

LIFESTYLES

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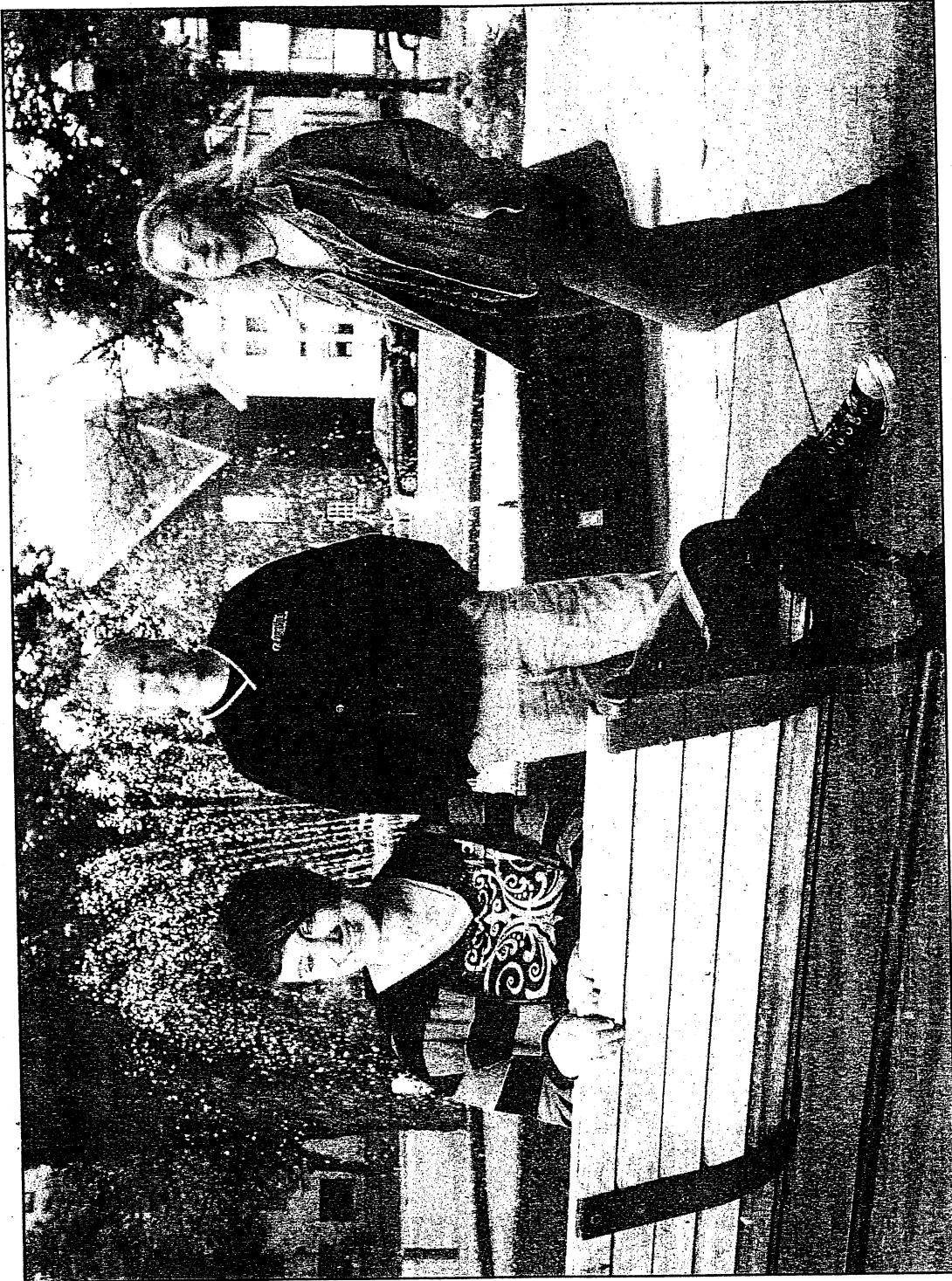
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When the mental health issues of children become overwhelming, parents can find help through the services of Eau Claire County's Coordinated Services Team program, which works to ...



