

*Luther Hall, a program of Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota, is a residential treatment facility serving children and adolescents 10 to 18 years old from throughout North Dakota who have been diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder and need 24-hour care and treatment for:*

- *Mood Disorders*
- *Anxiety Disorders*
- *Attention Deficit & Disruptive Behavior Disorders*
- *Psychotic Disorders*
- *Pervasive Developmental Disorders*
- *Substance Related Disorders*
- *Personality Disorders*

**L**enny Johnson was a pot-smoking slacker, a petty thief, a tactful liar and a master manipulator when he entered Luther Hall on his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Given the opportunity, according to people who knew him best, he could dupe Dorothy into dumping Toto into a dog pound...if there was something in it for him.


That was three years ago. Today, after completing the Luther Hall program, he's a nearly-straight-A freshman nursing major at a Minnesota college and on track for a promising career as a physician's assistant. No more drugs, no more head games, no more pilfering.

Lenny's journey from lost to saved began in a laundry basket at Luther Hall. He now says "100 percent of what I am today I owe to the counselors there."

The facts agree.

Said Curt Dobos, one of a team of residential specialists who worked closely with Lenny at Luther Hall, "I have 10 years experience working with hundreds of delinquent juveniles. And Lenny may be the most successful of them all."

## Uncovering the potential buried in adolescent chaos...



**For Lenny,  
Luther Hall  
gave wings  
to his future**

Luther Hall is a Lutheran Social Services of ND residential treatment center in Fargo for troubled kids diagnosed with a range of psychiatric disorders. They might be suicidal, drug-addicted, violent or suffering from an assortment of emotional or personality problems. But what they all have in common is the need for 24-hour care.

Typically, Luther Hall can treat at any given time up to 16 kids ages 10 to 18 who live, eat, go to school and sleep there for six to 12 months. During an average year, Luther Hall admits about 38 youth to this intensive program. The kids experience individual, group and peer counseling sessions with professional counselors, mental health specialists and caretakers.

Lenny (not his real name) was placed in Luther Hall after his mother relinquished guardianship to Cass County because she couldn't deal with his behavior any more. School suspensions, drug possession, shoplifting and too many encounters with police, social workers and parole officers tipped the scales.

For Lenny, who eventually spent an entire year at Luther Hall, his

introduction to the facility started out fine.

"It was my birthday on my first day at Luther Hall, and one of the perks there is that you get to choose your dinner on your birthday," he said. "So I picked tacos. I didn't want to be there, of course, but tacos seemed like an okay start."

But Lenny slid downhill from there. While he typically appeared calm and personable on the outside, he regularly had disruptive outbreaks, including tantrums like throwing plates and chairs, crying, yelling and stints in the time-out room for generally bad behavior.

"From the start, Lenny said he was happy with his life as a pot smoker and shoplifter and just wanted to be left alone," said Angela Ottesen, another residential assistant who worked closely with Lenny. "Underneath, though, he was very angry and it took him maybe half a year to begin changing."

### **A small town start**

Lenny grew up on a farm in rural North Dakota.

"Life in that small town was boring," he said. "The only thing to do was get high

and play video games. I was too young and too small to work much on the farm.”

On top of that, his parents were divorced when he was young and his father was an alcoholic—two ingredients that too often result in children going down a troubled path.

When Lenny was in ninth grade, his mother remarried and the family moved to Fargo.

For Lenny, Fargo became his own personal theme park, offering far more accessibility to drugs and a cornucopia of stores to feed his shoplifting habit.

“I did mow lawns to earn some money, but my main source of cash to buy pot was shoplifting,” he admitted. “I did it every day and I was good at it. I literally could shoplift six \$50 video games with a store clerk standing right behind me. I’d use a safety pin and some trickery. That’s \$300 for about 15 minutes of work... a pretty good day.”

Meanwhile, Lenny earned Ds in the classroom and got caught smoking pot in the locker room. He was suspended from high school several times. He was placed four times in Lutheran Social Services’ Attendant Care Program, a service that provides a short-term alternative to jail for youth who are charged by local law enforcement and awaiting court intervention or pick-up by a parent. Lenny also spent time in a Fargo psychiatric and chemical dependency in-patient program.

