Counseling changes child's life

By SHIRLEY BENTON
Advocate staff writer

Misti Morgan, a 10-year-old fourth grader with bouncy curls and an interest in playing softball, is doing well in school and enjoying her friends.

Two years ago, she was a smoker with three years experience, subject to nightmares and doing poorly in school. She thought of herself as "shy and dumb."

That's what she told Nancy Zachariah, when the Livingston Parish School Board referred Misti to the Livingston Youth Service Bureau in Denham Springs. Zachariah was a social worker there then, and is now at Parkland Hospital.

The Livingston Youth Service Bureau is a United Way agency which provides counseling, information and referral services, social adjustment education and a resource library for youth and families in Livingston Parish.

Shari Hartness of Denham Springs, Misti's mother, was very influential and cooperative in Misti's treatment and told Zachariah that Misti cried and screamed in her sleep, and had repeated the second grade, although before she had done well in school.

"Misti was often fearful that her mother would be hurt or harmed," says Zachariah, who saw Misti and her mother weekly.

Misti had many questions about her biological father, and resented the fact that her mother would not help her find him.

It developed in discussions during therapy that while Misti was very attached to her father as an infant and was only 1½ when his parents divorced, she was aware of the fact that her father abused her mother. From that came her fear that her mother would be harmed, Zachariah says. Distrustful of all men, including her stepfather, Alan Hartness, at the same time Misti feared he and her mother would separate.

"Although discussing these events in therapy was very painful, it ultimately resulted in a very healthy and pleasant relationship for Misti and her mother," Zachariah says. When the child understood her mother had been abused by her father, she stopped resenting the fact that her mother would not help her find him.

The smoking remained. Misti promised to stop, and again the threat of her mother being harmed surfaced, Zachariah says. Hartness smoked, which Misti had been told was harmful and unhealthy. Instead of directly confronting her mother, she had acted out her distress, by smoking herself and not concentrating in school.

"As Misti communicated with her mother more directly, the acting out behavior diminished. Her grades at school improved tremendously; she completely stopped smoking and her self-esteem was obviously much better."

The sessions which focused on Misti's parents' separation and divorce answered many of the questions Misti had been afraid to ask. She was able to let go of many of her fears," Zachariah says. Misti has not had a nightmare in six months.

"She loves her stepfather now." Hartness says.

As an added bonus, her mother stopped smoking too.

Sally Eltsey is director of the Livingston Youth Service Bureau. A sliding scale fee, based on income and number of family members, is charged for services. Some common reasons for referral are school problems, conflicts stemming from separation and divorce, child abuse and incest.

United Way drive opens

The Livingston Youth Service Bureau in Denham Springs is one of the 43 agencies served by Capital Area United Way. United Way serves eight parishes including East Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge, Iberville, Ascension, Livingston, East Feliciana, West Feliciana, and St. James.

This year's goal is $5,850,000. The annual campaign kicked off Tuesday. The first report luncheon is to be held Thursday.