

# Room at the INN

In communities across the country, volunteers are opening the doors of their churches, synagogues and mosques to homeless families—helping those in need get back on their feet.

BY SANDRA E. LAMB • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE KORTWRIGHT

**I**T WAS LATE SUMMER in Bozeman, Montana, when Angela and Daniel Shelton spent their last \$92 on a campground fee so they'd have a place to pitch their tent—the only home the couple and their two young daughters could afford. This was a family adventure, they told the girls, willing themselves to appear calm and cheerful. But Angela, 31, could feel the panic rising inside. “We had enough food for about three days,” she remembers. “There was a jar of peanut butter, some jelly, a half loaf of bread, a box of grits and several bananas.”



The couple had acquaintances in the area but didn't contact them. “People talk and things get said,” says Angela, a soft-spoken woman whose biggest fear was that Taiilor, 11, and Sierra, 9, would be taken away from them. So the family kept to themselves. The campground manager's wife, however, must have guessed the Sheltons' plight, because soon after the family settled in, she suggested they drop by the Salvation Army to see what kind of aid they could get. This wasn't the time to be too proud or embarrassed to accept help, Angela realized. The next day, she sat down with her

daughters and explained the family situation. The girls were quiet for a long time. Then they asked how long they would be camping. Would they still be there when school started? What school would they go to? Angela didn't have all the answers, but told them that "Mom and Dad are working hard to change things."

It was time to put words into action. Without saying anything to Daniel, 44, Angela dropped her husband at the construction job he'd found in town, and with the girls in tow she drove to the Salvation Army. The supervisor there gave them a voucher for one tank of gas to help get Daniel to his job and back. More importantly, he gave Angela the phone number for Family Promise, a nonprofit organization that provides shelter to homeless families and helps them learn to become self-sufficient.

Last year there were about 3.5 million homeless people in this country, and by most accounts, families with children make up the fastest-growing segment of this population, according to the National Coalition for the Homeless. More and more, the people seeking help are working families like the Sheltons—people who struggle with wages that are too low to cover anything but the barest necessities, says Karen Olson, founder and president of Family Promise. A 2006 American Payroll Association survey found that two-thirds of families live paycheck to paycheck. In addition, "one in eight people live below the poverty line," says Olson. "All it takes is the loss of a job, a car repair or



**"When we come through our door we don't see furniture; we see friends we've made."**

**FROM BACK TO FRONT: Daniel and Angela Shelton, with kids, Taiilor and Sierra, had exhausted all resources.**

medical bills to upset the delicate balance of scraping by."

While it's too soon to know how much of an impact the country's mortgage foreclosure crisis is having on the number of homeless, it's likely to make things worse, says Nan Roman, president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. As mortgages are foreclosed, some families may end up in the shelter system. Then there's an indirect effect, as she points out:

"People losing their houses are

entering the rental market, and in places where that's happening it makes rents go up and causes fewer vacancies. That starts to push people lower down the housing scale into homelessness." The problem boils down to a lack of affordable housing, says Roman, who compares it to a dire game of musical chairs. "There are more people who need low-cost housing than there are low-cost apartments or houses," she says. "People with a very low income who are paying 50 percent of their wages for rent are vulnerable to homelessness."

In potentially calamitous situations like these, Family Promise can provide a lifeline. Olson, a single mom who was living with her two sons in Summit, New Jersey, got the idea in 1985 to start the organization after seeing increasing numbers of homeless people in New York City. As she began to talk to them, she realized that "far more than the food, they were hungry for compassion." So in 1986 Olson started the Interfaith Hospitality Network, as Family Promise was originally known, with the help of clergy in her community.

When the network tried to buy a building to transform into a shelter, it ran smack into zoning regulations and a not-in-my-backyard attitude. That's when the group came up with a simple yet radical idea: Why not get permission to use church buildings?

Today Family Promise operates in 38 states through local networks like the one in Bozeman. It connects people, many of whom are looking to actively live the principles of their faith, with those who need help. Last year, with more than 4,500 congregations of all religious faiths involved, Family Promise provided shelter, food and support to more than 20,000 homeless families.

