



School Sisters *of* Notre Dame

Central Pacific Province

Winter 2014



**SERVING WOMEN AND
CHILDREN 'ATRISK'**

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FEATURE STORY



Alexis, age 19, came to live at Theresa Living Center in late 2013 when her daughter was a newborn.

PHOTO BY DIANNE TOWALSKI

FROM COMMITTEE TO CONCEPT TO COMPASSION

Stories from Theresa Living Center and Caroline Family Services

By Linda Behrens

Catherine was nine months pregnant. She had a 2-year-old boy with autism and two older children not living with her. She had a criminal record and problems in the past with alcohol. Home was a battered women's shelter. She had nowhere else to go.

"No one would give me a chance," Catherine shared. "The best way I know to describe it is, 'I was ugly on paper.' Without knowing me and seeing how determined I was to change things, on paper, on a report, I looked like someone who didn't deserve help.

"Others had shot me down. But by the grace of God, I found out about Caroline Family Services."

With the help of the staff at

Caroline Family Services, Catherine moved into an apartment and six days later, she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl.

That was in April of 2012.

Today, Catherine is sober. She works part-time as her apartment building manager and she attends St. Paul College full-time to become a diesel truck mechanic. She also plans to finish her business management degree started long ago and hopes to one day become a mechanic shop manager.

Today, she says, she has a roof over her head, is raising her two young children, can stand on her own two feet and is making plans for her future, all of which she couldn't have done without Caroline Family Services.

The Backstory

In 1985, a group of School Sisters of Notre Dame gathered in St. Paul, Minn., to talk about how to celebrate the beatification of Mother Theresa Gerhardinger, the foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, whose main concern was to meet the needs of women and youth. They talked about the increased number of cases of women who were homeless or abused. They felt the needs of these women were not being met. One of the outcomes of this conversation was if they were to find a way to address this problem, they would bring to it an SSND educational focus and not just a Band-Aid approach.

FROM COMMITTEE TO CONCEPT TO COMPASSION

In 1986, Sisters Rita Jirik, SSND and Marilyn Orchard, SSND, both former principals and teachers, were invited to find a place for the program, write a plan and find funding for the project. They were given a car and a monthly stipend of \$400. They found free housing at a parish.

In 1987, they formed a non-profit and named it Theresa Living Center (TLC). They could use St. Casimir Convent in a Polish parish on the St. Paul East Side staffed by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Rent was free but Theresa Living Center paid the utilities.

In 1988, the convent was rehabbed and rezoned to accept 12 women. The first woman moved in and, before the week was over, five more women plus several with children. They reached capacity and have been consistently filled since then.

In 1999, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd were downsizing a scattered site program, where participants lived in apartments, for one-parent families. The Theresa Living Center board used TLC financing to acquire the Good Shepherd program and renamed it Caroline Family Services (CFS). It started with eight families and quickly grew to serving 24 families.

Sisters Rita and Marilyn were co-directors of Theresa Living Center until Sister Marilyn left in 1994. Then Sister Judy Bakula, SSND, joined Sister Rita. They served as co-directors of both programs until 2011.

The Result

Theresa Living Center and Caroline Family Services in St. Paul, Minn., both provide homes for women and families on their way to a better life.

There is an important transitional

time between a commitment to change and the actual change. For women who are striving to reclaim their personal worth and dignity, this is a critical testing period.

difficult situations.

Theresa Living Center is a residential home for women with or without a child. Caroline Family Services is a scattered site transitional



Theresa Living Center in St. Paul, Minn., is a residential home for women who find themselves in difficult situations.

Theresa Living Center and Caroline Family Services are grounded in the belief that the right environment can make the difference. The programs offer support, direction and encouragement to women who find themselves in

housing program for women and children. It is staffed by case managers who assist women in their home setting.

Sister Rita is proud that there has been a School Sisters of Notre Dame commitment to this program,

especially from its grassroots beginning. "Our committee saw a specific need and acted on it," she said.

Both programs are supported with funding from School Sisters of Notre Dame grants; federal, state and foundation sources; and individual and group donations. They also rely on volunteers, many of whom are School Sisters of Notre Dame.

"We couldn't do it without all of that assistance and the support we receive from many different areas," Sister Rita said.

And what they do through these programs is transformative.

The women who are assisted through either Theresa Living Center or Caroline Family Services most likely were never taught basic skills to help them live on their own. Many have been dependent on drugs or alcohol or were in abusive relationships.

Before the staff at the programs can help them, participants are expected to commit to improving their life through job skills and education. They must be in school, in a job training program, employed, or a combination of work and school. They are expected to contribute to their housing fee or rent. They attend in-service training on topics

Theresa Living Center

is named in honor of School Sisters of Notre Dame foundress Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, to celebrate her beatification in 1985.

Caroline Living Center

is named in honor of Mother Caroline Friess, who came to America in 1847 and led the congregation in North America until her death in 1892.

such as budgeting, nutrition, house-keeping skills and tenant/landlord relationships.

"We can take the fear of not having a place to sleep off of their plates," said Lucy Zanders, executive director of the two programs. "With that fear removed and knowing they have an address, they can work on the things they need to do to stay stable. We are a safety net for them, so they can move forward.

"They work with case managers to help determine where they want to be in two years and what it will take to get there," Lucy added. "This all works toward helping them take the necessary steps to move out on their own, to have stability."

The Outcome

When Catherine began her training to become a diesel truck mechanic, she felt self-conscious about the

condition of her teeth. She wanted to have dental work done but she couldn't afford it. Caroline Family Services paid for the dental work upfront but Catherine has paid the program back. She now loves to smile!

Catherine said she used to be in a lot of trouble. Since being in this program and the trust she received from the staff, Caroline Family Services has helped save her family. "They gave me

a chance," she said.

"When I was pregnant and in the shelter, I prayed so much. God answered my prayers. Now I have stability and a stronger faith. Every day that I work hard, that is one less day we have to struggle. I am so grateful." For more information about Theresa Living Center and Caroline Family Services, go to www.theresalivingcenter.com.



Lucy Zanders,
executive director of
Theresa Living Center &
Caroline Family Services

Theresa Living Center and Caroline Family Services

Sisters Rita Jirik and Marilyn Orchard founded the program and are former co-executive directors. Sister Judy Bakula is a former co-executive director. Sisters Mary Gen Olin and Paulette Pass currently serve on the board of directors.



Judy Bakula



Rita Jirik



Mary Gen Olin



Marilyn Orchard



Paulette Pass