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STORY BY MIKE UNGER
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It’s dinnertime at the Langmaids.

Just four of their eight girls are home on this Thursday night in October, so things are relatively calm. Relatively.

Home is a third-story suite at Monument Academy, the charter boarding school in Washington, D.C., where Paul and Joy Langmaid work as houseparents. Their “kids” are seven middle school girls with varying levels of social and emotional challenges from some of the poorest sections of the city, and their own 3-year-old daughter, Micaela. When I walk into the home — the term that’s purposely used at Monument — I’m greeted by Paul and the family dogs, Midas and Lucy. In the kitchen, where there’s debate raging over whether to prepare ravioli or something, as one of the girls puts it, less “gross,” I say hi to a seventh-grader, who ignores me and retreats into the bedroom that she shares with a roommate. Langmaid excuses himself and follows her. A few seconds later they emerge, and K. (her first initial) walks up to me with her right hand extended.

“Nice to meet you,” she says, a shy smile creeping onto her face.

Such is life at Monument, an innovative school that is attempting to educate — in all senses of the word — some of Washington’s most traumatized children. More than 80 percent of the school’s 130 students have been involved in the child welfare system — including foster care or temporary removal from their homes — at some point in their lives, and data show that they are half as likely to graduate from high school on time as their peers. On average they have attended at least three schools prior to Monument, but none of them has attended a school like Monument, where the overwhelming majority of students live during the week. (All students go home on the weekend, to their foster families, parents, or caretakers.)

“There aren’t many schools that work with this population of students,” says Head of School DENISE MILES, ED.M.’05, who’s been at Monument since it opened four years ago. “We have the opportunity to really influence all aspects of a student’s life. When I was a high school principal, I often said if I could just rent the house across the street and give them a place that’s stable and quiet, where they can do homework and not have to worry about taking care of siblings or what’s going on in the neighborhood or anything else, then we could really move them further faster. Here we can be working on life skills with them, and they’re getting counseling, and house parents are doing academic support in the evening. They’re learning 24 hours a day.”

The lesson right now is one of socialization and manners. K. listens to Langmaid and alters her behavior both because he and his wife have established a culture of respect in the household, and because she wants to rack up core values points.

“We earn them by being kind to one another, being respectful to their daughter, the dogs, the house, and doing what we’re supposed to do,” another girl tells me.

When I ask about their favorite snack food, three girls answer in chorus: “Ice cream!”

Allowing kids to scarf down a bowl of cookies and cream after school is a brave move for any parent, let alone one living with a basketball team-worth of middle schoolers.

“They know if they can’t handle their sugar, then they can’t buy ice cream anymore,” Paul Langmaid says. “We’ve had a couple of girls that tried and failed, and that’s okay.”

MONUMENT ACADEMY is the brainchild of Emily Bloomfield, an economist who served as an elected member of the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District Board of Education, and later on the D.C. Public Charter School Board. It stemmed from a personal situation she encountered in which her aunt and uncle-in-law took custody of their two young grandchildren.

She wondered what their futures would hold if they entered the foster care system or were adopted, so she began examining statistics. What she found horrified her. Students in the foster care system move homes one and a half to two times a year, destroying relationships with friends and teachers; they’re twice as likely to drop out of high school; and only 2 percent earn four-year college degrees.

“I thought that was not acceptable,” Bloomfield says. “Considering that roughly 25,000 kids age out of foster care every year [in the United States], and it will cost the government $8 billion for the next six years of their lives, it’s a staggering waste of money but an even more staggering waste of lives. I began to think, Is this an inevitability?”

She started researching what does work for children in foster care, and discovered that personal-
ized education and a relationship with a caring adult are key. Life skills that they often miss, like cooking and financial literacy, also are important.

Bloomfield put together a white paper and shared it with educators, policy experts, and legal advocates around Washington. Her idea was based loosely on the Milton Hershey School, but unlike the renowned Pennsylvania institution, she designed Monument to be a weekday-only boarding school, in part to avoid the appearance of institutionalization, and in part to get buy-in from parents and caretakers. She and cofounder Marlene Magrino submitted the school’s charter application in February 2014, and it was approved that May. After a year of planning the school opened for fifth-graders in August 2015. It’s added a grade each year since, and now has fifth through eighth. As a charter school, it receives extra financial support from the city, and is around 90 percent publicly funded.

According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, about 3.2 million students attend 7,000 charter schools in 44 states plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Guam. Despite that, says KAY MERSETH, M.A.T.’69, ED.D.’82, a senior lecturer at Harvard and former director of the Ed School’s Teacher Education Program, the popularity of charter schools has been waning in recent years.

“There was tremendous growth, and they’ve run into a little bit of a buzz saw with people suggesting that they’re re-segregating the schools,” she says. “I get pretty frustrated with the criticism because the good ones are trying to provide an alternative for kids who have lousy choices.”

That was exactly Bloomfield’s aim. Creating Monument outside of the charter school framework would have been an impossibility, she believes.

“Charter schools are meant to be places where you can incubate an idea and try a really new thing,” she says. “We never could have done this in a traditional public school setting because of the whole idea of boarding and using our budget in such discretionary ways. Our first year we did so much revising of schedules, job descriptions, programming, all these things that are really hard to do when you’re working in a more [rigid structure]. We could be really nimble.”

Bloomfield envisioned a school that enrolled a high number of students in foster care, but there’s been a movement in Washington away from placing kids into that system. In June 2016, D.C.‘s Child and Family Services reported 1,020 kids in out-of-home placement, compared to 1,676 four years earlier.

