

From Homeless to Hope-filled: Changing the Lives of Homeless Children at a Shelter

“Today, they need shelter. To build a life, they need support.” These words from a study by published by *The National Center on Family Homelessness- The Characteristics and Needs of Families Experiencing Homelessness- April, 2008*, highlight the challenge of any rescue mission today sheltering homeless children with their parents. Homeless families comprise roughly 34% of the total homeless population. Approximately 1.35 million children will experience homelessness over the course of a year. (*Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress. (2007). US Department of Housing and Urban Development; Office of Community Planning and Development. Burt, M. et al. (1999a). Homelessness: Programs and the People They Serve. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Available at www.urbaninstitute.org; Burt, M. et al. (2000). America’s Homeless II: Populations and Services (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute).*)

The study continues by explaining that families experiencing homelessness are under considerable stress. Prior to the shelter, many have been living doubled-up in overcrowded apartments with relatives or friends. Others have been sleeping in cars and campgrounds, or sending their children to stay with relatives to avoid shelter life. Homelessness also increases the likelihood that families will separate or dissolve, which may compound the stress the family already feels. The typical sheltered homeless family is comprised of a mother in her late twenties with two children. (*Burt, M. et al. (2000). America’s Homeless II: Populations and Services (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute).*)

The impact of family stress during times of homelessness is not lost on children:

- 74% worry that they will have no place to live.
- 58% worry that they will have no place to sleep.
- 87% worry that something bad will happen to their family.

(*National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999*)

The Path of Citrus County is an eight-year old rescue mission located in a rural county north of Tampa, Florida. The vision of founder and Executive Director, DuWayne Sipper was to shelter men, women and children. Since opening its doors in 2001 The Path has sheltered many children, the majority with a single parent mother—but some have been sheltered with a single father as well. As a rescue mission, Path programs address spiritual, physical and emotional needs of homeless men and women who want to change their lives and break the cycles of habits that keep them from doing so.

While parents wrestle with new choices, a different lifestyle, and the challenges of decision-making plus discipline in their own lives, The Path and other rescue missions sheltering their homeless children face the added challenge of providing care and stability that will contribute to growth and transformation in the family, as well as the child. Children who arrive at the shelter have already experienced high levels of stress and trauma that affect them physically and emotionally, impair their school readiness or academic performance for some, and for most their ability to relate to their peers, parents and other authority figures.

According to “Understanding Traumatic Stress in Children,” (*Ellen Bassuk, MD; Kristina Konnath, LICSW, Katherine Volk, MA- Published for The Family Center on Homelessness, Newton Centre, MA- February 2006*):

“It matters whether a caregiver validates the child’s experience or blames the child, or if the caregiver is able to provide comfort and reassurance instead of having difficulty responding to the child. When a caregiver experiences a high level of distress, a child often responds similarly. Caregiver’s support is one of the most important factors in a child’s recovery from trauma.”

For a rescue mission that shelters children, there is the challenge of addressing a child’s need for safety, stabilization and support. Their world is not safe, consistent or predictable, and they look to caregivers to help them cope. The study on traumatic stress in children indicates there are many factors that increase the likelihood that a child can recover from a traumatic experience: feelings of control over one’s life, high self-esteem and confidence, sense of humor, optimism, safe, warm, caring, supportive environment, reasonable structure and limits, and strong relationship with at least one caregiver.

(pg. 4, “Understanding Traumatic Stress in Children,” (Ellen Bassuk, MD; Kristina Konnath, LICSW, Katherine Volk, MA- Published for The Family Center on Homelessness, Newton Centre, MA- February 2006)

Following Hurricane Katrina, a program called “Camp Noah” was developed by Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota to help children overcome the fear and trauma of surviving a natural disaster. *Camp Noah* is a weeklong, faith-based day camp offered for elementary-age children in grades K-6 who have experienced disaster. *Camp Noah* combines disaster recovery support for children with fun-filled recreation to form a unique and healing experience. This program uses volunteer teams to bring the skills and energy needed to provide fun, compassion, attentive listening and support for children and families who have been through the trauma of a disaster and the difficulties of recovery. *(Visit their website at www.campnoah.org for more information about this program).*

