

The Miami Herald

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2003

WWW.HERALD.COM

CHARLEE HOUSE TURNS TROUBLED LIVES AROUND

By **ASHLEY FANTZ**
afantz@herald.com

As Bob Berman prepares dinner, his six boys are running around the house.

One is rushing off to a part-time job, another is laser-beam focused on MTV. A few are in the kitchen chopping veggies.

Berman steps over to two yipping dachshunds scampering through the kitchen as he tosses pasta in a steaming pot. "So welcome to the family," he said.

A stout man who looks a bit like Newman from *Seinfeld*, Berman is fixing what will look like a Thanksgiving feast for the teenagers. No special occasion. Just a normal night at Charlee House in Margate, one of Henderson Mental Health Care Center's group homes for severely emotionally troubled boys.

A retired airline personnel director, 56-year-old Berman doesn't want to discuss what brought the boys to Charlee House. Most have been shuffled from dozens of foster homes and shelters. Yet nothing in the four-bedroom home, tucked in a middle-class cul-de-sac and decorated with track trophies and photo collages, betrays that.

"People forget they are normal teenagers without ideal starts," he said. "But their natural ability to bounce back in an encouraging environment is stronger because of that."

birthday. Eric hurries to put on a Domino's pizza uniform. He came to Charlee House two years ago after dropping out of more than 20 placements, he said.

"I don't want to leave here," he said. "I've been everywhere. Some people — it just didn't work out with them and me. [Berman] takes care of us."

Eric may become the fourth foster kid Berman has taken into his home. Closing in on his 18th birthday, Eric



PHOTOS BY J. ALBERT DIAZ / HERALD STAFF

PITCHING IN: A 13-year-old boy living at Charlee House helps prepare dinner.

Berman has gone out of his way to dispel the common perception of a foster group home. While the Department of Children & Families — which supports Charlee through its contract money with Henderson — is deluged with news reports that many Broward foster facilities are unfeeling, sometimes dangerous places, Charlee House is considered an exception.

"Henderson reputation is one that we need more of," said David Bazerman, a longtime Broward foster-child advocate. "We're used to criticizing because that criticism is due. But in this rare case, it's not."

is subject to a new Florida law requiring him to leave the house and live independently once legally an adult.

"I think the boys feel especially secure here because they see that he lives this," said Julie Radlauer, Henderson's director of youth and family services. "It's not just his job."

Radlauer's mother-in-law, Irma Doerfler, 57, is a much-needed female influence on the boys.

During his six years at Henderson, Berman began projects that give the teens, who lived largely off the system, a chance to give something back to the community, holding bake sales or car-washes that profit area charities.

His free time is spent at Publix picking up any freshly made bread or pastries the store didn't sell that day to stock Charlee's food pantries.

Right now, the teens are making candles to sell and raise money for a needy family.

Berman is the disciplinarian and father figure most of them had given up wishing for. Just shy of his 18th

Their "grandmother," she takes the boys out on their birthdays and hosts Christmas at her home. An assistant to a federal judge in Broward, Doerfler said even she was unaware of just how desperate the need is for quality foster homes.

"I knew that there were abandoned and abused children," she said. "But I thought of it in this abstract way, living in my happy little bubble. When Julie introduced me to this world, I knew a little anyone does amounts to a great deal."