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Photos by Jason Fochtman / Staff photographer

Love Heals Youth founder Rebecca Smith and her therapy dog, Charlie, offers free counseling to kids in foster care system homes and behavioral training and support to the staff members.

LOVE HEALS

Therapist launches effort to help kids in foster care

By Jamie Swinnerton
STAFF WRITER

For years, Rebecca Smith has been offering the services of her counseling practice to children in foster care for free. Last year, she created a new nonprofit, Love Heals Youth, to grow and expand this work.

There are around 55,000 children involved somehow with the foster care in Texas and the state has been facing a federal lawsuit about unsafe foster care conditions for nearly a decade. Smith is frustrated with seeing Texas making these kinds of headlines and wants to help the Lone Star State reform its foster care system. But first she's starting local.

Smith started her own private therapy practice about 15 years ago and in 2008 was approached with the opportunity to offer therapeutic



Love Heals Youth founder Rebecca Smith speaks about her nonprofit which offers free counseling to kids in foster care system homes and behavioral training and support to the staff members.

services at Montgomery County Youth Services. In 2011 she started a group practice, the Counseling Center of Montgomery County, and the center started receiving calls to bring services to group foster homes. She's been offering these free services for years but when officially formed the nonprofit in 2020 to be able to do more.

She has worked in family court for years and has seen what can happen to families that are separated and the emotional trauma that can cause to children.

"One of the things that really drove that home for me, in understanding the importance of having your mom and or dad in your life, is working in the family law cases with divorces and custody modifications, and the damage that's done whenever a child doesn't have access to their parent," Smith said.

Kids continues on N4

COMMUNITY

MIRACLE BABIES

These babies were born just 23 weeks into pregnancy but are now at home.

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SPORTS

YEAR IN REVIEW

We take a look back at sports' biggest moments from the past year.

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COMMUNITY

‘Miracle babies’ born 23 weeks into terms

By Lindsay Peyton
CORRESPONDENT

For Tameka Tate, the best Christmas present is not under the tree. Instead, it's the toddler down the hall.

This was the second Christmas at home for her son Asher. He was discharged from the neonatal intensive care unit on Dec. 17 last year.

At the time, Asher was sent home with oxygen and connected to a feeding tube.

“The first few months, I slept on the sofa with him on a bedside bassinet,” Tate said. “I was constantly checking on him.”

It wasn't until March that Asher began breathing on his own.

And that's something to celebrate, Tate said. When she looks at him, she remembers how much he has endured already. She was warned in his earliest days that he might not make it, and now he is thriving.

“I'm still trying to wrap my head around it,” said Tate, who is writing a book about the experience.

Asher was born 23 weeks into her pregnancy.

“From that point on, I couldn't stop bleeding,” Tate recalled. “I passed out. I had to have two blood transfusions. I was weak.”

But she had a reason to fight for her life. “I heard him cry,” she recalled.

Nurses and doctors at Memorial Hermann Southeast Hospital stabilized Asher, with plans to transfer him to the Texas Medical Center by helicopter. Before Asher left, staff wheeled him into to Tate's room.

“He was 1 pound and a half,” she recalled. “I touched him with my finger.”

As soon as Tate could walk, she practically ran to the NICU. She pulled up a chair to her tiny baby and nurses relayed a long list of problems: He had a brain bleed on each side and jaundice. His blood pressure was not steady. He was intubated, placed on a feeding tube and had an ostomy bag. He was diagnosed with chronic lung disease, pulmonary hypertension, an abdominal hernia and a potentially blinding eye disorder.

“What didn't he have?” Tate asked. “His numbers were bad. He only had a 10 percent chance. If he did make it, he'd never be able to walk. He wouldn't be like other kids.”

All she could do was cry. “He coded twice,” she recalled.

