



**These children spend their days nursing, working and worrying.**

**They care for sick or disabled parents.**

**They get little or no help from the state. They have little time to be children.**

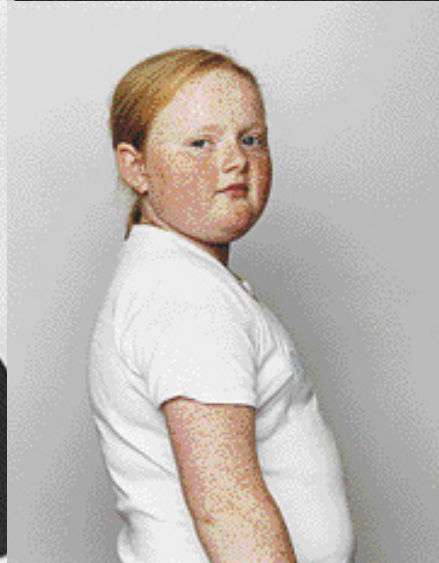
**They don't complain. There are thousands more like them.**

**YOU CAN CHANGE THEIR LIVES**

**BY CAROLINE SCOTT.  
PHOTOGRAPHS: JANE HILTON**









**F**our o'clock on a Monday evening, and a straggle of small children are trooping into the Carers Cottage, a restored council building on the edge of Howard Park, Kilmarnock. They've come for their weekly activity session, and for a couple of hours they'll play, do arts and crafts, and be given a hot meal, complete with tatties and vegetables – something most will not be getting at home. Some are absolutely tiny. Their hands disappear into their coat sleeves and when they sit down on vinyl-covered benches, their feet barely scrape the floor. Despite the cheery yellow and blue decor and the comforting smell of cooking, this place feels starkly municipal. As if they might need reminding, a brightly painted mural above them shrieks: "Young carers just wanna have fun!"

They look anxious and unsure of themselves until Jason the centre's family support worker, wedges himself between two brothers, Sam and Luke. "So what you's all being doing over half term?" he asks. They shuffle about and say nothing. "That bad? No!" But it's a hard question because the answer for many is not much. All of these children have caring responsibilities at home way beyond their years. Their parents are ill or disabled or they've got a sibling with special needs who requires so much care that it impacts on the whole family. Sam and Luke's mum suffers from depression and their dad has multiple health problems including chronic arthritis. He recently had a stroke, which means the boys and their two older brothers and sister take on a lot of responsibility. The centre managed to send them away for a week's break in a holiday cottage, donated by a local supporter. It was only four miles away, but there was a huge kitchen and chickens to feed and it was a change for everybody from the chaotic conditions at home. "So boys, what was the best bit?" Jason asks. Sam, 8, thinks about it. "There were beds with real lights you could turn on and off," he says, looking bemused.

**Previous pages: young carers from The Princess Royal Trust East Ayrshire Carers' Centre. Right: Lauren and Nikki. Below: two girls at Cumnock**



**Children don't think of themselves as young carers. To them what they do is ordinary**

Tonight PC Fergie Grant has popped in to talk about graffiti and Asbos. "Och no, they're never too young to start talking about crime," he says. But later concedes that perhaps they are. This group are all 8 to 10, and some of them are living in situations that make them very vulnerable. But when they stare at him with their round, baby faces, I don't think he has the heart to give them his drugs spiel. "What would you do if you saw someone doing something wrong?" he asks instead. "That's right! Tell your mummy." As he talks, Erin, 8, dressed in pink with the sweetest face, traces a



pattern with a finger on her skirt. Her brother, Finn, 10, stares at the floor. After being cared for at home for months, their mummy died of breast cancer two weeks ago. PC Grant isn't to know, but I know, and my heart breaks for them.

