

New Hope for Families





The nonprofit agency that provides temporary housing for homeless families may soon find itself homeless unless the community comes to the rescue.

By Craig Coley • Photography by Martin Boling





Like many cities, Bloomington has a visible homeless population, people who congregate in Seminary Square Park or on the downtown streets. But there is another face to homelessness that most people don't see or even think about. Because, just like in many other cities, a significant number of the homeless in Bloomington are families, and most of those families include infants and small children.

"On any given day there are about 330 homeless people in Bloomington," says Forrest Gilmore, executive director of Shalom Community Center. "About 140 of those are families with children."

The sad truth is that a human being is most likely to experience homelessness in the first year of life, according to a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development report. The next most likely time is between the ages of 1 and 6.

While Bloomington has three shelters for mothers caring for children, it has only one that takes in families with two adults or where a father is the only parent. Since opening in 2012, New Hope for Families has provided temporary housing for 130 families, including some 200 adults and 220 children.

New Hope provides more than a roof over the heads of families in need. Yes, the nonprofit organization provides temporary shelter, and works to place families in crisis into stable housing. But it also helps parents find employment, and offers child care while they go on job interviews and, later, when they start working. The truth is, mov-

ing families from homelessness into a home means more than finding them a house or an apartment—it means helping them through a sometimes complicated bureaucratic system of paperwork as they patch together jobs, child care, and, ultimately, stable housing.

Elaine Guinn, executive director of The Roof at New Hope, says the shelter succeeds because it is small enough—and the staff is passionate enough—to engage with every aspect of a family's situation. "We do whatever it takes," Guinn says.

Eighty percent of the families who left New Hope in 2016 moved into independent, stable housing. "We are not a Band-Aid," says Sherrie Shuler, New Hope's development director. "We are a solution to the problem of homelessness."

Now, however, the nonprofit is facing its own housing instability issues. New Hope for Families operates in a row of houses on West 2nd Street, all leased from IU Health Bloomington Hospital. But with the hospital's plans to relocate to the current site of the Indiana University golf driving range just off the Ind. 45/46 Bypass, the hospital's existing properties will be put to other uses. And that means New Hope must find a new home by 2020.

THE ROOF

New Hope for Families grew out of the 2010 Homelessness Summit where a consistent theme was Bloomington's lack of a shelter for families experiencing homelessness. Jim Riley and Roland "Bud" Kohr heard this as a call to action. Kohr, who died in 2015



(left) Leon Gordon, assistant director and primary case manager; (top, l-r) Steve Dyer, president of New Hope board of directors, and Sherrie Shuler, development director; (above) Elaine Guinn, executive director of The Roof.

and was a former president of Bloomington Hospital, persuaded the hospital to lease a house it owned on the corner of 2nd and Rogers streets. The rent was affordable—\$1 a year—but the house was abandoned and had to be renovated from basement to roof.

Volunteers did all the work. "I can remember days we dumpster-dived for furniture," says Sue Shindell, who has been on New Hope's board of directors since the beginning.

Guinn was there early on as well, responding to a Craigslist post seeking volunteers. Guinn and her family had been homeless when she was a child. "I understood, and I connected with this concept," she says.

New Hope welcomed its first family in July 2011, and over the course of its first year turned away about 230 people. "We never had an opening," Guinn says. "As soon as someone was gone, someone else followed very quickly." So the volunteers—who called themselves Hope Builders—went back to work, overhauling a second hospital-owned house farther east on 2nd



Four-year-old Troy Stivers with his dad, Adam Stivers.

Street. The second residence also quickly filled with families.

Today, those two houses, known as The Roof, accommodate seven families, with each family—regardless of size—living in one bedroom. In October, a family of eight was sleeping in the largest room, which has three bunk beds and a crib.

Each house has a living room, kitchen, and two bathrooms. Families do their own cooking. With three or four families sharing the space, all experiencing the stress of homelessness, getting along can be a challenge.

“I call this the great experiment,” says Leon Gordon, assistant director and primary case manager for families living at The Roof. “Just when I think I’ve seen it all, I haven’t.”

The average stay at New Hope is 68 days. When people move in, Gordon immediately has them set goals and apply for the resources that will help them move into long-term housing. “On this whole continuum of getting people housed, there are so many obstacles,” Gordon says.

