

# SENECA Connection

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## The San Francisco Family Finding Project

BY LAUREN PEARL



### The context...

Over the past three years, enhancing connectedness for children and families has emerged as a central focus of our work at Seneca Center. Family Finding, a set of strategies and practices aimed at identifying and engaging with family members of children in the foster care system, seeks to ensure that these youth gain connection to the lifelong, unconditional love and support that only family, broadly defined, can provide.

Many of the children who grow up in foster care move through many different “placements” (foster homes or group homes) and, as a result, lose contact with their relatives, who may not have access to information about their whereabouts. As we have witnessed in our residential programs for adolescents, the impact of this isolation

on young people’s sense of identity, belonging, and self-worth is devastating. Despite our best intentions, efforts to provide “treatment” for kids within this context of extreme loneliness and the suffering it causes often do not yield the results we hope to see.

The impact of Family Finding on the lives of the youth in our residential programs has been profound. As one of the boys said, after being reconnected to relatives who love him *after over 10 years of not having a single interaction with a family member*, “Now I don’t feel like ET phone home anymore.”

### The Project...

The San Francisco Family Finding Project is a groundbreaking effort to measure the impact of utilizing the Family Finding model at the start of a child’s entrance into the foster care system. The basic idea is simple: By doing more work to find and engage supportive family members now, we can avoid the trauma and despair (for children, families, and workers) of failed placements later.

Launched on September 2, 2008, the Project is a collaborative partnership among San Francisco’s Family and Children’s Services, Seneca Center, Child Trends (a national child welfare research organization), and Kevin Campbell (a leading expert and consultant on the Family Finding model and youth permanency).

As part of its national research on the Family Finding model, Child Trends is conducting studies of 12 program sites in North Carolina, Oregon, and California (San Francisco and Los *(continued on page 2)*

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Angeles). San Francisco is only one of two program sites to examine the impact of using family finding techniques proactively, rather than waiting many years until a child has become “lost” to his/her family within the system.

Karin Malm, Senior Research Scientist at Child Trends, explains, “Anecdotal information has provided evidence that the Family Finding model is successful in making connections and finding permanent placements for children in the foster care system. However, Family Finding has yet to undergo a rigorous evaluation using an experimental design. Given the perceived success of the program and the extent to which the model is currently being replicated on a national scale, an experimental evaluation is critical for determining the efficacy and effectiveness of the model and for securing funding and legislation to support it.”

Seneca’s Family Finding specialists are partnering with San Francisco’s child welfare workers to provide intensive Family Finding services for some of the county’s children who are detained by the Court and are in the early stages of the court dependency process. This includes “discovery” of at least 40 family members, engagement with relatives to move toward planning meetings, and identification of a permanency plan for children, including back-up plans in case the initial plan is not successful.

In utilizing Family Finding techniques to engage relatives in the planning process when a child first is detained by the Court, our goal is to improve permanency outcomes, keep children with relatives, enhance connections and supports for adults, and improve overall well-being for children and families.

As John Tsutakawa, Program Manager for San Francisco’s Department of Family and Children’s Services, noted, “When a child first becomes involved with the child welfare system, it is critical to identify relatives and extended family members who can provide children with placement and care, emotional support, and serve as legal guardians and adoptive parents. The earlier this happens, the sooner and more likely children will have permanency in their lives.”

# Going Green AT HOME with the Green Team!

## KIDS AND STAFF OF SENECA’S RESIDENTIAL PROGRAMS MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

The children in Seneca Center’s Residential Program took off running this year in an effort to be kinder to the environment and conscious of their impact on the earth with the start of their new ‘Green Team’.

In conjunction with six staff members, the children implemented various activities and house agreements to learn about environmental issues and conservation, as well as to take action in conserving water and energy at home and at school.

For example, July’s theme was “Water and Energy Conservation”. The children studied how much water and energy they consumed on a daily basis, and the steps that could be taken to reduce their consumption. They worked consistently on implementing conservation efforts such as taking shorter showers, turning off unnecessary lights and not running water while washing hands and brushing their teeth. The kids were excited by the challenge, and proudly reminded each other and the staff about these tasks.

On Sunday September 7th, Seneca’s Green Team initiated the theme of Water Pollution Awareness. The participants watched educational videos about how bay area watersheds and reservoirs operate. The first activity they initiated was a “Get your head out of the gutter” walk around

Oakland. During this walk, they cleaned up debris on sidewalks and, working in conjunction with the city of Oakland, stenciled approved messages by gutters such as “no dumping in sewer”. They expanded their efforts into the community and participated in the Surfrider Foundation beach clean-up. 24 kids, along with staff, walked San Francisco’s Ocean Beach equipped with gloves and garbage bags, removing trash and debris that cluttered the beach, and endangered the fragile ocean ecosystem.

Following the beach clean-up, they discussed the effects that garbage had on the beach, the ocean and the marine life. AP, age 12, was concerned after learning how littering and garbage harmed various life forms. “Cleaning the beach was a good thing to do because we were helping all the living animals...it’s a good thing we cleaned the beach because all the animals get to be happy.”

