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Homeless Solutions head honored for helping to 'make things better'

BY ROB SEMAN
DAILY RECORD

MORRISTOWN -- The Rev. Elizabeth Hall was a teenager living in the college town of Waynesburg, Pa., when she got her first pangs of righteous indignation, as she puts it.

The borough council there had just started a curfew for children 16 years old or younger, as a way to dissuade parents from leaving their children in the car while they went to drink in the local taverns.

Punishing children for the misdeeds of their parents didn't sit right with Hall, so she started writing letters to the local paper, the Waynesburg Gazette, signed by all her friends at school.

Eventually, the borough did away with the curfew because it didn't work, she said. What effect her letter had was beside the point, which was simply to do something about it.

That point hasn't changed for Hall. Instead of fighting city hall, she has in the last nearly eight years gone up against the growing tide of those who have fallen into economic disadvantage as the director of Homeless Solutions in Morris Township.

Her efforts have made an impression, at least, on the Community Foundation of New Jersey, a \$158 million philanthropic organization that enables donors to provide ongoing funding for charitable organizations across the state. The foundation last week honored Hall with their Exemplary Performance in Non Profit Management Award, which is given to nonprofit chief executives who have demonstrated leadership that has led to significant accomplishments and substantial impacts on New Jersey.

Making a dent

"We're a thumb in the dike along with the other people," she said of the work of the organization, which seeks to put the homeless and working poor into stable housing.

"Until the balance gets sorted out and rebalanced, that's the only way I can see this will ever be corrected," Hall said. "I don't believe it's going to be corrected by laws. I don't think it's going to be corrected by the kindness of people.

"We may make a dent," Hall said. "We may help a few people along the way, and we hope we do."


Hall grew up in the New Brunswick area and lived in the Basking Ridge section of Bernards and in Waynesburg, Pa., before attending Drew Theological School, where she became a Presbyterian minister.

She became associate pastor at First United Presbyterian Church in Troy, N.Y., and then became pastor for six years at Seneca Presbyterian Church in Buffalo, N.Y.

From there, she came back to New Jersey to take the position of interim director for Homeless Solutions, a job she thought would be only temporary. After two months, though, the board of trustees asked her to stay as full-time executive director, and she accepted.

N.J. challenge

"For one thing, I love a challenge, and as you can imagine, I have a passion for people who struggle to make ends meet and make their lives better," Hall said.

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DAWN BENKO / DAILY RECORD

The Rev. Elizabeth Hall, executive director of Homeless Solutions, is shown in front of a picture of one of the housing projects she helped get built. She was honored by the Community Foundation.

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Under Hall, Homeless Solutions undertook the construction of a group of affordable apartment units on Jean Street in Morris Township that opened in 2004. The apartments, along with the Homeless Solutions family shelter program and transitional apartment program, are how the organization attempts to move people from homelessness to independent living.

The statistics behind that task are what concern Hall. They show that hard-working people who would have once been considered middle class can no longer afford to live in Morris County. The inability to find affordable housing in turn contributes to their inability to make a living. The opposite, too, is true, she said.

Living statistics

The average income of a family living in the organization's shelter is \$19,329, with family members working for less than \$10 per hour during a 40-hour work week.

In the transitional apartment program, where the organization subsidizes rent, the family makes an average of \$23,500 in yearly income. That income rises to nearly \$29,000 for a family in the Jean Street apartment.

"Stabilized housing can make a difference," Hall said.

"The knowledge of a roof over your head is enough to stabilize your life enough to get a little bit more ahead and make better job decisions," Hall. "I think clearly stability helps decisions."

Hall primarily consigns herself to the administrative task of keeping the organization running.

Her average day, like this past Wednesday, started with a three-mile walk before answering e-mails at 8 a.m. She gets to work an hour later, working on everything from securing donations for the current \$4 million capital campaign, to meeting with various committees and the board of trustees.

One woman's story

While Hall might consign herself primarily to administrative work, the effects of her efforts have not gone unnoticed by those Homeless Solutions helps, such as Camille Smith.

Smith, a single mother and third-generation Morristown resident, said she was at one time a successful businesswoman until a heroin addiction sent her life and career spiraling downward. She spent a year living on the street before she discovered Homeless Solutions, which admitted her into its shelter program.

Smith and her daughter spent five weeks in the shelter before the organization moved her into a transitional apartment, where she stayed for a year and a half. She met her husband, also a recovering addict, through Homeless Solutions, and the two found an apartment in Rockaway, but recently moved into one of the Jean Street Apartments.

"They didn't make me better, they didn't make me work. That was my obligation in life," Smith explained. "Because of their doors opening to me, they made it possible to do what I had to do to get my life back on track."

That is largely due to Hall, Smith said. She said Hall is professional and direct with those she works with.

'A blessing'

"She's a blessing in disguise," Smith said. "She's not very recognized."

Elaine Johnson is director of programs and services at Homeless Solutions. Johnson, who has worked at the organization for the last four years after a 25-year career in corporate America, counts Hall as one of the best superiors she has worked for.

"She sees the big picture, and understands and empathizes with the people in need," Johnson said. "She believes in her convictions that everyone deserves a second chance."

Hall said she believes in an ethic of working hard to make a better life for one's self. The problem she and the organization face is when hard workers simply can't afford to live, she said. That makes it important for her staff to work hard as well.

"I think there's a tone that we're all here trying to do our best trying to make things better for some folks who have come our way," Hall said.

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