



~ photo by Kevin Wildt

SARAH ROBINSON

Sarah Robinson will never forget the night a teenage mother came to the Wichita Children's Home and handed off her infant son to the night security guard. The child's face reminded her too much of the father, she says.

Robinson, who has been executive director of the home for 25 years, is doing what she can to keep kids safe and off the streets. The WCH served more than 7,000 children last year, including almost 700 that were placed in foster homes. Though Robinson has no children of her own, she spends her days helping her staff care for the children in the community who need her most.

Born in St. Louis, Robinson moved to Wichita as a child and graduated from Southeast High School. She attended Washburn University in Topeka and received a master's degree in communicative psychology from Wichita State University. She came to the Children's Home in 1983 as assistant director and became executive director just a few months later.

One reason she's stayed so long is that the job is different every day. Robinson sees herself as a liaison between the WCH staff and its board of directors. "I have a real easy job because we have an incredible staff and a tremendous board," she says. But the days at the home can be unpredictable, with children being brought in by police at all hours.

Robinson works with other area nonprofit organizations to reach families in crisis, trying to prevent the situations that cause children to come to the home in the first place. "I'd like to figure out how to put us out of business," she says. "Unfortunately, that's not very realistic."

Her worst days, she says, involve tears, anger and confusion from children and their parents. That often devolves into what she calls "emotional chaos." But on good days, the staff sees children reunited with parents or going off to a trusted foster home.

"A good day is a happy ending," she says.

The home is expanding its independent living program for teens and young adults, many of whom are parents themselves. They finish high school and are encouraged to pursue higher education while learning how to live successfully on their own. Robinson says there has been a breakdown in intergenerational instruction - parents teaching their children how to parent - and family support networks.

"(As a society,) we're not really teaching how to solve problems," she says. She wants to show children how to be "good citizens and great parents."

Robinson has never been married, but she says she has her own support system: a network of great friends. In her spare time, she announces horse shows and is active with St. James Episcopal Church. But her main love is her work.

"I truly treasure my job here," she says. "I'm kind of a workaholic, and I'm OK with that." ○

~ STEPHANIE BARNARD