Erika Banchy of Eau Claire turned her life around after she and her parents, Terry Banchy, center, and Peggy Banchy, right, became involved with a program that helps families who have children with mental health issues.

Staff photo by
Shane Opatz

Keep families together

Keep families together

By Dan Holtz
Leader-Telegram staff

Erika Banchy graduated this spring from North High School, and soon she will move to California to help care for her ill aunt.

The 18-year-old's future looks promising, said her mother, Peggy Banchy of Eau Claire.

"Not only is she well, she's excelling," Peggy Banchy said. "She has a zest for life. There's an appreciation for life I don't see in others her age."

But that future was cloudy only two or three years ago as Erika Banchy dealt with mental health issues triggered when, as a 14-year-old eighth-grader, she became the victim of a sexual assault.

"That destroyed me," Erika Banchy said. "I freaked out. I just lost it. It's really hard to describe how sick I was."

Her mental health issues included panic attacks, depression and psychosis. She was truant from school and suicidal. She cut herself and was in and out of hospitals for psychiatric treatment.

"She was traumatized," Peggy Banchy said. Although Erika Banchy was under the care of psychiatrists and psychologists, she wasn't getting better, said her father, Terry Banchy of Eau Claire.

"We were at our wits' end with Erika," he said. "We thought as parents we could take care of this on our own, but sometimes that's not possible. We were pushed past the limit."

That's when Gina Caldwell, Erika Banchy's social worker, suggested the

various types of children and their families are targeted for the Coordinated Services Team program, said Gina Caldwell, a social worker with the Eau Claire County Department of Human Services.

Some examples include:

- Habitually truant children under court order to attend school.
- Children with alcohol or drug issues that lead to truancy and crime.
- Chronic runaways.
- Children who cut themselves.
- Overly aggressive younger children who can't control their rage. "They really become a danger to their family," Caldwell said.

Various types of children and their families are involved in the program. Each family has a support team of about 10 people that develops a plan to address the mental health issues of the affected child.

Erika Banchy's support team included her mother, father, grandparents, Caldwell, a psychologist, a psychiatrist and some of her friends.

"Everyone, including Erika, (was) held responsible," Terry Banchy said.

The support team meets once or twice a month, during which it updates progress reports and sets educational and treatment goals.

The support team concept is important, Pulkrabek said. "It allows families to bring people together to support them."

Another significant concept is the affected family controls the team, she said. "It's believing families know best," she said. "We want them to make the decisions."

The parents lead the team, said Caldwell, who works for the county's human services department.

"We give them voice and ownership of the team. This isn't a cookie-cutter approach. We individualize each case. We talk more about strategies and interventions," she said.

Another goal is to help the family function independently.

"We want to get them not to be dependent on a social worker or our department," Caldwell said. "The CST program

Who Gets Help

Team support

Seventy-two families are involved in the program. Each family has a support team of about 10 people that develops a plan to address the mental health issues of the affected child.

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— Terry Banchy, whose family dealt with mental health issues

changes the role of the social worker. Instead of the social worker making the decisions, we're getting more people involved in the solution."

In her case, Erika Banchy said, "every one on the team had a say, but the family had the most say."

At each meeting successes were cited — no matter how inconsequential they might seem — and goals were set, she said.

"(Support team members) did their job, and I did my job as far as doing what they were telling me to do," she said. It's up to the family to decide how to proceed based on the team's input, Erika Banchy said. "They don't push anything down your throat."

A Department of Human Services intern joined Erika Banchy's support team and spent time with her, having coffee or just taking time to talk.

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Program/Alternative learning options are offered

from Page 1E

That was helpful, Peggy Banchy said, because her daughter was socially isolated as she dealt with her mental health issues.

"They took a situation that was so overwhelming and made it manageable and gave us hope," she said.

Guide to resources

The most important benefit of the CST program, Terry Banchy said, was that his family learned about treatment-related options. "We learned about resources we had no idea existed."