There are systems in place to help. For example, Section 8 vouchers allow people to pay just 30 percent of their income as rent,

with the federal government covering the rest. But acquiring one of the 1,368 Section 8 vouchers administered by the Bloomington Housing Authority can be a complicated process. This is where having the New Hope staff ready to step in and help is vital to getting families settled into permanent housing.

Many families experiencing homelessness have been through a crisis and may have been delinquent on rent or utilities in the past. Getting a lease on a new apartment requires a security deposit, and if the family has a delinquent utility bill, it will have to be paid before the utilities can be turned on. But there is a system in place to help with this, too. By partnering with Shalom Community Center’s Rapid Rehousing program, families can get help with these and other up-front costs.

For people with low incomes, Bloomington is a difficult place to live. “Monroe County is the highest-cost housing market in the state of Indiana,” says Deborah Myerson, executive director of South Central Indiana Housing Opportunities.

According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, the fair market rate for a two-bedroom apartment in Bloomington

is \$884 per month, almost \$100 more than the state average, while the local mean wage for renters is \$9.20 an hour, \$3.77 an hour less than the state average. Myerson says Indiana University students put pressure on both sides of the problem—driving up rents while pushing down wages by being willing to work for less.

Even someone working 40 hours a week at Bloomington’s mean wage earns just a little more than \$19,000 a year. A two-bedroom apartment at Bloomington’s market rate would cost more than half of that annual gross income.

“Overnight, my family disintegrated”

Last year, Adam and Melissa Stivers lived in a three-bedroom house with their 3-year-old son, Troy, and Melissa’s two children from a previous relationship. They were buying the house on contract from the owners—\$9,000 down, with monthly payments of \$500. Melissa drove a new Kia, and Adam drove a Ford F250 pick-up truck. Adam, 49, worked construction. Melissa, 41, had just started college to become a certified medical assistant, and was working at IMA (Internal Medicine Associates). “We kind of had it going on,” Adam says, “but we were over-extended.”

In November 2016, a blood clot in Melissa’s leg traveled to her brain, and she suffered a stroke, which necessitated removing a third of her brain. She spent three months in hospitals and now lives in Owen Valley Health Campus. “It was touch-and-go forever,” Adam says. “By the time I went back to work, it was already too little, too late. One thing I learned is single dads have it rough. I got 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daycare. And in construction, they don’t want to hear that. They want you there at 6 a.m. and they don’t know what time you’re getting off.”

Stivers sold his truck to keep them afloat, but Melissa’s student loans went into default, so the tax refund Stivers hoped for did not come.

“Overnight, my family disintegrated right in front of me, and I couldn’t do anything to stop it,” he says.

The owners of the house had been sympathetic, waiting six months for a payment, but in the end they evicted Stivers and the children. Melissa’s kids went to live with their grandparents. Adam packed a few essential items, took some things to a pawnshop, and left the rest in the house. Before they moved into The Roof, Adam and Troy,



Emily Pike, executive director of The Nest, reads to some of her charges.

now 4 years old, went couch to couch, taking refuge with friends. “That was the scariest time of my life,” Adam says.

Childhood trauma

“A lot of people think that the traumas of poverty for young children are hunger and violence,” says Emily Pike, executive director of The Nest, New Hope’s child care program. “Those things obviously are traumas, but the single greatest trauma is instability.”

A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study found that every traumatic childhood experience—such as homelessness—increases the risk of adolescent pregnancy, suicide, alcoholism, heart disease, and other health problems.

“We know that the first three years is the vital time in a child’s development,” Pike says. “And for low-income kids, that is the time when they are least likely to have their needs fully met.”

THE NEST

Because New Hope’s case managers work so intimately with families, very early on they identified child care as essential to attaining stable housing.

“If you don’t have child care, you can’t work,” says Pike, who was a case manager in New Hope’s early days. “Even the cheapest licensed day care in this town is \$135 a week for an infant. If you’re working at Wendy’s 35 hours a week, that’s more than half of your take-home pay. You just can’t do it. It was causing families to be homeless and it was keeping them from being re-housed.”

