

THE CONNECTION

FAMILY CONNECTIONS — GRANDPARENT FAMILY CONNECTIONS
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

FALL 2006

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Homeless, with Children

When most people think of the homeless, an image comes to mind of single adults with disabling mental illnesses or addictions living on the streets. While this is not an inaccurate picture, the face of homelessness can take other, less visible forms. One of the fastest growing groups of homeless is families with children.

Family homelessness is an especially acute problem in Baltimore as the city continues the trend of becoming a “bedroom community” for many who work in Washington D.C.

Low-income families that had

been renting row homes, often for \$300-400, in areas such as Washington Village are being forced out so landlords can sell the properties for hundreds of thousands of dollars. It is increasingly difficult for families to find any housing in Baltimore City for under \$800/month and rents are creeping up over \$1000. As a result, families are doubling and tripling up with friends and relatives. It is not unusual to find more than 20 adults and children co-existing in a 3-bedroom home. This overcrowding disrupts family functioning and creates intolerable stress.

This issue of “The Connection” focuses on family homelessness. The interview with “Valerie Jackson,” a 59-year-old grandmother caregiver, painfully reveals how quickly a family can be plunged into homelessness by factors beyond its control. The article about the Baltimore Interfaith Hospitality Network introduces readers to a new resource and inspires hope that there is some responsiveness to the crisis.

Advocacy for Homeless Families Baltimore Interfaith Hospitality Network

One of the most innovative programs in Baltimore aimed at meeting the needs of homeless families is approaching its first birthday. The Baltimore Interfaith Hospitality Network (BIHN) opened its doors on January 1, 2006. BIHN is affiliated with Family Promise, which has 134 networks in 39 states. Communities of faith unite to house a group of families for one week on a rotating schedule. Volunteers from the congregations cook and serve breakfast, lunch and dinner, play with the children, help with homework and spend the night.

The Baltimore IHN has recruited 700 volunteers from 21 religious groups—Catholic, Jewish, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopalian, Nondenominational, Baha’i—who turn meeting rooms into private bedrooms for up to 14 caregivers and children (generally 3-5 families). After spending the night at the church or synagogue, families are transported by van to the BIHN Day Center at All Saints Evangelical Church on Loch Raven Boulevard. Unlike traditional shelters that require

guests to vacate the premises until evening, caregivers are welcome to use the day center phones and computers to search for jobs and housing, do laundry, and meet with the director about their goals. The van returns at 5:00 to take families back to the hospitality site. The routine provides a structure to families whose sense of stability and predictability has been shattered by homelessness.

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Computer Savvy

The Payne Memorial AME Church After School Tutorial Program and Grandparent Family Connections (GFC) have joined hands to offer computer classes at the NIM-ROD Center at 1701 Madison Avenue. The program began at the end of September and will continue, one evening per week, through December. The first session includes 16 participants, eight of whom are GFC grandparents and eight from the Church community. The goal is to offer at least two sessions each year. While caregivers are in the class, their grandchildren participate in the after school program. (They are also welcome to attend the after school program on the nights that there are no classes.) The evening concludes with a family supper.

I could never imagine myself getting on a computer before.

A committee from the church and GFC met for several months to develop this exciting program. It arose in response to a strong interest voiced by grandparents to develop computer skills to keep pace with the technical world, especially to understand what their grandchildren are doing. The classes focus on the basics,

learning to use Windows and Microsoft programs. The proven curriculum uses both formal classroom instruction and plenty of hands-on experience.

I'm finding it's not as scary as I expected and my grandsons are as proud of me as I am of myself.



GFC is very fortunate to have found a partner for this project--the Baltimore-based electronics recycling firm, CDM eCycling--that generously donated computers for our use. Without their contributions, this endeavor would not be possible. CDM eCycling, located on Wicomico Street, recycles used computer materials to protect the environment and provides refurbished equipment for users. Not only have they supplied the computers for the lab, they also have given us enough computers so that each GFC participant will

be given a computer for their home, if they don't already have one.

The words of one grandmother currently attending the class attest to the importance of this program: "I could never imagine myself getting on a computer before. I thought my brain was just too old to wrap itself around all that technology. But I'm finding it's not as scary as I expected and my grandsons are as proud of me as I am of myself."

