

"We look out for each other," says Portia (with, from left, Dillon, Antoine and Ricky in March). "We always will."



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FRIENDS *Forever*

Four babies born to drug-addicted mothers found hope in a loving St. Louis group home—and forged a bond for life **BY ALICIA DENNIS**

Tears filled Mary Dorsey's eyes as she watched over the four newborns swaddled in blankets in their cribs. They had arrived at Our Little Haven in St. Louis from the hospital, born of drug- or alcohol-addicted mothers and fighting to survive. "These babies were trembling, crying and vomiting," says Dorsey, who helped the infants get through

withdrawal. "It was tragic. But look at them now."

Eighteen years later it's another story. The four baby housemates—Antoine Evans, 18, Portia Parks, 18, Dillon Ohlemiller, 18, and Ricky Spratley, 18, are contemplating colleges and careers. "We shared the same beginning," Portia says. "Our family members were on drugs. But now where we came from is something we can be proud about

together." Founded by married social workers Scott and Kathleen Hummel in 1993, Our Little Haven (ourlittlehaven.org) was the first home in St. Louis to take in infants who tested positive for drugs or alcohol at birth. "Portia was our very first girl," remembers Kathleen. "Everyone was in love with Antoine's long eyelashes. Ricky got chubby after being born prematurely. Dillon was born at 28 weeks; we were afraid we'd lose him."

But he and the others survived—and thrived. Through one-on-one care, therapy and "lots of love," says Scott, the four children got a fresh start for a better life. The boys were placed in



HAPPY MEMORIES

Clockwise from left: Antoine with dad Tom; Portia with Mary Dorsey; Ricky and mom Janet; Dillon with parents Melinda and Kevin and brother Jake.

foster homes with loving families who adopted them; Portia lived alternately with her guardian, grandmother Glenda Patterson, 65, and Dorsey, 46. Over the years the kids stayed connected, going on trips to the zoo and having sleepovers. "They would share feelings of sadness," Dorsey says. "I thought it would help them to have friends with similar circumstances."

She had no idea how much. Antoine, taken in by sales rep Tom Evans, was a sweet boy who invited the neighborhood to his adoption party. But Evans, now 64, recalls Antoine also had violent outbursts: "He broke all the windows in our house. He set fires." Love and therapy bonded father and son; well-placed advice from his four pals helped. "When we got together, he'd say he'd gotten suspended," Ricky recalls of Antoine. "I'd say, 'Don't do that

anymore.'" Now a senior at a therapeutic high school, he volunteers at Haven (as do his three friends). "I had a feeling of not belonging," says Antoine, "but I turned out all right."

Ricky had an easier time. Adopted by Haven volunteer and teacher Janet Spratley, now 43, he excelled at football in school and will play for the University of Central Missouri in the fall. Still, in moments of doubt, he gets a boost from his pals. "They understand me," he says.

He feels especially protective of Dillon, who weighed just 2 lbs. 2 oz. at birth, had a heart defect and respiratory problems and was diagnosed

with fetal alcohol syndrome. Dillon won the heart of Melinda Ohlemiller, 48, who, with her college-professor husband, Kevin, 54, took him in at age 2. Today, he plays saxophone in his high school band and enjoys time with these friends: "We bowl, we eat cheeseburgers. I'm happy when I'm with them."

So is Portia, who has faced her own hard times. She miraculously survived without lasting damage after being shot in the face at age 3 in a random drive-by. She also copes with deep sadness that her mother is uninvolved in her life. A hip-hop dancer and basketball team point guard, she always gets a lift from Antoine's funny text messages and Dillon's clever quips. "I used to be quiet," she says, "but I've opened up to them a lot."

Now preparing to go their separate ways, they say this friendship will endure. "No matter what, no matter where we all are, we'll stay connected," Ricky says. "We've come too far together." ●

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BRIGHT FUTURE
"These kids," says Scott (with Kathleen and the youngsters they helped care for on the steps of Our Little Haven), "are our wonderful success stories."