The idea began to take hold at The Path that a similar program could be developed that would address a child’s spiritual needs and give them knowledge and skills to cope with the experience of homelessness, and the uncertainties of their environment when they left the shelter by equipping them to strengthen their family unit. Ideally, they would become stronger contributors and help their parent or caregiver, within their ability. In the past, The Path has supported the needs of homeless children staying at the shelter with their single parent by using volunteers to care for them so that the parent could focus on program classes held during the evening. These volunteers contributed their experience from a variety of childcare backgrounds, serving in secular and non-secular capacities. Establishing meaningful activities for children focused on their needs, building academic skills, and other basics created a foundation for coping with their experience and potentially preventing homelessness (aside from unforeseen circumstances) later in adulthood.

During the summer of 2009, the approach was formalized into a pilot program called “The Path Eagles.” For the twelve- week summer period, a caregiver was hired to work with Path staff to build curriculum and activities based on a simple, set program of 8 sessions, and then deliver these sessions, 3 hours each at The Path’s house for women, on the evenings the parent was scheduled for adult programs. Incorporating material about the life and habits of eagles, each night’s session focused on 1 of 8 themes reinforced with a variety of activities that supported these objectives to prevent future homelessness: strengthen academic performance and school readiness with activities incorporating reading, language arts, math and basic study skills; introduce the value of money and budget basics; teach balanced nutrition and promote exercise based on the material on the My Pyramid.gov website; build self-esteem and leadership skills; facilitate problem-solving, working together in groups, and other activities like performing simple chores around the house to build a disciplined work ethic, safety at home and what

to do in an emergency. Each participating child received a certificate of achievement, and a special award – bronze eagle pins--for completing the summer program.

The goal of *The Path Eagles* was to provide some skills that will teach children how to be a part of a family, reinforce academic basics, help their parents and each other, since most come from a single-parent, working household, and how to better cope with many of the uncertainties of their environment. Topics included healthy self-esteem, working together as a family/group, basic first aid, healthy eating and fitness; drugs, tobacco and alcohol awareness; money basics; reading and language arts. The younger children learned to write their name and letters of the alphabet. Children took turns reading the material together. Often, the older children read to the younger children. *Path Eagles* created posters, wrote poems and stories, and kept a personal notebook to decorate, journal and write poems, stories, letters to parents, etc. They cooked simple meals, and especially loved making home-made pizza. Children learned important information about making the right choices in life that can easily be applied in their lives after leaving the rescue mission. Each child left the program knowing that they are special in God's eyes.

Even with a specific children's program, there are many challenges for staff and volunteers working with the homeless children in a rescue mission.

1. The length of stay at the shelter is often not predictable. Another challenge was dealing with the diverse age groups and finding ways to engage all the children.

The Path's program for homeless children was comprehensive, but flexible enough so that a child would benefit regardless of the number of sessions he or she is able to participate in, or when the child joins (since new clients arrive at any time), or the child's age, since the older children seemed to enjoy more working with the younger ones and helping them—rather than doing activities on their own at their level. The discovery with this pilot program was that the interaction and practical activities like reading, drawing, learning simple first aid, journaling, playing and cooking together made an impact on all the children who participated, and had more to do with the adult who participated with them for 12 weeks. They looked forward every evening to the arrival of their teacher and could barely contain their excitement over what she was planning next.

2. Reaching and stabilizing the children- takes creativity, patience and a realistic understanding of their world.

Many children have spent time with so many adults in various stages of “relationships”, or with adults other than a parent, or in foster care, that the understanding of “family” is a complicated, unstable web. While some children are withdrawn and distrusting, others have an amazing understanding of the love of Christ, what faith is and how God can take care of them as well as all the other people coming and going in their lives. The concept of “family” can be confusing until the realization that it is a far-reaching net and can change quickly for these children.

Some are unusually fearful of strangers, unfamiliar surroundings and loud noises. One child was terrified of sudden loud noises, and especially of thunderstorms until a caregiver explained to this little

girl that it was God's way of telling her it was going to rain. After that, the child ran to a window every time there was thunder and shouted "mommy, God says it's going to rain, it's going to rain!" After several months, when a stack of books fell off a table she was working at, instead of screaming in fear she reportedly laughed and explained "God must have dropped a hammer again," and went back to playing.

