



VISTA MARIA NEWS

SUMMER 2018

“What’s one more?”

Amy and Walt Cuevas foster, then adopt nieces through Vista Maria

Amy and Walt Cuevas of Rockwood were enjoying an outing to Cedar Point in 2013 when they received a call that a baby had been left in the care of Amy’s disabled father. That baby was Amy’s sister’s five-month-old daughter, Erin. Clearly neglected, the baby came accompanied by an empty diaper bag. The couple rushed home, cleaned up the baby and immediately took her to the doctor. Soon after, Amy delivered an ultimatum to her sister: I keep the baby, or I call the police.

While disturbed to find their niece in such a state, Amy and Walt weren’t entirely surprised. Amy’s sister had struggled with addiction for years. The Cuevas’ had already adopted baby Erin’s older sister, Nevaeh (then 3), and had been helping care for Erin and Nevaeh’s oldest sister, Alexis (then 15). This was in addition to raising their own sons, Draven (then 15) and Seth (then 9).

Amy and Walt were still caring for all three girls a year after Erin’s surprise arrival when Child Protective Services (CPS) contacted the couple to let them know Amy’s sister had delivered another baby girl, and the infant had tested positive for having drugs in her system. Amy and Walt hadn’t known Amy’s sister was even expecting, yet they didn’t hesitate for even a moment to take two-day-old Viviana into their home. CPS encouraged that the couple become licensed foster parents for both the infant and Erin. That’s when Amy and Walt first came into contact with Vista Maria, which helped them navigate the process of becoming licensed foster parents while they pursued legal adoption of the girls.

Managing a full household and full-time work kept Amy and Walt more than a little busy, but they were happy. Unable to conceive more children after their sons, Amy and Walt were able to realize their longing of having more children through the adoption of their nieces.

Then one day in July of 2015, Amy got a call at work. Her sister had given birth to another baby girl. Amy began to cry.

“Once again, I didn’t know that my sister was even pregnant,” Amy recalls. “I cried all the way to the hospital. We were financially maxed out, and I didn’t know how we would afford diapers and baby supplies. Yet, I knew I could never say ‘no.’”

With baby Gabriella’s arrival, the Cuevas family had to expand their license to foster another child.



Amy Cuevas (left) celebrates the July 4th holiday with sons Draven and Seth, niece Alexis, husband Walter, and daughters Viviana, Nevaeh, Erin and Gabriella (front center).

Vista Maria helped with that process. It was Vista Maria that also helped facilitate Erin, Viviana and Gabriella’s eventual adoptions. Gabriella’s and Viviana’s adoptions became final in December 2016; Erin’s was finalized in March 2017.

Tamika Merriman, Foster Care and Adoption Supervisor at Vista Maria, worked closely with the family as it navigated through the system.

Completing this adoption was so fulfilling for me because I knew the kids would be well taken care of,” she says. “I love this family.”

Amy has been very happy with the support Merriman provided her family.

“Tamika was very good at listening and very good at her job,” she says. “She was genuinely interested in the well-being of the kids. She gave me faith in the system.”

Amy says the Cuevas girls are all doing well these days despite some early developmental delays for a few of them. While she acknowledges that it can be stressful at times, Amy wouldn’t want things any other way.

“I can’t imagine my life without them,” she says. “I’m glad the situation happened the way it did so that we had the opportunity to raise these little girls. My husband’s famous for saying, ‘what’s one more?’” 🌈

Embracing a trauma-informed care philosophy



Dear Vista Maria Friends and Family,

Every person has experienced some type of trauma in his or her life. It may have occurred in school. It may have been a car

accident, a death in the family, or any other traumatic experience. Whether the particular experience has lasting traumatic impact depends on many factors. The children served in Vista Maria's treatment programs have experienced prolonged and pervasive trauma; and hence, many of them have had to learn to survive on their own. Tragically, the science on trauma is clear: children with traumatic pasts are more vulnerable to a host of negative health outcomes from depression to diabetes to addiction and homelessness.

