



## A Village Made to Raise the Children

By Samantha Levine

Posted Sunday, October 22, 2006

Patrick Lawler sounds every bit the corporate bigwig as he points to bar graphs illustrating his organization's success. "These are our 10 core indicators," he explains in his well-appointed office. Except Lawler isn't talking about sales and revenues, profit and loss. As the chief executive officer of Youth Villages, a nationally recognized nonprofit for emotionally and behaviorally troubled children, Lawler is counting far different data. Indeed, the statistic he calls his "top selling point" is a deeply human one: the status of children one year after their release from the program.

Employing a combination of business savvy and decades of experience in youth counseling, Lawler has built a program for the children others deem too difficult to handle. "We take the kids nobody wants," says Lawler, 51, explaining that the children, the majority of whom have been physically or sexually abused, arrive with problems ranging from eating disorders to severe developmental delays.

According to the statistics he monitors so carefully, his program is working: 80 percent of children who receive treatment from Youth Villages are still living at home, going to school, and doing well even two years after discharge. In contrast, up to 70 percent of children nationwide who have received treatment through government programs wind up returning to government care within one year of their release.

Because it is built around treatments that emphasize hard evidence of success, Lawler's program has surged to the front lines of children's mental health services. "It is the latest, and clearly the most effective, service model," says Linda O'Neal, executive director of the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth. "He has set a standard and challenged other service providers to think about what they do and whether the service models they use are the best." Based in Memphis, Youth Villages now serves 11,000 children and their families per year.

### AMERICA'S BEST LEADERS

#### PATRICK LAWLER

As head of a youth treatment center, Patrick Lawler has managed to do something government programs often can't: help troubled kids improve their lives—even after they leave treatment. His holistic home-based care is now practiced in 25 states. The key to Lawler's success? It has to do with bar graphs.



The success of Youth Villages goes back to a moment about 13 years ago when Lawler and his colleagues began feeling that the traditional model of youth services—removing children from their homes for treatment—wasn't working. "In the early years, we thought we were in the business of raising other people's kids," Lawler says. "But many kids were not doing well after they left us."

Amid the search for answers, Lawler and his staff discovered the multisystemic therapy model, which was developed by Scott Henggeler of the Family Services Research Center at the Medical University of South Carolina. The model was designed to help antisocial children by stressing an intensive, holistic approach that treats the family as well as the child. Lawler and his staff became the first U.S. practitioners to launch MST on a large scale.

The home-based care model is now used in 30 states and 10 countries. "[Lawler] was able to project into the future and see the implications of new treatment technologies," says Henggeler. "That type of thinking has the potential to unbelievably improve outcomes for children."

**Stand tall.** Lawler's suburban Memphis, middle-class upbringing hardly prepared him for the difficult field in which he has spent his 33-year career. After high school, he took a job as a counselor at Tall Trees, a Shelby County youth guidance school. "I was drawn to the most troubled kids," he says. "They seemed to have so much life and energy, just like me, but they lived these horrible childhoods."

Tall Trees' director, William Key, said he first recognized Lawler's tenacity when he coached him on the football field. "He was a tall, skinny kid. But he was extremely eager to get an opportunity to move himself along," says Key, now the criminal court clerk for Shelby County. "He is a go-getter. He would be the first on the pileup."

While earning degrees in criminal justice and counseling from the University of Memphis, Lawler worked at various jobs, including as a probation counselor at the Shelby County Juvenile Court. When county officials considered shutting down a poorly performing residential treatment center, Key recommended that Lawler, then just 24, be hired to try to save it.

Lawler was the third director to take a stab at the job that year. He soon realized the enormity of his task. "I knew nothing about administration, had never seen a balance sheet, and didn't know we needed a license," he says. "We started with a \$150,000 budget and one typewriter. And the "K" key stuck. My dream was a copy machine. I could tell you how many rolls of toilet paper we gave to each dormitory."

