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Most of us wake to the same favorite coffee mug, at the same kitchen table and wrestle with the same tricky lock on our way out the door. We bring that rootedness with us throughout the day as we get things done at work, maybe grab a beer with some friends, then head home.

Home.

This narrative may feel familiar to many, but for millions of Americans it’s an idealized storyline they can only wish for.

The average American moves 11 times in his or her lifetime. Of that number, in any given year, two to three million find that their latest iteration involves spending nights in an alley, under a bridge, in a homeless shelter or a night here-and-there on the couch of a distant cousin or friend, because they have nowhere else to go. In Connecticut alone in 2016 three to four thousand people lacked stable housing; about a third were children.

Family Promise of CT returns some semblance of rootedness into the lives of the homeless families it works for by offering a consistent stream of assistance powered by volunteers and case managers. It works with local churches and synagogues to secure safe temporary housing for the families until they can find something more permanent.

As a relatively new organization, Family Promise of CT needs to continue to raise its profile so it can raise more funds for its important work and build a more accurate storyline about the housing situation in the state. Toward that end, a group of 10 Central Connecticut State University students in a Writing About Social Issues class profiled some of the people that make up the Family Promise web, from the president to a guest of the program. The end result: this magazine, which they hope will help Family Promise realize its mission and continue to thrive as it enters its second year.

As Family Promise President Kara Russell said in her interview with CCSU student Jenny Moran, family homelessness is “a problem, it’s just an invisible problem.”

Well, now is the time to take a moment and read more about it.

Professor Mary Collins
ENG 385, Writing About Social Issues
Central Connecticut State University

Sources:
(number of moves in a lifetime) https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-many-times-the-average-person-moves/
(homeless numbers and types of homelessness) http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/526/homeless-facts.html
THE CENTER
Inside the Day Center

By Jimmy Vitali

The scene inside the Family Promise Day Center feels warm and inviting. The soft yellow of the walls and rustic creak of the wooden floors of the New Britain house combine to create an atmosphere of home, exactly what interim-director Peg Kelly hoped for when they opened last year just off of Ellis Street.

Kelly said they always planned to have a home for the guests to use. The Day Center operates for the guests first and an office for the organization second. The staff emphasize providing a stable and familiar place for both the children and parents to relax during days off.

The first floor, which Family Promise uses for daily activities, has a dining room converted into a reception area, and a living room stuffed with children’s toys, like action figures, blocks, and coloring books. Opposite the television, there’s a special baby section with mobiles and playthings hanging overhead. The bookshelf has something for every age group; baby books, modern children’s fiction and poetry.

In the basement, the families have access to a washer and dryer, as well as storage closets full of basic goods. Kelly unlatches the door on one of these metal cabinets and pulls out a half-empty bag of toilet paper. She complains about the storage in the house, having to keep things so often needed so far away. She does, however, boast about the washer and dryer. President Kara Russell believes in the autonomy of the people staying with Family Promise. The guests should always feel self-sufficient and control of the family laundry gives a feeling of authority to people who don’t feel that most days.

Upstairs is devoted solely to the guests. Kelly first checks ahead on the families before allowing visitors upstairs. Family Promise gives each family a closet in the house to keep personal belongings. These closets remain private. The things kept inside—pictures, books, clothes—can feel immensely important, often all that is left of the past.

A woman leans sideways into the dark brown leather, listening to music on a pair of large, silver headphones. She looks comfortable in this environment, ignoring the bustle downstairs. Brushing off everything around her, she makes clear that she really wants space for herself. A real space. That’s really hers.
Kara Russell was enjoying lunch with an old friend, relaxing and catching up, when her friend mentioned being involved with Family Promise in the Boston area, a program that assists homeless families with children find shelter and other support.

“It just sounded really kind of – cool.”

Intrigued by both the idea of helping others and the “interfaith” aspect of Family Promise, Kara set out to join in her area. Once back in Connecticut, she looked up Family Promise CT, but the search sadly yielded no results. Amazed that Connecticut didn’t have an organization, she sent away for a packet to get one started.

“It took about four years” she paused, “and here we are today.”

Now President of Family Promise of CT, Kara emphasizes the fact that it is not a religious organization but a social service agency that works in partnership with the religious community, including churches, synagogues and mosques. She’s learned that there are hundreds of children in New Britain alone who identify as homeless.