EM, age 12, enjoyed the camaraderie and the community building that was evident while everyone worked together toward a common



goal. "Cleaning up the beach was a really fun experience because we were saving the beach and the animals. I liked it because there were people and friends I saw there and we got to talk and clean together and stuff"

In the months ahead, the Green Team have environment-driven educational field trips planned to the Easy Bay MUD recycling center, the San Leandro Water Treatment facility, volunteering in community projects such as cleaning up the San Leandro Marine Park and, most importantly, actively making a difference in our community!

Special thanks go to the Green Team staff who have taken a special interest in this project: Tony Iwane, Joleigh Davis, Francis Mendoza, Robyn MacConnell, Gabe Kahsay and Moses Santos. They have compiled an interactive learning curriculum, as well as responded to the enthusiasm of the kids, who now are reminding staff to adhere to their new ways. One staff member said "It's great to see the kids gain knowledge about the world around them and to see them feel empowered"



## **FROM THE CHIEF** **EXECUTIVE OFFICER**



**Ken Berrick, CEO**

Dear Friends,

As many of us approach the holidays with excitement and anticipation, it is important to remember that this time of year can be particularly stressful and challenging for the children and families served by Seneca Center. Due to challenging family circumstances, some children may not be able to spend as much time with their parents as they would like. While Seneca implements Family Finding practices for most of the children in its care, there are still some young people who have few if any

family members involved in their lives. Moreover, even when children have been reunited with their families, they may have persistent, traumatic memories that can precipitate a new crisis.

Seneca Center's mission is to help children and families through the most difficult times of their lives, and throughout our history, we have developed the programs and services that clients need to not only weather a crisis, but work toward a new and more optimistic future for themselves. Increasingly, this means developing within each county a continuum of services that can address the complex and ever-changing needs of children and youth with serious emotional issues.

In Alameda County, Seneca has partnered with County Behavioral Health Care Services to develop a continuum of crisis intervention services that can effectively intervene with young people experiencing a wide variety of highly stressful situations. For example, our mobile response team is able to stabilize many distressed children within their homes and neighborhoods. For youth experiencing more serious levels of distress, Seneca offers crisis stabilization services at the Willow Rock Center in San Leandro. And once young people are stabilized at Willow Rock, we provide them with follow-up supportive services designed to help their families avert further crises.

San Francisco is another county in which Seneca has created a continuum of residential and community-based services, partnering with County Human Services and Public Health, as well as private agencies such as Honoring Emancipated Youth, Instituto Familiar de la Raza, and Jewish Vocational Services. At the most intensive end of the continuum, the Community Treatment Facility works with the highest-need youth in the county. San Francisco Connections not only returns children from institutions to their families, but increasingly prevents young people from going into high-level residential treatment in the first place. And for young people with shorter-term stabilization needs, Seneca provides intensive services that prevent a disruption of their current living situation.

Especially in these trying economic times, none of Seneca's successes with vulnerable children and families would be possible without the dedication and support of our staff, donors, volunteers, and public and private agency partners. Your ongoing efforts are essential to the fulfillment of our mission.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ken Berrick".

# Holidays at Seneca Center



For many of us, the holiday season conjures up pleasant, warm images of happiness, plentiful food and a time of joyful celebration with friends and family.

The holidays are a special time of year, but they can be particularly difficult for children, who, prior to coming to Seneca Center, have lived in many other foster or group homes during their young lives, or who have experienced challenging life circumstances at an early age.

At Seneca Center, we include “wish lists” from siblings, caregivers and other family members. Because we partner with members of the entire family unit, and forging family bonding, love and connectedness is one of our primary goals, we attempt to bring the holiday spirit to the entire household, not just to the enrolled client.

Seneca Center needs your help to strengthen and support our families during the holiday season. We offer many opportunities for you to help us create beautiful childhood memories.

You, your family, your company, employer, church group, sports team, book club, neighbors etc. can foster goodwill and celebrate the holidays together by “sponsoring” a child or family over the holidays. For example, companies such as the PlumpJack Group’s Balboa Café, have a “giving tree” set up so that their customers have the opportunity to fulfill a child’s holiday wish

Our families often request support with food for holiday meals, as well as new warm clothing for the winter and gifts for their children. To provide these things, Seneca organizes the **100 Families Campaign**, which helps ensure that, for our 100 neediest families, each child has a gift to open, and each family has a traditional holiday meal to share.

I would like to invite you to join Seneca Center’s **100 Families Campaign**, and to partner with us to give kids a magical holiday season this year. Unlike the therapeutic services and programs we provide, special events like this cannot be funded through traditional government sources and are only made possible by the generosity of private contributors. All donations to Seneca Center are tax deductible. *Please check with your employer to see if they have a matching gift program, enabling you to double your investment in Seneca’s children and families.*

Seneca Center is a non-profit organization whose mission is to help children and families through the most difficult times of their lives. If you have additional questions, please contact Anne Farrah, Seneca’s Community Relations Director at (510) 317-1444.

All of us here at Seneca wish you and your family peace this holiday season.

