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Yolo Crisis Nursery: A mother's love cultivates change

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When his world turned upside down and he entered the foster care system, Artie was just 4 years old. Wized by the passing years, 15-year-old Artie asked, "Why didn't anyone help my mom when I was little? If someone had, maybe I could still be with her."

Artie's inquiry struck Laura Heintz, a program developer at FamiliesFirst (now EMQ FamiliesFirst). She didn't have an answer, yet the simplicity of what might have been for Artie cut her to the core, especially when, just a few months later, Laura held her own newborn and pondered how anyone so precious could be deprived of love and security.

In 1999, then-Yolo County Supervisor Lois Wolk visited the Sacramento Crisis Nursery. A mother herself, Lois respected the value of providing emergency respite care for young children when their families face crisis or hardship. During her visit, she met children from Yolo County and questioned whether her community could serve its own.

Ironically, The California Endowment soon would fund crisis nursery expansion in the Sacramento region, as long as a willing community and host agency was found. Wolk, ever the forceful advocate, connected the funds with the needs.

At the same time, and after her maternity leave, Heintz returned to a task that would alter the fates of many: Establish a nursery in Yolo County.

And she did.

To hear Heintz tell it, she was merely an instrument, open to doing the job she'd been given. She credits Wolk and the community — Rotarians, Soroptimists, multiple elected officials and assorted community leaders with creating and sustaining the nursery.

But those of us who were motivated by this soft-spoken force know the truth is much greater than Heintz's humble claims.

Without question, Heintz is the mother of the Yolo Crisis Nursery and, by extension, protector of nearly 3,000 children and their families who have been served since the nursery's doors were first opened in 2001, 10 years ago.

Heintz developed a community-based vision for how the nursery would look, feel and operate — just like a home — a simple model with professional support for families. With no long-term funding stream, she built strong coalitions and persisted in uncharted regulatory waters. Early on, she even went door to door with former Yolo County Supervisor Betsy Marchand, who also served FamiliesFirst, to educate and reassure the nursery's neighbors.

According to Heintz, "At every turn, we found people who supported the nursery because they knew, first-hand, how difficult parenting can be under the best of circumstances. They understood how quickly a family might crumble without the basics, like safe shelter or reliable medical care. The nursery thrives because Yolo County is full of enlightened people."

And leaders like Laura Heintz.

A task so challenging could never be achieved by someone punching a clock. It had to be pursued with the power of a mother's love, driven by an unanswerable question.

The quality of Heintz's work is well-known in California and, last year, she was recruited to serve children in another venue.

"Leaving was painful — like leaving my own child — but I know the nursery will go on because it's the right thing to do," she said.

In gratitude for the seeds she planted and nurtured, life that continues to flourish today, staff and volunteers recently dedicated the nursery's refurbished garden — Laura's Garden — in her honor.

In response, Heintz asks us all to serve others.

"I hope people respond to Artie's wish, no matter whom he represents in their lives," she said. "I'm so thankful for all the generous supporters of the nursery, but what matters most is when people give in a way that personally speaks to them. Compassionate hearts change the world."

Yes, they do.