

# Completely KIDS gives families hope

By Amy Nielsen

Cameron was 15 years old when he, his mother and his three younger sisters moved into a homeless shelter in June 2014. Cameron and his family called the shelter home until November 2015 when they were able to secure permanent housing.

During Cameron's stay at the shelter, he enrolled in the Completely KIDS program. Completely KIDS shelter coordinator Lulu Rangel addressed Cameron's concerns about moving away from the shelter.

"He didn't have much hope that his family would make it on their own or that things would end up well for him," Rangel says. "He had nothing to look forward to.

"Rangel helped Cameron identify goals he could work towards and also connected him with a mentor through Reach & Rise, a national YMCA mentoring program.

Connecting families with support services is one of the core components of the Completely KIDS program. Completely KIDS partners with the Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless (MACCH) to provide services and support for families in three area homeless shelters, eight area schools and at their headquarters on 25th and St. Mary's Avenue.

Completely KIDS director of marketing and communications Adrielle Griffin says of the partnership with MACCH, "The whole purpose is to get these kids and families up on their feet and thriving, and to a point where they can feel successful and feel like they have hope again.



"You think about the core needs for a person, such as being fed, and having spiritual, mental and physical health," Griffin says.

Being safe, successful, healthy and connected are the four components of the Completely KIDS program.

## Safe KIDS

Many of the families that enroll in the Completely KIDS program have suffered from trauma in their lives. The children may have faced neglect or abuse. Completely KIDS offers them a safe and enriching environment.

"They know that when they're with us, away from mom or dad, they're going to have people who care about them," Griffin says. "And they are not going to be on the streets."

Completely KIDS also teaches the children how to recognize and prevent bullying, and about gang violence and prevention.

If the child's needs exceed the resources available at Completely KIDS, the program will work to connect the child with outside resources, like a counselor, therapist or mentor.

Completely KIDS also offers swim lessons to all who are enrolled in the program. To participate in any swimming activities or field trips, the child needs to pass a swimming assessment evaluated by Red Cross Swim Standards.

## Healthy KIDS

The Weekend Food Program provides a bag of 20 nutritious and "childfriendly" food items for children to take home for the weekend. In 2015, Completely KIDS distributed 19,360 bags, serving over 450 children, according to Completely KIDS' Year in Review publication.

**"One thing we recognized years ago was that the kids were coming in Monday and they hadn't had anything to eat over the weekend," Griffin says. "If they haven't eaten all weekend, how are they supposed to be successful in school?"**



Completely KIDS serves breakfast and lunch during the summer. Children are also provided a meal after school during the school year.

Speakers are brought in to educate families on making nutritious, yet affordable choices when grocery shopping. Additionally, Completely KIDS teaches fitness and exercise, and how families can apply those skills at home.

## Successful KIDS

Homework help is provided at all Completely KIDS locations, with one-on-one tutoring services provided for the children in the three homeless shelters in which Completely KIDS serve.

In addition to homework help, all children participate in group learning projects. Elementary school children rotate in groups of three or four through various group activities, which helps teach team building and cooperation.

"They are not only applying academic concepts they learn at school and through homework, but then they are utilizing those skills in a hands-on environment," Griffin says.

Older kids work on extended projects that take approximately six to eight weeks to complete. These projects include writing, math, science and service learning skills. The children

present their projects upon their completion. Cultural awareness is another focus under the Successful KIDS component. Griffin says that teaching culture awareness plays on the "natural curiosity and acceptance" of kids.

The program also provides opportunities for children to enjoy attractions they might not otherwise have had a chance to explore. They are able to take field trips to museums,

Lauritzen Gardens, Henry Doorly Zoo, Mahoney State Park and Ashland Safari Park, among others.

## Connected KIDS

Completely KIDS works hard to connect families to the resources they need in order to thrive. However, gaining trust can take some time.

“A lot of our kids have been exposed to negative experiences with authority and so we want them to know that we are here for them and that we are here to help them,” Griffin says.

Griffin also says in order for the child to be successful the parents must be involved. Completely KIDS tries to make that as easy as possible by providing opportunities in the child’s school or in the homeless shelter.

Parenting and betterment classes are available to parents. GED and ESL classes are available, as are classes on personal finances.

Family Nights are regularly scheduled at all Completely KIDS locations. Families can eat together and participate in activities and service learning projects. Giving back to the community is a top priority for Completely KIDS.

## How to Help

Completely KIDS has volunteer opportunities throughout the year. Volunteers teach the children specialized skills through the talent-teacher program. The volunteer teaches a skill in which they are personally successful.

“When you talk about ways to give back, what better way than to invest in the life of a child by doing something that you love to do,” Griffin says.

“It’s just a win-win situation all around.” Monetary and in-kind donations are also appreciated. Groups can also hold supply drives and there are many fundraising opportunities. Some of the fundraising opportunities are Pinot, Pigs, and Poets, which was held June 2, and the Big Red Tailgate held in fall.



## Cameron’s success

When Cameron left the homeless shelter, Completely KIDS provided him the tools he needed to succeed. Cameron is now 17 years old and volunteers as a Junior Program Support staff for Completely KIDS.

Cameron is an example of how the children enrolled at Completely KIDS are helping to make the community better.

**“Communities are going to become safer, and healthier, more connected and more successful,” Griffin said. “And that is going to be the future of Omaha.”**

For more information on how you can help, please visit [completelykids.org](http://completelykids.org).