Each local network is made up of churches, synagogues or mosques that have signed on to help. Because anywhere from 8 to 13 places of worship participate in a network, families stay in one place for a week, then rotate to another. Because of its use of existing buildings, volunteers and donations, Family Promise can provide 24-hour care and intensive case management for only about \$18 per person per day. (The national average for emergency shelters is about \$42 a night per person, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness.)

The story of the Sheltons' slide into homelessness is, unfortunately, not unique. Like many families, they had found it a struggle to make ends meet. Twelve years ago mutual friends thought Daniel and Angela would be perfect for each other and introduced them. Over the next nine months they dated, and when they married in



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**Gloria Edwards, executive director of Family Promise in Bozeman, helps families come up with an action plan.**

Adel, Georgia, the future looked bright. Angela was a licensed nurse's assistant and Daniel was working as a skilled carpenter. But while the pay was good when Daniel could find work, the couple found that when one construction project ended, they would have to pick up and move to a new area for the next job. And with the family's health problems and lack of medical insurance—Daniel has diabetes and a history of heart attacks; their firstborn, Taiilor,

has asthma; and their youngest, Sierra, needed surgery to correct a foot deformity—it was hard to save. Living in motels near Daniel's work and moving to the next job became a way of life.

In 2000 the Sheltons left Georgia so Daniel could work in Florida, then in Iowa. The following year they headed to Colorado so that Daniel could begin a construction project in Denver. They “fell in love with the Rocky Mountains,” says Daniel, and in between jobs the family spent weeks camping and exploring the West. This nomadic lifestyle became difficult once Taiilor and Sierra started school. In the fall of 2005, Daniel and Angela decided to settle in Bozeman, a scenic, midsize community 90 miles north of Yellowstone National Park. They lived in a motel at the edge of town for six months while they saved for an apartment. But when they started looking they found that everything in their price range had already been rented to students at nearby Montana State University. Even when something was available, their savings—about \$1,200—

weren't enough to cover the first and last month's rent along with a security deposit.

Their troubles worsened in March 2006 when they drove back to Georgia to visit Angela's terminally ill aunt. By the time they returned to Bozeman four months later, their savings were gone and they didn't even have enough money for a motel. That's how they ended up at a campground just inside the city limits. Although Daniel had started a new job in town, he wouldn't be paid for two weeks. Soon it would be fall and the weather would turn cold. Taiilor's asthma was kicking up and the children would need to be in school. Where would they live? What would they do without enough money for food or gas?

When Gloria Edwards, executive director of Family Promise in Bozeman, opened the door of the old Victorian house that serves as the local program's headquarters, "there was an instant connection," says Angela. "She started talking to me as if she knew who I was." Angela followed Edwards into her cubbyhole of an office, and two volunteers invited Taiilor and Sierra to play with the other children in the living room. The house was abuzz with activity. "We were operating at our maximum capacity all summer," Edwards recalls, "and that day we had 12 people in the program."

Edwards explained to Angela that certain factors—including serious mental illness, violent behavior or ongoing drug or alcohol abuse—could disqualify families from taking part in Family Promise. Then she asked Angela about the Sheltons' current living situation, the reason for their homelessness, and



**HOW YOU CAN HELP**  
To find a network or start  
one in your community, go to  
**[familypromise.org](http://familypromise.org)**.

**Today 110,000 volunteers help the homeless through 135 Family Promise networks across the country.**

their medical issues. By the end of their talk Edwards had told Angela that Family Promise could help but that she needed to meet Angela's husband too.

So Angela left to pick up Daniel, who was skeptical when she explained that this could be the solution to their problems. He accompanied her to Edwards' office. Normally an outgoing man with a ready smile, Daniel was quiet as Edwards described the program. She told the couple they didn't need to make a decision that day; they should sleep on it.

That night Angela brought up the subject of Family Promise again. "I really want to do this," she said, determination underlying her soft Southern drawl. "I think it's the best thing for us." Daniel, still wary of joining the program, couldn't help feeling that accepting help meant he had failed his family. But he also realized they had little choice. The next day, Angela and Daniel told Edwards that they'd made their decision. "We wanted to get going in the right direction," recalls Angela.

