



Unity Care Group, Inc.
"Creating Healthier Communities"

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Unity Care Gives Young Adults a Safe Place to Stay While They Get on Their Feet

San Jose, Calif., (January 20th, 2005) - The day Adam Esa turned 18 he found himself homeless, a situation that might have continued if not for the Rose Garden-based Unity Care Group.

Now 20, Esa recalls that period of time two years ago when he was living with his stepmother, the woman his stepfather married. He doesn't know what happened to his biological mother.

"She disappeared or passed away, he never said," Esa says. "He took me and my sister under his arm and he remarried."

While that marriage didn't work out, Esa continued to live with his stepmother in San Francisco, where she collected checks for caring for him as a foster child. Those checks ended when Esa turned 18.

"My stepmom told me I had to move and to take all my stuff with me. She said my stepdad in San Jose would take me in for a week," Esa says. "I came down here and I guess he saw I was looking for a job, so he let me stay for a month. But after a month he said I couldn't stay there anymore."

"From there I was on street cars, on a bus that runs all night. I met a couple of people who let me stay for a night or two, but it wasn't anything stable," he said.

On the street, Esa learned of a program that might help.

"They sell you a dream. They said they would help me find a job and housing, but they put me in shelters. They had lotteries and you'd have to be there by 3 p.m. to see if you were going to get a bed. Since I was in school, I couldn't make it," he says.

For those not there at 3 p.m., there was a 10 p.m. lottery.

"Some nights there was a bed left, or enough spaces for everybody to get in," he says.

The staff at the shelter recognized Esa's commitment to school, letting him stay up to complete homework and sometimes letting him use one of their computers.

When there wasn't a bed, Esa slept on the floor.

"I just started taking whatever empty bed I saw and some nights people would come in late after working and the staff would wake me up because it was somebody's reserved bed."

Yet Esa says, "I didn't have too big a problem. It was a roof over my head during the rainy season and I wasn't wet or cold."

However, he admits that period "took years off me. I feel like I'm 30."

Through classmates at San Jose City College, Esa was referred to another program and eventually connected with Unity Care Group, the nonprofit youth development agency headquartered on Race Street.

Today, Esa is in Unity Care's transitional housing program—designed to give youths ages 18 to 21 a place to go when they are required to leave foster care because they reach legal adulthood; A place to keep them from becoming homeless, as Esa was.

Esa will turn 21 in May, which means he'll have to leave the program. By then, he expects to either attend the University of California at Santa Cruz or go into the workplace and get his own apartment with his wife Geraldine. The two married in 2004, but haven't been able to live together yet.

"We're trying to take the next step forward," Esa says. "I would probably still be at the shelter if not for Unity Care. They've done a lot for me. They provide bus passes, they provide housing, food and clothes and help you focus on the things that are going to better yourself."

Marquita Whitsett is one of Unity Care's success stories.

In foster care from the age of 12, Whitsett says she was transitioned out at 18.

"I didn't have anywhere to go and I wasn't financially ready to be independent," she says.

In the program for about a year, Whitsett says it helped her decide to give up one of her two jobs and become a full-time student. She's close to getting her associate of science degree in early childhood education and she's looking forward to earning her bachelor's in English literature.

She'd like to teach English at the high school level and she's already written one book for children, titled *At Our School*.

"It's about children and what they do at their preschool, how much they love it and how much they want to share the excitement," Whitsett says.

Now renting a room and living independently, Whitsett says of Unity Care, "I don't think I'd be where I am today without their help and support. Some people like me don't grow up with parents. I look up to them as parents—they never let me down, anything I've ever needed or any time I've had a question at any time of the day, they would help me.

"They're a wonderful program for young adults who don't have anywhere to go but want to get their life on track. When you're ready to make that change, they give you a wonderful start. It's independent living with guidance right alongside of you, so you can't go wrong," she says.

Andre V. Chapman, the founder of Unity Care and now the group's CEO and president, says the situation Esa and Whitsett faced is not an isolated one.

"In California, we have over 100,000 kids in foster care and 10 to 15 percent are aging out each year," Chapman says. "They leave at 18 and can't go back. Where can they go? They end up on the streets and they have to survive.

"These kids are coming out with no skills, they aren't graduating from high school and many have been abused or neglected. They don't have basic life skills. Seventy percent of inmates in San Quentin grew up in foster care."