A report from a recent Family Impact Seminar, held in Washington, D.C., noted that while many factors can contribute to family homelessness, if a family has been subsisting on one income earned by a single parent, the speed with which the family can move from housing to homelessness is remarkable. The report notes, “When children

are young, a lack of reliable child care can be the precipitating cause [of homelessness]. Depending on the nature of the parent’s employment, if the child care arrangement fails even once, the result can be the loss of a job and, soon after, a home.”

To help solve that problem, New Hope refurbished a third hospital-owned house on 2nd Street, and in 2015 launched The Nest, New Hope’s day care and preschool program, with Pike as its executive director. The Nest is a child-centered program licensed to care for 16 children. In less than two years it has attained the highest rating in Indiana’s Paths to Quality program—a rating held by fewer than 2 percent of child care programs in the state. In order to keep payments reasonable, particularly for those recovering from a financial crisis, parents pay on a sliding scale.

A two-part solution

Today, New Hope for Families is composed of the two programs—The Roof and The Nest. Because The Nest provides safe, affordable child care, people living in The Roof can find jobs, which improves their chances of getting into stable housing. And because their children can continue attending The Nest after they leave The Roof, parents are more likely to keep those jobs.

The importance of addressing the issues of affordable housing and affordable child care to the citizens of Bloomington was recently revealed. Earlier this year, the City asked area residents to participate in a survey in which they were asked to rate 26 characteristics of Bloomington. The lowest percentage of “good” and “excellent” ratings went to “availability of affordable housing.” The next-to-lowest rating was “availability of affordable child care/preschool.”

Steve Dyer, president of New Hope’s board of directors, says the survey results underscore the importance of the organization’s mission. “We are working on the two biggest issues in the community, at a hands-on, person-to-person level,” Dyer says. “And everything we do involves children.”

“Having my own place”

Amy Harris, 38, and her children, ages 7, 3, and 1, moved into The Roof in June when Harris became afraid of her husband. Leaving him meant the loss of her \$11-an-hour job as a quality control inspector at Cook Medical because she no longer had someone to watch the kids when she went to work. Harris had been in this situation before, having experienced “bad relationship after bad relationship.” Sometimes she wound up back with her parents in Paragon, Indiana, unable to find work. On other occasions,

she lived in a family shelter or a domestic violence shelter in Martinsville. The move to New Hope could have been a continuation of that pattern.

But Emily Pike helped her find a job at a Rally’s fast food restaurant. Leon Gordon helped her secure a Section 8 housing voucher, and accompanied her when she applied for a townhouse, where he assured the landlord that Harris and her children maintained a clean room while living at The Roof. The Rally’s job pays \$8.50 an hour, less than her previous position, but allows Harris to work while her oldest child is in school and her two youngest are in child care at The Nest. With the help of a babysitter on Sundays, she manages to work 30 hours a week. The townhouse rents for more than \$1,100, but with the Section 8 voucher, Harris pays just \$183 a month. As she earns more money, her payments will increase.

“I’d rather work fast food than send my baby to a day care I can’t trust,” Harris says. “Once my baby goes to school, I plan on going back into nursing. But I just need to work right now. I’m really happy. I’m keeping up with my bills. It’s awesome having my own place. I never thought I could make it on my own.”

