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## Program offers safe haven for gay teens

### Photos



Staff photo by Kate Flock

Carlos sings to the Pussycat Dolls in his room at Waltham House, The Home for Little Wanderers' house for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered kids.

**By Debra Filcman**

**GHS**

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Needham — Carlos pounded up the stairs, quickly snatching a copy of his latest report card along the way, one that landed him on the honor roll this semester.

“Here it is,” he said proudly, but continued up the stairs without making eye contact. He also points to a bulletin board, showing where he ranks in the household privilege scale, a hierarchy ranging from responsibility to respect to pride.

“I’m here now,” he said, pointing to the middle level, “but I’m going to be there soon,” the 18-year-old said; Carlos has worked toward the ultimate level, pride, since he moved into the Waltham House a year ago.

Carlos is one of 12 teenagers — all gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender — living at the Waltham House, which caters specifically to teenagers dealing with their sexual identity. The House, a program of the nonprofit child welfare agency, the Home for Little Wanderers, is the third of its kind, following in the footsteps of programs in New York City

and Los Angeles. It opened in 2002, and now serves as an example to other programs and communities.

The Home for Little Wanderers has been selected as the official charity of the Needham Times’ 2006 Gifts of Hope campaign. Donations to the Home help it operate 20 programs, serving children throughout Eastern Massachusetts; the Waltham House in particular, now serves children from around the country.

Carlos’ family troubles, which he declined to detail, led him to move out, and into a series of temporary homes. Now, in the Waltham House, he’s found a new family atmosphere that he enjoys.

After leaving a foster home, Carlos moved into a transition home in Brockton, when his school advocate suggested the House as his next option.

“I was like, ‘Oh, that sounds cool,’” Carlos said, wearing a “I bite on first dates” T-shirt. “Here you get to be who you really are. A lot of people take expressing themselves for granted.”

Like Carlos, the 11 other teens living at the Waltham House have experienced taunting and harassment associated with what many call an “alternative” lifestyle.

“Gay people are just like regular people,” Carlos said, looking down. “And people have to realize we’re only teenagers and we do make mistakes.”

The House, which is funded primarily by the Department of Social Services, not only houses these teens, but sends them to the appropriate schools, and provides counseling, medical treatment, mentorship and recreation.

A group of about 20 employees, including a doctor and therapist, takes care of the teenagers living at the Waltham House in shifts, with no sleepover staff.

But before finding the House, many teens were acting out in desperation. Several who ultimately moved in reported to staff that they intentionally tried to contract HIV, which would land them in a more gay-friendly atmosphere than the homes in which they previously lived.

“They feel safe here for several reasons,” said Colby Berger, the program’s training manager. “They all have had similar experiences because they are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, but that’s not why they are in the child welfare system.”

The Home for Little Wanderers takes the children in due to troubles at home or, occasionally, the death of a parent, but many of these problems do not stem from the child’s sexual identity.

The Waltham House Program director, Karen Voorhes, describes the other teenagers in the house as Carlos’ siblings.

“They find resources in each other,” she said.

Carlos, who is in his last year at the House, has made himself at home. His bedroom, on the second floor of three, looks like a college dorm room: clothes strewn on the bed; toiletries and other personal belongings stowed in stackable boxes; a SpongeBob Squarepants poster; and Britney Spears CDs.

After graduation, he hopes to attend the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth to pursue a career in music or reptile

care.

“Steve Irwin is my role model,” he said. “He tried to make the world a better place for animals that were misunderstood, like Great Whites [sharks].”

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Your tax deductible donations to the Home should be sent to: Gifts of Hope, Home for Little Wanderers, 271 Huntington Ave., Boston, MA 02115. Please include the words Gifts of Hope on your check.

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