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## OPINION

# Kids House lights way for caring

George Diaz  
COMMENTARY

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It began as a typical Saturday morning golf tournament -- bloody Marys and coffee for those wanting a pick-me-up, a few off-color jokes, and ample mulligans for those of us having accuracy issues.

But the jovial camaraderie at Pat Clarke's Celebrity Golf Classic gave way to an unexpected twist during lunch. when Paul Finelli took the microphone from Clarke to thank everyone for participating in the charitable event. benefiting Kids House of Seminole.

Finelli spoke of a child who had been brought to the facility recently. Finelli noticed him as the child was being walked up and down the halls by a nurse practitioner, and asked why the child was there.

The child had been finicky while eating, and the father had beaten him with a belt.

The child was 5 weeks old.

Finelli, the facility's development and community-outreach director, choked up as he told the story. Laughs gave way to silence. Eyes glistened.

This is always the time of year for reflection -- personal inventory, if you will. Hopefully, your blessings go beyond cherishing the latest gadgets that allow you to download music or play John Madden computer football from your Winter Park living room with a kid from Des Moines.

Perspective comes from the sobering stories of children who are abused, of dysfunctional families who have lost their way, of fathers and mothers who can't cope without assistance.

This is where Finelli and his co-workers step in, allowing children precious mulligans in life.

Kids House should be a role model for other social-service agencies. It offers a multitude of services under one umbrella, encompassing child-advocacy, mental-health, medical-trauma and child-protection programs, among others.

A similar formula could be applied to the homeless quandary, which lacks a coordinated effort among government, social services and church groups to establish a comprehensive scope of services packaged together.

The cooperative effort evolved from disjointed parts coming together to find solutions. Finelli calls it a

"systems change."

"A family going to six different organizations to get services doesn't make sense," Finelli said. "It's inefficient, it's ineffective. and we weren't getting the results we're hoping for. We decided to try a different way. And Kids House was a result of that."

The services include the muscle of the Seminole County Sheriff's Office and Sheriff Don Eslinger, a strong children's advocate. They have a direct involvement in protective investigations, which takes the burden off a stressed-out Florida Department of Children & Families.

But the police presence is an understated necessity. The facility, recently expanded to 9,600 square feet, is filled with stuffed animals in every nook. The feel is inviting, not intrusive. Animals surround a child in an examination room, where he or she will sit on a table shaped like a polar bear. Delicate and difficult questions will be asked in a room that has a seascape mural, complete with dolphins and seahorses.

Six child advocates and five mental-health counselors work at the non-profit, non-residential facility, established in 1999.

"Everything that you do has to involve passion and true care for the families that you're working with," Finelli said.

The P-word comes up often in an hour-long conversation.

It is a necessary frame of mind when you look into the eyes of a 5-week-old. and try to give him hope in a world that can be very cruel.

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