Jane Smith, the centre manager of The Princess Royal Trust East Ayrshire Carers' Centre began the young carers' group nine years ago with Laura Bennie. Then there were six children. Now four full-time and 10 part-time workers care for 400 children, aged from 5 to 21, at two centres, one here in Kilmarnock and one in Cumnock, 15

**£30 can pay for group support online for 10 young carers to share conc**



**Right: Jason, the family support worker at the young carers' centre in Kilmarnock, helps the children make Halloween lanterns out of pumpkins**

all the children. Formal invitations were sent out and Lorna, wearing an Oxfam dress, "married" wee William – a 10-year-old who looks after his disabled father – in the back garden with tables laid out, so everyone felt part of it. Jane cooked steak pie and mash and made sticky-toffee pudding and a cake. One of her absolute rules is that carers deserve the best. It's her way of caring for them. The children are never out of her mind. It's a standing joke that Jane cannot pass M&S without going in and buying pants. The office has enough pants, socks, T-shirts and jeans to clothe a primary school. And if she sees toothpaste reduced in Sainsbury's, she'll buy a basketful for distribution on respite breaks when children turn up with just the clothes they stand up in.

At Christmas there are parties for each age group, a huge dinner and all the children and their brothers and sisters get a sack of presents. Parents who are ill often buy something from a catalogue – a pair of boots or a toy – but end up handing it over beforehand, so a child has nothing to open on the day. Many won't be getting Christmas dinner at home either; there'll be nothing to differentiate it from any other day. Jane tells a story about an eight-year-old girl Kerry who, when her mum was ill, regularly heaved her baby sisters up the Foregate shopping centre in Kilmarnock in a double buggy. Kerry came to the young carers' Christmas party wearing a pair of thin leggings and a Mickey Mouse T-shirt she was very concerned about. It turned out it was her only Christmas present, and when she got home she had to wrap it up again for opening on Christmas Day. One of the few remaining pieces of furniture in the house was a highchair. Half the floorboards had been ripped up and burnt because there was no money for heating. Someone once criticised Jane for giving some children more than others. "Yes I do," she retorts. "I don't apologise for it either."

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Children don't think of themselves as young carers. To them what they're doing is ordinary. Nearly all of them say: "I want to help." And they do, but it takes an adult on the outside to notice when "helping" has become a workload that stops them behaving like children. Often, the little ones tell you an edited version of the truth. This is partly because they don't really know the facts – they're just used to Mummy always lying on the sofa – and partly because they're instinctively trying to normalise what they do. But what they do is never normal. It isn't right for a child to care for a parent, and it makes them frustrated, worried and depressed. Eventually they stop going to school or seeing friends because they don't have time to keep up with them. Some of the older



**It isn't right for a child to care for a parent, and it makes them frustrated and depressed**

ones give their parents their medication, they shop, they cook – or at least heat up food for their siblings – and they try to keep the house going. Others have a relatively light caring role, fetching and carrying, making tea, but nonetheless, the emotional impact of living with a parent who is depressed or chronically ill is absolutely crushing.

Children who are in crisis tend to do all they can to hide what's going on from the outside world. "My mummy needs to lie down a lot."

Isla, 8, tells me at the Tuesday Cumnock group. "She has asthma, so I get her inhaler for her and I try to keep everything tidy." Isla is tiny, with an elfin face. It's her first time here and she wears a big hat she never takes off. Derek knows the background of every child here. When I tell him something about the mother of one of them, he's baffled and upset at having missed something. He says Isla is an only child, she comes by taxi from the estate where she lives with her mum, who is a drug user. I've seen enough already to know the conditions she probably lives in and the sense of isolation she must feel when the front door closes. Derek spoons out "stovies", a nourishing soup of carrots potatoes, onion and sausage, and the children all sit around tables laughing and chatting. Next to Isla is Katie, her mummy died of heart failure at 31 and she now lives with her poppa (grandpa) who is disabled. There is nothing here to differentiate them from children in any other social situation, Brownies, Cubs, Beavers. But meet them in their homes and you see children trying and failing to hold things together. In the corner of the room, a boy

**£35 could pay for five schools to receive special information packs that**





**Top: Christian and his mother, Berenice, who has to have daily chemotherapy. Christian, a keen musician, does all the cooking**

## CHRISTIAN LUNN, 15

**lives in Harrogate with his parents. John has a heart condition and suffers from bipolar disorder; Berenice suffers from leukaemia**

