

Shopper News

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FOUNTAIN CITY

Churches make a home for families in need

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Every three months, Church of the Good Shepherd member Jennifer Bohlken starts transforming Sunday school rooms into guest bedrooms and the meeting room into a multipurpose space for dinner, games and television. Bohlken starts at 8 a.m., and her team of volunteers does not stop until well after their guests arrive for dinner that evening.



Central Baptist church member Paige Corcoran and Church of the Good Shepherd member Roy Arthur chat following dinner on Nov. 12. (Photo: Ali James/Shopper News)

“It takes almost all day,” she said. “When you invite people to come to your house, you put out your best.”

Members of the Good Shepherd and Central Baptist in Fountain City have been teaming up to support Family Promise for the past eight years. Volunteers stay overnight, serve meals, and provide fellowship for a week at a time.

Family Promise is a nonprofit organization that provides non-emergency housing to families with children who have lost their homes. The end goal is helping homeless and low-income families achieve sustainable independence.



Church of the Good Shepherd member Casey Collins volunteered to open the church for the Monday night guests and played checkers with one of the little girls staying the night. (Photo: Ali James/Shopper News)

The church receives a list of families to expect from Family Promise. “The numbers fluctuate from a family of two to up to 14 guests,” said Bohlken. “We only know their first names, and their ages.”

Usually in a homeless shelter, said Bohlken, if children are over the age of 12 and the opposite sex, they cannot stay with their parent in the shelter. Family Promise keeps the families together.

Central Baptist’s Family Promise coordinators are Corky and Paige Corcoran. “Our job is to help provide the food, fellowship, love and make sure they are safe for the night,” said Paige Corcoran. “We don’t know their background, sometimes they will tell us. But we provide the housing and the love. We are there to listen if they want to talk about it.”



“Serving together is a blessing that enriches the work we do together,” said Good Shepherd coordinator Jennifer Bohlken. Bohlken has transformed the rooms at the church into a home for Family Promise guests, four times a year for the past eight years. (Photo: Submitted)

“We have a lot of fun, we may have a PJ party, do story time, sit and talk, or play games,” said Paige Corcoran. This time, Corcoran’s church gave each of the children a brand new pair of pajamas.

“One time we had a magician come on the first night; it was hard to follow that,” said Bohlken.

“A lot of volunteers bring their children,” added Corky Corcoran. “They think it’s a slumber party and they all just play together you can’t tell which ones are different. All of us have done mission work overseas, but this is right in our backyard. So many of us are just a few paychecks, a car wreck or a medical emergency away from this situation. When I was a kid our house burned down and my parents and seven kids lived in a tiny hotel room.”



“It is not typical for an Episcopal and Baptist church to team up on projects but we have through FP,” said Jennifer Bohlken, pictured here with Paige and Corky Corcoran. “It is a wonderful way to nurture this interfaith relationship and answer the common call we both hear to serve. Feels like a mission trip, you work hard but everyone has bonded and it’s the same feeling.” (Photo: Ali James/Shopper News)

“Every week is different, you are always learning something,” said Paige Corcoran.

“When we had a little boy that was blind, he had to learn a new building once a week and would get frustrated. But he still wanted to talk to everyone.”

“Some of the children just need attention, and we have enough volunteers to provide that,” said Bohlken. She also recalls running out to buy a hand mixer to help a boy bake cookies for school the next day.

Guests leave the church at 7 a.m. each morning. If they do not have their own transportation, Family Promise sends a van to pick them up. The Knox County Schools shuttle stops to take children to the school they were zoned for when they became homeless. Then they return after 5 p.m.

“The thing that we really liked about Family Promise, is that they try to keep the kids in the same school, hoping to keep the kids in a stable everyday routine,” said Paige Corcoran.



Family Promise parks a trailer in the parking lot of the Church of the Good Shepherd. It is packed with a lot of the essentials, such as air mattresses and linen, to turn Sunday school rooms into guest rooms for the Family Promise program. This room is home to a mom and daughter while they search for long-term housing. (Photo: Ali James/Shopper News)

According to a Knox County Schools spokesperson, 360 students lack a fixed address and are eligible for services under the McKinney-Vento homeless assistance act, with an average of 527 students over the past three years. “We were amazed at the huge need, the schools often refer them to Family Promise,” said Paige Corcoran. “And that’s just people that they knew about. Your hope is that they get housing and they’re not back.”

“God gave us this building and for it to sit empty seems like a waste,” said Bohlken. “We use the term that the church is God’s house. When we do Family Promise it is a home.”

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