“It is a problem” she said, “it’s just an invisible problem.”

Pumped with the “spirit of goodwill,” as she called it, Kara tries to not only oversee the program, but also volunteers regularly as much as she can. Her husband, Mark, helps whenever he can as well. Whether its driving her to the locations, picking up extra shifts where a male volunteer is needed, or covering Kara when she has to wake up early to teach a class at Central Connecticut State University, Mark is there to help.

“It is a sacrifice on his part, too,” she says. “It’s a lot of hours that I put in outside of the house, but he is just really supportive.”

Kara’s two sons, ages 15 and 16, also have to bear the burden of Kara’s long hours. They’ve grown up able to recognize that volunteering is part of adulthood with a mother who goes above and beyond in that aspect, and even help volunteer themselves.

The first night that Kara and Mark volunteered, she felt trepidation. There was, and still is, some hesitation meeting new families, spending time with them, and worrying about whether or not they will like her. She wasn’t afraid that these people were homeless; she was afraid of strangers.

“I am honestly not a very outgoing person,” she acknowledged, but one little girl with pigtails was an ambassador. When the little girl gave both of them a hug around their knees, Kara thought this “is the exact reason why we were there.” They played Candy Land, socialized with the family, and fell in love with the little girl.

“We did not want her to go to bed, but you have to respect the parents.”
As a volunteer, that is all she is. She doesn’t tell people that she helped found the affiliate. She doesn’t want people to act differently about her, to feel uncomfortable. “It’s important for everyone to feel on an equal playing field,” Kara revealed.

The nights that she stays over remind her why she started the program in the first place. “I’m there to just be a volunteer... To just be Kara.”

Volunteering allows Kara to escape from all of the important work she does for the board, like meetings and fundraising. “It’s the stuff that has to be done, and I do it,” she said, but “my most meaningful moments are the times spent as a volunteer.”

“Sometimes out volunteers have to push themselves beyond their comfort zone,” Kara reported, and that’s hard for everyone, but once you do it is extremely rewarding.

“The reason this program really works are those moments when there is real connection – there’s human connection between these homeless families and people who care that they’re there and want to make their lives better. It’s just life affirming.”

“[Family homelessness] is a problem” she said, “it’s just an invisible problem.”
Gatekeeper

By Cassidy Altieri

“

We assist them in making the best choice for their family.

”

When her pastor at United Church of Christ in Newington mentioned the church had become a host for homeless families working with a new organization called Family Promise of CT, Peg Kelly decided to get involved.

As the mother of five children and a registered nurse, she probably didn’t expect she’d quickly be selected as the interim director of the fledgling program, but she stepped in and took up the challenge, motivated to give back and “make a difference.”

As she explains, at any given time there might be 14 people circulating through the Family Promise program, which provides housing for as little as 30 days to as long as six months, and other support, such as obtaining education for parents.

“We assist them in making the best choice for their family.”

Peg acknowledges it can be tough being the Interim Director—Family Promise is conducting a national search for a permanent director—because she serves as a gatekeeper. Working with case manager, Nate Fox, and other staffers and volunteers, Peg must shoulder the responsibility of whether or not to accept a family into the program.

She explains that Family Promise receives referrals from all different resources—guidance/school counselors, social workers, teachers, case workers, shelters, coordinators, and even self-referrals—but they cannot take every family because of some key restrictions. Applicants cannot have a past or current criminal history, any active domestic violence cases, active substance abuse, and/or untreated acute mental health issues.

Peg explains that every family is “unique” and each referral is handled on a case-by-case basis so nothing is “cut and dry.” When she and Nate have to say no, they work to find other organizations with the resources the people need.
On the Case

By Michael Forbotnick

Inside the Family Promise day center, located on the corner of Ellis Street and Cornelius Way in New Britain, a man sporting a big blue sweater, bushy beard, and glasses diligently types away on a MacBook pro. As the full-time paid Case Manager, Nate Fox must keep tabs on a lot of paperwork associated with helping the homeless parents and their children that rotate in and out of the center. It’s been less than a year since Family Promise officially opened its doors, and yet Nate has already helped dozens of families map out a plan to escape homelessness and find more secure housing and lives.