There's so much to do each day that I set the alarm for 6.30am. My mum can't look after my dad all the time, as she has her own problems. Because of her leukaemia, she has daily chemotherapy, and there are days when she has to stay in bed. I will have often made breakfast — an egg and bacon flan for instance — and my packed lunch the night before, so I don't have to think about cooking in the morning. Then Mum can eat when she gets up. Friends and neighbours help us with shopping. Everyone knows about my mum and dad at my school and I get a lot of support. I find school a

release from everything that happens at home. It's like a chill-down. Nobody teases or bullies me and the teachers know much I do around the house. School is how I heard about The Princess Royal Trust Harrogate & Craven Carers' Centre. Now I see my mentor, Helen, every week, and everything I've been thinking and feeling pours out. Helen asked a psychiatric nurse to come and explain to me about my dad's illness and that helped. I've had to grow up faster than other teenagers. It's not easy to accept, this double blow of Mum and Dad, but at least I don't feel so isolated. I meet other carers and think: 'Phew, it's not just me.' On bad days I sit and cry and wonder: why me, why us? Why is this happening and why can't my mum and dad just get better?

Without help from the charity I would feel very frustrated. It organises trips where I can meet other young carers. We've been to Alton Towers, and they paid me for me to have cookery classes. I will often make a casserole that lasts for three days to save time. At Christmas it'll be me cooking the turkey with all the trimmings.

with dark hair concentrates on his Halloween lantern, while outside his estranged father lurches past clutching a can of special brew. This boy's mum is also an alcoholic. The centre has supported him, encouraged him and cared about him, and that will continue until he stops needing them. It's been one of the few constants in his life. Children like this are in danger of being lost to society before they've even begun. Without support, they're likely to inherit destructive patterns of behaviour in the way previous generations inherited debt. Out of 400 registered young carers, 125 have parents with drug and alcohol problems, another 100 with mental-health issues. Jane refuses to differentiate. "Children are children. They didn't ask to be put in this situation. If I can help even one to see they can make different choices in their lives, then what we're doing is worthwhile."

But what they do is so much more than that. A report by Stirling University, funded by Lloyds TSB, concluded that the centre was improving childrens' self-esteem to the point it was actually "breaking into the cycle of deprivation". ➤➤➤

**will help them to identify, advise and support young carers**

LEFT: JANE HILTON FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE. TOP RIGHT: RUI SCHROEYER/ GUZELIANY FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE



**Above: children on the party bus parked outside the Carers' Cottage in Kilmarnock. Money was raised to turn a double-decker bus into a cafe, complete with a wide-screen TV and computers**

## My mummy needs to lie down a lot. I get her inhaler for her, and try to keep everything tidy

The centre needs £700,000 a year to keep going. Some of that comes from the council and the health board and some from the Scottish government through the Community Regeneration Fund. Two recent funding applications have been turned down. Charitable foundations demand that the centre must not just be supporting people, but "supporting people through change". Whatever that means. "It means we've got to rewrite the proposal and present the facts in a different way," Jane sighs. She's used to ducking through hoops, but you can see the utter pointlessness of it all gets her down in the face of such obvious screaming need. Impressively, she won't operate a waiting list. "If children need us – and more are being referred each week – we'll help them, and we'll find the money later." The project relies on 21 different sources of funding for its survival; Jane spends a crippling amount of time trying to secure the money they have while reeling in more for the following year. Laura, is "never out of Women's Guild groups. We'll go anywhere, talk to anyone, to get the message across". Some sources run for a year, others two, but each one of them demands time-consuming progress reports. The project constantly has to convince companies that it's doing something different and innovative. The irony is that if you've hit on a system that works, ie feeding, clothing and providing emotional support to young carers, you struggle to get re-funded. ➤

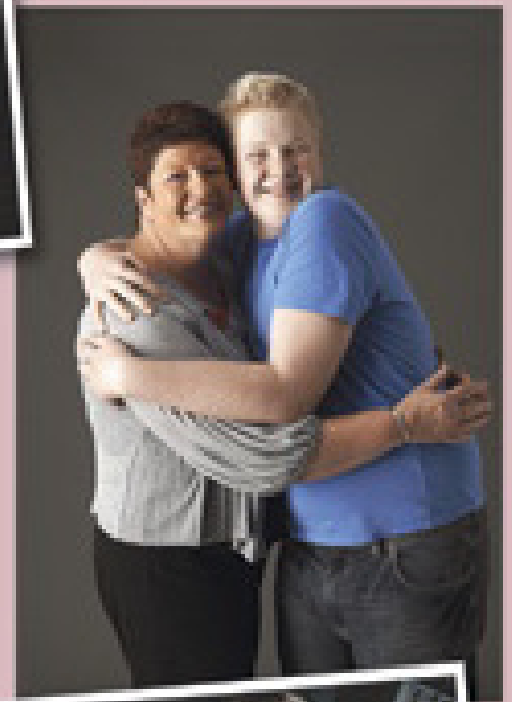


I enjoy school and my friends. Lunch is a chance to eat our sandwiches in the park if the weather is fine. But sometimes I just need to sit in silence. It's a struggle to get homework and coursework in on time, partly because of the housework, but also because I do so many activities after school. Mum has sent me to drama lessons since I was four and I've never stopped singing and dancing. I do vocal exercises in the shower every morning and I want to study the performing arts. I've won local competitions and would like to sing for a living when I grow up.

I was so happy to be picked for The X Factor in the summer. I didn't make it to the final round, but it was a great experience. I sang Can You Feel The Love Tonight and Electricity, by Elton John. I loved it and Mum and Dad were so proud.

Homework has to be squeezed in after drama and music. My week is crammed with dance classes, choir and drama. I'm also rehearsing two musicals, Annie Get Your Gun and We Will Rock You, so there are no evenings when I can just come home and get on with my school work. A great treat for me is to get everything done in time to watch EastEnders. After I finish cooking and clearing away, I watch half an hour of TV and then tidy up a bit, which makes me feel better. I don't manage to get to bed much before 10pm.

I have more free time at weekends, but even then I have drama on Saturday mornings and I sing in the church choir on Sundays. Mum wants me to have a lie-in, but I never do. I don't have time to have friends round during the week, so the only chance to meet them is Saturday night. We might go to the cinema and have a pizza, but it's expensive. We can't afford to do it as often as we would like. We live on benefits and there's no money for extras. I'm teaching myself piano, and I would love to have lessons for Christmas, but there isn't any spare cash. Mum and I manage to go away on holiday once a year because my grandmother pays. We are lucky; I know lots of children like me who have never gone abroad. In fact I was on a school trip to Berlin this year when my mum was taken ill. The doctors thought she had a small tumour, but when they operated they realised it was more serious, and she was in hospital for a long time. I was distraught: Dad was in care and I had no parents to come home to. I felt my whole world had collapsed and I was bursting into tears all the time. I had trouble



**Top left: Christian and his mentor, Helen, who he sees every week. Centre: with Berenice. Above: with his pet rabbits, Hope and Faith**

On bad days I sit and cry and wonder: why me, why us? Why is this happening and why can't my mum and dad just get better?

sleeping and I would wake up crying. I had terrible dreams about death, believing I had the same illnesses as my mum and dad. That's stopped now. When I go to bed, I put on relaxation music with whale and dolphin noises and it helps me relax. It's important, being a carer, that you keep yourself well so that you're not a worry for your parents. I know they feel guilty that I can't have a normal childhood, but I wouldn't change anything except for them to get better. My worst fear is that they will have a relapse. I don't want to think about that. I named my pet rabbits Hope and Faith for a reason.

**Interview by Deirdre Fernand**

To see a video of Christian, visit [www.timesonline.co.uk/sundaytimesappeal](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/sundaytimesappeal)

**£120 can pay for an evening homework club for 12 young carers**

# HOW CAN YOU HELP?

## GIVE MONEY

■ **ONLINE:** [www.timesonline.co.uk/sundaytimesappeal](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/sundaytimesappeal)

■ **DONATION LINE:** 0845 270 0336. Lines are open from 8am to 9pm Monday to Friday, from 10am to 4pm on Saturday and from 10am to 7pm on Sunday. At other times callers will be able to leave a message or hear other details of payment.

■ **BY POST:** Send a cheque made payable to The Princess Royal Trust for Carers to: The Sunday Times Appeal c/o The Princess Royal Trust for Carers, Unit 14, Bourne Court, Southend Road, Woodford Green, IG8 8HD. Sainsbury's will give an extra £1 to the appeal for every donation that includes the donor's address (please write it on the back of your cheque). Details will be used to

send out Gift Aid forms to sign and return, allowing the government to add 28p for every £1 of your donation at no extra cost to you.