The first step was to sign a guest agreement. It said that the Sheltons would receive shelter and meals for up to 90 days. During the first week, with help from Edwards, they would develop a "family permanency plan" that outlined steps they'd take to obtain stable housing. Both adults had to agree to look on a daily basis for financial aid, jobs and a place to live. They also had to promise that the children would be enrolled in school and that Angela and Daniel would meet regularly with Edwards to report on their progress. *(continued on page 110)*

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look at issues that got them there in the first place and to try to resolve them. We have a lot of expectations for the families. They aren't just coming in at night and flopping on a bed." Just as any person or congregation can volunteer and participate in a network, there are no religious restrictions on families seeking shelter. "When we tell people they're going to be sleeping in churches, some of them are afraid of doing this," says Edwards. "But I explain that nobody is going to preach to them."

Daniel and Angela felt better as soon as they got to the church where they would be staying—it was a relief to know that they were no longer in this alone. "We were real people to them; we weren't just a number," says Angela. She and Daniel didn't know it at the time, but earlier that week volunteers had prepared rooms for the families to sleep in, clearing away books from Sunday school, taping paper over windows for privacy and making up roll-away beds. In another room more volunteers had set up tables for mealtime.

That night the Sheltons had dinner with three other families and some of the volunteers. Afterward, they helped clean up and packed brown-bag lunches for the next day. That was how it went every evening. Sometimes volunteers would bring their own children and the kids would play games together; at other times staff or volunteers would drop by to provide financial, parenting or career counseling. By 10 p.m. everyone would get ready for bed. A few volunteers would spend the night at the church too, in case the families needed anything.

In the mornings everyone would pile into a van to go to the Family Promise house, and Angela would drive Daniel to work before joining the other families. The daily routine at the house was orderly and straightforward. Staff and volunteers helped the adults apply for jobs and look for housing, and they hooked them up with community and state services such as health care and financial aid. They also transported the older kids to their schools and took the little ones to a nearby day care center. At 5:30 p.m. the van would take the families without cars back to their host churches, where volunteers would be waiting with a hot meal. In the weeks that followed, the Sheltons became well liked among the volunteers and other guest families. "Daniel could fix anything and often did," Edwards says. "Angela helped other moms with their small children and the girls were always asking what they could do to help."

"Family Promise isn't just a shelter," says Edwards. "It's a commitment from the family to

With the kids in school, Angela turned her attention to finding a place to live. "Every day I'd start going through the ads," she says. "You needed to be first in line and ready with every penny." One day she saw a promising ad for a two-bedroom apartment just blocks from the girls' school, but when she got there she was devastated to find that she didn't have enough money for it. While talking to Angela, the building superintendent mentioned that in two weeks she'd have another opening, which she'd hold for the Sheltons. The day they finally moved into their home, the girls were overjoyed. "Are we going to stay here for a while?" asked Sierra. Which side of the room would be Taiilor's? Which would be Sierra's?

Next, Angela needed a job. After her daughters were born she had worked as a licensed nurse's assistant, but only intermittently and on night shifts. She needed and wanted to do something else, but she was nervous and lacked confidence. With the encouragement of the Family Promise staff, Angela worked on her résumé and pounded the pavement. She was in it for the long haul; after each rejection, Angela picked herself up and tried again.

**I**t's been a little over a year since the Sheltons left Family Promise and those 12 months have been rough. Daniel injured his head and shoulder on a job, had six surgeries and is receiving workers' compensation. Nevertheless, the Sheltons are optimistic; they now have the support and tools they need to keep them on track. Daniel and Angela check in regularly with Edwards, filling her in on their lives, and Edwards has gently suggested to Daniel that he consider returning to college to pursue an engineering degree.

Despite setbacks, Angela and Daniel stress that they have a lot to be thankful for. In May, Angela was accepted into a training program at an optical store chain. The kids are thriving—Taiilor plays the cello in her school orchestra, and Sierra, who is scheduled for more foot surgery in March, performs in a drama class. The Sheltons' apartment, furnished with items rounded up by Family Promise, is warm and homey. "Miss Caroline, an afternoon coordinator at Family Promise, gave us a green chair we call the Miss Caroline chair, and a doctor in town gave us our couch," says Angela. "When we come through our door we don't see furniture; we see friends we've made."

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*Sandra E. Lamb is a speaker, lecturer and the author of How to Write It and Personal Notes.*