All this, along with interminable fights with his mother (he threatened to kill her once), brought him to the door of Luther Hall. He arrived in handcuffs with a social worker direct from the Cass County Juvenile Detention Center.

Not a career criminal yet, Lenny was on the cusp of falling into the abyss.

“To be honest, I was one of the lucky ones,” he said of those days. “There are just way too many kids like I was, living in Fargo. I’ve reached out and talked to

some of the old friends I had before coming to Luther Hall, and it’s sad. They’re lost, wasting their lives and getting nowhere. It’s a huge problem and not many people are aware of it.”

Not even the people closest to them.

“Before we moved to Fargo, I was oblivious to his problems,” said Lenny’s mother, who now lives in rural North Dakota near the Canadian border with her teenage daughter and her second husband. “Lenny was a smart and very personable child. Part of the problem, thinking back now, is that he got in with the wrong crowd, and that escalated. I think he always had this feeling of not

What was he thinking? Here is a poem Lenny wrote while a high school student in Fargo... one of few assignments that he actually turned in during those years.

*I was busted last month on the twenty-third  
they hauled me to the office and questioned me  
doing drugs in the bathroom is what they heard  
I believe I did no wrong cause it’s only weed  
suspended five days and community service  
grounded for weeks from going anywhere  
authority is so cruel and why do they do this  
the punishment for weed is so unfair  
weed is healthier than your pack of smokes  
have you heard of a pot related death, never  
it’s ok if I sit here and toked  
besides, my life goal is to do it forever*

fitting in, especially with his two older brothers who were pretty hard on him. But he was a charmer, and he used that to his advantage. He could look you right in the eye and lie, and you’d believe him.”

Today Lenny admits that he was smoking pot and shoplifting before the family moved to Fargo. “I’d hitch a ride into Minot with a friend and buy weed, which back then cost about \$50 for an eighth of an ounce. I’d steal the money from home or shoplift.”

## Recovery...

“I had a love-hate relationship with Lenny for the first half of his stay with us,” recalled Ottesen, the Luther Hall residential specialist. “We had a couple simple rules at first: get off drugs and alcohol and find a new set of friends. And obviously he didn’t agree with those rules. Not only did he enjoy his lifestyle at the time, he had a lot of anger built up inside.”

Ottesen described a formula she and other residential specialists developed to approach most of the Luther Hall kids. It’s geared to changing the process of how they think and act.

“We set high expectations for each of them,” she said. “We explain to them that if they are both honest and hard-working and live up to our standards, all of us would give them 100 percent of our effort to help them change.”

For Lenny, the first six months became essentially a grieving process, mourning the potential loss of his old lifestyle and approach to life.

“We never think a kid will fail,” said Dobos, the other residential specialist. “That’s where we start from. Sometimes they do fail, however, and that’s disappointing. But we hope that our successes will snowball, and the kids who do make it will set an example for others. That’s what Lenny has become—a role model.”

Lenny said that the Luther Hall approach worked for him. But it wasn’t immediate.

“I guess it began working in a group meeting, when I remembered a point in my life when I didn’t go down to the Twin Cities to visit my grandfather who was dying of cancer. Instead, I decided to get high. That memory hurt, because I was close to my grandfather. It was my decision, and it was totally wrong.”

At about the six-month mark of his stay at Luther Hall, Lenny had what can only be called a breakdown and an epiphany.

“I was talking to Angela and Curt at the time, and I just lost it,” Lenny said. “I sat down in a laundry basket in my room and just cried and yelled and let everything out. It lasted about an hour. I don’t know how or why it happened, but after that, I started to change.”

Dobos remembers the moment well. “Yes, he did start to change after that. But like the stock market, he was up and down. Eventually, instead of just listening to us, he started asking questions—like why did we have faith in him or why did we see good in him.”

And something else was happening in Lenny’s life then: a growing interest in religion and faith.