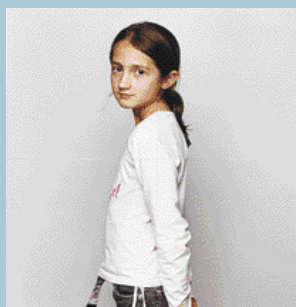
## TELL YOUR SCHOOL

If you think that your school could help to identify and support hidden young carers, and you would like details of how your school could receive £1,000 to help with this, or if you need more details about our school-awareness programme, go to [www.timesonline.co.uk/sundaytimesappeal](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/sundaytimesappeal).

## IF YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO NEEDS HELP NOW

Find more information at [www.timesonline.co.uk/sundaytimesappeal](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/sundaytimesappeal) and at [www.carers.org/sundaytimes](http://www.carers.org/sundaytimes) or call 0844 800 8527 (lines are open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday; a machine operates out of hours)

# THE SUNDAY TIMES CHRISTMAS CAMPAIGN WHAT WE WILL DO



## KEEP THE CENTRES OPEN

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers has 83 young carers' centres that provide support and advice and an opportunity for children to meet other young carers. But many of these centres are at risk of closure, even though the number of young people referred to them continues to rise. Your money could keep them open. The cost of achieving this? £20,000 would keep one centre running for another year. £400,000 would support all the centres at risk of closure and equip them with the resources to survive for up to three years.

## GIVE THEM A BREAK

No young carer is the same. But all of them need a break. A huge proportion provide over 50 hours of domestic, physical or emotional support a week. Your money will ensure as many as possible get a break, whether it's an after-school class so they can catch up, or an adventure weekend. The cost of this? £20,000 would provide around 200 carers with a break or allow them to join a club. £75,000 would provide 700 children with this opportunity.

## FIND THE HIDDEN CARERS

Many young carers struggle with the demands of home and school, yet schools are often unaware that there are young carers in their midst. £320,000 will support a ground-breaking plan to raise awareness in UK schools. Each school will be offered a pack of information with material for PSHE (personal, social

and health education) lessons. This will include advice on establishing links with families and adults services where carers are involved, and other professional guidance. We are also offering around 100 grants of up to £1,000 to schools who can show they can make a difference to carers' lives, through initiatives such as anti-bullying programmes. Teachers will be made aware of the young carers' website so everyone knows where to get support.

## PROVIDE EVERY YOUNG CARER WITH ACCESS TO SPECIALIST SUPPORT

Your money will give us the chance to train more key workers to provide the emotional support that young carers need and to develop initiatives to deal with truancy and bullying. We have already targeted 100 workers ready to be trained across the centres. The cost of achieving this? £200,000

This is the kind of thing that strangles smaller projects. They haven't got the time or resources to deal with fundraising on top of supporting the children they know of and carrying out crucial pre-emptive work to try to identify hundreds of others who remain hidden. Research suggests there are around 30 young carers in every secondary school. Derek regularly visits all eight secondary schools in East Ayrshire. It's vital work because it enables the project to identify young carers before they become overwhelmed and isolated. Jason's work with families where there is substance abuse is funded by Lloyds TSB's Partnership Drugs Initiative and the Children's Change Fund. Lloyds TSB and The Robertson Trust pay for Lorna's post. "It's due to finish next year and I'm going to have to find another source of funding or we're not going to have Lorna," says

**Children like this are in danger of being lost to society before they've even begun**

Jane. "The community-regeneration money that funds Derek's post ends in March. If I can't persuade them that we've got 200 young carers in Cumnock who will be left with no support, we're in trouble." Does she lose sleep over it? "Oh yeah. All

the time I'm reassuring staff and at the same time thinking they may not have a job next month."

Dalmellington, 30 miles from Kilmarnock, is a lifeless place. Once a thriving opencast mining community, the work is long gone, but row upon row of neglected pebble-dash council properties remain. Unemployment is rife, and this spot, just a spit from Burns country where well-heeled Glaswegians do their weekend walking, has one of the highest incidences of diabetes in Scotland. Here, children have a particularly heavy caring role. People struggle with illness and depression and substance abuse and no wonder. It's hard to appreciate the view when you've little hope for the future. It costs the project £1,400 a month in taxi fares to bring in children from villages like this in the Doon Valley to the centres. So, rather than turn children away, Jane has taken