HELP US TO HELP OTHERS

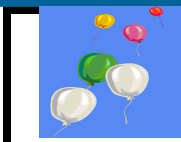
Grandparent Family Connections is city-wide.

We provide services to grandparents who are raising grandchildren anywhere in Baltimore City (at least one child has to be between the ages of 5-11).

If you know of grandparent families who need assistance, please refer them to our program.

Family Connections continues to serve families living in West Baltimore.

**For information or to make a referral,
Call 410-706-3672**



Celebrating Families



Multifamily events, or what are more commonly referred to by staff as family celebrations, are a key component of the Family Connections model. They allow our families, some of whom have no base to call home, to come together in a safe place and participate in an activity together. They enable families, many of whom are isolated from friends and relatives, to connect with each other and build a support system. Essential family activities, from games and art projects to dinner table conversations, are modeled and can be implemented in the home.

Each year, Family Connections holds four major multifamily events.

The first—and the largest—is the annual winter holiday celebration. Last December's event, attended by over 200 children and their caregivers, was held at New Song Acad-

emy. It featured a catered dinner, a performance by the Sankofa African dance troupe, and a DJ who organized the children in dance contests according to their age group. The dinner tables were decorated for the occasion and families were able to take the centerpieces home to add cheer to their own holiday celebration. Staff and volunteers circulated from table to table and helped the children (and adults) with craft activities such as sock snowmen, frames for the family picture taken when they entered the hall, jingle bells, and foam reindeer. As a result of a major outreach campaign to faculty at the School of Social Work, parents at the Friends School of Baltimore, and other supporters in the community who kindly "adopt" a child or a family, every child and caregiver received three gifts from their "wish list." Caregivers

were particularly touched by their gifts; they are used to sacrificing their wants to provide for their children or grandchildren and many reported it was the first present they had received in years.

February featured a Black History Month celebration. This year, the focus was on honoring the experience of grandmothers as the bearers of the wisdom and culture of the African American community. Vincent Thomas, whose dance troupe has a Grandmothers Project, collaborated with Family Connections on this event. First, he met with a group of 15 grandmother caregivers. With Billy Holiday playing in the background, they went around in a circle and completed the sentence, "My grandmother always said..." Then Mr. Thomas led them in identifying a series of

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Thanks



Each year many contributors give generously to make the Multifamily Events a success, especially the Winter Holiday Event. We thank you for your continued support and welcome anyone who can lend a hand. If you are interested in providing gifts, financial support, or some of your valuable time please contact us. In the past for the Holiday Event, due to benefactors offering gifts for individuals or whole families, we have been able to provide every family with presents to meet their basic needs as well as something for fun. We meet with every family to compose a "Wish List" that identifies their wants and needs. From the lists we are able to let contributors know what families can use.

If you can help please call Maureen Harkness at 410-706-1463.

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BIHN's director, Allie Pearlman, earned her MSW from Columbia University School of Social Work with concentrations in homelessness, domestic violence, substance abuse and HIV/AIDS. In an interview with "The Connection," Ms. Pearlman commented on how the program has benefited its volunteers as much as the homeless families. "It helps for them to see the face of homelessness. Many of our volunteers have an image in their heads of what the homeless will look or be like. Then they meet our families. They see that the children are "normal," that the parents are great, and that most of them are working every day and still can't afford housing." She told the story of a volunteer who, after sitting around the table having dinner with the homeless families, remarked, "I felt like they were old friends by the end of the meal." Such encounters between groups that do not, under standard conditions, ever

interact are powerful in dispelling stereotypes and fostering compassion.

Now that the program is on solid ground, Ms. Pearlman is giving more thought to policy initiatives. "Obviously we need to expand both the supply of and support for public housing," she stated, but Ms. Pearlman expressed some concerns about the trend toward pushing public housing outside of the city where there may not be adequate transportation or access to social support networks. "Rather than just focus on moving families into higher-opportunity areas, I'd like to see us put more opportunities into the communities where families have lived for years and have connections."

