

by Susan H. Bonnett



PHOTOS: FAMILY PROMISE

# When it all just comes together

True story. On a cold, dreary afternoon this past January, I heard about a mother with two small kids who had no place to sleep that night. Through a post on a Facebook page of a friend of a friend, we learned that she and her kids were sleeping in their car and she was almost out of gas, so heat for the night was not an option. She was not a beggar, not a meth addict and she was not in some inner city looking for a handout. She was a working mother in St. Tammany who had fallen on hard times and simply could not make the rent. She was, shockingly, a lot like you and me.

The worst part of the story is that there was no place to send her. No shelter, no program, no resource to get her back on her feet. And if she really started looking for help, she risked losing her kids, because after all, the state could not allow children to live in a car. So what to do? Well, I wish I had a happy ending to that story, but all I can say is I hope

enough people heard her story and got her money for a hotel room for a night

or two. But I don't know. And I don't like the way that feels.

*Flash back to a few years ago ...*

In my "rounds" as leader of our local community foundation, I attend countless meetings with our non-profit partners surrounding specific issues or general community need. One pattern I noticed was that a great deal of our discussions kept coming back to a surprising homeless population in our parish that was not only unknown, it was virtually unserved. Several valuable local organizations were doing their best. Motel vouchers for the night or tents to sleep in a local state park were all we had. And that, I thought, was purely unacceptable. Regardless of what I thought, however, here is what I knew: The voters in our parish, though kind and compassionate, had no appetite for additional public resources to build a shelter, and they were even more uninterested in having it in their backyard.

*Out-of-the-box thinking ...*

While the obvious and logical solution to house a homeless population was bricks and mortar, that clearly was not our future—

not now, at least. So non-traditional thought was needed. On a personal note, there was a nagging that I couldn't place—a sort of "I know I know this" kind of feeling. So I called my sister, the compassionate, nice nurturing part of our family. She reminded me that several years ago, once or twice a year, our parents would go to their church on the Mississippi coast to feed and visit with homeless families who were sleeping there.

That was it. The model existed—the Family Promise model—and it is working all over the country.

Faced with the daunting statistic that families account for 40 percent of the homeless in our country and one out of every four of them is a child, Family Promise was founded to use existing community resources to serve this fragile population. First and foremost, Family Promise brings together the faith-based community as the anchor to help families regain their housing, their independence and their dignity. The program is a partnership of congregations within a community that work together through volunteers of all faiths to reduce homelessness and transform lives.

Started in 1981, the organization has grown to more than 185 affiliates in 42 states around the country—in large cities, suburbs and rural counties. Over 160,000 volunteers and 6,000 church congregations participate to simply >>

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 1<sup>st</sup> Session: June 10-June 22  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Session: June 24-July 6  
 3<sup>rd</sup> Session: July 8-July 20  
 4<sup>th</sup> Session: July 22-August 3

**SHORT-TERM SESSIONS**  
 M Session: June 3-June 8  
 A Session: June 10-June 15  
 B Session: June 17-June 22  
 C Session: June 24-June 29  
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combine existing congregational space for lodging and compassionate volunteers who commit to serving these families. Coupled with existing social services in the community, the program creates a unique and extremely effective response to the very real need. This is about a hand up and not a hand out; most meaningfully, it causes lives to intersect that may not otherwise. And all of this is done for a third of the cost of traditional shelters.

*Meanwhile, back on the northshore ...*

After learning of the successful model, St. Tammany Parish Government and the Northshore Community Foundation partnered to put the pieces in place to launch our own local Family Promise affiliate. In a very short time, the response and the progress have been nothing short of astounding.

Over 16 churches of all sizes and denominations spread across the entire parish have officially signed on to be host congregations. Countless volunteers have already begun training, and a board of directors has been seated to lead the now independent 501(c)3 organization. Seed funding for the first year of operation has been secured; private donations, most of them unsolicited, have surprised the organizers time and time again. A small staff will be hired to manage the program, and the first homeless families will be served this spring.

But here is the truly remarkable part. These

families will now be served because of so many willing parties pulling on the same rope. St. Tammany Parish President Pat Brister had the vision to invest in setting up the infrastructure. The Northshore Community Foundation was the vehicle to get the ball rolling. Countless volunteers have worked tirelessly to recruit and develop the network. Churches throughout the parish are waiting for their assignments. Incredibly generous people are already writing checks, big and small, to make this happen.

So the next time I hear about a single mom and her two kids living in their car, I don't have to wonder how the story ended. And that will feel really, really good. ❁



PHOTO: FAMILY PROMISE