

"They come here and they know they're safe. They see positive role models."



**GINGER
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**The Shepherd's
Watch Ministries**
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By Erica Christoffer

Providing a Farmland Oasis for Foster Kids

Ginger Dowdle's 60-acre ranch has become a healing, educational retreat for foster boys and other children in her community.

Horses run in an open field, friendly dogs greet newcomers, and there's usually at least one boy with a fishing line in the pond. This is The Shepherd's Watch Ministries, on the outskirts of Statesville, N.C., at the corner of Redemption Road. The street name couldn't be more fitting.

Ginger Dowdle—who owns a home construction business, Dixie Land Inc., and Sunrise Realty—is the founder of Shepherd's Watch Ministries, a 60-acre farm where she and her husband, Steve, run a summer camp for the community and a year-round residential program for foster children and at-risk youth.

Deeply connected to her Christian faith, Dowdle felt a calling to work with troubled youth, specifically teenage boys in foster care, who are often the hardest to place. In 2006, she and Steve, who were recent newlyweds, obtained a foster care license. They have since cared for 20 boys between the ages of 13 and 18. "It's sad what some of these young people go through—the loss of parents and of friends they've had to move away from. And often they're also the victims of sexual abuse," Dowdle says. "But God still puts love in their hearts."

Daniel Crouse had just turned 17 when he moved in

with the Dowdles in May 2011. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder, Crouse had previously ended up in the hospital and then a group home. "I didn't know how to handle people. I was a lovable, caring person, but I didn't trust people," Crouse says. "Ginger and Steve helped me work on a lot of things," he says, "and they actually cared. They also helped me learn how to have fun."

Crouse recently moved back home with his parents and five brothers. It's an outcome the Dowdles aim for whenever possible. "Fostering isn't us versus them. You're trying to help everyone involved," Dowdle says.

"We give parents time to get their lives calm, so they're able to get back on track. If the parents need to learn some skills or need substance abuse help, you're helping them by being a foster parent to their child during that time."

Not all the boys are going home, though. Some are in the custody of the state because of abuse or neglect. Others can no longer live with their families because of their behavioral issues. The Dowdles obtained a special group home license that entitles them to take in children who have trouble with authority or mental illness.

To make the most of the boys' experience, the Dowdles built a workshop on their property where Steve teaches mechanics and carpentry skills. Together, they also teach the boys everyday skills, such as cooking, doing laundry, managing money, and taking responsibility for homework and chores.

"Sometimes [the kids] don't want the changes necessary in their lives; other times they welcome them," Dowdle says. In 2009, the Dowdles adopted two brothers, now ages 16 and 18. The boys' biological mother had passed away and their father, who was addicted to drugs, didn't provide supervision or food and eventually went to jail. The older of the two boys is now in his first year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "Seeing these kids change helps me know that the Lord brought them here," Dowdle says. The couple, who have two adult children from Steve's first marriage, are now in the process of adopting another boy.

Even while caring for up to six additional boys at a time, the Dowdles wanted to do more, and their large ranch provided them with room to grow. So in 2007 the couple launched a summer camp for local youth. Their goal: to provide children with a safe, constructive place to be while learning about nature, farm animals, and team building. The 50 or so weekly campers also enjoy



kayaking, fishing, and arts and crafts. The camp is run with the help of 20 staff, many of whom are college students home for the summer. Admission is on a sliding scale, and the Dowdles offer scholarships and free tuition to foster children and kids from low-income families. More than 100 children receive free or reduced rates each summer.

But for all the love and care they offer, the Dowdles recognize that the young men in their care will face hurdles when they age out of the foster care system. That's why they recently built an independent-living duplex that houses four young men. The Dowdles teach them "grown-up" skills like how to access medical and dental services, obtain their GED, and find and maintain a job. Rent is on a sliding-fee scale.

"We're trying to teach these boys the right way to go in life and help them understand that the Lord has a purpose for them," Dowdle says. "This is a commitment, and we're fully committed." ■

Whether it's for foster kids, campers, or young adults who've aged out of foster care, the Dowdles offer space, and the motivation, to grow and learn.