

Homeless Solutions a godsend for those in need

Elaine Powell is 40 years old, tall, smart, good-looking, very well-spoken — and poor.



WARREN BOROSON

So poor that despite having a \$35,000-a-year job, she lives in a subsidized 15-unit apartment complex in Morris Township called the Jean Street Apartments, run by an estimable organization,

Homeless Solutions.

Her story: Powell was born in California and grew up in Utah as a "good Mormon." She studied at the University of Utah and a community college

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in Salt Lake City, getting an associate's degree in graphics design. Then she became pregnant accidentally, and "because of my Mormon upbringing, I thought it best to get married."

"Boy, was that a bad idea." Powell and her husband moved to Pennsylvania, and they had two children, a boy and a girl.

Her husband turned out to be physically abusive. She left him, but she had no means of support. Her parents were back in Utah, and she was having a hard time finding a job.

"I was stuck in Pennsylvania," Powell said.

Some help with rent came from a domestic-violence program in the state; interfaith churches helped arrange temporary lodgings, but she had to move almost every week.

"It was hard," Powell said.

Powell and her husband got into a custody fight, and her lawyer urged her to leave Pennsylvania and flee to a state more favorably disposed to abused women.

In September 2003, she took her children to New Jersey.

Her son, Maxfield (after Maxfield Parrish, the artist) had been experiencing speech problems in Pennsylvania.

At a local school, the Lafayette Learning Center in Morris-

town, the speech-therapy program helped him enormously.

Her daughter, Jade, had been having problems in Pennsylvania. "She wasn't getting it."

Here, she kept winning certificate after certificate for her accomplishments. At one awards ceremony, Powell said, "I stood in the back of the classroom and cried. I was so proud of her!"

She applied for admittance into the shelter run by Homeless Solutions and had to take a drug test. She failed.

She had eaten a poppy seed bagel, which causes people to test positive for opiates — something she didn't know.

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She had to wait three days to take the test again. "And I almost never eat poppy seed bagels!"

Powell finally got admitted to the shelter, on West Hanover Avenue in Morris Township, across from the Firefighters and Police Academy.

It's an old three-story building with spare but decent rooms, each with a bed, a dresser and a sink. Priority is given to parents with children.

The tenants' quarters are divided into men and women and people with mental problems.

Rules include no drinking, no drugs. You must sign in and out when you leave. No cooking in the rooms except for a microwave. Lights out at 10.

Botsey Hall, who runs Homeless Solutions, told me that the tenants are encouraged to go out during the day, even if they are not working.

Everyone must help out by mopping floors and cleaning bathrooms.

With two kids in tow, Powell was almost overwhelmed.

More than 500 volunteers from 50 or 60 organizations a year are scheduled to drop by every day to help cook meals, paint, do yard work and so forth. Caseworkers help the tenants adjust, find jobs and obtain transportation.

"It was like high school," Powell said.

"There was always so much going on." Most tenants, like her, were about 40 years old.

The tenants can listen in on all sorts of classes, on nutrition,

budgeting, relaxation. Powell especially admired workshops sponsored by the Junior League.

"There's a relaxed, pleasant atmosphere. During my visit, I didn't encounter the Artful Dodger or Fagin or any other Dickensian characters.

"You're in close quarters with a lot of other people, and you get to know them," Powell said.

Sometimes men and women eat meals together and sometimes they eat with people receiving psychiatric treatment.

When a new man checked in, the women might chatter among themselves. "He's cute!"

If the shelter is grade school, transitional housing in traditional apartments not far away is high school, where tenants graduate when they can become more independent.

"You don't share a bathroom there, and you can sign out for weekends," Powell said.

College is the Jean Street Apartments, which are like regular apartments except that the rents are controlled; tenants pay only one-third of their income.

Almost all the tenants in the transitional housing and the Jean Street apartments are employed. Powell has one of the highest incomes.

She pays \$427 a month rent for two bedrooms. Like many other people at Homeless Solutions, she has other problems — in her case, \$20,000 in legal debts, which she pays off at \$300 a month. "It's a big hit."

As for Jean Street, which opened in June 2004, "I was lucky to get in. It's a great place. It's secluded and park-like, and there's even a tennis court. I feel that I won the lottery, living in the Jean Street

Apartments."

At Jean Street, many tenants know one another; many came from the shelter, then through transitional housing.

"Going through it all unites us," Powell said. "We're ethnically diverse, from all sorts of backgrounds, and we came here for different reasons, but we get along so well. Something tragic happened to each one of us, and we needed help. Last night, I was hanging out with my neighbors outside, trading CDs and videos. It was awesome."

The caseworkers have been wonderful, Powell said. When her son would throw a fit, the caseworker told her exactly what to do. "Cynthia was always on top of things," Powell said.

Powell's outlook on life, in a few years, has gone from shadow to sunshine.

