

There's no place like home

House of Hope gives the homeless a place to live and the support they need to build new, independent lives.

By Cindy Powers / *The Bulletin*

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Growing up moving from foster home to foster home, Darlene Woods said she craved stability, security and love.

She said she married at 14 and, at 63, is still with the same man.

Woods, of Bend, described herself as one of the "working poor," and now considers herself lucky to be able to help others struggling to get by.

Now Woods owns six homes that house people with no place else to go.

Woods runs House of Hope ministries, a nonprofit dedicated to providing a clean, safe place for anyone who agrees to be responsible for their residence and live drug and alcohol free.

"Usually they come to us because they have sought help, through the county or the church," she said.

She has taken in folks referred by the Oregon Department of Human Services, the Bethlehem Inn homeless shelter, churches, community members and Deschutes County Adult Parole and Probation.

The ministry opened its first house in 2003, Woods said, and since then has provided shelter for 190 people. The ministry currently houses 22 people in six homes around Bend and Redmond.

She said no one is turned away, unless they refuse to follow the rules.

Residents vote on whether a new person will be allowed to move in and participate in weekly house meetings. They are taught to take care of themselves and each other, Woods said.

"We have some mothers of children who are daughters of addicts," she said. "They have never eaten at a table, they have never been loved and all they know is survival. Most of all, they are scared and they have gotten tough because they felt it was the only way to survive in their world."



Rob Kerr / The Bulletin

Jessica Foster, 23, juggles watching her roommate's children, trying to get a ride for Tamione Dunnigan, front right, answering a question from Destiny Dunnigan, center left, and mediating a squabble between Terrell Dunnigan, far left, and Devonne Dunnigan, right rear. Foster, two other women and their combined eight children live together in a home in Bend owned by House of Hope ministries.

But she is determined to teach the residents a different way of life, one that includes love, support and, if they are interested, religious instruction.

Making room for everyone

Woods started the House of Hope ministry just to give folks a place to live.

"I don't want to sound like a fanatic but, plain and simple, it is a God thing," Woods said. "I can't work this much at my age if it isn't a God thing."

Woods said her ministry is not a traditional one, because she will not force religion on her residents. And, she said, the ministry did not have a traditional start.

Despite a lifetime of attending church, Woods said she has never really understood people who claimed they were called by God to do something.

But she couldn't shake the thought that, without housing, people struggling through tough times didn't have a chance for a better life.

So she talked to her minister.

"I asked how do you know when God is talking to you," she said. "He said, 'It is when you have a thought in your mind that you can't let go of, and it is something you would never do.'"

"So I started the process," she continued. "I was in my mid-50s and had no money. My family thought I had lost it, really gone off the edge."

That was in 1996. Five years later, she put a Bend property she owned on the market to pay for the first House of Hope in Bend and an offer came in.

Then it fell through.

"I was so distraught, making all those plans and thinking that I was following God's lead," she said. "So I went upstairs to my bedroom and said, 'God, you have always been there for me and I am going to stick with you.' "

Six months later, she said, the buyers came back and paid cash for the property. It served as the down payment for the first House of Hope that opened on Jan. 1, 2003.

Since then, Woods said she has "flipped" houses in the highly profitable Central Oregon market to pay for additional homes.

Residents who now live in one of the half dozen Houses of Hope vote on whether a new person can come live with them, Woods said. There is no time limitation on how long they can stay, as long as they pitch in to take care of the home.

Woods owns two homes that house men and four designated for women, she said.

Any resident who is physically able must work in some capacity, she said, and the homes have a zero tolerance policy when it comes to drugs and alcohol.

"That can be tough because about 80 percent of them have drug, alcohol or mental health issues," Woods said. "The other 20 percent are generally partnering with someone who has those issues."

But for those who stay, living in one of Wood's houses can be a life-changing experience.

"Some people come to the House of Hope and they will not leave because it is first time they have felt safe and loved," she said. "We have no timetable because why should we put them back in their old world when they are doing fabulous?"

Residents pay \$440 a month for a private sleeping area or \$350 for a shared sleeping area, and \$25 per month for each child living in the home.

"I hate it that it's about money," she said. "We tried for grants and got nothing."

Paying their way

Come Thursday, Jessica Foster, her 3-year-old daughter and 1-year-old son may have no place to live.

The 23-year-old Bend native said she became homeless when she left her drug-addicted husband, who is now serving prison time.

She and her children stayed at the Bethlehem Inn homeless shelter in Bend months longer than families are usually allowed to stay.

They ended up living for a few weeks in the car she had at the time, she said.

"I would sleep in the car in the morning while they were at the sitter's then do what I could with them during the day," she said. "Then they would stay at the sitter's at night while I worked."

Foster was then working at a janitorial service, she said.

About a year ago, a caseworker at the Oregon Department of Human Services told her about Woods and her ministry.

Foster and her kids have lived in two houses owned by House of Hope since.

