



*Photographs courtesy of HillSides*

HILLSIDES:  
TRANSITIONAL LIVING PROGRAM FOR  
EMANCIPATED FOSTER YOUTH

AFTER FIVE ABUSIVE FOSTER HOME PLACEMENTS in four years, it appeared things were finally looking better for Marina. She was placed with Agnes, a veteran foster parent who liked to be called “Mom” and whose calm manner assured her young charges that things would be taken care of. As fate would have it, by the time Marina emancipated from foster care at age 18, “Mom” had stolen her identity, charged thousands in bad debt in Marina’s name and, on Marina’s last day in her home, “accidentally” burned Marina’s clothes and few belongings in a small backyard fire. With nothing but seven dollars in her pocket and the clothes on her back, Marina was unceremoniously sent out the front door and into an unknown world.

With rare exception, there is no safety net for the over 600 youth emancipated from the Los Angeles County foster care system each year. Most begin life as grown-ups wholly unprepared for what lies ahead. Many have endured a lifetime of abuse and neglect, some have been inadequately educated, and the distrust nearly all these young people feel for adults can prohibit their every attempt at successful social integration. Few have the skills to make smart choices; forty percent will become homeless by the age of 21, only ten percent will hold a job for more than one year, and fully sixty percent of the young women emancipated from foster care will become pregnant before their 22nd birthdays. Even among those who are fortunate enough to have been placed with caring, attentive and ethical foster parents, few have the resources and life skills needed to survive independently as successful adult community members.

Established in 1913 as what was then an alternative to traditional orphanages, HillSides has evolved to become one of the most respected

and experienced providers of mental health and residential services to abused and neglected children in Southern California. Not surprisingly, it is Hillsides that has taken a visible leadership role in providing a response to the crisis in foster care emancipation. In developing its *Youth Moving On* program for emancipated youth, Hillsides knew it had to overcome some key obstacles in the path between foster care and independent living; landlord reluctance toward young renters – especially those lacking credit histories, and unaffordable rental rates in our region were two big concerns. Additionally, Hillsides staff wanted to “reverse the paradigm” under which foster youth had lived their lives; instead of telling these kids they must once again fit into some bureaucracy’s version of their best interests, Hillsides was more interested in developing a program that addressed the individual needs and values of each young adult in its care. As a result, choosing a neighborhood for the program that offered the comfort of familiarity was important, yet finding a specific location that would create distance between these determined young people and the negative social networks of their pasts was also taken into account. How to strike the balance between the familiar and the positive became a guiding question as Hillsides sought to create a new program.

The answer was found in an apartment building. In 2005, Hillsides purchased a 49-unit property located in the heart of a lovely residential Pasadena neighborhood, close to both public transportation and civic and commercial life. Ten of the apartments are dedicated to housing two carefully-matched emancipated youth each, while the other units are rented out at market rates to carefully selected tenants; this income



from the market-rate units is used to subsidize the rent for the emancipated youth.

will fully cover costs of the YMO program within the first three and one-half years of operations. Those youth who live in the building are provided housing free of cost for the first 30-90 day period, during which time they must secure livable-wage employment or enroll in college. Throughout the maximum 24-month period of their residencies, a capable and caring staff aided by a wonderful on-site residential director, coordinate services that include extensive life skills training, financial literacy classes, mental health therapy in both individual and group settings, assistance with job training and skills, peer support and community building, mentorship, assistance developing and tracking progress on a “life plan”, and daily case management. The rent, which reaches a total of \$400 in \$50 increments, is returned to these young tenants in order to make a first, last and security payment as they progress toward independence.

The YMO model is as sensible as it is innovative. For the program, it provides a steady stream of earned revenues, so critical in an age of intense competition for limited contributed dollars. The program’s growth, as much as its sustainability, is underscored by the probability that increasing equity will provide the funds for the purchase of additional buildings in the future. For the youth, the value of this program is nearly immeasurable; for what for many is the first time in their lives, positive caring adults, a sense of community, and a built-in support system that keeps saying “you can” is the very foundation on which the rest of their lives will be built.