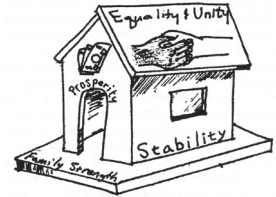


“TO KNOW THAT SOMEONE CARED”

Sandra's Story

She's a 37-year-old woman who dreamed, while growing up in Chicago, of becoming a fashion designer. *“I designed outfits out of my head, without a pattern, for my nieces and my mom. I made my sister's graduation dress when she graduated from the 8th grade. I even had a fashion show in 1988.”* But instead of finding herself surrounded by fabrics, patterns, and pinking shears, Sandra is a single mother to four young men (currently aged 18, 17, 15, and 13), and she admits she's had more than a little difficulty understanding them. Her acquaintance with Mothers and Sons goes back to 1996 when two of her boys were getting into trouble at school. Not the kind of trouble that prompts a mother to throw her hands in the air and say, “Boys will be boys,” but rather the kind of trouble that, even to an untrained eye, indicates impending crisis. Anger management, difficulty with authority figures, theft (leading to one son's eventual involvement with the First Offender program), and charges of sexual misbehavior had Sandra feeling light years away from any fashion runway on this or any other planet.



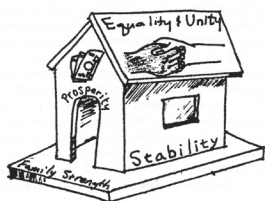
It was the vice principal who first brought the program to Sandra's attention. Shortly after, a staff member came to her home and explained, step by step, how the program could help her sons. *“She explained that if I didn't want any information about me released, it was up to me. That made me feel a lot more confident. At first, I didn't know where to turn. When I was introduced to the group I was at my worst. I was at a point where I was ready to give up being a parent. But when I got into it, it was, ‘Wow, I like this!’ It gave me something to look forward to.”* When asked specifically what made an impact on her, Sandra replied, *“Knowing that I wasn't alone. I always liked being around a lot of people, but I was the type of person who was always scared to meet new people. Mothers and Sons became like a family because everybody cared about everybody, and we had each other's phone numbers and could call each other. Before that it was basically like coming to a foreign place for me after living all of my life in Chicago.”* Sandra, her mother, her sister, and her sons had left Chicago only one year earlier, in 1995, when Sandra had decided that it was not the place she wanted to raise four boys.

“We wanted our meetings to be confidential, and we didn't want anyone to feel judged or that they were a bad parent because they had a different way to raise their kids. Something they said or did might be of benefit to the next parent. Sometimes, even the staff would say, ‘Oh, this is good information!’ They treated us with lots of respect. After I left, I felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulder.”

Sandra

Sandra benefitted from a project that had participants build a house as a metaphor for their lives. *“We clipped pictures out of magazines and each part of the house had to represent a part of*

our life. The foundation was the way we wanted our family to be. Each wall represented it's own little part of your life and the good things you would keep in and the bad things, like drugs and violence, you would keep out. The walls would be like your shield. And the roof was the last thing you would like to put at the top of your life." But the best part for Sandra was feeling responsible for setting the ground rules.



Not only were emotional needs being addressed, but the program helped meet some of Sandra's family's basic needs as well. *"They would take me to places for food when I didn't have transportation and once they gave me information about where my son could get a coat when he was cold and I couldn't afford to buy him one."* In turn, Sandra was later given the opportunity to support other parents who were new to the program.

It was just a little over a year ago, when Sandra's needs took a new turn, that she really began to understand the program's commitment to nurturing support. In June of 1998, Sandra's mother, who also happened to be her biggest cheerleader, was diagnosed with cancer and succumbed to the disease. *"They (two alliance staff) tried to get me into counseling and made frequent visits to my house. They called to see how I was doing, and a lot of [the participants] sent me sympathy cards and told me to hold on. That meant a lot, because after I lost my mom I just had an empty feeling there. They got together and bought me a gift basket and told me to take time for myself. If I needed something, it was there."*

Unfortunately, and ultimately out of fear, Sandra made the hasty decision to move away from the area, thereby placing her two youngest sons in anew school district. *"You know how sometimes, after the smoke clears, you think more clearly? Even though I talked with the Alliance Social Worker a lot and she tried to get me into a bereavement group, I didn't know how to grieve. And I moved because I was scared to walk the places I had walked with my mom, and because we had lived right next door to each other. I figured if I was away from things that reminded me of her it would be better. I was isolating myself from my family, and I didn't understand how to deal with the pain. I guess I made decisions without thinking. Most of the programs in my new district have been cut, and I really want to get back to my old neighborhood. Even getting back in a group would make me feel refreshed."*

It sounded as though Sandra could benefit from pulling out her shoebox "emergency kit" that she and other group members had made together at an earlier time. It contained things like candy, to remember to treat yourself; erasers, to erase mistakes; and a rubber band, to know how much you can stretch. *"I look back and I read things from that time, and I know that I'm strong enough now to deal with something I ran away from. I was telling my kids not to run away from their problems because they're always there."*

We spent the remainder of our time together talking about her mom and about sewing projects Sandra had created from remnants of fabric and a whole lot of ingenuity. She had brought her youngest son along with her and he'd kept himself busy in the otherwise empty facility by alternately talking on the phone and thrashing the punching toy in the well-stocked kid's playroom. When she'd talked herself out, we climbed into my car and I drove them home, but not before we got lost on a freeway system that has exits with the same street names off of each a northbound and eastbound route. It wasn't until I

asked for Sandra's help in determining if we were finally heading in the right direction that I fully appreciated the magnitude of my own potential for a quick escape. "I don't know," she said in response, "I've never been on the freeways before."

I dropped them off in a quiet enclave of small homes just off the heavily trafficked city street that serves as Sandra's major artery for busing her to whatever is within route limits. Some kids were tossing around a ball. When I'd asked her earlier to identify the one thing that had meant the most to her from her experiences with the program she had responded, "To know that someone cared." I could only hope she could duplicate that feeling here.