*P.S. We appreciate whatever amount that you can give to Seneca Center. \$100 will help a family with one child, and \$1000 will help several families with food and gifts for the holidays.*



**Yes!** I would like to be a part of Seneca Center’s 100 Families Campaign and contribute to making the holidays magical for Northern California’s most troubled families.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_ Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

How did you hear about Seneca Center? \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Sponsor a Family with one child</b>	<b>\$100.00</b>	<b>Holiday Angel</b>	<b>\$1,000.00</b>
<b>Sponsor a Family with two children</b>	<b>\$200.00</b>	<b>Holiday Snowman</b>	<b>\$2,500.00</b>
<b>Holiday Elf</b>	<b>\$500.00</b>	<b>Santa for 100 Families</b>	<b>\$10,000.00</b>

Donations may be made by credit card online at our website [www.senecacenter.org](http://www.senecacenter.org). or can be sent to: 100 Families Campaign, Seneca Center, 15942 Foothill Boulevard, San Leandro, CA 94578. **THANK YOU FOR YOUR GENEROSITY AND SUPPORT!!!**

Seneca Center is a non-profit organization, and all donations are tax deductible.

# Week of Caring: Volunteers from Chevron and Kelley-Moore Paints Lend a Hand

**M**any thanks to volunteers from Chevron and Kelley-Moore paints during the “Week of Caring” organized by Karla McCormick of the Volunteer Center of the East Bay. These volunteers demonstrate their care and concern for Seneca’s children by donating their valuable time to projects that kids and staff designate as important.

A team of 10 volunteers from Chevron arrived bright and early on Monday, September 8th to complete a project at Seneca Center’s non-public school in San Leandro, where over 130 children, the “Seneca Dragons,” attend school every day.

The volunteers embarked on an ambitious and transformative site beautification project. First, they were tasked with painting a bright, brand-new mural near the school entrance. The mural was drawn and sketched onto the wall by artist Maggie Ferrill, a Seneca Center staff member. Maggie created a whimsical and charming scene of a castle, featuring a

friendly, green and purple adult dragon reading to a family of little dragons, some hatching from their eggs. The volunteers also painted several flower boxes and picnic tables, in addition to planting new flowers and plants to brighten things up.

“Our employees loved helping your organization and learning first-hand the important work that you do to improve the community,” said Lucretia Weiner, Chevron Humankind program manager.

On Friday of that same week, a team of volunteers from Kelley-Moore paints, led by District Manager Shawn Lawrence, arrived early in the morning to paint the exterior of our very large school! They expertly prepared the site before painting, and even helping out to get the area ready for an afternoon team from Chevron! Seneca Center is especially thankful to Kelley-Moore paints for donating not only their time and expertise, but all of the paint and materials to accomplish these projects. We are most grateful!

Setting the stage for this production, completing everything from preparing the

wall for the mural to organizing the necessary supplies and materials was Richard Myers, a valued leader in Seneca’s Facilities Maintenance Department. Richard plays a critical role in making sure that Seneca’s volunteer projects run smoothly.

“Their volunteer efforts are invaluable, helping us accomplish our mission and create a warm and inviting atmosphere for our students” said Lihi Rosenthal, Director of Seneca’s school. “They were terrific—incredibly productive and cheerful volunteers. They were respectful of our students and their families. We are proud to partner with Chevron and Kelley-Moore paints to meet the needs of our kids.”

It was a great way to freshen things up for back to school. One of the children who walked by said to her therapist “They are here doing this for US?”

*If you and/or your company would like to participate in a volunteer project at Seneca Center, please contact Anne Farrah, Community Relations Director, at 510-317-1446 x.227.*



Congratulations to all of the kids and teens at Seneca Center who participated in the annual holiday card design contest. Pictured here is one of the runners-up. Stay tuned to see the winning design, which will arrive in your mailbox in December!

## How You Can Help

There are many ways individuals, organizations, groups and companies can support Seneca Center.

- >> Donate
- >> Volunteer as an individual or with a work or school group
- >> Become a Foster Parent
- >> Host an event
- >> Learn more about our Auxiliary Group

Please call Anne Farrah, Community Relations Director, at (510) 317-1446 x227 for more information on making a donation or getting involved with Seneca.

Seneca Center sustains children and families through the most difficult times of their lives and we rely on your generosity to accomplish our mission. We gratefully acknowledge the following donors.

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Many thanks to these special donors to Seneca Center:  
Terry Farrah  
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Kenneth Van Cleve

Best wishes to Seneca Staff members Lauren Pearl and Daren Dickson who, together with their families, celebrated a "Wedding-ish" weekend and were married on October 25, 2008.

Lauren and Daren selflessly asked their friends and family to support Seneca Center's Family Finding Project in lieu of wedding gifts. Many thanks to their loved ones who generously supported this initiative. The funds will be used to help reunite Seneca Center's loneliest children with their kin.

Seneca Center would like to extend a very special thanks to Mr. Eric Rudney who is donating \$5,000.00 to Seneca Center's Training Institute. The funds will be used to support a pilot alumni longitudinal study that will be conducted by Seneca Center's researcher, Sarah Chance.

If you donated to Seneca Center from August 1 - November 30 2008, and are not listed, please accept our deepest apologies and call 510-317-1446 x 227.

### Seneca Center

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