In addition, Asher was born with patent ductus ar-



Yi-Chin Lee / Staff photographer

Eighteen-month-old Asher A. Tate smiles while playing with his mother, Tameka Tate, Dec. 7, in Houston. Asher was born at 23 weeks into the pregnancy and given a 10 percent chance of survival.

teriosus (PDA), a heart defect in which the connection between the aorta and the pulmonary artery do not close after birth. He had surgery to correct the problem.

When it was finally time to leave the NICU, Asher still had a laundry list of complications.

Luckily, Tate said, the UT Physicians Pediatric Center Neonatal High Risk Clinic – a clinic designed for the complex cases faced by infants discharged from the NICU – was ready for Asher's continued care.

“We're very unique,” said Fatima Boricha, a pediatrician with McGovern Medical School at UTHealth Houston and UT Physicians who is also affiliated with Children's Memorial Hermann Hospital. “We provide comprehensive care. We manage a lot of things that regular pediatricians don't. We're just different from a lot of follow-up clinics.”

In addition to offering routine pediatric care, the clinic's multidisciplinary team manages equipment, such as oxygen and feeding tubes. The center is also part of the Neonatal Research Network, one of only two in Texas.

Boricha and her fellow clinicians – doctors Tina Reddy, Sandra McKay and Janice John – work closely together. “We know all of our kids, and we are able to give them personal care,” she said.

Parents can see a host of specialists, including a pulmonologist and an endocrinologist, without leaving the center. “It's a one-stop

shop,” Boricha said. “Parents don't have to make multiple trips.”

And that makes a difference, for busy moms – or those traveling a distance to the clinic like Lisa Ordaz, a Lufkin resident.

“We don't have to travel across town,” said Ordaz, who began seeing Boricha two days after her son Noah was discharged from the NICU.

Any baby born before 37 weeks of pregnancy – about 1 in 10 babies – is considered preterm. The final months and weeks of pregnancy are a critical time in infant development. It's an especially essential time for development of the brain, lungs and liver.

“The ones born less than 32 weeks have a higher chance of morbidity and mortality,” Boricha said.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Pre-

vention, in 2019, preterm birth and low birth weights were responsible for 17 percent of infant deaths.

Babies who survive often have problems with feeding, breathing, vision and hearing, as well as developmental delay and cerebral palsy – and require an immense amount of care at the NICU, Boricha said. By the time of discharge, parents come out traumatized and under significant stress.

“A lot of moms are crying during their first visit,” Boricha said. “They are so overwhelmed. They are so scared. They don't know how to navigate.”

That's what makes Boricha's work so fulfilling.

“It feels so good when you see their parents and their children thrive and just enjoy life,” she added.

“Seeing the smile on a mom's face, it's very rewarding.”

Take Noah, for example. He was born Feb. 29, 2020 weighing 1 pound, 2 ounces – only 23 weeks into Ordaz's pregnancy.

Her amniotic fluid had been leaking – and doctors in Lufkin transferred her to the Texas Medical Center, where she spent five weeks in the hospital before giving birth. After a surgery in his first week of life, Noah stayed in the NICU at Children's Memorial Hermann Hospital for about nine months total, battling chronic lung disease, pulmonary hypertension, breathing difficulties, a congenital heart defect, brain bleeds, rib fractures and two abdominal hernias.

Like Asher, Noah left the NICU with both a feeding tube and on oxygen.

By June, he was able to eat by mouth and is now being weaned off his oxygen tank.



Courtesy

Baby Noah was born only 23 weeks into his mother's pregnancy and had to spend months in the NICU. But he's home for the holidays this year.

KIDS

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She's been involved in several organization's over the years that work in these areas, including Access Builds Children, which focuses on keeping families together.

But through her work she also sees the damage that being in the foster care system can cause, including increased substance abuse and need for government assistance in people who age out of the system. Through Love Heals Youth she wants to give children in the foster care system consistent care at no cost.

“(The group homes) have discretionary funds that they can spend on some stuff, but if we're able to offer those services for free then they can re-allocate those funds to do more for the kids,” Smith said.

