

ist of two parts  
CANDACE ATKINS  
ING PAGE EDITOR

**T**HERE ARE ANGELS in Santa Cruz County who require, but rarely give, enormous amounts of love, nurturing and acceptance. Believe it — these angels don't fit the cherub stereotype. They're often skinny, cranky and impossible to placate. But they're still angels, say a group of local people who insist the troubled infants deserve the special treatment they require.

Angel Haven Too is a new group whose primary purpose is to help babies and children born alcohol and drug-addicted. But the group also wants to extend its services to any child who is in need. Their help may be a new bed or car seat, a list of resources, or a couple of hours of respite time for the child's natural or foster parent.

"The list of what these kids need is so big," said founding director Lori Morris Albo, of Watsonville. She is also a foster parent for such infants. "I've just wanted to do this for so long."

The group was formed in March and recently received its non-profit status from the state. Members walk a tightrope — helping needy children while staying within confidentiality laws, and not crossing boundaries of what social service agencies are required to provide for the same children. Because of legalities, the group says it "enriches" the lives of children, but that enrichment can be as basic a necessity as a crib or car seat.

Susan Archibald, the county's placement and licensing supervisor for foster care, said the group "will enhance the baby's well being. It will be supportive of both natural and foster parents."

"We have resources," said Carolyn Ivelich, of Watsonville, vice president of the seven-member board of directors. She added that children who are in foster care situations or those born to addicted parents can lead a life characterized by continual crisis, moves and changes. Their very own bed can take on added importance, she said, when a child's surroundings are in flux.

"At least they have that security," she said.

Angel Haven Too was met with open arms by the County of Santa Cruz. Social worker Dora Craig, who works with the Santa Cruz County Children's Services, said the respite care alone that the group offers is worth its weight in gold.

"There's no money for it (elsewhere)," Craig said. "We saddle these people (foster families) 24 hours a day, seven days a week. (Angel Haven Too) has come up with something that's been needed a long time."

Archibald said the number of alcohol and drug-exposed babies has increased steadily in Santa Cruz County. There were six such infants in January, which she called "a big increase" from previous years. She said just about the time the numbers seem to level off or even drop, there will be what she called "a bubble," and the figures will rise again.

Most of the babies, she said, are born to parents in their 20s

rather than teenagers. That doesn't always make the parents any more mature and able to care for the infants. Even though taking illegal drugs while pregnant isn't grounds to remove a child from the home, often the drug lifestyle will.

So far, there have been enough qualified foster homes to receive the infants (some are only a couple of days old), but she said it's tricky getting a workable match between the infant and foster family. A public health nurse is assigned to each case, but it's up to the foster parents to provide around-the-clock care for the babies.

Respite care for babies exposed in the womb to drug and alcohol requires a specially trained individual. These babies can go into medical crisis in the snap of fingers and are notoriously impossible to comfort and calm. Many seem unable to communicate on any level except wailing. Some have a difficult time trusting and bonding with even the most tender care. Because of this, parents — either foster or natural — can become overwhelmed and overburdened without some time away from the child.

"Rest," Albo said. "I would say the greatest need (for parents) is rest. It's not like taking care of a normal baby."

Albo said she checked on qualified respite care available for hire. Only one agency offered it. The price was \$131 per hour.

"That's why Angel Haven Too went with respite care," she said.

Those who are qualified have completed training (classes are offered through Cabrillo College) and are certified. They have also completed cardiopulmonary resuscitation instruction.

So far, the group operates on its own fund raising, but with its non-profit status, members will apply for grants. None of the positions are paid, and like other service agencies, they are continually looking for members and donors.

Mary Armstrong, president of the group, said they are hoping to recycle some of their donations, such as large furniture and clothing. She said this will help expand the number of children they can help, and for natural parents who need to improve the quality of their own lives, it will give them a boost, but not an excuse to stop trying, since the items will be on loan.

With that in mind, Armstrong and other board members have also organized a support group for parents who are trying to

The first problem is adequate housing.

Craig, of Children's Services, agrees, saying it's one of the biggest dilemmas for these families. She told of trying for weeks to find a mother and her five children a place to live and, in spite of her resources in social services, finding nothing.

