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St Jude's Ranch offers help for abused children

[By Guillermo X. Garcia](#) - Express-News

NEW BRAUNFELS — With a mandate to help abused, abandoned and neglected kids, St. Jude's Ranch for Children houses and gives hope to infants and youths in a safe environment.

Many of the 60 children currently at one of the agency's three facilities here and in San Antonio are from Bexar County or the surrounding region.

But whether they come from the South Side or Amarillo, children receive counseling and a safe haven after being damaged physically and mentally by parents who abandoned them, or as victims of sexual and physical abuse or neglect, community relations coordinator Erika Curtis says.

In operation here for more than 40 years, the facility includes an emergency shelter, where children first arrive after being removed by the state from their parents, as well as a home for pregnant teens.

The group's home in San Antonio houses children who have aged out of foster homes but who still need “a little more attention before going out on their own,” Curtis said.

The SeaWorld-area facility is home to several St. Jude's residents who are attending college as they prepare for life on their own.

The agency is one of many area nonprofits the San Antonio Express-News is profiling as part of its annual Grace of Giving series, which runs daily until Christmas.

Because about eight of 10 children taken into state custody are victims of sexual abuse, many of the newly arriving kids at the emergency shelter are withdrawn and in need of counseling and other services.

Holidays prove to be a particularly difficult time, in part because the children are separated from their families but also because, as victims of sexual abuse, they're unsure about how to relate to adults.

“The girls, especially, are prone to lots of tears around this time,” Curtis said. “They really don't know how to act when an adult is nice to them, like giving them a gift. They think they are supposed to return the kindness in an inappropriate way, and they have to learn otherwise.”

She says some toddlers cry out and act up when held — they aren't used to human touch since they were neglected at home by drug-abusing parents.

With a round-the-clock staff in addition to counselors and speech and occupational therapists, the first goal is to provide stability in young lives that have had far too little of it.

And because many of them are developmentally delayed because of the abuse or neglect, they sometimes have poor language skills, often not able to speak in more than five-word sentences, and they lack the motor skills to pick themselves up and walk.

The residents attend public school during the day, returning to the ranch at the end of the day. Teen moms with newborns also attend school while their infants are cared for at the ranch's on-site day-care facility.

The ranch is on a \$400,000 fundraising drive in an effort to double capacity. But for the short term, the facility needs help — cash donations to provide for haircuts, school clothes, presents and a little holiday cheer — to restore a child's smile.

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