**£150 will pay for 50 young carers to receive one-to-one crisis support**



# SUPERMARKET SWEEP

Up to 2,000 Sainsbury's staff will be collecting money for The Sunday Times Christmas appeal. Collections start on December 17 and run until December 24, ensuring all 489 Sainsbury's supermarkets and its 300 local convenience stores are visited by the teams. Sainsbury's has also pledged nearly £200,000 in additional support for The 'They Care: We Think You Will Too' campaign. The supermarket is donating:

- £200 Christmas party hampers for the 83 Princess Royal Trust for Carers' centres, which support children.
- 15,500 vouchers worth £10 to be distributed among young carers attending The Princess Royal Trust for Carers' centres
- Sainsbury's will also give an extra £1 to the appeal for every cheque received that includes the donor's address. Details will be used to send out Gift Aid forms to sign and return allowing the government to add 28p for every £1 of your donation at no extra cost to you.

Send cheques payable to The Princess Royal Trust for Carers to: The Sunday Times Appeal c/o The Princess Royal Trust for Carers, Unit 14, Bourne Court, Southend Road, Woodford Green, IG8 8HD.

If your company has a corporate responsibility programme and you'd like to support our Christmas Campaign, please email: [theycarecampaign@](mailto:theycarecampaign@)

**Sainsbury's**  
Try something new today



## STACEY, 14

Stacey's father is chronically ill after having a heart attack two years ago, and also suffers from depression. Her mum is epileptic and has grand mal seizures almost every day. Stacey hasn't been at school full time for three years

**I'd love to go to university when I'm older, but I can't leave my little brother looking after my mum**

out a vast £250,000 mortgage on a house here, the biggest house for miles around. The money saved on travel will pay half the mortgage and the other half, well, she has plans to turn it into a social-enterprise business to provide respite for other carers. "And if the money doesn't come in we'll have to do a bit of singing and dancing, won't we Laura? Believe me, the job description is wide."

In Patna, where Stacey, 14, lives, there's a Spar and a chippy, all boarded up. People live in abject poverty in the most beautiful setting where rough back gardens slope down to a lush pine forest. The primary school looks like a gulag and everyone looks pinched and frozen. There's no cover up here, in the dead of winter the wind must

rush up the main street and practically lay you out.

Stacey is slight, and looks as if the weight of the world is on her shoulders. Her dad is chronically ill. He had a heart attack two years ago and is waiting for surgery and being treated for depression. Her mum, Nanette, is epileptic, and almost every day has grand mal seizures. Stacey has to lay her on her side, put a pillow under her head and look after her until the seizure stops. If it doesn't stop, she calls an ambulance. She is so worried about Nanette she doesn't want to go out, and Nanette is beside herself about Stacey because she's stopped seeing her friends. Stacey, it turns out, hasn't been at school full time for three years.

Years ago, Nanette had a home worker who did the shopping and helped in the house. Now Stacey does all this. Listening to her, I wonder how on earth she copes. The answer is not very well. She reels off emergency phone numbers, her postcode, the details of both her mum and her dad's condition. The pills they take and when they take them. "I want to help," she insists. But when Jason, in an effort to get her to come to the young carers' group, asks her what she likes doing, she's stumped. "Arts and crafts? Drama? Bowling? Swimming? Ice-skating?" He ploughs on, but she shakes her head solemnly to all these suggestions. "Sometimes I hear her singing in her room." Nanette offers and Jason says: "That's it! We've got a karaoke and we'll have hot dogs and popcorn. Would you like that Stacey?" But Stacey just looks at the floor. You realise she is a child who has begun to shut down.

All the children referred to the centre by either schools or social workers have reached crisis ➤➤➤

**£300 would allow a young carer a much-needed break from caring**



point. Caring carries a whole raft of hidden consequences – low self-esteem, self-doubt, blame, social exclusion – but in the groups, I had a sense of children being pulled back from the brink. Some of the older children, despite heavy caring responsibilities, are full of insight and hope. Last year, 250 of them went on respite holidays, sailing, riding and canoeing. There are often tears on the coach back, simply because they've seen a different side of life – order, clean beds, people to care for them – and they don't want to leave it.

