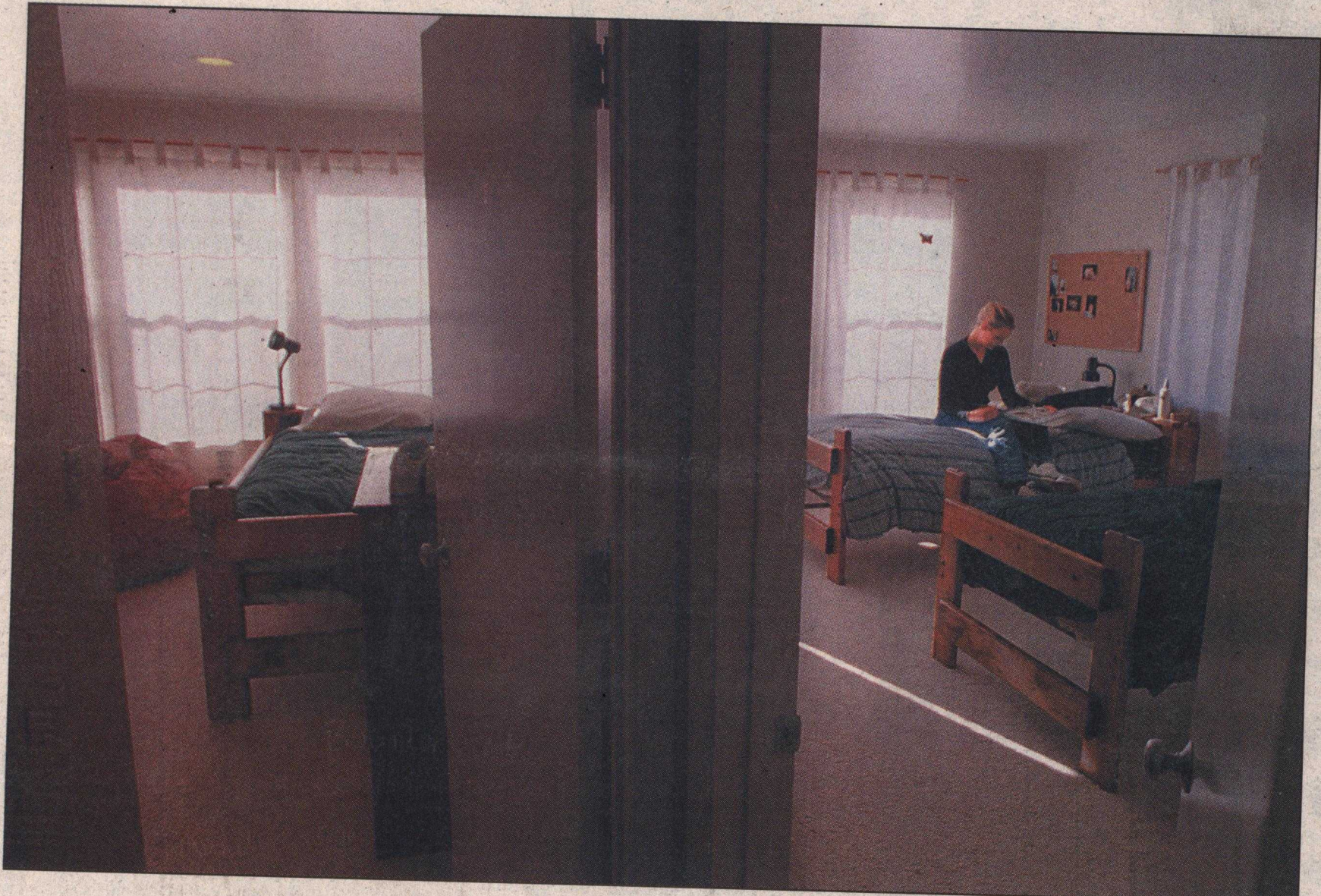
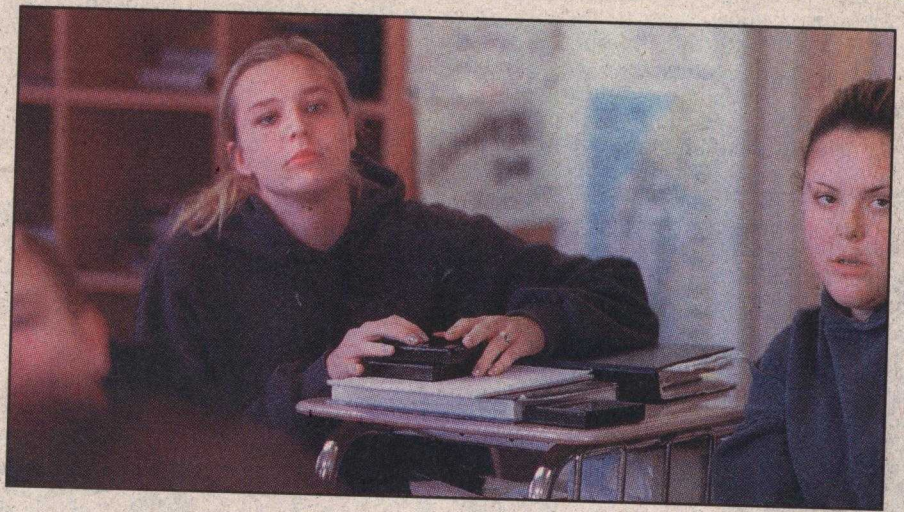