Each time someone comes through the door, Nate must work with the specific needs of that family. Some plans including housing families for a month while they look for cheaper renting options, while others need more time and stay beyond the six-month mark. The families with the fastest turn around use the charter as respite.
Nate’s eyes move with a delicacy before he speaks. He reflects inward before he details the role Family Promise can play for the families who require a month-long stay. He calls these instances “Cherry Picking” or helping families that have experienced a temporary “glitch,” which is the Family Promise Niche. Just over a year ago the state cut their eviction prevention program. The charter stepped up and took on that responsibly but in a limited capacity. They help families with income and place them into homes that are more affordable, avoiding the eviction process.

A successful case manager is someone who can explore the “rabbit hole” of the family’s life and unpack it with them. As case manager he could get them a minimum wage job, but that does not fit the charter’s goal.

“We really want to make sure when folks emerge from here they are in a stronger place,” Nate explains.

One case involved a young woman in her early twenties with two children. Unbeknown to Nate, the mother didn’t have her high school diploma. It took multiple sessions before she trusted Nate enough to help her with this problem and enroll her in a GED program.

The most difficult aspect a case manager’s job: facing families with teens. The children might exhibit frustration toward their mom as they search for someone to blame.

“I would definitely say that there is a spirit of not wanting to be here. It’s hard because we want to be here but we also understand that our mere presence is frustrating,” Nate says, which helps explain his calming manner. He understands there is only so much he can do as one person.

“Someone could get a full-time or close to full-time minimum wage job but that’s not going to put them into a position where they can thrive long term. We really want to make sure when folks emerge from here they are in a stronger place.

“A year and a half ago the state wiped out their eviction prevention program which was state funded.”

That leaves places like Family Promise with even more work to do as they strive to bridge gaps in the safety for these families.

“We really want to make sure when folks emerge from here they are in a stronger place.”
THE GUESTS
Ula’s Journey

By Amily Colon

Ula, an African American woman who is deaf, lives with her two sons in an apartment in New Britain. She describes her boys as her number one hobby. Erei, a laidback, gentle kid, is the oldest, and enjoys spending time with his brother, Isiah, the most outspoken member of the family. The two boys complain a bit about how little time Ula gives them to play their favorite videogames (only on the weekends), but they are thankful when their mother brings them to Chuck-E-Cheese’s and lets them have ice-cream for dessert.

While they enjoy the comfort of their own apartment now, just over a year ago they were homeless. Already grieving the recent loss of her mother, Ula struggled to juggle the demands of school, raising her sons and her tight finances. Thankfully, Ula’s best friend advocated her case at the New Britain Fair Housing Office. Ula, a gifted lip reader, watched the exchange in anticipation, her eyes flickering back and forth between the Fair Housing Representative and her friend. In about 30 minutes, they reached a conclusion and introduced Ula to Family Promise.

Shortly after being escorted to the church, any shyness that lingered in Ula from the stress she had endured was immediately eradicated. Slowly, Ula’s smile returned, and she found herself consistently comforted by the warm, friendly volunteers and church members. The children remained preoccupied with crafts, games, and other activities provided for them. They too found reassurance in the kindness of the volunteers. School remained the same, and the boys confidently wore the clothing Family Promise gave them, knowing that none of their classmates would be able to notice any difference.

During her time with Family Promise, Ula received assistance with housing applications, food, paperwork, and mental health treatment.

“There was one Family Promise Member who went out of their way to help me reconnect with a therapist I had lost contact with,” Ula recalls. When she wanted to attend a church sermon, another member offered to translate for her.

“Elaine is a very sweet woman,” Ula says, “Her beauty radiates from within.”

Within three weeks, Ula had found a new apartment, a rapid transition for guests of Family Promise, but one that Ula was certainly grateful for. “I didn’t expect it to happen so soon,” she says with a hint of disbelief and joy, “I just feel so thankful and blessed!”

Things for the family seem to be falling into place. Ula is completing her degree in Paralegal Studies, and looks forward to finding a well-paying job. The closer she becomes to maintaining a stable life, the more she considers volunteering. Her experience with Family Promise made a lasting impression, and she hopes that sometime in the future, she can help out a family in need.
Facing Mental Illness

By Abigail Murillo and Mary Collins

What causes someone to become homeless? If we all asked ourselves that question more often, we might have more compassion for the people who have no home of their own and the million or more children in the United States that have no housing on any given night in America.

