

Church of God Children's Home

Set in the foothills of the Smokies, the facility has a history of restoring the lives of troubled outh

Conceived outside of marriage, "Tricia" had run away from home four times by the age of 16. She had been with several men, stolen her father's car, and abused drugs and alcohol. Her father had all but given up on her future, but his hope was renewed when Tricia entered the Smoky Mountain Children's Home, a facility operated by the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.) since 1920.

At 13, "Clayton" was failing school, getting involved with a gang, drinking, smoking and experimenting with drugs. His dad was in prison, and his mom was unable to handle him. As an act of desperation, Clayton's mother placed him in the children's home.

Tricia and Clayton are not unlike the hundreds of children who have lived at the home. Today on the 64-acre campus there are few traditional "orphans"—those whose parents are dead. Most of the children have at least one parent who has a genuine interest in their welfare. They realize this place nestled in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains National Park can offer a ray of light for their children's well-being.

"We call many of our kids 'orphans of the living,'" stated Assistant Director Mike Walker. "Children are a product of their environment and the turmoil of the last generation. Many kids come from the grandparents, who see the home as a rescue for the children of their children that are unable to offer proper parental care. The home is for abused, neglected and homeless children, and we offer quality care, which translates into hope and healing for at-risk children and youth."

Since 1949, the home has been located in Sevierville, Tenn., hometown of country singer Dolly Parton. The facility sits at the gateway into one of the most popular tourist destinations in the South, Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg.

For its first 29 years, the Church of God Orphanage, as it was called, hop-scotched between properties in the denomination's hometown of Cleveland, Tenn., until in 1949 it inherited the former location of what is now Lee University.

Over the last 50 years, the home has physically changed, most visibly from the demolition of dormitories. Since the mid-1960s, nearly a dozen family cottages have been built on the campus, situated on roads named for notable personalities throughout the home's history.

The cottages house up to eight children and are under the supervision of house parents. Several of the residences have been built through fund-raising drives conducted by Church of God congregations in several states and carry such names as Rocky Top, Old Dominion and Home Sweet Home Alabama.

In an effort to more accurately reflect the facility's ministry, the name was changed last year from the Church of God Home for Children to Smoky Mountain Children's Home. Although still supported by the Church of God, the home now seeks and receives grants and funds from dozens of agencies, trusts, foundations and individual benefactors.

Additionally, the home reflects the denomination's commitment to minister not just to children. Currently under construction on campus is a \$2.5 million residential facility for widows of

ministers.

Since Clayton came to the Home three years ago, he has been selected "Best Christian Character" by his peers, has been on two missions trips, leads worship in an RV camp and teaches Tae Kwon Do. He will soon graduate from high school and, if he chooses, will have his college tuition paid through the Home.

After one year at the home, Tricia has not run away and believes she has been given the chance she needed to prove she can straighten out her life. She too is expecting to graduate soon.

"I always thought I had to have a boyfriend to be accepted," Tricia said. "But I recently broke up with a nice guy because I needed to prove to myself that I could be independent. The home accepts people from so many different backgrounds, and it doesn't matter what you have done in the past. You get a new start here. There are people that love you, care about you and want you to succeed."

Cameron Fisher

For more information, call (865) 453-4644; or visit