She has a job as a graphics artist at Plains Printer in East Hanover. She's even running for the Morris Township Council, although, she admits, her chances for election are slim.

And she has a new boyfriend. "How do you feel about Homeless Solutions?" I asked her over lunch recently at Arthur's in Morris Township.

"I would do anything for them," she said simply. "They helped me when I had no other resources."

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Being poor in Morris County is a lead-pipe cinch. It's a nasty combination of low incomes and high rents.

Who are the poorest?

Not counting the unemployed, they are cashiers (average wage: \$16,385), child-care workers (\$16,425), hand packers

and packagers (\$17,110), hair-stylists (\$17,326) and waiters and waitresses (\$17,955). (Source: New Jersey Department of Labor, 2002.)

And in New Jersey, a family would have to earn \$40,700 a year to afford \$1,058 for a two-bedroom apartment. (Source: National Low Income Housing Coalition, Out of Reach Report, 2004.)

Morris County housing costs are 20 percent higher than the national average. The result is that more than 20 percent of the county's population pays more than 30 percent of their gross income for housing. And 30 percent is considered the right percentage — the very definition of "affordable."

The ranks of homeless here are growing.

A survey conducted in January, as part of the 2005 Morris County Homeless Plan, found 539 homeless people, up from 331 in January of last year.

Some 395 were in some sort of shelter, and 112 were homeless without a shelter.

In 2004, the number of unsheltered homeless was only 77.

Morristown and Dover had the highest homeless populations, no doubt because there are food vans and soup kitchens there.

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The Rev. Dr. Betsey Hall, the eloquent executive director of Homeless Solutions, isn't campaigning for a bigger shelter with more rooms. "We don't want bigger shelters. We want more affordable housing.

"People don't belong in shelters. They may need shelter in emergencies, but they belong in apartments. Some of them just made stupid mistakes. Some survive and some don't. We want to help improve the survival rate."

Since 1983, Homeless Solutions (once called the Morris Shelter) has been the largest provider of services to the homeless in the county. It serves about 145 men, women and children a night.

The main facility has:

- (1) A shelter program for families and single women.
 - (2) A shelter program for men.
 - (3) A shelter program for the homeless mentally ill.
- Tenants are called "guests." The caseworkers know how to network. They can put guests in touch with sources of finan-

cial help, medical help, job help, child day care, substance-abuse programs, legal referrals and so forth.

"The poor may not know how to game the system," Hall said.

What happened to provoke the establishment of a permanent shelter in the 1990s?

"Someone died in a Dumpster," Hall said. I didn't ask her to elaborate.

What's the success rate?

Some 40 percent are stable a year after they leave, Hall said. That compares with 33 percent nationally. Families are more stable than individuals.

Hall is a Presbyterian minister, having obtained a master's degree in divinity from Drew University and a doctorate from Columbia Theological Seminary.

She worked in parish churches for 14 years. She had helped out with the homeless here in the early 1990s.

Would she work full-time? someone asked her. "Sure," she said.

But isn't her job somewhat depressing?

"It's a great job!" Hall answered. "We bring hope to people. I like challenges, and this thing is a huge challenge.

"But I like to get people with good minds and good hearts to see the problems we have to face — that affordable, decent housing is fundamental to people's lives."

The motto of Homeless Solutions is: A Hand Up, Not a Hand Out.

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Why is there not enough low-income housing?

James W. Hughes, dean of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University, told me last week that, first of all, there's little or no cheap land in New Jersey, a mature state.

"Cheap land is a distant memory of the '40s and '50s," he explained. "Builders can't afford to build anything but non-affordable housing."

Not only is there a scarcity of land; there's a scarcity of lots zoned for multi-family houses.

"This is a high-income state," he said, and prosperous communities seem to want restrictive zoning. (The Colonel's lady doesn't want to live down the street from Rosy O'Grady.)

The scarcity of low-income housing is exacerbated by "vir-

truous" activities, Hughes went on, rules intent on protecting the environment that also discourage construction.

These days, even land in older, less desirable areas that might have been used for low-income housing has been gobbled up for sale to the wealthy.

Of course, there's the fact that many people don't want low-income housing built near them. They're worried that it might lower their property values.

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Candace Weeks, president of the board of trustees, reports that Homeless Solutions recently purchased property at 38-42 Abbett Ave. in Morristown to build (if Morristown officials approve) as many as 12 low- to moderate-income rental units.

"The ultimate solution is to provide more affordable housing," she said. "Our goal over the next five years or so is to open an average of 10 new units a year. That's a drop in the bucket, of course, but it's a significant amount to the families that need them."

To make a contribution, send a check to Homeless Solutions, 540 W. Hanover Ave., Suite 100, Morristown, NJ 07960.

Warren Boroson writes about money matters Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays.