



*“At Optimist, I felt at home and with people who really cared about me.”*

*- Tony Johnson, Former Optimist Resident*

Over the holidays, we received a very generous donation from a new donor and upon following up with him, discovered he was a former Optimist resident who felt compelled to give back to the agency he learned so much from. Enjoy his story below.

In the recent weeks leading up to my 50th birthday, I found myself reflecting on how I got here. Somehow, I find myself as an IT executive with 30 years of experience in life science and professional service industries. Somehow, I find myself as a husband of 33 years and a father of 5 (ages 33 down to 18). Many a person would venture key assumptions about how I got here—two parents, a couple of siblings, good school, safe neighborhood, and a traditional college education. Sounds great, but all of these assumptions would be wrong.

I was born in Kansas in 1968 to a 15-year old teenage girl. My mother brought me to LA when I was an infant and set out to make a life for us here. The challenge of a kid trying to raise a kid grew increasingly difficult, so by the time I was 10, I found

myself in foster care, followed by a short holding period in juvenile hall, and then eventually to Optimist Boys Home at age 13.

My experience and learnings while at Optimist provided a remarkable foundation for me. The counselors at the time proved exceptional at helping me personally with introspection, dealing with conflict, finding my gifts, valuing work and pay, and accepting my differences.

All of my counselors were unique people who were unwavering in their support for me. Regardless of their age, every counselor imparted one or more skills to me. Oddly enough, some of the people who influenced me while there were not counselors per se. The office manager (Olivia), the cook (Al Lewis), and the nutritional manager (Kristie) all started to influence how I thought and eventually behaved. At Optimist, I felt at home and with people who really cared about me.

I remember nearly every activity we did—from attending school on and off campus, to daily group meetings, to flag football and basketball, to public speaking events, to trips to Westwood Village to see The Gods Must be Crazy. These were the best 2-years of my life as a child. I graduated from the program in '84 and became a resident in a group-home in Carson.

Despite my success at Optimist, I made several mistakes thereafter and was eventually given only one true alternative: attend a vocational school in

Utah. I attended the school for one year, earned a GED, and left the program to live and work in the Salt Lake City market. I met my wife in vocational school and became a father at 17, which is not an ideal age for fatherhood, but in my case, this was a defining moment because I had two people who would grow to rely on me.

The next defining moment was when I met my mentor—a fellow who recruited me out of a warehouse labor position and brought me into Information Technology (IT). This fellow taught me IT, gave me responsibilities, tolerated my errors while holding me accountable, and increasingly helped me feel great about myself and my ability to learn. This last part (my ability to learn) was the key to everything else. I went onto earn my first Manager position by age 24, Director by age 27, Vice President by 33, Chief Information Officer by 35, and eventually completed my business degree by age 40.

My success today stems largely from the special people I met at Optimist and from the skills they imparted to me. They did what no one else would do for me then: teach, tolerate, hold me accountable, give me something productive to do, and point out the things that made me special. I would not be where I am today if it weren't for their commitment and support.

Cheers,  
Tony Jonson