

2012

"I get so much from these kids," says Burns (with, from left, Teen Project's Hernandez, Sandy Phan, Ashley Moody, Chelsea Roberts and Renea Gamble).



A HOME AND HEART FOR TROUBLED GIRLS

LAURI BURNS, 48
Mission Viejo, Calif.

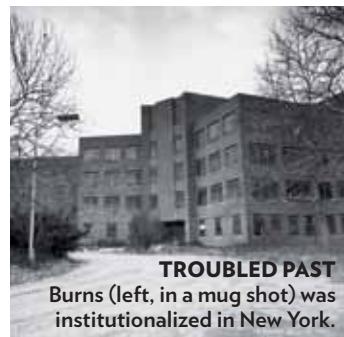
Lauri Burns was just 23, but she was ready to die. Emaciated, heroin-addicted, working as a prostitute, she was shooting up alone in a Santa Ana, Calif., motel room one night in 1986 when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. "My hair was all over," Burns recalls. "I had blood dripping down my arms. It was the most horrible feeling."

That moment, after a decade of life on the street—and a near-fatal beating from a john a few months later—

scared her straight. She vowed to turn her life around and succeeded beyond her wildest dreams, going to trade schools and parlaying a knack for math into a thriving career as a computer program manager at defense manufacturer Northrop Grumman.

Even as she rebuilt her own life, Burns resolved to rescue other girls at risk of falling through the cracks. Since 1998 she has taken in 31 girls as a

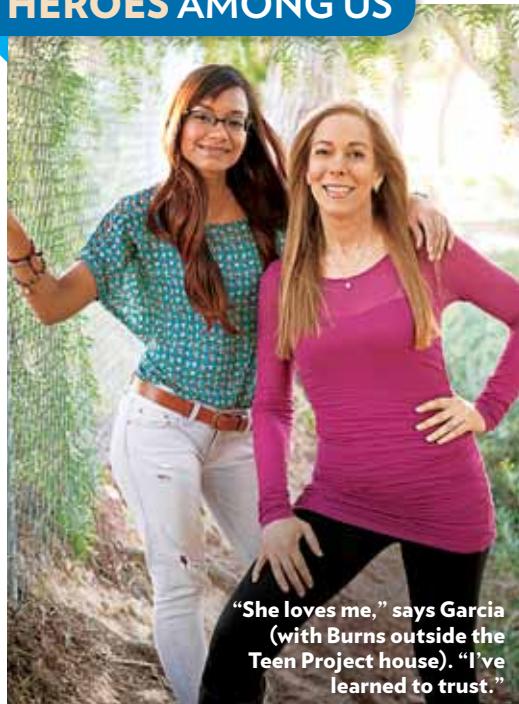
foster mom; in 2007 she founded the Teen Project (theteenproject.com), a nonprofit that has provided psychological counseling, life-skills education and old-fashioned mothering to hundreds of



TROUBLED PAST
Burns (left, in a mug shot) was institutionalized in New York.

HAIR & MAKEUP: CAPRICE GRAY; KRISTINA DUFF; STYLIST: KATIE MEEHAN; BOTTOM FROM LEFT: COURTESY LAURI BURNS; COURTESY JASON KRIEGER

HEROES AMONG US



"She loves me," says Garcia (with Burns outside the Teen Project house). "I've learned to trust."

**“I BELIEVE
MY LIFE WAS
SAVED FOR A
REASON” —LAURI BURNS**

girls when they age out of foster care at 18. “To have an educated, strong woman who is interested in them is so rare,” says Carlee Okerman, a social worker who counsels Burns’s girls and serves on the nonprofit’s board. “They hear Lauri’s story and are inspired.” Tall, slender, perfectly turned out, Burns has a steady gaze and serene manner that offers no clue to the hellish childhood she endured. Growing up in a physically abusive home on New York’s Long Island, she remembers cowering in fear of the severe punishment that would follow missteps like forgetting her lunch money. By the time she hit adolescence, she was shoplifting, taking drugs, even doing a *Girl Interrupted*-like stint in a mental institution. Pregnant at 19, she would leave her baby daughter Summer with friends for weeks at a time,

until she finally entered rehab and sobered up for good. “I was broken,” she says.

Today she is strong and a source of steady support for five young women now living in the Teen Project home, a five-bedroom house in Lake Forest, Calif., that Burns purchased in 2010 with funds raised from private donations. All former foster kids, they stay about two years, paying \$200 a month rent that goes into a savings account; they get the money back when they leave. One of Burns’s two employees serves as a den mother,

but Burns is there almost every day, and her energizing presence has helped transform once-discarded girls into promising young women. “My life has changed in every way,” says Rose Hernandez, 21, who escaped a childhood home that she describes as abusive. She just graduated from cosmetology school. “This is the chance I thought I would get every time I got placed.” Also moving up in the world is Janelle Garcia, 25, who “graduated” from the house last year and now lives with Burns while she completes her associate’s degree and applies for college. “If Lauri can see it in me, and she’s that successful, then I believe it. And I know I can do it.” Garcia says.

All of which makes Burns—married for two years to Jeff McMullens, 60, and who recently went wedding-dress shopping with Summer, a Columbia University graduate and social worker—feel that her own struggle was worth it. “I wouldn’t,” she says, “trade my life for anyone’s.”

By Elaine Aradillas

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