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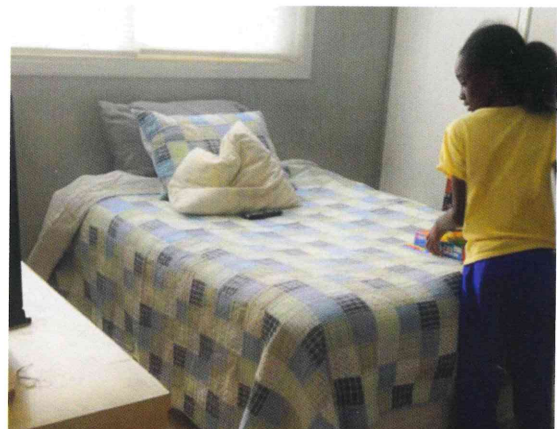
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ONE LOCAL NONPROFIT'S MISSION TO BRING STABILITY TO THE HOMELESS

A Bed All Their Own

ARTICLE BY AMY SALVAGNO



For Hearts for Homes to be able to help, children must be involved, the family must have a source of income and once they're in the door, they must be able to pay their rent going forward.

Additionally, Karan looks for other ways to support them: financial literacy so they know how to budget and manage their money; directing them to local food pantries; and finding them some household items, from large items, like bunk beds, microwaves and vacuums, to even the smallest accessories, like pillows, blankets, towels and garbage cans.

She has created a network of other organizations and churches – Macomb Community Action, Macomb Charitable Foundation, Good Shepherd Coalition,

Trinity Utica and Shepherd's Gate churches – and jokes that she even has St. Vincent de Paul on speed dial.

“To work with them has been fabulous. We have people giving us furniture and others that can help us move it. They're helping us get pantry starter kits together with cleaning supplies, brooms and buckets and getting families settled into their house without spending a ton of money to do so,” she says. “There is a difference between needs and wants, and what we take for granted is unattainable for these families. This gives you such perspective, to be grateful for having a garbage can,” says Karan.

Last year, Hearts for Homes was able to help 55 families and 109 children move into a home. Still, it's only a small dent in a growing predicament.



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**If it wasn't for this organization,
I don't know where we'd be today.**
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Four years ago, Ashley King received news no mother could imagine: Her 3-year-old little boy, Eddie, had leukemia. Far along in a pregnancy with her second child and at the height of the pandemic, the stay-at-home mom faced added heartbreak. Rather than remain at her son's bedside while he fought the illness, her doctor asked her to stay away from the hospital to protect her unborn baby. This meant Ashley's husband, Bryan, had to walk away from his job to be Eddie's main caretaker and advocate. Before the couple realized it, they were drowning in credit card debt and months behind on their mortgage payment.

“No one talks about the financial struggle of everything when you're walking through something like this,” says Ashley, who delivered a healthy baby girl, Susie, in March of 2021. “It's a vicious cycle.”

She shared her financial struggles with her sister-in-law, who pointed her to the organization, Hearts for Homes. Led by Executive Directors Karan Bates-Gasior and Christa Carpenter, the nonprofit aims to end child homelessness in Macomb County.

“She truly was a godsend. She was so fast with responding to me, she was already on top of it,” Ashley recalls. “By the following week, she paid what we were behind on. She went above and beyond. It was just amazing.”

Within the year, Bryan was able to return to work and catch up financially. Karan's good-hearted gesture through Hearts for Homes gave the Clinton Township family peace of mind so they could focus on Eddie's cancer fight. And last March, the now 6-year-old rang the bell, signaling the end of his cancer treatment.

“If it wasn't for this organization, I don't know where we'd be today,” says Ashley. “I can't express how grateful we truly are. Their generosity toward our family is just wonderful.”

The King's story is a bright light in a season when so many struggle – and often, most people aren't even aware that it's a problem. In Macomb County, there are more than 1500 school-age children who suffer from homelessness, and that doesn't include younger siblings. Some live in cars, some on the street, some in hotels, on friends' couches or relatives' basements. These children are usually at least a grade behind in school and face struggles most their age never do, from proper hygiene to clothing to social challenges.

“There are not enough places for homeless people to go. And most are definitely not choosing to be homeless. I feel bad for the kids. They didn't ask for this, they didn't make a bad choice. They've done nothing wrong, but here they are,” says Karan. “There's just not much of a safety net for families. It's not that people are lazy. Most of the parents are working, but child care is so expensive.”

Hearts for Homes was launched in 2017 by community and religious members who recognized an issue with families who were homeless and working, but couldn't make the jump to safe housing. They could afford rent, but not the security deposit and first month's rent, Karan explained. The founders' dream was for every child to have their own bed in a safe and stable home. Today, the mission remains the same – to assist homeless or low-income families in obtaining safe, decent and affordable housing.

Karan joined the organization in 2022 and raises funds, pays the bills and works with the clients.

Those who receive needed help either call or email Hearts for Homes, or Karan receives referrals from homeless liaisons at schools. Some families have suffered a house fire; some have fled a domestic situation; some have faced unforeseen circumstances and can't get ahead. Real affordable housing is now more than 50 percent of a family's income, which is not sustainable.

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“For the families we do help, we’re making a difference by putting a roof over their heads. Unfortunately, the hard days outnumber the good days,” Karan admits. “I will tell you the impact of those doing this kind of work is really hard. Some days I come home and tell my husband, ‘It was a real soul-sucking day.’ Ten people called and I can’t help most of them. There are four kids and a mom living in a car; how are they going to be successful if this is their life? How can they do their homework, get enough sleep and get enough to eat? It’s heartbreaking.”

Karan worries that Hearts for Homes will run out of money – there is more need than she can afford to do something about, she says. The last few years have proven difficult in receiving private grant money, and there are only so many government agencies that can give assistance.

“Part of my advocacy for this is we need better child care in place,” Karan explains, recalling a single dad and full-time painter who lost his job because he couldn’t find anyone to take care of his children. “I’m horrified by the whole situation. It’s a vicious cycle. Which comes first? You need child care to get a job, but you need a job to pay for child care.”

Karan has worked in the nonprofit sector for 20 years, and says it’s easy to get burned out.

“I see a lot of need and it’s hard when you know you can’t help everybody and provide all those needs. It’s really sad. Anybody can end up in that situation, you never know.”

Karan says Hearts for Homes always welcomes monetary donations and items like furniture and pantry contributions. You can find out more about the organization by visiting hearts4homes.org. Reach out to Karan by emailing her at help@hearts4homes.org.

