

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC



Social-service agency provides sanctuary for young woman

Connie Cone Sexton - Nov. 18, 2009

For Pragathi Schmidt, having a sense of family has never been easy.

The 18-year-old was born in India but never knew her birth parents. She was adopted but later placed with a foster family, moving to Chandler about four years ago. Building relationships with the guardians she has known has been difficult. She yearned for a sense of comfort.

About a year ago, Pragathi's life was especially tough. "I was going through a lot of family issues and was struggling with depression and anxiety," she said.

She found a foothold in January at Florence Crittenton of Arizona, a non-profit that provides safety, hope and opportunity to at-risk girls. The organization counsels girls and young women ages 12 to 21 about behavioral and mental-health problems, teen pregnancy and teen parenting and helps them overcome such issues as abuse and neglect.

Established in 1897, it is the oldest social-service agency in the Valley.

Lory Lasica, Crittenton's marketing and communications manager, said the organization helps about 2,000 girls every year.

It relies on donations to meet expenses, which for 2008 were \$8.7 million. Since 1993, Florence Crittenton has received \$516,250 from Season for Sharing, the annual fundraising campaign of *The Arizona Republic* and 12 News.

Pragathi came to live at Crittenton's residential-group home following relationship and communication problems with her foster parents. Providing a bed is just one part of the program. Girls and young women are aided by counseling and support groups and are given a chance to continue their education and gain confidence.

Pragathi, who attended the Crittenton Youth Academy while living in the home, said she feels stronger and ready to move on with her life.

A few months ago, Pragathi left the group home and moved into the organization's transitional housing, where she is learning daily living skills, job-search methods and how to function as an independent adult. She is grateful for the help that Crittenton has offered. She has remained in touch with her Chandler foster family, and they talk about once a week.

"I think my relationships with other people have definitely improved since coming here," Pragathi said.

Being around others who have had problems has helped. "All of the girls come in for many different reasons," she said. "I've never done drugs or smoked, so my story was pretty different, but it did help me realize that I'm not the only one who goes through these things."

She said she plans to study business management at GateWay Community College and later may open a store, specializing in Indian items.

Pragathi doesn't foresee moving back in with her foster parents. It's better for her to be alone, she said. "But I'm not completely alone," she quickly added. "I've developed relationships here."

To other girls who are struggling, she hopes they will seek help. "What you're going through now isn't going to be what you'll be going through your whole life. It definitely gets better," Pragathi said. "Someone once told me that life is 10 percent what happens to you and 90 percent how you react."

<http://www.azcentral.com/community/phoenix/articles/2009/11/18/20091118sfs-crittenton1118.html#comments>