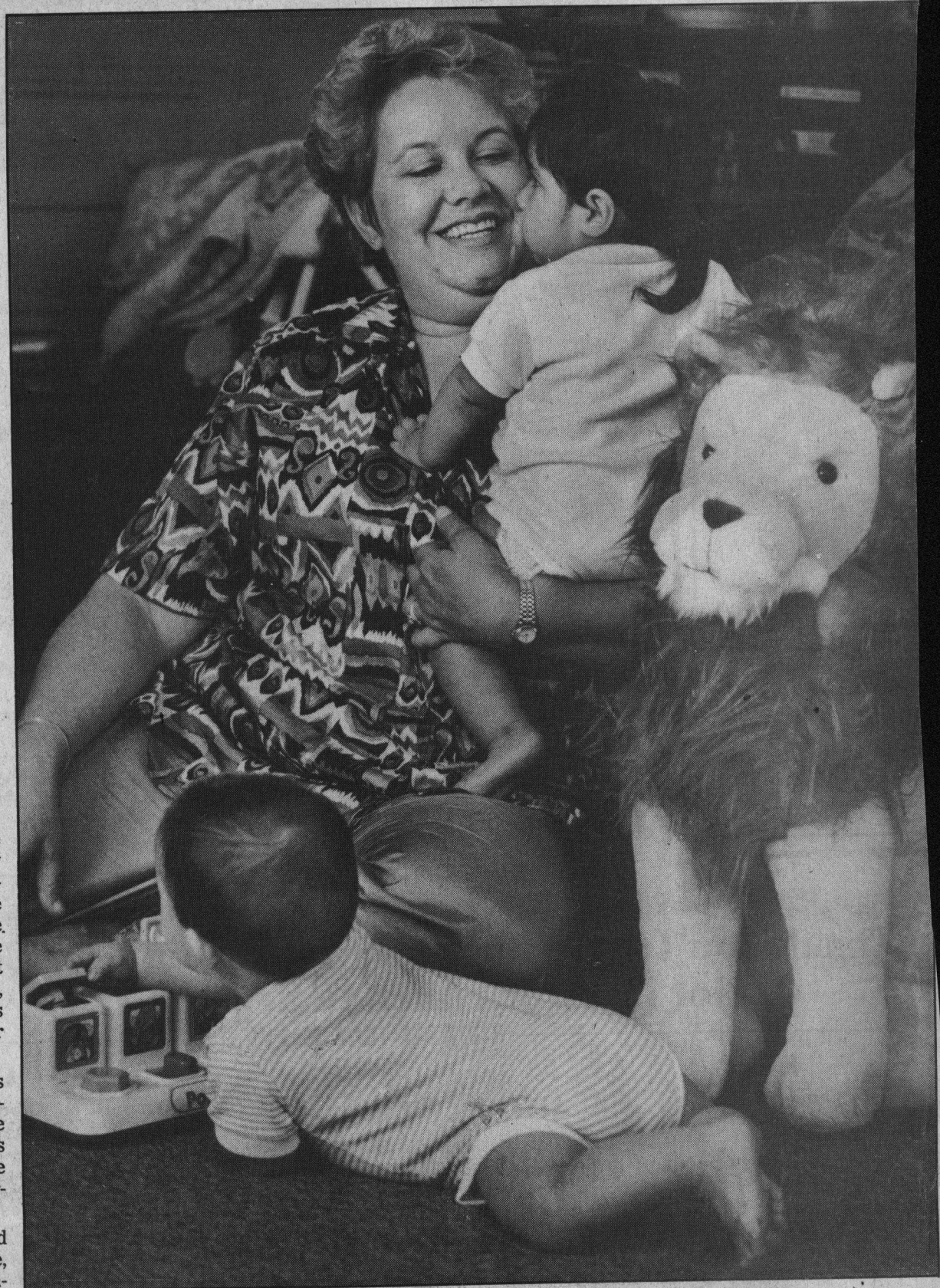
Ivelich says that's why the group plans to develop a residence program. She acknowledges it's a tall order.

"You have to have grandiose ideas," Ivelich said. "Down the road, we'll have a residence program and take in these moms and their children."

Again, the help is with the purpose of giving the families a chance, rather than a handout. In a transitional residence, they can save for first and last months' rent, establish a checking account, credit and employment. The alternative now is too often the street, she said.

"We have lots of ideas," Ivelich said. "Lots more ideas. There's a certain amount of animosity toward addicts. This is not a voluntary situation these people are in. Kids. These are the victims. They deserve to be cared for."

Craig said a large number of homeless adults were foster



Kurt Ellison

**Lori Albo, of Angel Haven Too, is also a foster parent to high-risk babies.**



again.  
Most of the babies, she said, are born to parents in their 20s

rest," she said. "I would say the greatest need (for parents) is rest. It's not like taking care of a normal baby."

## Cradle tops wish-list

ONE OF THE FIRST projects Angel Haven Too hopes to complete is the purchase of at least one, possibly two, Natures Cradle beds. The beds cost \$1,300 each, but are \$935 each on a multiple purchase.

The beds are enough like a womb that premature babies and drug-addicted babies (some infants are both) have an easier time relaxing and getting the rest they need to help them overcome health problems.

The cradle-type bed fits an infant snugly by the use of special pillows, and has an automatic rocking mechanism that simulates the womb. In addition,

there is a regular heart-beat sound, which is comforting to the most agitated infant.

"It's automated respite care," says Lori Morris Albo, who cares for two foster babies who are considered high medical risks.

Such infants have trouble getting to and staying asleep because of withdrawal pains and other complications.

The beds, made by Infant Advantage in Milpitas, are considered a godsend by those who care for babies with special needs. The babies are weaned from the cradles in a few months, making the beds available for others who need them.

With that in mind, Armstrong and other board members have also organized a support group for parents who are trying to get their children out of foster care and for those who have their children and are trying to establish a stable home life. The group will meet Wednesdays at 6 p.m. beginning Oct. 1 at 321 E. Beach St., Watsonville. There is no charge.

"Many of the moms will be in early recovery (abstaining from drugs and alcohol)," Armstrong said. "They get overwhelmed."

"There is a need for help for the mother who wants to keep her baby," Archibald said.

Armstrong said the group will concentrate on mutual support and problem solving, and will be strictly non-judgmental. Most of the mothers who have their children back, after losing them through the court system due to neglect, abuse or other problems, quickly become disenchanted.

the victims. They deserve to be cared for."

Craig said a large number of homeless adults were foster children who, once released from the system at age 18, find no where else to go. A depressing and dangerous cycle is in motion, which results in generations of homeless.

But Angel Haven Too hopes to change that for at least some families.

"You bet we're determined. We don't know the meaning of the word 'no,'" Ivelich said. "I wish we could package one thing and hand it out. Hope. Hope that's it's going to get better."

*People interested in donating time, money or baby items can write Angel Haven Too, P.O. Box 2044, Freedom 95019-2044, or call 761-8907 or 722-0485.*

*Wednesday: One foster mother's account of caring for a drug-addicted baby.*