Most individuals wind up homeless because of a traumatic event—death in the family, loss of a job, divorce—but another hidden underlying factor is often severe mental illness. According to the National Institute of Health, about 25 percent of homeless people have a severe mental health issue, which is about five times higher than the national average.

At Family Promise of CT, the staff and volunteers understand these root causes but they also understand the need for an open, embracing environment that encourages any homeless parent with young children to come through the Family Promise Day Center doors in New Britain and ask for help.

One Family Promise guest, whom we’ll identify as M., felt emboldened to get help after seeing the clean environment and meeting the empathetic volunteers. “There was no judgment whatsoever,” she says.

M., a mom with several children, lost her job and her housing because of her untreated anxiety disorder. Even though Family Promise cannot offer her the professional counseling she needs, it does serve as a hub of resources. People like Nate Fox, a case manager, can plot out a plan of action that includes other agencies and state programs.

Sources: (percentage of homeless with mental illness)
http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/Mental_illness.pdf
Citing National Institute of Health 2009 study
THE VOLUNTEERS
‘A construction truck nearly put me in the cemetery,’ Marie Bachand says.

She wasn’t in control, but neither was the driver, who had stolen the vehicle just minutes before the crash. Since that ill-fated day in November, 2001, Marie has continued to live with the consequences of that moment, marked in her mind and on her body, which still bears the scars.

She couldn’t work, so she lost her job as a kindergarten teacher. Faced with the harsh reality of unemployment, she had to apply for Social Security Disability, which did allow her to pay her rent. For a short time, she managed with her two young daughters. But then the house they lived in went through foreclosure, which led to the eviction of the Bachand family.

For nine months, Marie stayed wherever she could while her children stayed with others.

“I felt guilty that my family had split up, but it wasn’t my fault. I had no choice. My family was broken apart. We didn’t know when we would see each other again.”

One day, she and a friend were driving around, they spied a sign outside of an old home she used to live in that said “For Rent.” Marie immediately called up her old landlord, and entirely lucked out. After nine months of being homeless, she and her family reunited.

Now, 16 years later, Marie still looks back on her experience with homelessness and feels empowered by spending her days giving back to those who have no permanent home. She loves the fact she can be part of a program that tries to prevent homeless families from breaking apart.

Many say Marie is a good listener, because she understands the hardship they are going through.

“Sometimes, I’ll share my story with them just to give them that hope and to let them know they should never give up.”

She has become an office angel, which includes fielding phone calls, making calls for donations and more. Even more significantly, she is there for the family’s support.

“I wish we had a program like Family Promise back then. It would’ve saved me a lot of heartache.”
Churches throughout Connecticut have fed the homeless for generations, but in the last few years some, such as New Britain's South Congregational Church, have gone a step further and agreed to be part of a team of religious organizations that host homeless families with children for a week while Family Promise works to secure the families permanent housing. The church or synagogue only participates for the one week every three months, but it still requires a much deeper level of engagement because the families live for the duration on location.

As head of the South Congregational “branch,” Reverend Jane Rowe had already spent years offering a hearty breakfast for the hungry and a Christmas dinner every holiday season. Deciding to take on entire families was a departure from what she had previously experienced.

“I’d say my understanding has broadened a bit about who might be described as homeless and what kinds of situations land people there,” she says.

Rowe often personally interacts with her guests, at least a couple times a week, sometimes breaking bread with them. On Thursday evenings she is the volunteer “night angel,” meaning she is the one who stays overnight and sees them in the morning.

“I’m motivated to help the homeless out of compassion for their situation. That’s a way I live out my call as a Christian. As a pastor and Christian in an urban setting, the situation of homelessness and the threat of homelessness are very prevalent, and we are trying to follow God’s call to serve the city where we are located.”

A day in the life of Rowe is not as hectic and full of organizing as it may seem for a pastor for a church-shelter. Thanks to her excellent team of coordinators, who take charge of taking guests to the day center before 7:00 a.m., she often doesn't even see the families in the mornings. This relegates her to a support role that has her helping her coordinators and troubleshooting their problems. Her interactions with guests are limited to the evening, when they’re back for dinner and she’s able to socialize with them a little. Then the day is over, and she either goes to her own bed or fulfills her role as the night angel.