One evening a group of teenagers talked to me about the kinds of things they cope with; Jennifer, 15, whose mother suffers from schizophrenia, has pretty well sole responsibility for her little sisters. One minute grown up and in control, the next throwing herself on her bed and howling because nobody will help her. Rian, 16, feels it's his job to protect his nine-year-old brother from having the life he's had. "I'd love to go to university when I'm older, but I can't leave him looking after Mum." Rian seems to do everything. He cooks, cleans, shops and takes his brother to school. "I don't know where I'd be without Young Carers to help me." When he was given an assessment by a social worker – something all young carers are entitled to, but in practice, few receive – just the act of doing it changed his perspective. "I feel I know what my goals are now. The small things are getting out a bit more. The big things are good health for my mother, and a good life for me and my little brother." All of them feel isolated from their peers. "You hear them moaning because they've got to do the washing up," says Rachel, 14. "You're thinking: 'I do it seven days a week and I do all the shopping.'"

It struck me over and over again how little these children ask for. A bit of time, someone to take an interest, to chat to them about their dreams and say: "You can do this." It's not much is it? But it's more than a lot of them have. Young carers feel trapped and hopeless, and as they get older, this is what makes them so unhappy. Each teenager here has a personal-development plan, helping them identify targets and goals. Every year the centre takes a group to Columba 1400, a leadership academy on the Isle of Skye. There, they are treated like guests. When they arrive there's a



#### ROSS, 14

An only child, Ross has a heavy caring role. His father, a former postal worker, has been in a wheelchair since a head injury at work seven years ago left him with balance problems and memory loss. His mother suffers from epilepsy

card on their pillow just for them, and at the end of five days of activities, the course leader talks to them for 15 minutes about their individual strengths. It helps them realise they've got options and choices like everyone else, and despite their responsibilities, they can do things for themselves.

It's late on Wednesday. I'm exhausted, but Jason is still going. He's on his way to Kilmarnock to run a football club for children who would otherwise be on the streets. When I ask him why he does all this, he says simply: "Because I know that every single thing you do for them makes a difference." And it does. I've seen it. Whether you give £100 or £5 to buy a chocolate-selection box for a child who wouldn't otherwise get one, or a present for them to open on Christmas Day, you'll be easing the load on these small shoulders. As Jane says, it's all in the effort. "Just by taking the trouble to make things special for them, you're saying: 'You're worth it.'" ■

**They feel trapped and hopeless, and as they get older, this is what makes them so unhappy**



### THE PRINCESS ROYAL TRUST FOR CARERS

The trust has 83 projects across the UK that provide support and advice to 15,500 young carers. Only 54% of funding comes from local authorities. The rest comes

from individual fundraising. The result is that most projects exist on a shoestring, with no idea where funding will come from one year to the next. Social-care budgets are based on the 2001 census, which estimated that the UK has 175,000 young carers. But it is believed that these figures are flawed, and that actual figures

could be much higher because of the young carers we don't know about. There are 1.3m children living with alcoholic parents and up to 350,000 whose parents misuse drugs. Many of these will be young carers, but their caring is largely hidden.



**£300 keeps the trust's young carers' website running for 24 hours**



# THEY CARE. WE CARE. BUT DOES THE GOVERNMENT GIVE A DAMN?

Rod Liddle points a finger at the state and social services — and asks why the plight of young carers has been ignored for so long

**T**he unfortunate thing is that the minister whose job it is to redress this grotesque injustice is — to use the technical political term — a bit of a wrong'un. Beverley Hughes is the minister of state for children, young people and families. You may remember her name from the time she was required to resign her last ministerial post, in 2004, for having lied about her knowledge of an immigration scam. Or, as Bev put it, "unwittingly I may have given a misleading impression". And it is the same Beverley Hughes who a couple of years before had denounced Channel 4 for running the acute and funny Brass Eye special on paedophiles. Later it was revealed she hadn't even seen the programme. I made a note, back then, to keep a watchful eye on this woman. I had been looking forward to meeting her to see what she had planned, if anything, to address the continuing unconscionable misery of young carers — but she pulled out of an interview with me at short notice. Her boss, Ed Balls, was also apparently unavailable. Make of that what you will.