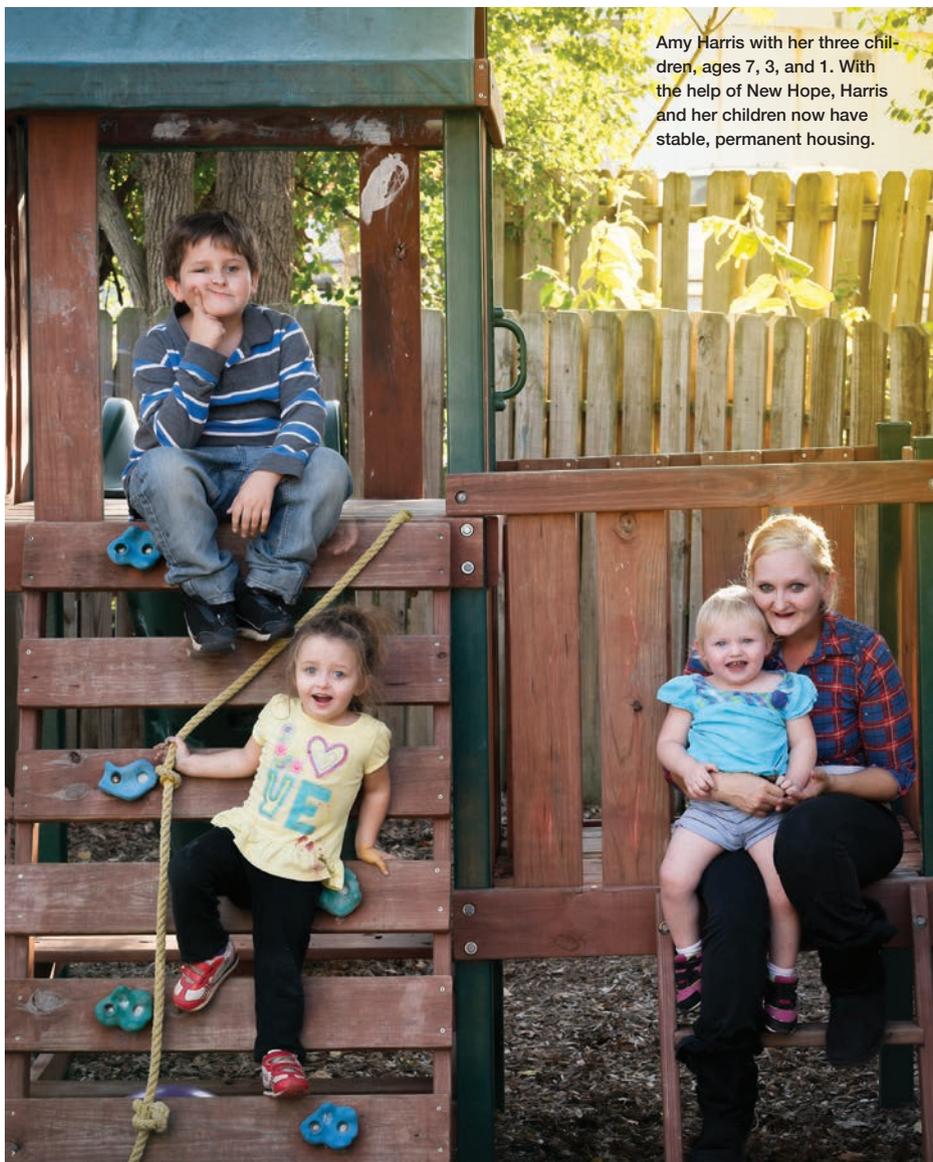
Not every family is successful

Not every family moves on as successfully as the Harris family. Adam and Troy Stivers left The Roof without a stable home, though Troy continues to attend The Nest for preschool. Gordon says what happens to families depends on their attitudes and actions. Sometimes, parents choose to leave before securing permanent housing. But more frequently, their attitudes change as a result of the time spent in The Roof.

That’s because, in large part, the staff has more opportunities to work with families on all kinds of issues, Guinn says. “We aren’t just caseworkers who tell people what to do. We are very much a family at New Hope,” she says. “If families are arguing, we facilitate a conversation. We turn that into a learning moment and that’s how they learn how to be good neighbors when they leave here.”

What happens if they lash out at a staff member? “If they get angry or aggressive, we model a response they might never have seen before,” Guinn says. “We stay calm and we say, ‘You can’t talk to me like that, but let’s work this out.’ And that makes a huge difference. They learn from that.”

Guinn says looking over the data shows that families who stay longer at New Hope,



Amy Harris with her three children, ages 7, 3, and 1. With the help of New Hope, Harris and her children now have stable, permanent housing.

from six to 10 months, stay in permanent housing longer. “Basically, we rub off on them,” she says. “Those who stay here longer are more often, five or six years later, still in permanent housing. And we feel that’s because we have more time to work with them on the things that, in the past, kept tripping them up.”

“A healthier family now”

At just two weeks shy of a year, Priscilla and Justin McCutcheon hold the record for the family that has lived longest at The Roof. “Everywhere we applied, they denied us,” Priscilla says. But their time at The Roof changed them in ways Priscilla says are difficult to express.

