

Mary's House Offers pregnant teens and women a home, compassion

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UNION BRIDGE — Lisa's relationship with her father was always a bit rocky. She said that's part of the reason she dropped out of high school and moved out at 15.

Drug abuse was a problem, too. Her mother tried to help Lisa by paying her rent. Then came the surprise pregnancy at 16.

"My dad told me, 'If you have an abortion, I'll pay for it. Otherwise, you're on your own,'" said Lisa. She refused.

Pregnant and in need of a place to live (her mother could no longer afford the rent payment), Lisa moved in with friends for a few months. "I was very blessed to have that because they didn't have any extra money either," said Lisa.

The baby's father, she said, "was basically out of the picture. He knows (about the baby). He didn't want to be there."

A friend suggested she contact Birthright, a Frederick crisis pregnancy center. She did, and the volunteer she met that day was able to place her at Mary's House, a temporary shelter for women facing personal, financial or family difficulties during pregnancy.

"I was five months pregnant," recalled Lisa. "I was very depressed and sad. If I hadn't been pregnant, I would have been totally gone" on drugs. But, she says, the drug use stopped when she learned she was pregnant.

On a recent afternoon, Lisa, who asked that we not use her real name, sat on a sofa in the family room of Mary's House, her 3-month-old daughter, Jayla, snuggled in her arms.

"I see my future as very bright," said Lisa, now 17. "I'm looking forward to life with (Jayla). My life has changed a whole lot." Since arriving at Mary's House, Lisa completed her GED and hopes to study nursing at a local community college. Her mother visits often.

A foundation built on faith

Mary's House is a project supported by St. Peter the Apostle Roman Catholic Church in Libertytown and Uniontown Bible Church. The house itself belongs to Ron and Bea Laneve of Woodsboro, who initiated the project. Mary's House recently received 501(c)(3) nonprofit status.

"I was trying to figure my position on abortion," said Mr. Laneve, a retired Montgomery County high school principal. He worked with emotionally-disturbed kids for more than a dozen years, and, he said, "I

saw kids who were born and never cared for."

Actually, it was formulating his position on the death penalty that led to his position on abortion. "I decided that only God should create life and only God should take it away. If I believe that, I have to be consistent," he said. "Once a child is conceived, that's a human life."

The Laneves wanted to do something "concrete" to support their position. "I'm not one who will go out and wave a sign, but I wanted to do something about it," he said.

The couple had recently bought a home in Union Bridge as a rental property. But the layout of the house, a central living area flanked by four bedrooms and two bathrooms, proved to be the foundation for Mary's House.

"This was an opportunity to take some action," said Mr. Laneve. "I was aware of several girls who had been rejected from their homes because they were pregnant."

The Laneves, both in their mid-60s, knew they would not be able to provide what would be needed to care for the residents, so they began the search for a host family, one who would live with the girls and minister to their physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

"The idea is for (the girls) to see what a normal, well-functioning family is like," said Mr. Laneve. "Our goal is to try to get them back into the community."

The first host stayed about a year, and it took that long again to find the current host family. Mr. Laneve was about ready to give up and rent the house, when he got a call from Jodi and Tim Sell.

"They wanted to be the host family. They are like saints from heaven; always have kids around. It's a busy household," said Mr. Laneve.

The Sell family has lived at Mary's House for more than a year now. During that time, they have provided a home for several pregnant girls who had nowhere else to turn.

"I really don't know what I would have done if it hadn't been available," said Lisa, who has lived there since January.

Divine intervention

"It was definitely a calling from God," said Ms. Sell of her family's decision to live at Mary's House.

"I never wanted anything to do with a pregnancy center, because, when you're infertile, you don't want to be around pregnant women," she said. The Sells now have three sons; 5-year-old Ben is their birth child. Bereket, 7, came to America when he was 2 years old. He needed emergency heart surgery, which was performed at a Maryland hospital. But when the time came for him to return home, the missionary who brought



Staff photo by Doug Kootitz

Jodi Sell holds 3-month-old Jayla, the daughter of one of the teen girls living at Mary's House near Union Bridge. Mary's House is a home for pregnant teens and women in need. Ms. Sell and her husband, Tim, who have three children, are the host family at Mary's House.

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-- Lisa, 17, Mary's House resident and Jayla's mother

him here was told Bereket's birth mother was very sick with AIDS and to "find a home for him here," said Ms. Sell. They adopted him. Nine-year-old Luke was adopted from Guatemala by the Sells when he was 5 months old.

One Sunday morning, Ms. Sell read a notice in the Uniontown Bible Church bulletin requesting prayer to find a host family for Mary's House.

"I thought, 'Oh my gosh, who's going to want to do that?'" recalled Ms. Sell.

"After church, I told Tim, 'I think we're going to move in there,'" said Ms. Sell, who was a middle school special education teacher for more than 13 years and continues to work with youth at her church.

"I didn't feel the calling," admits Mr. Sell, who is a computer programmer. "But she seemed like the perfect fit for the job. It seemed like the right choice."

They talked to the previous host and met with the Laneves. They moved in a few months later.

Looking back on that time of transition, Ms. Sell sees divine intervention at work. The family was living in an old house that belonged to her husband's family. Water issues forced them to leave, and they had to move into an apartment.

"We wouldn't have given up the farmhouse to move in here," she said. "We loved the farmhouse. But it was

easy to give up the apartment and move here." They pay rent which, according to Mrs. Laneve, is put into a fund for house maintenance.