“It was odd,” he said. “I wasn’t particularly religious at the time, probably because I was usually high, but a passage from the Bible kept entering my life. I heard it in detention, in AA meetings, on the radio, in group meetings. It was more than just a coincidence.”

What he kept hearing was Matthew 7:14 *But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*

“I can’t explain it completely, but I eventually began to accept and love God. That’s where I am now and I’m no longer on the road to destruction.”

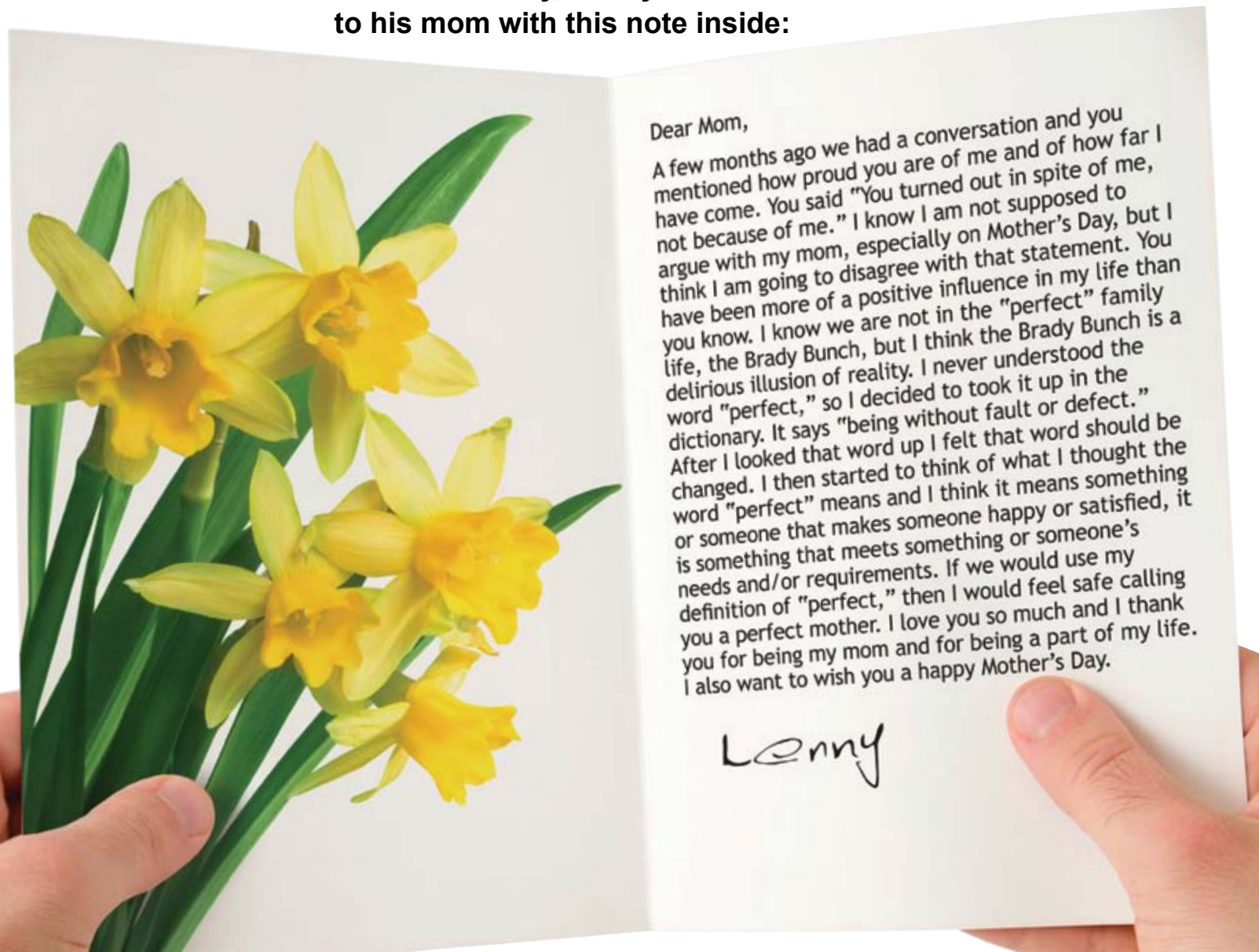
Lenny’s mother was elated. “I don’t know what they did or how they did it, but the people at Luther Hall changed Lenny’s life completely.”