Under Lawler's leadership, however, the program, Dogwood Villages, thrived. Operating on just a few hours of sleep per night, he worked weekends and holidays. He often mowed the grass himself. In 1986, Dogwood Villages merged with Memphis Boys Town to become Youth Villages.

Along the way, Lawler learned some important lessons about the business world. "I thought we were supposed to be a charity," he says. "We ran on a shoestring. But a board member explained that we needed to have money and a reserve."

The organization's annual revenues have risen from \$900,000 in 1986 to more than \$90 million in 2006, thanks in large part to government contracts. Today, about half of its revenue comes from the state of Tennessee. The nonprofit now has more than 1,300 employees in 40 locations across Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Texas, North Carolina, and Washington, D.C.

A significant ingredient in Lawler's success attracting millions of dollars each year in private contributions, his colleagues say, is his personality. "He oozes charisma," said Ken May, president and CEO of FedEx Kinko's and a member of the Youth Villages board. "He has the ability to reach inside someone and make them feel comfortable." Several of Lawler's colleagues added that he has an uncanny ability to hire the right people for the right jobs, listen to them, and implement their ideas.

To be sure, Lawler gets some ribbing for his abundant energy and attention to detail. A sometime triathlete with an impossibly healthy diet, Lawler tried to institute a strict nutritional plan in the centers, focusing on low-fat food and limited second helpings. "At one point, I had only skim milk" at the facilities, says Lawler, a married father of two. "But the staff got on me about it. ... We went to 2 percent."

Lawler also has a tendency to see potential where others might see trouble. That was the case for former foster child Melanie Jackson, who entered Youth Villages at age 12. "People tend to think that with so many odds against you, you will fall into the category of negative outcomes," said Jackson, now 26. "[Lawler] looked at me as more than a foster child—as a young person who could have a bright future ahead of herself." Jackson just earned a master's degree in public administration; Youth Villages paid her way. "For him to believe in me," she said, "it just kind of blew me away."

## America's Best Leaders

By David Gergen

Posted Sunday, October 22, 2006

Where have all the leaders gone? As Americans survey a landscape that seems uncommonly bleak, a new national survey commissioned for this issue of *U.S. News* found that two thirds of the public

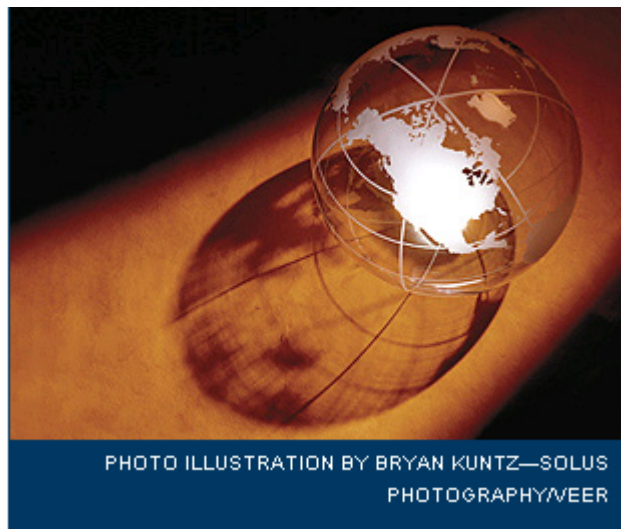


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believes the nation is in a leadership crisis, while nearly three quarters worries that unless we find better leaders soon, the nation will begin to decline. Some 9 of every 10 people say political leaders today spend too much time attacking rivals, while 8 of 10 believe that corporate leaders are more concerned with making money than with running their companies well.

There are some glimmers of hope, however. As it did last year, *U.S. News* teamed with the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government to identify leaders who are making a difference. A national panel sifted through thickets of recommendations and agreed on a small group of men and women who embody the most important traits of leadership. There may be a dearth of leadership in our national life, but as the portraits in this issue attest, there are still great leaders abroad in the land. —*David Gergen, cochair, "America's Best Leaders" project*