The Sells have shared their home, and their lives, with five young women since moving into Mary's House. Three were in their 20s; the other two were teens. Lisa shares her room with Jayla. Another Frederick County teen recently moved in. "Her mom is a single mom with several children and one with special needs. She just can't handle it," said Ms. Sell.

Part of the family

Life at Mary's House is not like checking into a hotel with room service. It's a bustling, active household.

"They are part of our family," said Ms. Sell. "They do their own laundry and keep their rooms and bathroom clean. They help clean up after dinner. Basically, when you see something that needs to be done, just do it."

"(Lisa) volunteered to mow the lawn," said Mr. Sell.

"And I'll do it when I put Jayla down for a nap," she assured him.

The residents need to let the host family know where they are going, when they'll be back and who they'll be with. "We want to make sure they are safe," said Ms. Sell. But they are

free to leave the program at any time "and walk out the door."

The young mothers have to share their bedrooms with their child, or children. The Sell family's private rooms are on the other side of the house. They all share the kitchen, dining room and family room. "At one time there were seven kids here, up to (age) 13. Two were newborns," said Ms. Sell. "That was pretty hectic."

Most of the girls receive medical assistance, though, sometimes, parents will cover those costs. They have to buy their own diapers, but a lot of baby furnishings — cribs, strollers, clothing — are donated.

"They're required to do something," said Ms. Sell. "We definitely want them to get their GED, but taking care of their children is a priority." An action plan is established during the interview process.

Bereket, Ben and Luke take it all in stride. "It helps our boys, especially Bere. He loves the babies," said Ms. Sell.

"They were always asking me, 'When's the baby coming?' They were always ready for me to have it," said Lisa.

The residents can stay up to one year, but most stay longer. "We're not abiding by that at this point because our girls are getting younger, and they need more than a year," said Ms. Sell.

The board of directors, which includes representatives from both churches, the Laneves and the Sells are planning to expand Mary's House.

"The name comes from the Bible," said Mr. Laneve, where Mary, about to give birth, and Joseph find no room in which to stay. "At Mary's House, we thought there would be room. But there have been a few times when we didn't have room," said Mr. Laneve.

Plans are to develop a transitional housing program, next door to Mary's House, to allow new mothers to get "their feet on the ground," yet under the guidance of the host family, according to Mr. Laneve. From there, the girls would move to satellite apartments, with some financial assistance. The goal is for them to become independent, he said. "They usually don't have a lot of support from their families," he said. "Now they have a baby, which is a heavier load to bear."

Before moving to Mary's House, the girls are interviewed by the Laneves and Sells. A second interview with the host family helps both parties to determine if the living arrangements will work.

"When (a girl) walks in here, the baby is not the problem," said Mrs. Laneve, a retired teacher. "They're looking for help. We need mentors or a counselor to help them work through their life experiences."

At first, Lisa wasn't sure Mary's House was for her.

"I made up my mind that there was no way I was moving here. It's in



Staff photo by Doug Koontz

Tim and Jodi Sell are the host family at a home for pregnant teens and women who need a place to stay. The home, called Mary's House, is supported by two area churches. "It was definitely a calling from God," said Ms. Sell of her family's decision to live at Mary's House.



Staff photo by Skip Lawrence

Ron and Bea Laneve are the owners of the home that serves as Mary's House. Mr. Laneve said he decided to pursue the project as a way to support his position on abortion. "I decided that only God should create life and only God should take it away. If I believe that, I have to be consistent," he said. "Once a child is conceived, that's a human life."

the country. I grew up in the country and I hated it," said Lisa of her first visit. "When I came in and saw all the kids I thought, 'Why are they sending me to a foster home?'"

But after her interviews, she knew she had to do it. "It was something I wanted to do. I needed to get my life straight," said Lisa. "If I stayed in Frederick, I knew it couldn't happen."

The program cannot take girls who have drug or alcohol problems. "We're not equipped for that," said Mr. Laneve. Some come from abusive situations and are asked not to contact their abusive partner, or risk having to move out.

"Ron and Bea are very strict on no drugs, no situation where there's a

threat to our family or the girls," said Ms. Sell. "We haven't had that problem," but one girl was removed from the house for disclosing her location to an abusive partner. She left to live with her mother.

"That was the whole reason she was here," said Mr. Sell. "It was an abusive situation (with her partner)."

A substitute mother and a friend

Ms. Sell sees her role of house mother as being a substitute mother and friend. "I want to build a close relationship with them; someone they can talk to," she said. "My big goal is that they will grow spiritually in their



Staff photo by Doug Koontz

Laundry time at the Sell household in Union Bridge is a production line. Jodi Sell, center, passes the laundry to Bereket, wearing hat, who will pass it to Luke, front. The Sells are the host family for Mary's House, a home for pregnant teens and women in need.

love for the Lord, grow in their mothering skills and their job skills for the future."

Once the babies are born, she's available to help the new moms in any way. "They take charge of their own babies," she said. "I'm here for whatever they need ... help with changing diapers, bathing them, or making adoption choices. So far, none have gone that route since we've been here."

Life at Mary's House can be hectic, but it's where the Sells want to be.

"We hope this is our lifetime ministry call," said Ms. Sell.

(Mary's House accepts donations of baby clothing, diapers, and wipes. Volunteers can help by providing transportation to doctor's appointments, arranging social outings, companionship and babysitting. Monetary donations are also accepted. For more information, call Jodi at 410-848-0853.)