"God blessed me, the way I see it," she said.

But she has fallen behind on her monthly payment for a room she shares with her children, Selena and Christopher Porter.

Woods said she wants to keep a roof over the family's heads, but she has to pay the bills and mortgages for each of her homes. But she and her husband live on the pension he earned while working in the mills, so they cannot offer much financial support.

"We really have a policy that we can't carry them because what they pay is what we use to keep the house going and we don't have the money ourselves to do that," she said. "We do try to bend that rule as much as we can."

But Foster is still scrambling for a way to come up with the \$340 she said she owes.

Fortunately, there are some in the community who step up to help Woods and the residents out.

A few years before the first House of Hope opened its doors, Bend resident Buck Sherwood had started a ministry of his own, called Willing to Help.

"I heard about House of Hope and I wanted to know what it was because I had run into people who didn't have any place to stay and I didn't have any place to send them," he said.

When Woods opened a home for men, Sherwood became the residents' mentor.

Sherwood's ministry provided some House of Hope residents with donated cars, helped them with day care expenses and employment.

He said the four things that homeless people absolutely must have to succeed are: a place to live, transportation, employment and day care.

"Because even if they have a job, who do they have for day care?" Sherwood said. "And if they have someone for day care, let's say they get a job that isn't nearby, how do they get back and forth?"

Teaming up

In the one-bedroom house that Foster and her children share with two other women and their children, there is only one option for getting around.

Shari Waldmann's 1997 Kia, with balding back tires and a need for extensive repairs, serves as the only available transportation for everyone.

Waldmann, 38, has lived in a House of Hope women's home with her 13-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son since July.

She and Buffy Dunnigan, 31, live with Foster and their children. Waldmann and Dunnigan also work together cleaning houses in Sunriver.

The three women said they help each other out with child care and emotional support.

Waldmann's oldest daughter participates in a Bend-based program teaching special needs children to ride horses. On those days, Waldmann drives back and forth between work and her daughter's lessons, putting about 100 miles on her car.

Waldmann said she spent years struggling with drug and alcohol issues before coming to House of Hope. She said DHS took her children for a short period and her caseworker referred her to Darlene Woods.

Now she is working to rebuild her life, she said, but it's tough to get a break. She has her children back but does not see a way to find permanent housing for them.

"I had a drug charge in 2000 and have bad credit," she said. "With the criminal charge and my credit history there is no one in town who will rent to me. What's really hard is when you are held back and you are trying really hard to do good."

Waldmann said she hopes to go back to school to become a social worker.

"Because of my experiences I think I could go out there, be really honest and help people, period," she said.

Dunnigan, who has four children ranging in age from 6 to 12, said she is hoping to further her education as well.

She said she was in an abusive situation before coming to House of Hope. She called Central Oregon Battering & Rape Alliance and the organization put her in contact with Woods.

Dunnigan said she has some college under her belt and is now thinking about getting her real estate license.

On a recent night inside the cramped house the women share, children filled the living room, talking, coloring, spinning in place and running to their mothers for hugs.

Dunnigan's oldest son, 12-year-old Terrell, picked up Christopher Foster and announced that the toddler needed a diaper change.

"These two help out pretty good," Foster said, pointing at Terrell and his younger brother, 9-year-old Devonne. "You just have to keep them separated."

As Foster spoke about the stress of not being able to pay her bills, 3-year-old Selena climbed onto her mother's lap and hugged her.

"This is my happiness in a little package right here," Foster said.

Finding a place

Foster said she also has had a hard time finding permanent housing.

She also has a felony conviction, she explained, for forging a check. And though she said she has never used drugs, she blames methamphetamine for her downward spiral.

"The kids' dad fell into drugs really hard and we lost pretty much everything we had because of it," she said. "You don't even have to use it for it to ruin your life."

The two bright spots in her life now are her children and her job in the floral department at Safeway, she said. The other women in the home call Foster "the flower girl."

"Even if I go in in a bad mood I can arrange flowers and it cheers me up," Foster said.

But she doesn't make enough money to make ends meet and she is worried she will have to move back to the homeless shelter.

Liz Hitt, executive director of the Bethlehem Inn, said that she recommends to residents who can afford House of Hope's monthly fee that they give Woods a call. Some do not have the money, though, and others prefer not to participate in a faith-based program.

"We have such limited options here for low-income housing," she said. "People need to have choices and that has become a real problem."

Hitt said that the Bethlehem Inn has changed its policy of limiting the length of time residents can stay because of the housing shortage. They now have no limit on how long a person in need of shelter can stay.

Nonetheless, Foster said she hopes her family will not be moving back in.

"I know that if it weren't for the people I am in here with it would be much harder," she said. "We are in the same boat and willing to help each other out and I've made some good friends."

But it is getting to the point where she is having a hard time keeping her spirits up.

"It just doesn't seem like there is a silver lining to this cloud," Foster said.

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