

Home changing teen lives in Boulder

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BOULDER - It looks like a typical family home, but the people who live there aren't related. For them, it's a home away from home and often a turning point.

"I've pretty much come to grips with who I am today and who I used to be," Sara Thompson said.

The 23-year-old college student is on the other side now. She's a staff member at Attention Homes, where she was once like the teens she helps there today.

"I was in and out of facilities from the time I was 14 until I came here," she said.

Thompson was addicted to drugs and alcohol. She had problems at home, so several times she either ran away or was kicked out.

"I was sleeping on the streets and friends' couches," Thompson said.

She spent some nights huddled in the doorways of churches and post offices. Then, at the age of 16, she found shelter at Attention Homes and wonders where she'd be without it.

"I would most likely be dead. It's hard to think about," she said.

For life's hard knocks, Attention Homes is a cushion. Teens find a new family there in the staff and counselors.

"These kinds of kids are often thought of as throw-aways," Attention Homes Executive Director Jim Rianoshek said.

Rianoshek explained that many of the teens have behavioral problems as the result of an abusive, neglectful, or otherwise dysfunctional home. The program at Attention Homes is organized like school. The teens can move up from freshman to graduate level as they demonstrate the ability to handle more responsibility. At each level, they get more freedoms and privileges with the goal of graduating into a better life.

"What we'll provide them is really the basics of how to get by and hopefully get along with life when they leave here," Rianoshek said.

"The more hands that are provided to help a kid out of a hole that they're in, the better off that they are," Thompson said.

Her new life is the proof of that. Helping hands have carried her far from her past.

"Even though those memories still exist, it's not who I am, and it's not who I can ever become again," Thompson said.

Since its founding in 1966, Attention Homes has helped more than 6,000 teens. It expects to have a waiting list after the holidays when there's typically an increase in demand. The organization also sees more need in tough economic times like these because financial problems exacerbate the stresses of home life. Volunteers and

donors are welcomed. To learn more about how you can help, visit www.attentionhomes.org.

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