When Chapman watched a young man, who was later helped and mentored through Unity Care's other programs, end up a college dropout and homeless, he turned to his board.

"This young man had a scholarship to San José State, [was] playing football, and he didn't have enough money to live in the dorms. He'd been in foster care for four or five years and the day he turned 18, all the support systems went away," Chapman recalls.

"He lived in his car, with friends and wherever he could find a place. He ended up failing his second semester. He couldn't make it because he didn't have stable housing. We looked at these kids turning 18, facing life challenges and not having a place to go back to, to call home."

The result is the transitional housing program. Today there are 11 residents between the two houses in San Jose and one that opened a year ago in Monterey County.

"They're required to work full time or go to school full time," Chapman says. "If they're going to school full time, we try and help them find a part-time job.

"There are rules, restrictions and weekly case meetings. Each one is worked with individually with whichever is their focus. We provide support to help them get to where they need to go. We provide financial and community resources.

"We'll help them pay for books. If they're working full time, we do job mentoring with them to make sure they're meeting the needs of their employers. If there are any problems, we're there to support them and make them self-sufficient."

Chapman credits Santa Clara County Supervisor Jim Beall with supporting the concept from the start. In August 2004 the county Board of Supervisors approved a loan commitment of \$250,000 to the transitional housing program.

More homes are needed, says Jason Rose, who works as case manager for the youths living in the San Jose homes operated by Unity Care.

"We're investing in the future," Rose says of the costs.

"More transitional housing is needed for the young adults who are emancipating from juvenile care facilities. I've come across some talented, intelligent young people. I have one young man who started his own cleaning business; I have a young lady who is an artist and another young man planning to go to college in Oklahoma next year, Rose said."

"I look at these young people. I have two children, a 4-year-old son and a 7-month-old daughter and one of these young people is going to be my child's teacher or one of these young people may be a mentor to my son."

Unity Care Group, 237 Race St., San Jose, 408.971.9822, www.unitycare.org.

Random observation leads to Unity Care Group

For Andre V. Chapman, founder and now CEO and president of Unity Care Group, what started out as a volunteer effort ended up as his vocation.

Working as sales director for a high-tech company in the early 1990s, Chapman traveled around the United States. One of the things he noticed was that wherever he went, employers were finding employees from their own community.

"I was somewhat amazed at different regions like Iowa, where you had the majority of majors at their university taking classes very specific to the industries in that area, such as agricultural engineering," he says. "In Santa Clara County we didn't have that focus on technology. We're the Mecca of technology, but we weren't doing enough to focus kids on technology."

In 1990, Chapman says, "I started developing a program exposing kids of color to technology at grade six."

While working in Los Angeles, a client who knew of his interests took Chapman to visit a group home where foster children had a weight room and a large television.

That inspired Chapman, who says, "I wanted to open up a residential facility and have it technology-based so I could get kids who don't have the resources and focus them on technology."

"In August of 1993 I opened our first house and we had computers from day one. We're very focused on providing a safe and secure place for kids in the foster care system and focusing them on technology."

"The county would say, 'Hey, you guys are taking our most difficult-to-place kids and having tremendous success with them. Would you consider opening another home?'"

From there Unity Care grew. Today it has 15 different programs, serving more than 500 children and youths a year in Santa Clara, San Mateo, Santa Cruz and Monterey counties.

"Every program is either a residential-care program or school-based or mental health-based," Chapman says. "Every program has a technology component and we use technology as a tool to focus on giving the kids an idea what the future looks like."

For the first six years after founding Unity Care, Chapman worked during the day at his high-tech job and spent his nights at one of the facilities.

In 1999, he says, "I hung up my high-tech shingle and focused on Unity Care."

While funding is always important, Chapman says there are other things as important as money.

"The way people can always help is through mentoring. We're always looking for mentors, organizations that want to partner with us and provide employment opportunity, financial resources and housing.

"We're always looking for someone who will come to the table and help us fill a need."

ABOUT UNITY CARE GROUP

Founded in 1992, Unity Care Group, Inc. is a community-based non-profit multi-service youth and family development agency. Founded with the goal of developing educational and social programs to enrich the lives of at-risk youth, our mission is to provide quality youth and family programs for the purpose of creating healthier communities through lifelong partnerships. For more information contact the Development Department at (408) 971-9822 or visit us at www.unitycare.org.

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