

Copyright (c) 2020 Baptist Press. Reprinted from Baptist Press ([www.baptistpress.com](http://www.baptistpress.com)), news service of the Southern Baptist Convention. The original story can be found at <http://www.bpnews.net/54616/baptist-childrens-homes-find-opportunity-amid-crisis>

## Baptist children's homes find opportunity amid crisis

by Tess Schoonhoven, posted Wednesday, April 08, 2020 (19 days ago)

NASHVILLE (BP) -- Children who come from hard places need to have the chance to feel safe and loved, said Randy Lee, residential parent with Louisiana Baptist Children's Homes.

Lee and his wife have served as "house parents" at an all-boy residential home since 2014.

Feeling a call to children's home ministry while serving as a worship leader and children's pastor, Lee said the journey to his current role took five years as he waited on God's timing and prayed for opportunities.

The children he now cares for come from homes where there was sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect.

"They come out of very tough circumstances and have no idea what a healthy family is supposed to look or feel like," Lee said.

Showing the children that a better home life is possible and telling them as much as he can about a God who loves them are his biggest desires, Lee noted.

However, many of the children want to go back to their original homes, even if those homes are dysfunctional.

"Our role is to guide them through this transition time and love them through it," Lee said. "Some return home, some are adopted and some may go to other foster homes."

Lee and his wife oversee every aspect of the boys' lives, seeking to make it as normal as possible, while acknowledging that there is nothing normal about being in the foster care system.

"Normal" life includes taking part in sports and going to doctor appointments, youth group activities, movies, school events and other outings.

"The goal is to do all the things that kids normally do and have a godly influence wherever we can," Lee said.

But with the recent developments of the COVID-19 pandemic, those normal life events that Lee worked so hard to provide have been mostly eliminated.

"An event like COVID-19 can really be tough on the kids," Lee said. "I do not know if they fully understand how global this is and what a historic time we are in. They just know that they can't see friends or go anywhere. This event has put a lot of pressure on us to keep these kids busy and engaged and not let them just drift through the days. At times this can be very challenging."

Lee said they have tried to develop an alternative schedule for the boys to follow to get them into a positive routine.

But without the ability to go to school, the boys in the cottage have had trouble feeling independent and occupied, Lee said.

"Most of our boys are well behind in school and have not been good students," Lee explained. "By no fault of their own, they have lots of catch-up to do in their education."

Perry Hancock, president and CEO of Louisiana Baptist Children's Home, said the resident home parents, like Lee, have taken on more responsibility with the closing of schools and recreational activities.

"Cottage parents are now cooking all meals," Hancock said. "Before, the schools and our part-time cooks provided meals. In addition, cottage parents are providing supervision for online school assignments. They are also serving as a recreation staff for the children. We normally have a recreation staff after school for the children. So every day is a full day of work for our cottage parents."



Louisiana Baptist Children's Home house dad Randy Lee has been holding group guitar lessons to take advantage of the extra time boys have at the home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Photo from Facebook

However, as the situation has progressed, Lee said it has been encouraging to see the boys adapt to distance learning and show some social initiative.

"They have really stepped up and are focused and hardworking," Lee said. "They are getting out of the house and playing with the other kids on campus and learning healthy play."

Although they utilize technology like Netflix and video games for downtime, Lee said, they are also encouraging the children to see that there are other things they can do with their free time.

Several of the boys have taken up the guitar during their recent downtime.

Lee, who plays in his church's worship band, said he has begun teaching the boys guitar in a group setting.

"All the boys see me playing my electric guitar every Sunday," Lee explained. "I have tried to give lessons a few times since we have been here, but most of the boys who took part were too young and they lost interest. This is the oldest group we have had, and there is more ability."

Although only one of the boys is interested enough to spend time practicing on his own, Lee said the others just enjoy strumming along, having fun with the lessons.

Finding ways to develop relationships with the boys in the home is difficult, Lee explained, but creating opportunities for engagement, learning and fun experiences is key to walking them through the current pandemic.

School sessions meet through online platforms such as Zoom, as do many of the children's sessions with counselors.

"We've all been reminded how precious relationships are," Jen Lee said. "We've been able to have many conversations about how none of us can control what's going on, with the exception of staying home and staying safe, but God sees all and knows all. He is aware of our situation and every need."

Hancock said other parents have also reported that relationships within the home are strengthening during this time.

"Our cottage parents have said that the crisis has provided an opportunity to talk with the children about God's provision through the difficult times of life," Hancock said. "Most of our children have come from very difficult places. It would be easy for them to have a fatalistic view of the future in the midst of this challenge. Our cottage staff is assuring them that this will end and we will be able to move forward. Life is good even in the midst of a storm. God is going to see us through this storm."

Other children's homes around the country are experiencing similar challenges, but dedicated staff and supporters are rising to them.

"We have a staff who are here because God called them there," said Russell Martin, president of Missouri Baptist Children's Homes.

Michelle Glassford, director of communications for Alabama Baptist Children's Homes, said donors have stepped up in support of the homes as well.

"It has been encouraging to hear from so many of our church partners and donors who are aware of the needs we have in serving children and families," Glassford said. "They are doing all they can to help meet those needs, even as they themselves face challenges. They have reached out to provide food and household donations, financial gifts and prayers."

Rod Marshall, president of Alabama Baptist Children's Homes, said the ministry is still fulfilling its mission to protect, nurture and restore children and families through Christ-centered services.

"During times of crisis, and perhaps especially a true global crisis, it is not uncommon for the weakest, smallest, youngest and most fragile to be ignored," Marshall said. "No one intentionally ignores children and the fatherless, but they do not have a very loud voice, and they can go unheard during a global panic."

"Our response to the most vulnerable is an expression of our love for our Savior. Our ministry is the Gospel in action on a daily basis, and this situation is no different."