

GAGE LADOUCEUR has an issue with bureaucracy.

The 19-year-old's passport has been stolen and he needs a new one fast because the college basketball team he plays guard for is heading south of the border to compete. Typical college-student stuff, except that Ladouceur is not your typical college student. And for help, the freshman has called home to Jenny Shantz, who isn't your typical college student's mom, either.

Shantz is the director of "The House", a home in the east end of Vancouver that takes in youth at risk and in crisis. "The House," which Shantz conceived and operates with Carla Dickinson, occupies an unusual niche within Vancouver's stretched social services system. The majority of the kids who live in their home have parents with drug or alcohol problems. And few have ever experienced predictable routine, love or acceptance, whether living with their families, or in B.C.'s foster and group homes. Shantz and Dickinson try to fill this gap by cultivating the ordinary details of family life in their home. Although Ladouceur no longer lives there—his college is in Abbotsford, B.C.—it's only natural that he would turn to Shantz and Dickinson for help with bureaucratic rigmarole. Isn't that what parents are for?

After hearing from Ladouceur, Shantz drives 100 kilometres from Vancouver to Abbotsford. She checks through Ladouceur's passport application, then ferries him to suburban Surrey, midway between the two cities. While they wait in line together at the passport office, they chat. Shantz tells him his bed is waiting for him when the school term is over. "Woo hoo!" Ladouceur says, smiling.

This is simple motherly stuff for Shantz. Nothing like the baptism of fire that launched the home back in 2001, when two-year-old twins landed on the doorstep of the two-bedroom basement suite she shared with Dickinson. Shantz and Dickinson were 24 and 22 years old respectively, and new to raising toddlers. But they knew the twins' mother from the church where they worked, ministering to Vancouver's poorest residents. She needed to enter a drug and alcohol treatment centre, and they wanted to help her out. For seven weeks the pair learned on the go. "I'd be in the shower," Dickinson says, "and the twins would stand outside the door crying." Familiar to anybody who is a parent, but for Dickinson and Shantz, this was all terrifyingly new. There were difficult moments during those seven weeks, but the twins survived—and so did the two young women. Though Shantz and Dickinson didn't know it at the time, it was the launch of what has become their calling: giving a home and stable family life to children who have known neither.

Today, this unusual home is located in a non-descript house in East Vancouver that is typically occupied by two families, one on each floor. So unlike most homes, The House has two kitchens, two living rooms and seven bedrooms. The accommodations aren't lavish, but the rooms are bright and open. On the top floor, an open-beamed living room overlooks a beautiful view of the mountains. A hallway that runs past the seven bedrooms is lined with dozens of photographs recording life at The House and biblical quotations.

On a Saturday at suppertime, The House is a busy place to be. An attempt at a head count one evening before a Christmas get-together comes up with 19 or 20 hungry children looking forward to a turkey meal. Two happy toddlers bumble around while a rotating group of six or seven older kids hover over pots on the stove. Currently, Gage, Mark, 22, and Toni, 16, use The House as their home base. On the weekends two brothers, Darius, 4, and Dazarus, 2, also come to stay. Their mother, a former resident of The House, is staying at a treatment centre. Evening meals and gatherings at The House tend to include more than the four or so kids who stay the night. Everyone is encouraged to stay close to their birth families, so parents and siblings often come over. And Shantz and Dickinson welcome kids to visit and stay for meals without moving in.

The House is unique in how it has managed to support the social services system while staying outside of it. For almost six years, Shantz and Dickinson operated The House on their own dime, with the occasional donation. In the course of eight years, 35 kids





ALL IN THE FAMILY
"We do the things for them that our parents did for us," says Jenny Shantz (bottom left) about life with the children who come to stay. Since 2001, 35 kids have lived with Shantz and Dickinson (top right).





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SLAM DUNK

Gage Ladouceur's life has looked steadily up since living at "The House." He is now in his first year of college and hopes to become a youth pastor. His mother, a drug addict, has been clean since the summer. "I'm proud of her," he says.

have lived with them. Six have stayed for more than nine months, and five have graduated from high school. In 2007, Shantz and Dickinson finally incorporated as a non-profit society and raised enough money to move into the house they currently occupy. Inner Hope Youth Ministries Society, as their home is legally known, is licensed to house five children, aged 16 and over. But Shantz and Dickinson can also take in younger children at the request of parents or guardians. With their new status, they have attracted a little more funding. Among their new supporters is World Vision, which is providing financial assistance and leadership development to Shantz and Dickinson. This is part of World Vision's Partners to End Child Poverty program in Canada, which focuses on children and youth in low-income urban areas.