The church also provides entertainment for the children who stay over in the form of books and games, though according to Rowe they’re content with just running around playing among themselves. More often than not the families interact affably with each other, which creates a genial atmosphere.

In fact, Rowe can only remember one instance in her church that had an unfriendly family.

“It wasn’t a physical fight, but some ‘not
speaking’ and exclusion was going on. Mostly, they seem cordial or at least not hostile to one another, and sometimes quite friendly.”

There are pros and cons to using a church to host homeless families. If a smaller and less financially well off place decides to volunteer, their space and budget could easily become tightened. This could become problematic for those associated with Family Promise as the organization funds itself. But this con can be flipped as a pro as many churches have a base willing to donate time and money as well as food. Thankfully for South Congregational they have no shortage problems.

“We are blessed with a very generous congregation that has stepped up with donations of food that they supply and money to support the program needs.”

Rowe also believes that this is just one way to help the homeless, and that we as a country are still a far way off from fixing this problem, but she remains cautiously optimistic.

“I like that there has been a concerted effort in the last few years for federal and state and city agencies to work together to reduce homelessness. We were making progress before budgets got tight. Now I think not enough is being done. In New Britain, we used to have an overflow shelter that was paid for with funds from the state and city, but that was discontinued a couple of years ago. It’s a problem now that there aren’t places for some people to go.”
At 10:20 p.m., on Monday, January 15, 2018, an anonymous caller reported seeing heavy smoke billowing from the Connerton Street apartment building. The blaze had, reportedly, started from a gas leak in the flue pipe, which was badly rusted and connected to the six furnaces spread throughout the building. Thankfully, not one of the residents of the three-story, six-unit building were home when the fire broke out, as the building had been condemned, and the people evicted a few days before. Now, after the fire, all of those people became classified as homeless.

“It’s important to realize they’re people like you. Families that are trying to make the best of a new place,” says Kevin Andersen, a volunteer with Family Promise, who has two children under age 15 of his own. He explains that when someone comes through the Family Promise center front door, they “don’t really know much of what their situation is and we’re asked not to press because they are with a new group of volunteers every night.”

Anderson works as a teacher in the New Britain public school system and has lived in the district for 15 years, yet he’s still surprised by what he sees and learns as a volunteer.

“These are my kids,” he says. “These are my families.” Like all of us, he argues, they are trying to make the best of a new place as they move from one transient housing situation after another.

“They may be in the program for a million different reasons. Our goal is to give these people, these families, an opportunity to turn their lives around.”

As part of the “Night Angel” crew, a group of volunteers that stay with the families overnight, Andersen spends time playing with the younger kids.

“Though by 9 to 10 p.m., most of the younger families are going to bed; the volunteers stay in order to maintain a feeling of safety.”

After Andersen successfully coaxed the Hebrew School, which also occupied a part of the rented building, to participate in the Family Promise activities, he and his children became much more active members at events, and often rising early to prepare breakfast for everyone.

“It’s just another way to provide support to the families and community that I love so much.”
Not About Us; It’s About Them

By Abigail Murillo

Cheryl Liedke, like many of the Family Promise volunteers, first heard about the program from Church of Christ Congregational in New Britain. She had already been deeply involved in her community as the mother of three children and a teacher in the New Britain school system for 31 years so volunteering for Family Promise felt like a natural fit.

She grasps that the church is more than a shelter—it’s a major resource for the families. Eager to host a special event for Family Promise guests around the holidays, Cheryl suggested that the families get involved in a popular town tradition of decorating fire trucks at Christmastime.

She quickly learned that the families were happy with plans they had already made. Cheryl felt disappointed but then stepped back and realized “it’s not about us; it’s about them.”

She grasps that the church is more than a shelter— it’s a major resource for the families.
Learn More About Family Promise of CT

While the national chapter of Family Promise was founded in 1986, the Connecticut chapter just opened in 2017! To learn more about how to help, either as a volunteer or a donor, visit our website or call 860-259-5649.

Websites

CT CHAPTER
https://www.fpcct.org/

NATIONAL CHAPTER
https://familypromise.org/