

How About A Welcome Sign?



Rick Green

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Anchorage Lane in Old Saybrook is the place we all want to come home to, a quiet suburban street you might like to grow up — or old — on.

As I turn onto Anchorage Lane, an American flag flaps atop a pole, flanked by a grassy lawn and split-rail fence. At the end of this dead-end road of capes and colonials, there's a marina, which overlooks the spot where the mighty Connecticut spills into Long Island Sound. Gorgeous.

Except for the lawn signs.

They belie something less sunny about Anchorage Lane, suggesting that all is still not well on this street at the edge of Long Island Sound, where the state Department of Children and Families has opened a "therapeutic group home" for five teenage boys in state custody.

There were once many more signs and dozens of angry residents during the uproar last year when DCF proposed the facility. A few signs remain, ugly reminders that some types of people — emotionally wounded children — aren't welcome.

"Find a Safer Home than 7 Anchorage Lane," and "DCF drownings have doubled since 2001," and, another, with a hand rising out of the water: "Stop 7 Anchorage Lane."

Stop what, I wonder.

In the bedroom of the first boy to move into this house, there are a couple of small toy firetrucks on a bedside table, pictures of Tom Brady and the Patriots on the wall and a view of the lawns and well-kept houses outside. It could be my own son's room.

And yet I'm not so different from these neighbors. A few years ago, I didn't even like the idea of a big house in my own West Hartford neighborhood being converted to a law office. How would I have reacted to a house full of boys in DCF custody on my own street?

Regina Walsh, program director for Gilead Community Services, which runs the home, told me a story when I shared my own doubts about plunking a place like this onto a street where the good people live.

On his first day at 7 Anchorage Lane, Walsh told me, the first resident of the home, a teenage boy, looked out the window from his bedroom at the signs along the well-kept street and asked her a question.

"Gina, do you think they will like me better if I mow their lawn or shovel their snow?"

I can see why people were scared of this place. Neighbors worried that these teenagers might run off, perhaps drown in the river or somehow threaten their safety. I don't blame folks for worrying about their property values, either.

But these are kids, innocent ones, who deserve a chance.

"We are not against a program helping kids. Let's not have anybody twist it that way," said Old Saybrook First Selectman Michael Pace, when I called the other day. "There was a safety concern, right next door to property with deep water."

"The commissioner has made a decision. We will do everything we need to do make sure everyone understands that [these boys] are residents of this town."

There's no sign that this will be anything less than another well-kept suburban home. The teenagers here, Walsh and Gilead director Barry Simon reminded me, will be under 24-hour supervision by trained professionals. I can't say that about my own three kids.

When some people were feeding the opposition fires, when the agency could have just dumped one of these homes in a city, DCF Commissioner Susan Hamilton took a stand at 7 Anchorage Lane.

"These kids are our kids. They deserve to live in nice neighborhoods. They shouldn't all be located in Bridgeport, New Haven or Hartford," Hamilton told me. "They really need to live like any other kids in any other neighborhood."

She's right. Time to take the signs down.

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