She would not have to do very much, in truth. Here is a patent case of social injustice, which comes as an affront to all who read of it. We may find it hard to believe children as young as five are left alone to look after infirm parents, dependent for intermittent relief upon charitable donations. It is not the sort of thing one would normally associate with a modern, western democracy that claims for itself the title of a welfare state. It has, instead, the grim whiff of the Victorian age, or maybe something you'd see on a documentary about poverty in Burkina Faso or

Cambodia. Yet these iniquities take place right here; Lauren, 11, preparing breakfast and washing her wheelchair-bound mum before leaving for school, at weekends almost entirely housebound because of the absence of support from the state. There are around 175,000 children in Britain in a similar position to Lauren — a city the size of Cardiff, a city of stolen childhoods, of relentless, selfless drudgery, of low achievement at school,

**Here is a wholly blameless section of society which it should be a priority to serve**

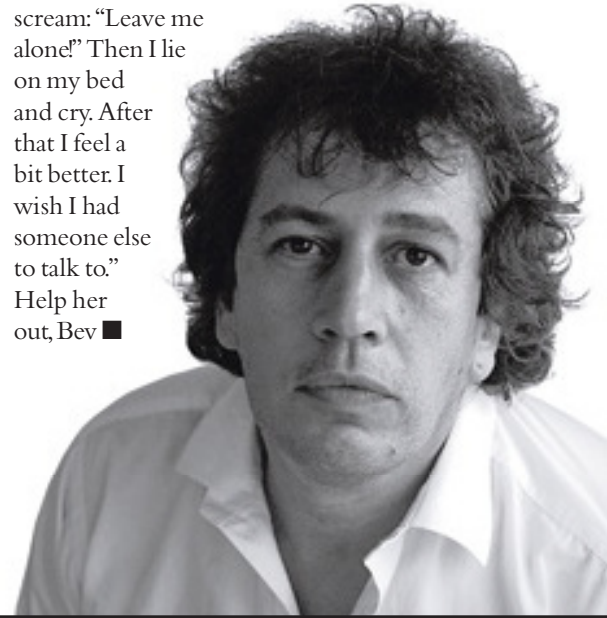
of friendlessness and loneliness. Even those of you who believe we spend altogether too great a proportion of our GDP supporting the idle would surely agree that here is a wholly blameless sector of our society which it should be a government priority to protect and serve. That these children should be somewhere near the top of that very long list — the list of who gets a hand-out from the nation's vast stockpile of wealth. And yet the awful truth is that the plight of these children is not merely ignored, but usually unnoticed. Meanwhile, the children's services are too busy worrying about that other blight upon our society, kids who are directly abused. It is left to charities, such as The Princess Royal Trust for

Carers, to scabble about like mad and fill in the holes — which it does, with great commitment. Right now it is able to help perhaps a little less than 10% of that 175,000.

Has the government actually achieved anything in this area? Some hope. In the past 10 years the issue has been floated in about half a dozen government reports, but those beavering away at their work stations and pumping out these tracts seem to think that young carers are not worthy of a white or even a green paper. Maybe a yellow one? What are they afraid of? None of these reports have amounted to much, not least because the link between the welfare of young carers and the welfare of their parents has never been made clear.

When I say Bev wouldn't have to do much, it is not simply the blithely tossed-off comment of an irresponsible journalist. Although in many ways I am, obviously. But while more money should be diverted to ease the plight of children who look after their parents, this is not primarily a financial issue; what Bev needs to show is an awareness of the scale of the problem, an understanding of why the authorities have so far failed to get to grips with it, and a responsibility and breadth of imagination to put things right. Yes, I know, don't hold your breath. But in reality this is less a funding issue than a problem of disparate services believing the problem does not lie with them. And of befogging legislation, professional allegiances and territorial aspirations that, together with that deadly, ubiquitous, excrescence of new Labour — the fatuous array of targets — militate against these children getting the support they need. It is as if our entire social services and children's welfare authorities have become so embroiled in the process of delivering adequate care, they no longer see the wood for the trees. The last green paper, Every Child Matters, and the subsequent Children's Act declined to give final responsibility for child carers to any single branch of social services. Instead it gave it to all of them, which is the same as giving it to none. There is talk of a wide-ranging review due in May. But still no concrete policy.

This is how Lauren, 11, ends every day, at around 9pm. "Most the time we hide what we feel from each other, but sometimes I shout and scream: "Leave me alone!" Then I lie on my bed and cry. After that I feel a bit better. I wish I had someone else to talk to." Help her out, Bev ■



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