



When I was about 5 years old I got out my Barbie carrying case, loaded it full of my socks, and ran away from home; walking a mile to my Mom's best friend's house. No one seems to remember why I was so mad and motivated but everyone remembers the incident and the story is told frequently in my family. Cute – right?

Now imagine a different runaway. The 14 year old who has been kicked out of her home by her mom's boyfriend, a home where both alcohol and dysfunction flow rather freely. As this young woman aged, her acceptance of the conditions of her family became more and more unacceptable to her and in speaking up, she found herself on the streets and homeless. There is no element of cuteness with this all too familiar scenario in which we stand witness to on a daily basis at Our Family Services.

November is Runaway Youth Awareness Month, an attempt to shine some light on the plight of too many youth in our nation and right here in Tucson. People are startled to learn that 3,000 teenagers runaway in the city each year. On average, the police department estimates that 150 of these young people are missing on any given night. Yes, right here in our own backyard. Many of these youth are escaping physical and sexual abuse, family dysfunction, substance abuse or mental illness of their caregivers. Many youth find themselves on the street due to their family not accepting their sexual orientation – it is estimated that 26% of LGBTQ youth (National Gay & Lesbian Task Force) are kicked out when they come out to their family.

Our Family Services is proud of our long history of working with youth. We have been a safe harbor for over 30 years with our Street Outreach Program, Housing Program for youth ages 18-24, Commercial Sex Trafficking Program, and Reunion House – a 20 bed runaway shelter for ages 12-17. We were thrilled with the news of a recently awarded federal grant to increase our Street Outreach Program for teens, the only such program in Southern Arizona geared specifically for young adults. Each year we provide safe shelter, counseling and advocacy for approximately 500 youth and touch the lives of as many as 1,000 more through street outreach and basic survival assistance.

But most important, we provide hope. Our talented staff listen to those we serve and instead of just “doing” things for the youth, we stand with them as a teacher, a coach, a mentor, and an ally. We work with these youth to discover their strengths, to care about their future, and to take steps toward reaching their potential. And we never give up, we understand.