Surprisingly, many have learned to survive day-to-day with amazing maturity and resilience while living in a chaotic, turbulent environment. Unfortunately for some, they have been robbed of their childhood. Often, there is an adult mind in a child's frame and it can be heartbreaking. Caregivers should not be too surprised at what they learn from these children about their world.

However, the children at The Path embrace faith in Jesus Christ wholeheartedly, evidenced by the sincerity of their prayers and concern for the adults who care for them. Jacob, a nine-year old, would respond with the same prayer request at every church he visited during his stay at The Path: "Please pray that my mom can find a home for us." Often, the children lead their parents to Christ.

3. Recognizing that many of the observable issues can be connected to lack of stability, structure, regular meals, healthy diet, and some old-fashioned discipline. And, learning styles.

One child at the shelter was very fidgety and disruptive, more so than usual. After researching learning styles, and trial and error, the volunteer taking care of this child learned that the fidgety kids were in fact paying attention and often had better understanding of the lessons than some of the other more compliant and "better behaved" children.

To engage this child, a certain amount of fidgeting was tolerated, and she found colorfully illustrated Bible stories online, printed one story at a time, and put them in a notebook for him. They read together out loud, or acted out the stories, and he couldn't move on to his choice of an activity until the story was finished and he could answer some basic questions. He was also given time to ask his own questions. That was opening a Pandora's box sometimes, but they had fun together trying to answer his questions. He was a good reader, and figured out quickly how to navigate through his Bible after being shown a few times. This child often made up the games they played together. Their all-time favorite was miniature golf, using umbrellas for golf clubs.

4. Dealing with the behavioral and emotional issues. Recognize their fears and work through them together.

Get involved! Play! Interact. Be patient and persistent. Explain to children what they did wrong and give them a chance to "fix" mistakes. They are not "bad" or "losers". The problem is the behavior, and that can be changed. Gerald was nine years old when he came to The Path a few summers ago. He was quite the "adult:" demanding, very much in charge, and angry. It didn't take long to realize that this young boy was extremely mature and very intelligent. He had well-tuned survival instincts and quickly figured out what buttons to push to get what he wanted. He was also very destructive.

It was very challenging to teach Gerald respect for his surroundings—to realize he had to take care of his room, the furniture and other belongings in the house. When he behaved inappropriately, he had to “do it over the right way” to show us he knew what was right or the proper way to treat chairs and cabinet doors. His reaction was interesting: he looked shocked at first, then sorry. He genuinely cared but no one had ever spoken to him like that before or gave him the chance to “fix” his mistakes. He seldom made the same mistake twice.

Over time, the lesson learned is that what makes the difference in the lives of these homeless children is the individual who works with them, and the relationship that is established. The best way to minister to their particular needs is to be yourself, be strong and loving, encouraging, and let them know that God is there for them to give them hope. Keep your word and mean what you say, but don’t make unrealistic promises. Let them know all the time that they are safe at your rescue mission and can trust you. Listen, listen, listen... Find indirect ways like drawing, acting, or writing to encourage them to open up and express themselves. Above all, don’t assume they can’t understand the message of salvation. Salvation is what their hearts desire and what they need the most. Hope changes everything.

[About Kathryn Sipper](#)

Kathryn Sipper serves as Development Director for The Path of Citrus County (Florida) rescue mission alongside husband and Executive Director, DuWayne Sipper. A published author and public speaker, Kathryn has an undergraduate degree from Duke University and an MBA from Fairleigh-Dickinson University. She has also served for many years in Christian Education. Prior professional experience includes over 20 years in HR/Benefits administration, technology and consulting. Contact Kathryn at sipperk@bellsouth.net.

An edited version of this article will appear in the January-February 2010 issue of *Rescue* magazine, published for the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions (AGRM). Used by permission. The Path of Citrus County is an established 501-c-3 solely dedicated to addressing the issues of homelessness, assisting Path clients with obtaining full-time employment, and transitioning to permanent housing. Houses for men, women and their children have been in operation since 2001. For more information, contact: The Path, PO Box 3024, Inverness, FL 34451. Phone: 352-527-6500 or visit their website at www.pathofcitrus.org.