



My Journey

My name is Theresa. I'm 42 years old. I was raised in your average suburban middle class home. I'm college educated. I am single mom of three bright, amazing, and polite young men (I admit that is a prejudiced opinion.) I am reasonably intelligent. As I sit here today writing this, I am also homeless – at least technically. In about a week, I will be moving into a new home and beginning a bright new future with my family. Today, I would like to tell you about my journey through and thoughts on the program that has made it possible for me to share that happy news with you – Family Promise.

Until March of 2014, homeless was a word that invoked anything from sympathy to mild distaste for me, but in a vague and disconnected way. It had no real meaning for me and I had no personal connection to it. Then a series of unfortunate circumstances – some that were entirely my fault, and some that were completely out of my control – caused us to be evicted from our apartment and homelessness smacked me right in the face, literally. I cannot describe to you the depths of the nightmare of fear and hopelessness I felt. Since my children were born, I have defined myself as a mother before and above any other role. I dedicated myself to raising my children in the most caring, loving, and stable environment possible. Suddenly, I was in a situation that contradicted most of those goals, and I didn't know where to turn.

We were living in a motel room and paying by the week when I first heard about Family Promise from the in home care worker assigned to our case. In retrospect, I'm ashamed to admit that it was a tough sell. Although our family wasn't making any forward progress and we were crammed two to a bed in a 10 x 14 room, we were living independently and together and "making it work". It is unfortunate that in our society, the word "shelter" has come to have such a negative connotation, and as a result, when it was first mentioned to us, we refused to consider it. Luckily, the social worker was persistent and very familiar with the program – she had placed a client there previously. As she began to give more details, Family Promise became more palatable and we tentatively decided to apply and at least interview. That remains one of the best decisions I've made in my adult life.

When we arrived at the doorstep of the Crafton Day Center with pretty much our entire lives in tow and with a great deal of trepidation about the experience ahead of us, I am not ashamed to admit I was fairly broken. I have suffered most of my adult life with an anxiety disorder that has waxed and waned in severity depending on the situation and circumstances in which I found myself. On my first day in the program, the symptoms of my disorder were once again threatening to overwhelm and I didn't have the coping mechanisms to deal with it. Although it didn't happen overnight, as I journeyed through the program, I was given the stability and support I needed to get myself back into treatment and to begin to accomplish my goals. Today, I can say that I am a much stronger and more confident person, and although I am certainly not "perfect" or "fixed", I am definitely no longer broken. For that, I can thank Family Promise.

Up until now, I have spoken of the program as if it were an entity unto itself, and although that makes it easier or at least more convenient for the sake of this essay, it is far from the truth. Rather, the program is more like a complex mechanism with multiple working gears, or a large beehive with tons of

bees buzzing around. I'd like to take a few moments to delve into some of the parts and pieces and how they specifically affected me through my journey.

First, I'd like to talk about the staff of the Crafton Day Center – Richard Tillman and Laura Vincenti. I'm not sure I know enough adjectives to properly describe these two extraordinary people who became such an integral part of my family's life for the past 6 weeks, but I'd start with kind, generous, caring, empathetic, supportive, and informative. If we had a question, they were there with an answer – or at least a direction in which to turn for the answer. If we had a need, they worked tirelessly to try to fulfill it. If we had a bad day, or, in my case, a panic attack, there were open arms to console and help. And never once in my time in the program was there scorn, judgment, or criticism that wasn't constructive. I cannot emphasize how important that last thing is. For me, being homeless was shameful and depersonalizing, but never once was I treated less than professionally. I am eternally grateful to Richard and Laura for never making me feel bad about my situation. Thanks to them, I was able to stop dwelling on the self-blame and concentrate on making positive progress. Furthermore, and amazingly, although I can attest to the fact that both of them are busy many hours a week, I was never made to feel intrusive or that there wasn't time for me.

Although Richard and Laura may have been the most prevalent and prominent “gears” of the mechanism that is Family Promise, it is obvious to me that the entire machine does not function without the many volunteers and supporters who generously give their time, attention, and financial backing to the program. In our tenure here, my family visited 6 different churches and met dozens of volunteers. Never in that time were we met with anything but open arms and welcome. Although it is natural that certain faces stand out more than others, I will never forget any of the people who touched our lives and made it possible for us to say that we didn't sleep in 6 different places, but rather, we had 6 different homes. The volunteers gave my family what we were most lacking – warmth, safety, security, welcome, and love. And in fact, when most people think of the word home, isn't that truly what we mean? After all, a home is not just four walls and a roof. Laura once told me that she prefers to think of the guests of Family Promise as “houseless” rather than “homeless” and I can truly say that she is right. Thanks to the way that the staff and volunteers conducted themselves, we were never without a home during our stay here.

I've already mentioned that Family Promise allowed me to grow and change, and I will say again how grateful I am for that, but there is one benefit of the program that stands above and beyond any other for me – the change and growth I've seen in my children as a result of this experience. I'm a Mom first, last, and pretty much everything in between, and I can proudly say that my three teenagers are lovely, intelligent, caring, and respectful young men. This program has allowed them the safety and security to flourish and mature in those aspects even further.

My son Sean is 18 years old, and frankly, would not have qualified for any other program. Family Promise opened their arms and doors to him and us, and in his time here, he went from barely passing English to a high school graduate and a Private in the Pennsylvania Army National Guard with a bright and promising future ahead of him. He has learned to plan ahead, to save his money, and to keep working toward his future goals. My 16 year old son Ian has frequently mentioned to me that he has

grown up and matured into someone he can respect and be happy with, largely thanks to the program and our circumstances. In our time at Family Promise, my 15 year old son Connor has transformed from a painfully shy and awkward boy into a happy and at least more outgoing young man. Despite the difficulties in our circumstances and the nearly constant change that we endured, the three of them kept their composure, their smiles, and their pride and they walk away from this experience not damaged, but instead, enriched. As a mother, that is the greatest gift that Family Promise has given me.

And so now, I am reaching the end of one part of my journey. I am soon to have a home and to no longer be a guest of Family Promise, but I can tell you that this is not the end of my involvement with the program. While I was houseless, the only thing I could give was my sincere thanks. Now, as a successfully transitioning former guest, I am a changed person. I can never again be someone for whom homelessness is a vague and disassociated cause. Now, I intend to remain involved and work to the best of my ability to serve the program in any way I am able as an advocate and volunteer. I plan to pay forward all the wonderful benefits that I received and I hope that someday, maybe thanks in a small part to my efforts, another family can realize that the word shelter is not a negative word, but that Family Promise lives up to every thing that it implies – protection, security, nurturing, care. Truly, this is one promise that was fulfilled in spades for me and my family.