Boys Hope is couple’s wish for BR

By JOHN K. CARPENTER
LSU student writer

Fred and Shannon Cerise could be living the good life, but they prefer to give that opportunity to others.

He’s a doctor, but he passed up a large salary to work with the residency program at Earl K. Long Medical Center.

She worked as an accountant for Price Waterhouse but decided to become a social worker after volunteering at a shelter for homeless women and children.

And now the couple is trying to open a private home in Baton Rouge for young boys who show academic potential but are victims of poverty, abuse or neglect.

“I guess you could say my mid life crisis came early,” Fred Cerise said.

“We didn’t want to wake up at 50 and realize we hadn’t really done anything to help others.”

Earlier this year, the Cerises, who are both 31, contacted officials with Boys Hope about the possibility of opening a home here.

Boys Hope is a national, non-profit, non-denominational organization with 20 homes in 10 American cities and two foreign countries.

“The purpose of Boys Hope is to provide a home and education for children with average or above-average intelligence who are at risk of being lost in the juvenile justice system,” Shannon Cerise said.

Fred Cerise said the national organization in St. Louis was somewhat skeptical when he and his wife contacted them.

“This situation is a little atypical,” he said. “They usually target a city where they have a large percentage of men before they get into trouble,” he added. “They are not coming out of successful homes.”

Shannon Cerise said having nearly 60 meetings with people who work with disadvantaged youth convinced her there was a need for a Boys Hope home here.

“There is no program like this in Baton Rouge so there will be no duplication of services,” she said.

In addition to having a place to live, the boys will be fed, clothed, and provided medical care.

The Cerises said they hope to have the home open in time for the next school year, but they are still seeking private and corporate contributions ranging from pots and pans to computers.

“It’s pretty much all we do outside of work,” Fred Cerise said. “But the flexibility of my job allows me to spend time working on this. If I was in private practice, it would be impossible.”

Shannon Cerise works in the health clinic at Istrouma High School, but she said she will serve as the unpaid director of the Boys Hope home when it opens.

Fred Cerise said he has never been concerned about making a lot of money.

“I was fortunate to grow up in a family where there wasn’t a great deal of emphasis on material things,” he said. “I’ve stayed focused on that and I really enjoy my work.”

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They see a need, so when we got in touch with them on our own they were a little surprised.”

Boys Hope national program director John Ryan said Baton Rouge is one of only two cities in the country where efforts to open a home originated from outside the organization.

“That’s not the way it has traditionally been done,” he said. “But the efforts in Baton Rouge seem to be paying off.”

Ryan said one of the greatest challenges facing the establishment of a Boys Hope home in Baton Rouge is securing steady funding.

“In many ways the initial funding is easy,” he said. “What needs to be done is to establish a base of funding, and for that we just have to rely on the goodness of the community.”

Already, the response to the idea of opening a Boys Hope home has been so “enormous,” Fred Cerise said, that their dream is fast becoming a reality.

The couple is working with City National Bank to obtain a lot off Government Street for the home, which will eventually house up to eight boys and two house parents.

And local architects have volunteered their services to help design the home.

The cornerstone of the Boys Hope program is providing an education to the boys, who are 10 to 14 when they enter the program.

Catholic High School has already donated several houses worth over $3,000 per child per year, Shannon Cerise said. “And Sacred Heart has agreed to provide at least two scholarships for the younger boys.”

Shannon Cerise said every child in the Boys Hope program will have to meet the admission requirements of both schools.

Brother Francis David, president of Catholic High School, said there is a real need in Baton Rouge for a program like Boys Hope.

“After 25 years in school work I have seen the disintegration of the family structure,” he said. “Today young people are living in single-parent homes or two-parent but dysfunctional homes.”

“We embraced Boys Hope because it provides a stable living environment,” David said. “People are smart and have potential but are drifting through school without motivation.”

Shannon Cerise said she is aware the Boys Hope program could be called ‘elitist’ by some, considering it only accepts boys with special academic ability.

But she said she is convinced it is an effective way to help children at risk.

“All the children enter the program voluntarily,” she said. “We think that if we can help this relatively small number of boys then they can go back into the community and help others.”

“We want to get to these young men before they get into trouble,” she added. “They are not coming out of successful homes.”

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