Essential to any policy initiatives is getting a more accurate sense of just how many homeless families there are in Baltimore. "Family homelessness

is a face of homelessness that is invisible," Ms. Pearlman pointed out. She knows that the homeless censuses fail to count families. "Parents and grandparents want to be able to take care of their children even when they don't have a place to live. You don't typically see them on the streets because they know that's not a safe place for a child. Instead, they are doubling or tripling up with other families or living in cars." It is Ms. Pearlman's hope that if politicians realize how many children are homeless, it will give a different connotation to the problem.

To make a referral to BIHN, call Allie Pearlman at 410/235-2111. The families must be motivated to make changes, abstinent of all drugs and alcohol, not be from a recent domestic violence relationship, and have stable mental health since the program does not have appropriate staff to help clients with complex issues.

A GRANDMOTHER'S EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS

Valerie Jackson* was living the American dream. After years of scrimping and saving, she and her husband had purchased a single-family home in Woodlawn with a back yard where Mrs. Jackson could grow vegetables and flowers. Her daughter was finishing up high school and making college plans. There was enough money to help her younger siblings fill a prescription or catch up on their BG&E.

In 1998, a random act of violence shattered Mrs. Jackson's life. Her husband was murdered on his way to work. Over the next six months, the three other people most central to Mrs. Jackson's support system—her mother, older brother, and aunt—also died. Her daughter fell into drugs, quit school, and delivered an addicted baby who was placed in Mrs. Jackson's care. The siblings and cousins Mrs. Jack-

son had helped out, financially and emotionally, so loyally went their own ways. "I thought my mother had left us a legacy that we look out for one another," she said. "But now that I was the one in need of help, they turned their backs on me."

It's frightening how quickly a once stable life can crumble. "I was alone in this black space, (Continued on page 5)

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grieving and feeling like I was going crazy,” Mrs. Jackson recalled. She got out of bed only long enough to feed her granddaughter. The bills piled up unpaid. It didn’t take long for the bank to show up with foreclosure papers on the house.

Still too depressed to work and out of money, Mrs. Jackson and her granddaughter began what would be a five-year journey of shuttling from relative to relative, friend to friend—all of whom made it clear she was not welcome. The few possessions she carried with her from her former life were stolen. “Even today, I couldn’t tell you how I got so lost. I just didn’t know who to turn to or where to go. I was really losing it. All I’d ever done was take care of everybody else. I’d forgotten about myself.”

Mommy, if something happens to you, who’s going to take care of me?”

One day Mrs. Jackson’s then 5-year-old granddaughter turned to her and said, “Mommy, if something happens to you, who’s going to take care of me?” That moment was the turning point. Mrs. Jackson said to herself, “Girl, get up off the floor. Her mama’s in jail and isn’t going to help. This is my responsibility. My grandbaby is a part

of me and I am her survival. It took her to bring me back to reality, back from the dead really.”

Mrs. Jackson saw a brochure about the Grandparent Family Connections program at her granddaughter’s school and swallowed her pride about accepting help and made the call. Her worker convinced her that a homeless shelter for women and children might be a safer place from which to launch a new life than the home filled with over 25 people, many of whom were drug addicts, in which she was currently living.



Mrs. Jackson and her granddaughter moved into the shelter in March 2006. To be homeless at the age of 59 was a devastating experience for Mrs. Jackson. “Nice as the shelter was, I had once slept on a queen size bed and now I was on the floor on an air mattress.” Mrs. Jackson added, “There’s no privacy in a shelter. I was used to choosing who I let into my life and who I didn’t, and now everyone knew my business. The children at my granddaughter’s school found out she was living in a shelter and teased her.

But it was good for us to be settled somewhere and for me to learn to accept help after a lifetime of giving.”

The search for affordable housing took longer than Mrs. Jackson expected. Subsidized housing programs were either out of funds or had impossible waiting lists. She once again entered a dark period. “To be homeless is to have this terrible loneliness inside of yourself,” she said. “I’d tell myself, ‘I’m living in

I felt invisible to the rest of the world.

the Land of the Free but I’m not living free right now. I’m a homeless person living a shelter-ed life.’ When I walked down the streets, I felt invisible to the rest of the world. I’d be crying out inside my head, ‘Doesn’t anybody see me? I’m human too. All I want is a home and a chance.’”

