



## Home away from home by Sharon Gittleman

published October 2009

Lonely, frightened, hungry and hopeless — that's what too many youngsters have to face day after day. They may be teens running away from abusive parents or children forced out on the street to live on their own. Thanks to the Ann Arbor-based Ozone House, youths, age 10-20, can find temporary shelter and counseling and a chance at a better future.

Today, the group has on-site emergency housing and a facility that provides transitional living for teens ages 17-20 who don't have a stable home. However, in years past, different arrangements were made.

In the early 1970s, Jeanne Learman was browsing the displays at the Ann Arbor Street Art Fair when she came across a booth dedicated to the then recently organized Ozone House. "I was interested in what they do," said Learman, 65, a nurse anesthetist at Clinton Memorial Hospital. "I thought, we could foster some teens."

Learman and her husband Joe, 63, cared for 82 teenagers over seven years, with youths staying from two days to two weeks in their home. "The idea was to get them back to their families or with another relative," she said. "I think like a lot of things you get into, you think, 'I'll do some good for someone else,' and you realize later it does good for you."

Whenever a youth arrived at their home, the family's first stop was the supermarket. "We would buy them their favorite type of cereal or lunch meat. We'd ask them what kind of bread they liked," said Learman, a Saline resident. "They knew we cared then."

Many of the youngsters who stayed at her home made a deep impression. "I felt bad for one young gal. She was 16," said Learman. "Her dad didn't want her to live with him because his girlfriend was only 19. Her mother's boyfriend wanted to go to bed with her."

Learman and her husband had three young boys when they opened their home to troubled teens. "There was a boy who decided to teach our sons how to steal. He showed them how to take a skateboard — to throw it in the park and get it later," she said. "Our kids were pretty impressionable, until he took our son's piggy bank with his complete life savings. It was a good lesson to show how bad stealing is."

The family's experiences with the teens sparked discussions about the importance of making good choices, she said. "I think the opportunity to have those conversations with children is helpful," said Learman. "A lot of what parents say goes in one ear and out the other."

The youngsters who stayed with them taught her family another lesson. "The really important thing I learned, and that my kids learned, is these aren't bad kids. These are kids in bad situations," she said.

Today, older teens gain "real living" skills at Ozone House, she said. "The biggest goal they have is giving the children a sense of worth. If your mom doesn't want you, you feel like a bad person," said Learman. "They really help teenagers get back on track."

For more information about Ozone House, visit their webpage at [www.ozonehouse.org](http://www.ozonehouse.org).