Before leaving Luther Hall, Lenny was mainstreamed into summer classes at a Fargo high school, where he applied his natural ability in street smarts to books. “I think it’s the same thing,” he said, “because academics became easy for me.”

One year after entering Luther Hall, Lenny was moved to the Dakota Boys Ranch where he was located closer to his father. He didn’t like it there, but got As in class and then transferred to another

Lenny—continued on next page

### Last Mother’s Day, Lenny sent a card to his mom with this note inside:



Dear Mom,

A few months ago we had a conversation and you mentioned how proud you are of me and of how far I have come. You said “You turned out in spite of me, not because of me.” I know I am not supposed to argue with my mom, especially on Mother’s Day, but I think I am going to disagree with that statement. You have been more of a positive influence in my life than you know. I know we are not in the “perfect” family life, the Brady Bunch, but I think the Brady Bunch is a delirious illusion of reality. I never understood the word “perfect,” so I decided to look it up in the dictionary. It says “being without fault or defect.” After I looked that word up I felt that word should be changed. I then started to think of what I thought the word “perfect” means and I think it means something or someone that makes someone happy or satisfied, it is something that meets someone’s needs and/or requirements. If we would use my definition of “perfect,” then I would feel safe calling you a perfect mother. I love you so much and I thank you for being my mom and for being a part of my life. I also want to wish you a happy Mother’s Day.

Lenny

**Lenny**—continued from the previous page  
high school in Minot where he also  
flourished academically.

But Minot wasn't where Lenny belonged,  
and he and his mother knew it.

The solution: Lenny moved to the Twin  
Cities to live with his grandmother and  
began receiving tutoring from his aunt  
who homeschooled her own children.

He spent his senior year studying at a  
suburban community college, taking  
several college-level courses through  
the state's Post Secondary Education

Option program. Minnesota law allows  
high school juniors and seniors to take  
college courses if they meet admission  
requirements, and Lenny qualified.

Not only was Lenny thriving in the  
classroom, but he was also working  
part-time and taking classes to earn a  
license as a Certified Nursing Assistant.

After a high school graduation ceremony  
with a group of home schooled students,  
Lenny worked his tail off that summer to  
earn money for college, putting in  
80-hour work weeks.

Today Lenny lives in a college dorm  
where he is completing his freshman  
year of a four-year nursing degree  
program designed to prepare competent  
nursing professionals to practice Chris-  
tian caring in a variety of cultures around  
the world. He'll then spend another two  
years in graduate school to earn his  
physician's assistant certification.

“At this point in my life, I want to learn  
how to help people and give back to  
those who helped me,” Lenny said.

He's already doing it. 🙌

## You can help us serve more youth like Lenny

Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota is currently raising \$1.5 million for remodeling and an addition to Luther Hall as part of the agency's \$6.5 million Abound in Hope capital campaign.

Luther Hall was constructed in the early 1960s to serve as a home for unwed mothers. It was converted into a residential youth treatment center in 1991.

“The heating is inefficient... too cold and costly in the winter. In summer the air conditioning is limited and air exchange and humidity are constant problems. This is not conducive for optimal living or working,” according to Joy Vaagene, president of the Eastern ND Synod Women of the ELCA.

Both Eastern and Western Synod Women of the ELCA are supporting the Luther Hall capital campaign.

Said Alvina Skogen, president of the Western Synod Women of the ELCA, “Because helping children is such a focal point of the Women of the ELCA mission, we are strongly urging every unit to make a pledge to this campaign, which will ultimately help children statewide.”

For information on how to donate to the Abound in Hope capital campaign for Luther Hall and Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota, contact Dennis Aune in Fargo at 701-730-2524 or [daune@lssnd.org](mailto:daune@lssnd.org).