

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CAU's Family-Style Youth Shelter Offers Union County Youth New Start on Life

ELIZABETH, NJ -- It's amazing how little it takes to save a life.

A little time. A little caring. A little guidance. And a little place to call home — for just a little while.

A place like the Union County Youth Shelter.

That's what it took to help save 17-year-old Cora-ann Maharaj, who readily admits she was heading for trouble before finding refuge, support and direction from the counselors at the shelter.

Run by Community Access Unlimited (CAU), the youth shelter functions as a home, family, support system, and all-around safety net for Union County youths between the ages of 12 and 18. The six-bed facility provides short-term placement for youngsters who are homeless or have run away from home, are in the midst of a serious family crisis, or have found their way into the criminal court system.

"It's been like a second home for me, a second family," says Cora-ann. "They gave me a safe place to stay and a way to see how to get going where I want to go — and to stay off the streets."

Making difficult times a little less puzzling

With the motto "Making difficulty times a little less puzzling," the youth shelter program takes on all the duties and responsibilities typically handled by parents.

While they're in the program, professionally trained staff members accompany the kids to everything that encompasses their lives says Suzzy Pelissier, Director of CAU's Residential Services and Transitional Opportunities Program.

“We escort them to their court dates, medical appointments, therapy appointments, educational appointments, and anything else that a parent or custodian would normal do,” she says.

Counselors also make sure the kids go to school, do their homework, take care of their own personal hygiene, are involved in community volunteer activities, have the opportunity to participate in the kinds of recreation and entertainment activities most teens enjoy, and (when appropriate) hold down a job.

Trained personnel also provide the program’s members with life-skills education; self-care, daily living and vocational training; and individual and group counseling.

“We give these kids safety, a sense of belonging and self-worth, and support when they’re ready to move on,” says Ms. Pelssier.

“We run the shelter like a family, with parental figures, structure, personal responsibilities, and personal space,” she adds. “We’re trying to make it as real-life as possible while exposing them to what else is out there, showing them viable things they can do to keep them out of trouble, and help them become productive members of the community.”

‘Little’ things pay big dividends

Like most of the youth referred to shelter, Cora-ann had lost most of those “little” things that help youngsters grow up to be healthy, happy, productive and self-sustaining adults. Her father died when she was 9 years old; five years later, her mother died.

“It was just me, on my own,” Cora-ann recalls. “I made bad decisions, got mixed up with the wrong people. But Suzzy [Ms. Pellissier] has been helping me focus on what I need to do form myself, to pursue a future for me.”

That includes helping Cora-ann prepare for the General Educational Development (GED) examine, get a job, and find a safe place to live when she leaves the shelter.

For Cora-ann, these little things have paid off in big dividends. This month, she’s getting ready to take her GED exams, the first step toward a future she couldn’t even imagine a few short months ago.

“I realize there are people out there who I can depend on,” says Cora-ann, who now hopes to become a registered nurse. “It’s been a real learning experience.”

About the Union County Youth Shelter

Run bay Community Access Unlimited (CAU), the Union County Youth Shelter provides short-term (up to 30 days) placement for youth who are referred to the program from the Union County Family Crisis Intervention Unit, Juvenile Detention Intake Unit, or the

counties Juvenile Criminal or Family Courts. The shelter provides youngsters ages 12 to 18 with therapeutic assessments upon request; medical follow-up and medication monitoring; life-skills, self-care, daily living and vocational training; referrals to community resources; supervised completion of court-assigned community service hours, probation and court appearance; individual and group counseling; linkages to family support services, transportation to appointments, probation, and court appearances.

About CAU

Community Access Unlimited (CAU) supports people with special needs in achieving real lives in the community. CAU provides supports and gives a voice to adults and youth who traditionally have had little support and no voice in society. CAU helps people with housing, life skills, employment, money management, socialization and civic activities. CAU also supports opportunities for advocacy through training in assertiveness, decision-making and civil rights. Currently, CAU serves over 3,000 individuals each year.

For more information about CAU and its services contact the organization at Community Access Unlimited, 80 West Grand Street, Elizabeth, NJ 07207, call (908) 354-3040 or visit www.caunj.org.

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