

# find a friend

## My View

Deborah Gardner Walker

For 40 consecutive years, the United Way has funded Children's Friend and Family Services, one of the oldest, private, nonprofit child-focused agencies in the nation. Children's Friend assists thousands of at-risk children and families throughout Essex County with mental health and other services.

In 2006, the North Shore United Way gave \$55,000 to Children's Friend and Family Services to support counseling in Cape Ann and Beverly, where poverty can be a barrier to treatment. Children's Friend counsels nearly 1,000 children and adolescents in Gloucester and Rockport, 50 percent of whom are between the ages of 5 and 12.

"The North Shore United Way provides critical support for our counseling and mentoring services, allowing us to serve many additional needy children and families," says Children's Friend and Family Services President Stephen Schaffer.

Collaborative, creative, caring, warm and friendly describe the 10 family therapists who work in Children's Friend and Family Services waterfront office, in the big brick building they share with the Cape Ann Chamber of Commerce.

Families face a host of problems — substance abuse, domestic violence, learning disabilities, behavior and academic problems in school. Children are hungry for the individualized attention and caring they receive from Children's Friend.

The counselors have some unusual assistants — trained therapy dogs — that help them reach very young, disabled or disturbed children.

"Children who will not even look at a therapist will talk to a dog," explains clinician Amy Hubbard.

Children empathize with her 8-year-old cocker spaniel, Dickens, who is blind.

"They see that Dickens is not perfect," Hubbard says. "They identify with his disability and want to nurture him, cuddle him, give him extra attention."

Conversely, the therapy dogs sense which children need them most.

"They gravitate to people with severe learning disabilities," says clinician Richetta Dubin, whose 2-year-old collie, Runkie, is "a great ice breaker with children."

"Children with language disorders will reach out to an ani-



Courtesy photo

Some of the friendly faces at Children's Friend and Family Services in Gloucester include trained therapy dogs Dickens, a blind cocker spaniel, and Runkie, a young collie.

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mal, they trust animals," Dubin says. "Working as a team with a therapy dog changes the whole atmosphere for children. They are calmer."

Children who have problems paying attention or following directions love learning how to groom and walk a dog. Even putting on the dog's leash teaches responsibility and reinforces positive behavior, explains Dubin.

Counselors at Children's Friend collaborate with the public schools and a host of agencies that serve children, including Pathways for Children, Help for Abused Women and their Children, the Department of Social Services, the Department of Mental Health, the courts and pediatricians.

According to Gloucester Site Director Lisa Watson, many referrals for counseling come from agencies that observe children struggling and in need of intervention.

"Gloucester Friend and Family Services offers holistic, comprehensive case management, something that is rare in these days of specialization," says North Shore United Way President Margo Casey. "This holistic approach results in excellent care for families that are stretched thin, working multiple jobs to make ends meet."

According to Casey, the North Shore United Way provided \$350,000 in funding in 2006 for 17 programs, including Children's Friend and Family Services, that provide vital services to Cape Ann.

Children's Friend works with families and educators to produce the best results for each child. Therapists collaborate with guidance counselors when children are suspended, seem depressed or having issues that interfere with their success in school.

"Schools are the frontlines for kids," explains Watson, who adds that counselors often refer children when they see the home life is chaotic.

Therapists educate and advise families and educators about problems and treatments, provide strategies for managing behavior and helping children to cope. They also help parents advocate for children who need special education services.

"We like to focus on collaboration, instead of thinking that we are the experts," comments clinician David Swanson. "Parents are the experts with their children."

Half of all therapy sessions take place in schools, child care facilities and homes. This provides insight into how children behave and interact in their normal daily settings.

Children's Friends offers social skills groups for children in elementary, middle and high school. Watson explains the therapeutic value of groups for children and teens.

"A lot of what therapists can do in a group, they can't do individually with children, especially in terms of providing social skills. Kids connect with other kids who have similar experiences. It is very powerful."

For more information, contact Children's Friend and Family Services at 33 Commercial St., Gloucester, telephone 978-283-7198.

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