Vista Maria has continually evaluated and adopted best practice models of care to improve the outcomes for the children and families that we serve. Over the years, and based on the Good Shepherd values, we have developed our own model of trauma-informed care. We know, and now studies have shown, that real and meaningful healing can occur when a traumatized child forms a respectful,



Members of Vista Maria's Risking Connection® Task Force will guide the implementation of this trauma-informed care approach.

trustworthy and caring connection with an adult. The result is hope and healing, which leads to lasting positive outcomes.

As part of Vista Maria's learning culture evolution, we have taken our trauma-informed care to the next level to become a trauma-informed organization.

By understanding trauma, the basics of brain development, adaptive behaviors and our own personal trauma, we can improve how we approach our work and improve our care whether we work in Accounting, Health Services, Donna Maria Hall or the Transitions program.

To that end, we are training all 380 of our regular and contingent employees throughout Vista Maria on the Risking Connection® model. This model from the Traumatic Stress Institute replaces traditional models of care that consequence behaviors rather than acknowledge that an individual's adaptive behaviors may have helped him or her to survive. We focus on the child and seek to understand why she acted in a particular way, and then we can help her to develop new and different ways to respond to her traumatic stressors. Risking Connection® acknowledges that in order to heal, traumatized individuals and caregivers

"...In order to heal, traumatized individuals need to risk forming connections with caring service providers."

need to form positive connections based on respect, information, connection and hope (RICH relationships).

In addition to training, Vista Maria has selected employees to serve on the Risking Connection Taskforce, and subcommittees have been formed to ensure that our trauma-informed practice is consistent and reliable in all of our programs, work processes and environments. For example, the Risking Connection Quality Subcommittee is looking at key measures to identify improvements in critical outcome areas

such as employee retention, reduced seclusions and more. They are also reviewing agency policies and procedures as well as handbooks to ensure that our language is consistent from our training to our everyday work practices. We expect the initial training to be completed by the end of August, and we will be integrating our Philosophy of Care, Core Values and Trauma Informed and Implemented Practices within our new hire on-boarding and training.

As mentioned before, living out our values and ensuring that we integrate

trauma practices within everything we do on a daily basis takes time, teamwork, encouragement and practice. The Vista Maria team is very encouraged by the additional trauma training, and many have commented that, "this is really what we already do, but the training gives us a common language and helps us to teach new hires." Many thanks to the employee trainers and champions for all their work to implement Risking Connection® across the Vista Maria team!

Angela Aufdemberge
President & CEO, Vista Maria



During two-days of employee self-care events, staff enjoyed workshops, chair massages, yoga classes, complimentary breakfast and lunch, and line dance instruction from Fast Freddy.

Employee self-care essential to trauma-informed approach

A key component of our Philosophy of Care is compassion for one another. Vista Maria's employees commit to serve children and families with compassion but even more important is compassion for our co-workers and ourselves. A common outcome of working with traumatized individuals is vicarious or secondary trauma and "compassion fatigue." These conditions can cause undue stress, sleeplessness, weight gain, high blood pressure and other stress-related medical conditions. The conditions can then lead to high levels of staff turnover. Due to the deep concern and compassion that our staff have for our youth, our staff need to understand their personal stressors and

develop personal self-care plans. No one can help another person when he or she is drowning.

As a way to raise awareness of the need for self-care and to promote self-care activities, Vista Maria held its first Employee Self-Care Event in December 2017. Over two days, staff were invited to participate in activities designed to combat burnout and fatigue, including chair massages, yoga, Zumba and workshops on goal-setting and healthy habits for the workday. In July, staff enjoyed an appreciation luncheon provided and prepared by employees of Solomon Plumbing. Additional staff-focused self-care events take place periodically on campus. Beyond these events, staff have been trained and encouraged to utilize self-care tools and techniques and to actively utilize their self-care plans.

DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Plastipak continues long-time support of Vista Maria

Plastipak Packaging, Inc. has had a longstanding relationship with Vista Maria, a connection first made when Harold Dubrowsky, a former Vista Maria board member, connected his long-time friend, Plastipak CFO Michael Plotzke, with the organization.

A rigid plastic manufacturing company, Plastipak is based in Plymouth. Over the years, many Plastipak employees have volunteered at Vista Maria including a group of women who created an event known as "Empowerment Days" at Donna

Maria Hall. The women provide dinner and coordinate activities for clients designed around six character pillars: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.

In spring 2017, Plastipak held a fundraiser to makeover the activity room in Donna Maria Hall. More than 40 employees together raised \$2,000 to purchase tables, chairs and a storage unit for toys and games. The group also painted the entire room. Plastipak has also been a long-time sponsor of Vista Maria's High Hopes golf outing held each summer.



"Plastipak is frequently involved in community events and with numerous charitable organizations doing important work," says Plotzke. "Vista Maria certainly qualifies. As a guy with four sisters and four daughters, it has been an easy sell to support Vista Maria when you consider the terrific work they're doing for the community."

ALUMNAE SPOTLIGHT

Former Vista Maria client returns to campus as intern

Dana Secord's experience with Vista Maria has come full circle. The current intern in the Volunteer Resources department first came to campus at age 15 after spending five years in "the system" bouncing between placements.

Before arriving at Vista Maria, Dana spent time in multiple foster homes, a juvenile detention facility and a hospital's pediatric psychiatric ward.

During her year and a half as a client at Vista Maria and a subsequent year in a placement in Florida, Dana determined that she wanted to get her GED some day and work in the fields of medical and mental health. Today she is working

part-time in retail while finishing her final year at Eastern Michigan University. She is on track to earn her bachelor's in health administration this December.

"My motivation for going to college has always been my younger siblings," she says. "I want them to see that you don't have to be a product of your environment."

Dana began her Vista Maria internship in May. She works three days a week, occasionally helping in the medical clinic and with campus nurses. She is also learning how the departments at Vista Maria work together as a whole and how they all play a part in our youth's healing and treatment.

She would like to help expand health services on campus and is researching grants that would fund a dietician and full time OB/GYN on campus. She is also



Dana Secord (left) was a recipient of the Dr. Arsiwala/H.E.L.P. Foundation scholarship in 2017. Here she is pictured at the 2017 Celebrating Women event with Connie Dixon, Dr. Mohammed Arsiwala, Angela Aufdemberge and Maurice Keahey Jr.

creating a medical resource handbook for clients.

"My end goal is to create medical programs for the girls in care," she says. "I've always known that I wanted to do something to help kids like me."

Help make the holidays bright at Vista Maria

Vista Maria relies heavily on the donations of time and treasure from supporters to make the holidays magical for clients in care.

Every year, our staff works to fulfill the wish lists of approximately 140 girls in residential treatment, as well as youth in our independent living programs. If you, your family, business, church, or

circle of friends are looking for an outlet to give during the holidays, Vista Maria would be happy to provide wish list items in need of purchasing. If you'd like to give of your time, we are always looking for wrappers and other volunteers to help make the season bright for our youth.

If you are interested, please reach out to Becky Hermann, Manager of Volunteer Resources at rhermann@vistamaria.org or (313) 203-2027.



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Upcoming Vista Maria Events

- ▶ **Women's Empowerment Breakfast**
September 21, 2018 at the Detroit Athletic Club
- ▶ **Strikeout Human Trafficking**
October 6, 2018 at Thunderbowl Lanes

Our Mission

We deliver innovative care, support, treatment and education to vulnerable youth so that they heal, believe in their worth, and build the skills needed to succeed.

Our Vision

We will ensure that vulnerable youth and families are supported, prepared and equipped to achieve lifelong success.



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