesspeople donated their sweat and materials to transform the buildings after Place of Hope purchased the property for \$1 million.

Place of Hope, which operates Villages of Hope, is a faith-based nonprofit organization that also runs a shelter for children forced to leave their homes while the DCF determines when and if they can return to their biological parents.

The shelter gives them some calm and semblance of a family life — away from the physical and mental abuse at home — while the DCF and the courts sort out their next step.

But Place of Hope does nothing about the growing problem of how to help foster children when they turn 18 and step out of state-funded care. Instead of a celebration, a foster child's 18th birthday often signals a downturn when he can't find a job or a place to live.

Villages of Hope opened last year to provide up to 12 residents a place to stay. Volunteers help them hone their interview skills, live within a budget and find a job. There is a curfew, and no overnight guests are allowed. Driskill and other officials can enter the apartments anytime.

Residents — there are now seven women and two men — can stay until they turn 25. One woman has a 3-year-old girl. Some are referred from other programs; others simply show up and knock on the office door. When they move out and rent an apartment, residents are eligible for loans to pay first and last month's rent and the security deposit.

"We had a young woman show up the other day with two pairs of shoes and two T-shirts in a plastic bag. That's all she owned," Driskill said. "She told me she heard about us from her cousin."

Some applicants are turned away.

"They must agree to get

a job," Driskill said. "If they do not have a high school diploma, we require they go for their GED."

While growing up in Atlanta with her parents and two brothers, Driskill never imagined she would be working with disadvantaged children. She attended private schools. She studied for several months in Europe while attending Miami University of Ohio, and graduated with a degree in marketing in 2000.

After graduation, she was hired by J. Walter Thompson, an international advertising company, and moved back to Atlanta to start her first job.

She lasted seven months.

"I was doing things like finding the right magazine to advertise a brand of contact lenses," Driskill said, rolling her eyes. "I knew that job was not for me from the first week. My heart was not alive there. So I took a leap of faith."

She was volunteering as a teacher for a weekly high school Bible study class when a friend mentioned a job at an inner-city program called Atlanta Youth Academies.

The faith-based program in east Atlanta accepts pre-kindergarten to eighth-grade students who can't keep up their grades in public schools.

After taking the teaching job — and a significant pay cut — Driskill stayed for three years.

"It was hard. Most of the kids were bullies," she said. "Here I was, this white woman in an all-black school. I came home crying many times. But deep down, I knew I was in the right place."

Three years later, she left on a mutual exchange program with Guatemala. During the 10 months there, Driskill stayed with a host family and learned Spanish. But most important, she said, she learned how to listen.

"We would talk for hours," Driskill said. "Everybody has a story. These people care deeply for each other. They know the pathway to joy."

She returned to Atlanta to teach. When her husband took a new job in the investigation field, they moved to West Palm Beach. She began as the first director of Villages of Hope on March 4.

Driskill competed with four other candidates for the position, said Place of Hope Executive Director Charles Bender. The choice was easy, he said.

"Her heart got her the job," Bender said. "She cares so deeply for the kids."

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Program requires residents to get job

Risk of trouble

Statistics for children who outgrow foster care:

- About three-fourths have not completed high school.
- Within 18 months, about half will be unemployed.
- Within 18 months, about one-third will be in jail.
- Within 18 months, about half will be homeless.
- About 60 percent of women report getting pregnant within three years.
- They are seven times more likely to be addicted to drugs.
- They are twice as likely to be addicted to alcohol.
- They are seven times more likely to suffer from bulimia.

Sources: Florida Department of Children and Families, Place of Hope, Voices for Children of Palm Beach County

To contact Villages of Hope, call (561) 775-7195 or go to www.villagesofhope.net.