For example, Erika Banchy was able to complete some schoolwork online or take some classes while staying home. From June 2007 to January

2008, Erika Banchy went to Phoenix Alternatives, an Eau Claire youth and adult mental health services agency that offers clients the opportunity to earn high-school credits while completing a day-treatment program.

Erika Banchy's multiple hospital stays created financial worries for her parents because their mental health insurance benefits were limited.

The CST program directed the family to what's known as the Katie Beckett program, which allows states to make Medicaid benefits available to certain disabled children who would not ordinarily be eligible for Supplemental Security Income benefits because of their parents' income or resources.

"These are some of the things most people don't know about," Terry Banchy said.

Erika Banchy was 15 years old when she started the CST program. Her progress was relatively swift and steady.

When she entered her junior year of high school, she had just six credits and needed 22 to graduate. She managed to earn the remaining 16 credits in her junior and senior years and by attending summer school.

"Without CST, that wouldn't have happened," Erika Banchy said. "I would have been a high-school dropout."

"We really didn't think she

was going to graduate," Terry

Banchy said. "It's nothing short

of amazing she graduated."

By the end of Erika Banchy's junior year, she no longer par-

ticipated in the CST program. She wasn't seeing a psychologist anymore, no longer needed her medications and had a job, Terry Banchy said.

"Her attitude did a 180," he said.

A coordinating committee consisting of parents and representatives from the courts, Eau Claire and Altoona school districts, clergy, mental health and health care professions, law enforcement, Head Start and the county's restorative justice program monitors the CST program, Pulkrabek said.

The majority of Wisconsin's counties have coordinated services teams or are developing them, she said. Pulkrabek is encouraged by the impact CST can have on families involved with the pro-

gram. "It's really amazing to watch these families flourish," she said.

Terry Banchy strongly believes in CST. "It helps kids who are on or past the edge come back," he said. "You have to learn how to reach them."

After his daughter completed the program, he was invited to become a parent member of the coordinating committee. He accepted.

"We're gaining a lot of experience, gaining momentum," he said of the program. "I think this is the way to go to help some troubled kids. You're not going to reach them all, but you are going to reach some."

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Blended/Sharing parents tough at first for many kids

from Page 1E

Her two sons from a previous marriage, Blair Peter, 13, and Louis Peter, 10, live with them in Waterford Township, Mich. Every other weekend his children from a prior marriage — son Nic, 17, and daughters Nomi, 11, and Sierra, 8, visit from their home in West Branch, Mich. Typical children's squabbles about little things like who gets to sit where in the family van and where to go on family outings became major battles with cries of unfairness coming from children on both sides.

"We learned to say, 'This is where

Neither daughter has decided whether she will live primarily with her father in Rochester Hills, Mich., or remain with her mother in Macomb Township, Mich. But both are happy to be gaining a new family.

"I was glad when I found out they were getting married," Simone says. "I really liked her right away."

Shayla agrees. "Nate, he's like a real little brother. We're just like brothers and sisters. We've gotten along ever since we've gotten to know them."

Tom Staley grew up in a blended family and says he has learned lessons that will help his new family.

Learn More

Want to find help for blending families? Here are a few books and Web sites:

■ "Stepmonster: A New Look at Why Real Stepmothers Think, Feel and Act the Way We Do" by Wednesday Martin (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$25).

■ "Step Parenting and the Blended Family, Recognizing the Problems and Overcoming the Obstacles" by Scott Wooding (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, \$24.95). ■ The Stepfamily Foundation, a support and information network for blended families, www.stepfamily.org.

■ The National Stepfamily Resource

Staley — his stepfather's last name. "I am so blessed because we all get along with each other and with each other's ex-spouses," says Hoffman, a communications specialist at GM Online. "If our kids didn't like one or the other person, we wouldn't have planned to marry."

The girls' mother, Valerie Staley, says she's glad her daughters will have another person in their lives who cares about them.

"I think Jakey's great," she says. "For me to be threatened or intimidated would be silly. 'It's not like people have a limited amount of love to give,' she says.