

Family reconciliation over turkey dinner

By: **JASON HARRIS** (Wed, Nov/22/2006)

MOUNT HOLLY — Over turkey and dressing at The Children's Home last night, Sonia Negron and her 13-year-old son, Christopher, sat down for the first dinner they've had together in four months.

It might be the first dinnertime conversation they've ever had.

"Me and him never did this, talking like this" she said. "He'd always be angry. Now we can talk."

The Children's Home, a school and residential treatment center on Pine Street for at-risk children, has for 15 years been hosting Thanksgivings dinners for young residents of the home and their sometimes-estranged families.

There are a lot of reasons for the staff and administrators at the home to take the time and effort to prepare a turkey dinner with all the trimmings for more than 200 as they did last night, but the simplest is to bring often-troubled families a little closer.

"We recognize that one of the most difficult times of the year for kids to be away from home is holiday time," said Roy Leitstein, executive director of The Children's Home. "No one elects to spend Thanksgiving away from their family. Some of our kids can go home, but for those that can't, we bring their families here."

The Children's Home originally was founded to shelter Civil War orphans. Today, it works with children with learning disabilities or behavioral and emotional problems. Fifty-one young people between the ages of 11 and 17 live there.

Leitstein said every child that comes to The Children's Home is given an individualized treatment program that usually includes family therapy.

Christopher doesn't go into detail, but he was referred to The Children's Home after an incident at his school in Camden. He hates being away from his family and he'll be at the home for another five to 20 months, but he said he's better off.

"It's more stable," he said around a mouthful of dressing and gravy. "It's better to stay here than staying on the streets."

Negron, her daughter Natasha, and Natasha's friend Giselle Coln, met Christopher for dinner. The family meets regularly with a therapist and even Natasha sees a difference in her little brother.

"We don't argue like we used to," she said. "I like his attitude now. He listens."

Christopher knows he'll go home and hopes that will be sooner rather than later, but said he doesn't want to fall back into his old patterns of behavior. He said he's working on controlling his anger and really wants to stay out of trouble.

"I'm thankful for being in school and getting good grades," he said.

Christopher is on the honor roll this term, something Sonia said never happened before. She misses her son, but likes the young man he's becoming.

"I've seen a lot of change," she said. "He's more positive. He's doing good. He's happy and I'm happy for him."

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