“As Mulhern gives me a tour of the academic space, after-school activities like sports, dance, cooking, and chess are taking place. During the week, Monument students almost never stop learning. Among the staff of more than 100 are 11 on the well-being team, which provides behavioral, emotional, and therapeutic support. In addition to their academic curriculum, every student at Monument receives two hours of weekly instruction on mindfulness, emotional regulation, and distress tolerance.

In the third-floor student wellness lounge, complete with beanbag chairs, an exercise bike, and colorfully painted walls, Mulhern stresses the importance of the school’s psychologists, counselors, and social workers.
“There’s so much we don’t know in terms of supporting students who have had adverse life experiences,” he says. “Running a $1.5 billion initiative at the Department of Education is a cakewalk compared to this. It is humbling every day. But I have never worked with a more talented, committed group of adults. This team and what they do on a day-to-day basis and what they’re willing to do for children, they’re the heroes of this work.”

Because the school is relatively new, lots of outcome data is not available. But its 85 percent retention rate is impressive considering its enrollment is more than 50 percent special needs, as compared to about 12 percent in most other charter schools, Mulhern says. Homelessness is also a growing problem. Perhaps as a result of gentrification in Washington, about 35 percent of Monument’s students this year are homeless (which includes living in a hotel, shelter, or with relatives).

“These kids have experienced a lot of trauma in their lives, so the challenge is creating a structured academic environment that caters to their specific challenges because trauma presents differently in each individual student,” says Zenon Mills, who teaches fifth- and sixth-grade special education. “I had a student who, the first time he saw me, said I was his favorite teacher ever. I have another student who, no matter what I do, it’s incredibly difficult for me to connect to him on a one-to-one level. He needs a lot more social reinforcement. And that’s pretty standard — seeing that kind of spectrum.”

He credits the school’s boarding model for providing kids with a stable emotional and social environment that helps them in the classroom. When Mulhern uses his key card to open a door that leads to student life homes, it’s as if we’ve entered a different world. Paintings of palm trees line the walls; welcome home banners decorate front doors. The smell of Italian food wafts through the air.

Each home comprises a common open space that includes a living room, large dining table, and kitchen. Students share small bedrooms that have bunk beds and the bathrooms are also shared, dorm style. Paid house parents, who are usually a married couple (like the Langmaids) or two individuals, run the household. They have their own room and bathroom within the suite.

Coexisting with up to 10 middle school students is certainly not a job for those who lack patience. It can be exhausting and emotionally draining, but also quite satisfying. Denise Miles started at Monument as a house parent.

“It took us several months to build the trust and the culture in our home to where they knew they were safe, they knew nobody was going into their bedroom to mess with them,” she says. “They could come home, relax, do their homework, do different activities. Once you establish that culture in the home, you see the decompression happen, and then you see it during the day as well.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, students who board more consistently tend to do better at Monument academically than their peers who don’t. (Boarding isn’t required, but it is strongly encouraged and widely done.) Students must read for 30 minutes each night.

J. is a seventh-grader in her third year at Monument. During the week she lives with the Langmaids, an arrangement she enjoys.

“I do miss my mom sometimes, but sometimes we argue and I think it’s better for both of us to have our own space,” she says.

That students shuttle between two worlds — Monument and their often less-stable home — creates a challenge for house parents like the Langmaids. Their rules and strict structure often don’t exist for the kids outside their home, making for a sometimes rocky readjustment period after the weekend. When the students arrive back on Sunday afternoon, they can be upset because they fought with a family member — or because they enjoyed their time at home and didn’t want to leave.

At Monument, the challenges for staff are huge; the jobs are so much more than nine-to-five. What makes it worthwhile?

“One of the students who was in my home is one of our brightest students,” Miles says. “He told me when he was in fifth grade, ‘My second-grade teacher told me I was the angriest person she’d ever met.’ He would upend furniture, run out of the classroom, and he was in fights constantly. He’s an eighth-grader now and hasn’t been in a single fight. They’ll be typical eighth-grade adolescent pushback, but there’s none of that aggression, for the most part” — attributed, she thinks, to the the small, close-knit atmosphere at Monument and to meaningful collaboration with his mother and grandmother. “He’s looking at selective high schools now and really sees himself as a student with the opportunity to do what other good students are doing, which is not the person that he was four years ago.”

At the Langmaids, K. has transformed in the hour since I arrived. She’s talkative and engaged in the conversation. As I prepare to leave, she thoughtfully thanks me for visiting her home.

“Thanks for having me,” I reply. “It was a pleasure meeting you.” Then homework continues.
A Typical Day at Monument

7–7:30 a.m.  
wake up, chores, and showers

7:30–8 a.m.  
breakfast together as a home

8–8:25 a.m.  
complete chores, goal setting, and head to advisory

8:30–9:10 a.m.  
whole school is in advisory with members from well-being, operations, academics, and student life. Student groups are centered around DBT steps (dialectical behavioral therapy), such as distress tolerance

9:10 a.m.– 3:30 p.m.  
typical school day that includes lunch, recess, two electives, and core content classes

3:30–4:15 p.m.  
dismissal, return to the homes, relax, have a snack, and prepare for the evening

4:15–7 p.m.  
family meetings in the home for students, chores, and meal prep, while others attend extended-day activities outside of the home, including Girls on the Run, Lego League Robotics, Cooking Matters, and African dance

7–7:30 p.m.  
dinner together

7:30–8:30 p.m.  
homework, showers, chores, family meetings, or house activity together such as games, crafts, or time in the gym

8:30 p.m.  
begin prep for bed and 30 minutes of nightly required reading

9:30 p.m.  
lights out