The organization, which recently celebrated its first anniversary, is funded through grants and donations and just recently received its first grant from the Apricity Foundation, founded by Montgomery County residents Robert and Lindsey Kasprzak.

Love Heals Youth provides free therapy for children in group homes, free



Jason Fochtman / Staff photographer

The nonprofit Love Heals Youth offers free counseling to kids in foster care system homes and behavioral training and support to the staff members.

training for the staff overseeing the children at group homes, and the organization provides another level of oversight for the care of the children. This past summer when Treehouse Center, a group home based in Conroe, was put under investigation by the DA's office for abuse allegations, Smith

knew she wanted her organization to be part of the solution to prevent this from happening again.

Smith works with counseling students getting their Master's degrees to staff Love Heals Youth, which helps keep overhead for the organization low, and offers a framework that can be repeated

almost anywhere. These students, in order to complete their degrees, have to do field work, and Love Heals Youth offers students that chance while meeting a need in the community. Ideally, Smith would like to see branches of Love Heals Youth pop up across Texas where they can be useful.

Last year, Love Heals Youth provided 400 services to 50 youth at group homes, all for free. The students have between three to five kids on their caseload, which gives them the opportunity to offer more focused care.

The foster care system is a complicated and messy one. Not all children with a

“Noah is crawling and trying to walk and talking,” Boricha said. “If you meet him, you would be amazed.”

Noah and Asher are both current patients at UT Physicians Pediatric Center Neonatal High Risk Clinic – and both were born only 23 weeks into pregnancy.

Asher is 17 months; Noah is 22 months. But Boricha said their development should be determined from their mother's due date.

“They actually have time to catch up,” she said.

These days, Tate and Ordaz are both able to wait months between follow-up visits, but Boricha likes to check in on them regularly – often using telemedicine appointments to make it easier for the moms. Ordaz appreciates the virtual visits, which allow her to skip the two-hour drive to the clinic.

This will also be Noah's second Christmas at home – and his first without a feeding tube.

For Ordaz, that feels like an answer to prayer. “He's our true miracle baby,” she said. “Seeing him now, and knowing what could have been, I just thank God.”

She is amazed to think Noah is almost 2 years old. “He's got a sassy attitude,” she said with a laugh. “And that grin – everyone says he's such a flirt.”

When Ordaz sees photos from the past, she wonders at how much he has grown, the milestones he has reached.

“It brings a tear to my eye,” she said. “It's great seeing him come as far as he has.”

Tate is also in awe of how Asher has flourished. “They said he wasn't going to make it. He's proved them wrong,” she said. “He's a superstar.”

“He just brings me so much joy,” Tate added. “He has the softest eyes. He looks up at you, and he giggles. Whenever he laughs, it's contagious.”

For other parents in the NICU, she advises, “Just stay present in the moment with your kids. Experience every little thing. Celebrate every milestone.”

And afterward, don't worry about everything you went through in the past, Tate explains.

“Just keep going forward,” she suggests. “Faith and fear can't coexist. I had to keep going. He was fighting every day. I decided, we're going to fight together.”

Lindsay Peyton is a Houston-based freelance writer.

foster care case in Montgomery County are housed in the county, and not all the children living in group homes in Montgomery County have cases in the local courts. Ideally, Smith would like to help all kids in group homes regardless of where their case is housed, or where they are housed.

“There's that gap for kids that have nobody,” Smith said of children housed here that have a case elsewhere.

While the organization centers its work in group homes, there are still children who wouldn't be served because they haven't even been placed in a home because of lack of available beds. Smith wants to offer therapy services to these children and their families as well.

“If we are able to get the family services, help them from a therapeutic standpoint, then ideally we'd be able to get more kids placed back in their homes,” Smith said.

As part of her five-year plan Smith would like to see a group home staffed by therapists open in the county, and a residence for children without placement.

jamie.swinnerton@chron.com