# 'It feels like home'



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

12-6-99

## Program helps homeless teens reclaim their lives

By **STETT HOLBROOK**  
Sentinel staff writer

Homeless - 1990

**CORRALITOS**

**A** MONTH AGO, 17-year-old Sarah Angellynn's home was the street.

After an unhappy experience in foster care, she began sleeping on friends' couches or wherever she could find a bed.

"Eventually, I ran out of couches," said the lanky, blue-

eyed blonde.

When no one would take her in, she spent weeks on the street, sleeping in Laurel Street Park or in nearby hills. Instead of going to school, she and her homeless acquaintances smoked pot and used speed and heroin.

But things are different now. Angellynn goes to school, she is sober, she works a part-time job and sleeps in a clean bed at night. She and four other formerly homeless teen-age

**Top:** Sarah and Amanda, residents of the Above the Line shelter for teens in Corralitos, attend a math class at the facility.  
**Above:** Sarah spends a quiet afternoon in her room.

Please see PROGRAM — BACK PAGE

# Program

Continued from Page A1

girls are the first residents at Above the Line, a group home that opened last month in Corralitos.

Above the Line is unique in Santa Cruz County because teen-agers participate in the program voluntarily. They can stay for up to 16 months if they agree to go to school, work to improve their lives and not use drugs or alcohol.

Above the Line takes its name from the belief that certain situations, such as teen homelessness, are below the line of acceptability.

While teens who stay at the spacious two-story house are supervised, they are not there for punishment and can leave if they do not want to stay.

"They have to come willing and able to change their lives," said Kimberly Carter, founder and executive director of Above the Line.

Carter said she had planned to open the home this summer, but state licensing took longer because the agency's preventative approach was a new concept.

"You can't run it in a punitive way," she said. "Homeless children are not criminals."

Above the Line is funded by a combination of public and private money, about \$750,000 a year.

Carter said most public funds are targeted for punitive programs that serve youth who have run into trouble with the law. To provide the flexible services Above the Line offers, such as field trips, an in-house classroom, counseling, and job training, private funding is essential, she said. She is now focusing her efforts on fundraising, and the agency will hire a new executive director next month.

Small gold plaques with donors' names hang over various rooms throughout the house. The restaurant-style kitchen bears the name of the Crow's Nest and Shadowbrook restaurants, which donated the kitchen equipment.

"As much as we need government support, we really need to have private support to keep from being so institutionalized," Carter said.

Gail Groves, spokeswoman for Santa Cruz County's



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photo

Above the Line program director Diane Hirsch, left, joins residents Sarah and Amanda for lunch in the shelter's dining room.

Human Resources Agency, said Above the Line fills a gap in the county by offering treatment early on.

"The whole county system is based on emergencies not prevention," she said. "We don't want kids to end up needing our services."

The Human Resources Agency works closely with Above the Line. Groves said public/private collaboration and Above the Line's preventative approach appear to be trends in social services.

The Freedom Boulevard home has room for 12 male and female teens, but is admitting residents slowly to make sure the new operation runs smoothly, said Diane Hirsch, program director.

Fourteen-year-olds Amber and Jessica, who did not want to give their last names, said life at Above the Line has more rules than their former life of sleeping all day in temporary lodgings and running loose on the streets of Santa Cruz at night.

"It keeps us out of trouble," said Amber. "It feels like home."

Teens at Above the Line have access to art classes, computers, stacks of books, a volleyball court and a garden.

"We never know what's going to speak to them or excite them as an alternative to drugs, street life and truancy," Hirsch said. "We try to expose them to as many activities as possible."

The agency tries to reunite teens with their families, but that is not always possible. While many of the teens have substance abuse and behavioral problems, their parents often have equally serious problems of their own, Hirsch said.

Teens generally leave home to flee a bad situation, she said.

"Most kids don't choose to go to the streets," she said. Thinking back to her life on the streets, Angellynn feels like she has been given a second chance.

"For me (being homeless) would have meant going back to old habits," she said. "Now I've got my act together."