Finally, in June, Mrs. Jackson got the break she deserved. A two-bedroom apartment opened up in a complex for grandparent caregivers. Mrs. Jackson is slowly rebuilding her life, looking for a job, slowly acquiring furniture and making plans for how she can become an advocate for “women of shelter.”

* The grandparent’s name has been changed and personal information altered to protect her confidentiality.

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words that summarized what they are teaching their grandchildren (e.g., respect, listening, becoming a leader) and had them come up with a hand motion for each word. These hand motions were strung together in a “dance” that the grandmothers, many of whom are disabled, were able to perform from their chairs. At the end of the evening, the grandchildren (who were in a separate room doing crafts and playing games with student interns) were called in to watch their caregivers perform. A week later, over 100 caregivers and children gathered at New Song Academy to watch Mr. Thomas’ troupe perform the Grandmother Project. The project combines dance, videography and story telling.

In May, a Day of Nurturing for Caregivers was held at the Bon Secours Retreat Center in Baltimore County. To ensure that caregivers got what they needed from this day of respite, a planning meeting was held with several program participants and graduates. They stated that, rather than having the entire day structured, they wanted time to stroll the grounds and talk to each other. Craft activities, such as bead making, were available, but most caregivers chose to relax on

benches under the trees or watch the ducks and frogs in the pond. At the conclusion of the event, each caregiver was presented with a laminated copy of an inspirational poem entitled “Strong Women.”

Finally, in August, a Back to School celebration was held at Nature Camp in Monkton, Maryland. Close to 100 caregivers and children traveled by bus to enjoy a day in the woods. The children navigated a ropes course, hunted for salamanders in the creek, played noncompetitive games, sang camp songs, and roasted marshmallows. Many of the grandparent caregivers amazed themselves by performing physical feats, such as walking across a log, that they thought were beyond their abilities. In conjunction with the event, each child was provided with a backpack filled with school supplies. Many caregivers report that the children still sing the songs they learned that day and talk about the “lobsters in the creek.”

Maureen Harkness, the staff member who coordinates these events, views them as a way of complimenting the program’s caregiver focus. “We always

make sure in each event that the caregiver’s dedication and commitment are highlighted, whether it’s by involving them in the planning, making sure they get a gift, or constantly asking them if there’s anything they need. We have learned that if we flood our moms and grandmothers with attention and nurturing at these events, they will go home and transfer that to the children.”

Program director Frederick Strieder sees these events as “a way of fostering what gets broken off from families dealing with the stress of chronic poverty and deprivation.” He adds, “We only wish we could do more of these events and in the coming year plan to schedule one every other month. We know they work.”



FAMILY CONNECTIONS STAFF MEMBER NEWS

Patricia Noel joined the Family Connections staff as an Academic Coordinator in June after her graduation from the University of Maryland School of Social Work. Patricia was a Title IV-E Public Child Welfare Education Program intern at Family Connections during the 2005-06 academic year.

Patricia was excited about working for Family Connections because, as she puts it, “The program isn’t just about talk. It’s about action.” She especially enjoys working with grandparents. “It takes a lot of dedication to raise children again after you’ve already raised one set and these caregivers deserve more than just a pat on the back.” She added, “I’ve learned a lot from the grandmothers and their stories. They

truly inspire me.”

Patricia grew up in West Baltimore and looks forward to being able to give something back to the community in which she was raised. “It’s changed a lot since I was a child. There’s much more poverty. I see my role as giving people a little bit of hope, whether it’s by providing resources or being there to listen.”



Before obtaining her M.S.W. degree, Patricia worked for many years as an Administrative Assistant in the Office of International Educational Services at UMBC.

The other Academic Coordinator at Family Connections, Maureen Harkness, who joined the staff after completing a Title IV-E internship with the program in 2003-04, recently received her LCSW-C .

Academic Coordinators assist the two field instructors in covering cases and serve as role models for the MSW interns. They also carry a small caseload of their own, and interns have the opportunity to “shadow” them on home visits to enhance their learning.

Family Connections Staff Frederick Strieder, Director Deborah Sarsgard, Faculty Field Instructor Maureen Harkness, Academic Coordinator Patricia Noel, Academic Coordinator
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