

# Success brings greater challenge

By ERNEST HOOPER, Times Columnist  
Published January 20, 2006

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When she was 4, she did something she had never done before.

She slept in a bed.

Before coming to Joshua House, the foster child had never experienced the comfort of sheets and a mattress. She spent her nights on the floor in a closet.

She arrived battered and bruised, a victim of her stepfather's sexual abuse. Education experts determined she was borderline mentally retarded and would struggle to fare well in school.

Flash forward 10 years, and you find that this once timid child has blossomed into a poised young lady. Her straight-A grades belie the experts' prediction.

"All she needed was a chance," Joshua House founder Dottie Berger MacKinnon said Thursday.

To tell the story of Berger MacKinnon's philanthropic efforts, you have to tell the success story of the kids at Joshua House, a residential home for children who have been removed from their families. Berger MacKinnon would want it no other way. She periodically has lunch with the blossoming 14-year-old, and it's the turnaround of that young lady - and others - that fuels Berger MacKinnon's passion.

On Thursday, Leadership Tampa Alumni honored the former county commissioner with the prestigious Parke Wright III Leadership Award. The award is presented annually to a member of the group who has demonstrated exceptional leadership and made a significant difference in the Tampa Bay community.

Berger MacKinnon certainly falls into that category, as evidenced by the fact that she has received several awards for her philanthropic efforts. Previous honors include the Judeo-Christian Health Clinic's Humanitarian of the Year Award, the Guardian ad Litem Guild's Champion for Children Award and the statewide R. David Thomas Child Advocate of the Year Award.

Her outlook is simple.

"One person can make a difference," she said Thursday. "You have to remember that. For every child you touch, there is a domino effect."

You might imagine someone so accomplished would speak fondly of how she started and the obstacles she cleared. And Berger MacKinnon did explain that her child advocacy is rooted in the fact she adopted a son 32 years ago.

What I never expected her to say was, "I have a lot of work to do."

Hasn't she done enough?

Berger MacKinnon is a founding member of the Friends of Joshua House Foundation. She helped the group establish a \$1.2-million endowment through the Community Foundation of Tampa Bay.

She hasn't stopped there. Last year, she helped form a new group, Kids Charity Tampa Bay, and quickly raised \$30,000 to aid foster care kids.

"We started out small," Berger MacKinnon said. "We're just trying to address the needs of foster care kids that are not being addressed.

"I wake up at night thinking about them. I can't sleep because I have so much to do."

Much of the initial money for Kids Charity Tampa Bay went to purchase holiday gift cards for teens who have aged out of the foster care system and have no real family to be with during the holidays. Berger MacKinnon said the new group will continue to address other pressing needs as it moves forward.

These days, Berger MacKinnon allows for a little more leisure time, but she takes her computer and cell phone wherever she goes. She is thankful to have an understanding husband in Sandy MacKinnon, a Yale Industrial Trucks chief executive.

"I'm high energy," she explained.

With rejuvenated kids as her source, Berger MacKinnon isn't likely to run out of energy any time soon.

That's all I'm saying.