“I’ve learned a lot,” Priscilla says. “We know the rights from wrongs when it comes to housing and bills and things like that. We are a healthier family together now. They brought us together as a family and made us stronger.”

In 2016, the couple, along with their three children, were thrown out by Priscilla’s father, with whom they had been living. They stayed for short times with friends and other family

members. Before they arrived at New Hope, they were living in a motel room they rented by the week. The Department of Child Services (DCS) visited them there because their 9-year-old daughter wasn’t attending school. It was at that point that DCS referred them to New Hope for Families.

Priscilla says she was devastated when they moved into The Roof. “I didn’t want any part of it,” she admits. “I didn’t want my kids to have to be in a shelter. It made me feel as if I was a worthless parent.”

But time spent at The Roof changed their lives. In April, the McCutcheons moved to a three-bedroom apartment in public housing. A fourth child was born soon after. They have a Section 8 voucher and are searching for another place.

“We’re looking for a house out toward the country,” Priscilla says. “It looks promising.”

Looking ahead

Elaine Guinn feels the same way about New Hope for Families. When you assess the organization today—with its half-million-dol-

lar budget, nationally accredited child care program, and impressive record of moving families from crisis to stability—success seems like a foregone conclusion. But she remembers that it wasn’t always so.

“When I agreed to become director [in 2012], it was 20 hours a week, for \$11 an hour,” Guinn says. “We had \$4,000 in our bank account and everyone quit in the same week. Instead of sitting there and thinking, ‘This is a disaster,’ I said ‘If I just put three years of really hard work into this—just give it everything—this can be straightened out.’”

Five years later, Guinn has seen those goals achieved. In October, she announced she would step down as executive director in early 2018. She’s ready for something different, and she says New Hope is prepared as well. It’s a time of change for the organization.

Board members and staff have been exploring locations for New Hope beyond the hospital-owned houses on 2nd Street, and have looked at more than 40 vacant properties to build on and developed properties to repurpose. Earlier this year, the board hired



Priscilla and Justin McCutcheon with their four children (and the family pet) on the porch of their home. Now in stable housing, they hope to move to the country soon.



Volunteer Judith “Grandma Judy” Olmstead helps preschoolers at The Nest make a healthy snack. New Hope staff believe their impact can be greatest with young children.

Sherrie Shuler as development director and contracted with a consultant to study if and when the community would support a fundraising initiative. The consultant’s feasibility study is scheduled to be complete by the start of the new year.

Looking ahead to possible changes, draft plans include a modest increase in the size of The Roof, with accommodations for up to eight families, and room to expand to 12 in the future. As for The Nest, they hope to allow for the care of up to 48 children, a significant increase from the 16 who receive care now.

Shuler and board president Dyer say that The Roof wouldn’t be the same place if it grew much bigger, because successfully placing families requires the close attention of case managers like Leon Gordon. However, they feel that The Nest can benefit from growth. Right now, six of the 16 spots are reserved for children from middle-income families paying market rate—there is a waiting list of middle-income families wanting to get in—and Pike says a larger capacity would allow a mix closer to half and half.

“We know that learning outcomes are better in a mixed-income cohort,” Pike says. “But we also know that when those two groups have exposure to one another, it makes the middle-income families less nervous about homeless people, and I think it helps the families touched by homelessness to value the care more highly.”

New Hope staff also believe their impact can be greatest with children. “There’s a whole body of research out there that says putting money on the back end of this problem is putting your hand over a running fire hose,” Guinn says. “Putting money in the front end, into the kids, and making sure they’re in a safe, secure, nurturing environment—that helps in the long run.”

“One family at a time”

The thought of leaving the houses on 2nd Street is bittersweet for board president Dyer, who has spent countless hours renovating and maintaining them. He first discovered New Hope while cleaning up around the program’s first house through a

church service project. At the time, he says, he was feeling pessimistic about solving the problem of homelessness. Not today.

“Homelessness, if you look at it as just this big thing, it feels like it’s too big,” Dyer says. “We used to call it trying to boil the ocean. You can’t do it. You have to take one person at a time, one family at a time, one child at a time, and work with them.” ✧