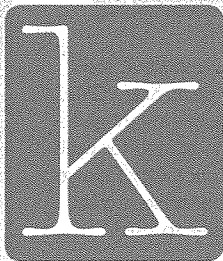




Kathleen, with daughter, Aurora, 11, and Chris Brooks (left) and Callyce Carroll, who've come through her program.

safe HAVEN

KATHLEEN BOUTIN WAS A HOMELESS TEEN WHO TURNED HER LIFE AROUND. NOW SHE'S A MOM HELPING OTHER RUNAWAYS GET BACK ON TRACK. **BY SHARLENE K. JOHNSON**



Kathleen Boutin was just 13 when she started running away from home, couch-surfing from one friend's house to the next. Time after time she was arrested as a runaway, handcuffed, strip-searched for drugs, labeled "unmanageable" and forced to go back home.

Not once did anyone ask Kathleen why she ran. After all, she had a

seemingly posh childhood that looked good from the outside. But things were very different inside. "My mom was never actually abusive," says Kathleen, "but my stepfather was. Whatever tirade he was on, or whatever harsh punishments he was imposing, she would always back him up."

Kathleen spent time in two different group homes before being sent back to her family with a new strategy—go to work, go to school and avoid being home as much as possible. "I had two

great therapists who had said, 'As long as you don't get pregnant and you graduate from high school, you'll be okay,'" she says. The advice worked, and she followed up with college and a career as a professional health worker.

Now 39 and divorced from her husband of seven years, Kathleen lives with her son, Alex, 15, and daughter, Aurora, 11, in Henderson, Nevada. But Kathleen never forgot what it felt like to be a kid on the run. "When I was struggling to make sense of my life, I

promised myself that if I was ever in a position to change the way troubled kids are treated, I'd do it," she says.

Kathleen finally got the opportunity to fulfill that commitment. "I was at a pregnancy assistance center for my job and I met a 17-year-old girl with four children," she says. "Her situation was crazy. She and the kids were sleeping at one friend's place one night, another the next night. She reminded me so much of where I could have ended up."

Kathleen did some research to see what other cities were doing about teen homelessness and was appalled to realize that Nevada was "decades and decades" behind other states. "Can you believe there were no services at all?" she asks. "Shelters and organizations that served homeless adults couldn't help so-called unaccompanied minors without a parent's consent." Kathleen immediately began drafting a plan to get homeless teens off the street and help them become self-sufficient. She named her vision the Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth (NPHY).

She worked 60-hour weeks, tracking down attorneys, social workers and professional fundraisers to serve on the Partnership's board of directors. "I really didn't know what I was doing, but I knew how to find people who did," she says. She managed the family/work balance by including her

two kids whenever she could. "I've always taken them to homeless shelters and meetings with the mayor and press interviews," says Kathleen.

Realizing that without legal protection it would be impossible for the Partnership and other organizations to provide services, she added "lobby the state legislature" to her long to-do

their self-sufficiency skills." The first client was Candace, brought in by someone who saw her sleeping in the park. Both of the 17-year-old's parents were dead; her grandmother had kicked her out and was keeping Candace's monthly benefits check from Social Security.

Kathleen quickly found Candace a

"We tell kids there are only two roles to choose from in life: You can show up as the victim or you can show up as the hero."

list. Victory came in 2001, when Nevada passed a law that emancipates kids who leave an abusive or neglectful home and allows them access to the same services available to homeless adults. This "Right to Shelter Law" also granted immunity from civil liability to the organizations that provide those services. "Now they won't have to worry about being sued," says Kathleen. Her accomplishment was so huge that representatives from the American Bar Association spent time in Nevada researching the law with an eye toward creating a similar federal law.

Even more exciting, though, was this milestone: The day the legislation kicked in, NPHY opened its first drop-in center, called Sanctuary, in a Las Vegas storefront.

"What we want is for kids to have a very warm, friendly environment," says Kathleen. "Kids can take a shower, play video games, heat up a microwave meal or snack on some cookies. Once their basic needs are met, we start working on

temporary place to stay and helped her retrieve her Social Security money. "Within a year she had a job and an apartment, and we were able to close her file," says Kathleen. "And she's now married to a great guy."

In 2005, NPHY opened a second drop-in center, called Safe Place, and it too was a success. "We don't bombard kids with paperwork," says Kathleen. "If it takes 10 visits before they will sit down with a case manager to talk,

Learn more about Kathleen Boutin's work at nevadahomelessyouth.org. For information on runaways, call the National Runaway Switchboard at 800-786-2929 or go to 1800runaway.org.

teens in trouble

- Between 500,000 and 1.3 million kids age 18 and younger in the U.S. are both homeless and not under the care of a parent or guardian.
- 32% of runaway and homeless youths have attempted suicide at some point in their lives.
- Every year, between 1.6 million and 2.8 million kids run away from home or are asked to leave.
- 17% to 53% of homeless youths have been sexually abused at home, and 40% to 60% have been physically abused.
- 25% of teens who "age out" of the foster care system at age 18 experience homelessness.

that's okay." Another center is opening in 2008 in a nearby county.

Next on Kathleen's agenda is a three-year plan for a \$13 million campus offering one-stop services for homeless teens. Called the Open Door, the site will include housing, a child care facility, a gym, classrooms, a Zen garden and even jobs provided by local businesses that will build on the site.

Much as she'd like to save every homeless teen on the street, Kathleen knows that isn't realistic. But she focuses on the ones she can help—like Callyce