On the surface, Shantz and Dickinson don't look like the type of women to embrace an alternative family arrangement. Shantz comes across as the cheerful but responsible big sister. Dickinson admits she'd always known she'd become a foster parent, but didn't want to take the step until she was married. The two met while they were students at Trinity Western University, a Christian university in Langley, B.C. Shantz had started a group to get students involved in inner city mission work, and Dickinson was one of those who signed on. The women hit it off and became roommates and co-workers at New Beginnings Baptist Church, which ministers to the neediest families in East Vancouver. Shantz had discovered the church while working as a camp counsellor on Vancouver Island. During her final summer, she had landed in a cabin that included two girls whom a pastor from New Beginnings had rounded up from Vancouver's poorest, darkest corners. For both Shantz and the kids, it was love at first sight. "It changed my life," she says. Dickinson echoes this connection to the children she met through the church. "I fell in love with the kids," she says.

From their work at the church, Shantz and Dickinson got a clear perspective of how the system was failing children, especially those of Aboriginal background. In Vancouver, 94 per cent of Aboriginal children fall below the federal government's low income cut-off line—one of the highest proportions in the country. Thirty-one per cent of children who are in the care of the B.C. government are Aboriginal. They and their parents have little control over what kind of foster care they end up with. Teenaged youth tend to be placed in group homes where structure and support are limited and outcomes are historically poor. But staying at home, in many cases, is impossible. The daily exposure to drugs, alcohol and violence is just too damaging, and in these kinds of scenarios, parents are frequently absent.

Three-quarters of the kids who have lived at The House have come from an Aboriginal background. "These are amazing kids," says Shantz, "but they have big needs that aren't being addressed." Shantz and Dickinson have made routine a key priority in their household. On weeknights at 10:30 p.m., the front doors are locked and the phones and Internet are turned off. "We're a drug- and alcohol-free home," says Shantz. "We need to be, because so many of the problems the kids have stem from that. They want a safe place." Shantz says that the children who stay at The House find the call-home-if-you're-late rule particularly challenging. "They grow up not knowing where their parents are, so

why would you call at 11 at night when a movie goes late?" says Shantz.

Shantz and Dickinson make sure the kids staying at The House learn simple life skills: "Going to the dentist, getting ID, enrolling in high school, starting a bank account, getting a driver's licence, budgeting, how to pay bills." Shantz ticks off a list of things that sound routine until one imagines figuring out these bureaucratic intricacies as a teenager, without an adult to guide you.

But perhaps most importantly, Shantz and Dickinson offer individual attention and direction—the kind you get from people who really care. "They're like our own kids," Shantz says. "We do the things for them that our parents did for us." This list ranges from making sure everyone wakes up in the morning and helping with difficult high school homework to giving driving lessons using their car and co-signing student loans.

Gage Ladouceur lived at The House for three years and is testimony to the nurturing that it provides. As a child, he was shuffled from foster home to foster home when he wasn't living with his birth mother, who struggles with a drug addiction. Like too many kids in Vancouver, most days for Ladouceur were simply about survival, about staying warm and dry and finding enough to eat. Ladouceur is tall and good-looking, but he hunches down inside the hoodie he's wearing underneath his team jacket and almost imperceptibly rocks his body. It's a vestige of a survival mechanism he developed as a small child. "I missed out on a lot of what being a kid is about," he understates.

When he was 14, he was one of the many kids who started dropping into The House for a meal. He was given a key after a friendly neighbour observed him crawling in through a bathroom window and left a ladder out to make it easier the next time around. When Ladouceur moved in full-time at 16, he was already a member of the family. But that didn't make the change in living circumstances any less abrupt. He remembers the little things, like the novelty of having sheets on his bed. Shantz thinks of the bigger ones, such as his simmering anger that got in the way of everything.

One evening several months after he'd moved in, he called asking to stay out beyond the nightly curfew. He calmly explained why the request was reasonable, and she agreed that, no problem, it made perfect sense. After she hung up, she thought to herself, Wow, a real conversation.

Thanks to The House, the cycle of poverty and neglect in Ladouceur's life might be broken. Things are looking up for him, and for his family, too. Last year, he travelled with his father to the Métis settlement in Alberta where his dad grew up. Their relationship can't be described as close, but Ladouceur says he understands something of the hurt that lay behind his father's once abusive behaviour. Meanwhile, his mom has been clean since summer. "I'm proud of her," Ladouceur says. When he graduates from college, he plans to become a youth pastor. But for now, Ladouceur is happy to be back at The House for a weekend, new passport in hand, salivating over the turkey smells that are filling his home. He, more than anyone, knows that while kids may complete Grade 12, they never graduate from "The House." ■

To see more pictures of "The House" in action, please visit worldvision.ca/thehouse

