

# 'The House that Love Built'

90 the FREE PRESS • FEBRUARY 1997

ORIGINAL COPY

by Peggy Weston Moore

The sign by the front door of the Thurman Brisben Homeless Shelter reads, "The House That Love Built," and, as Executive Director, Ellyn Hartzler seeks to "give people the place and time to get their lives together again."

Eight years ago, when she began her job as Executive Director, she was given a list of job responsibilities four pages long, and she prayed her training as a psychologist would prepare her for the unique challenges ahead.

Known to work up to 70 hours a week, Ellyn's work day consists of overseeing all operations; she makes sure the children get to school; she "hangs tough" with a woman to have her teeth taken care of and then drives her to the dentist; she helps people discover jobs; she cooks and serves food; and she counsels people in life management skills.

So what motivates an individual to take on the incredible challenges and responsibilities this job entails?

"It's a calling. I asked God for a dream and I got it. I gave my application the last day possible after agonizing for months."

Of all the people who come through the shelter, it is the families and mentally handicapped, Ellyn confesses, who "haunt my dreams, quite literally." Currently, the shelter holds 14 family, with a total of 43 children.

Ellyn says, "I'm at home at night in tears. I don't see solutions yet."

She says some of the people who come into the shelter have "minds too far gone." Their families don't want them and they lack the knowledge to access their benefits.

One story Ellyn shared was about a man, in his seventies, who came up the gravel driveway of the shelter in his hand powered wheel chair. He was not local and said he was on his way to Louisiana. He was dirty with open sores on his legs. Because he wasn't cooperative with his cleanliness, Ellyn called Social Services for a public health nurse. After the man had spent three days at the shelter he swore at Ellyn repeatedly. He chose to leave on a cold day and was spotted wheeling down the middle of Lafayette Blvd. Later in the day a distressed motorist called saying he had given the man a ride south but the man "wanted out. What do I do?" Ellyn remarked to him, "It's a free country."

Another challenge is the potential element of danger in Ellyn's work. She recalled an incident in her early days of the shelter when the rules weren't as strongly enforced. A large man threw her against a wall. Today she "doesn't put up with anything."

In more recent history there was a stabbing resulting in a death at Brisben Shelter. The incident involved three individuals who had been drinking after hours which is a serious violation of the shelter's rules. There was a sudden argument and just as suddenly it was over. Ellyn was devastated and felt responsible.

"I prided myself in directing a safe and secure shelter. I learned a lesson," she said. Otherwise there has been "no serious violence or even fist fights," Ellyn remarked, "just women jawing over their men."

Evidently, there is a rumor the staff refers to Ellyn as the Warden and, yes, she "runs a tight ship". The staff supervisor, Jacqueline Evans, said Ellyn "has a heart that is so big." Rebecca, who was busy working



Ellyn Hartzler with two children at the shelter. Photo by Ann Tury

on laundry when she was asked about Ellyn agreed, "she's great." And seriously added, "she's a second mother."

Everyone who stays at the homeless shelter has chores to do to help. Ellyn spoke of the sense of community spirit and bond that exists among the people of the shelter. This is an aspect of her work that she remarked is very rewarding.

The shelter residents must seek jobs daily, except for single parents. Once working, a percentage of a person's earnings is put into an escrow account for them. This provides them with savings given to them when they leave the shelter.

Also in order for the shelter to receive aid, the records must show no evidence of substance abuse. Therefore, the shelter requires sobriety and gives breathalyzer checks at random.

The policy on length of stay at the shelter for individuals or families from area counties is limited to 30


days, with possible extension up to 90 days. Homeless persons outside the area are limited to stay 24 hours with possible extension of seven days depending on the nature of the situation. Shelter is provided only on an emergency basis for these persons. Ellyn Hartzler must fight sometimes, case by case, for families and individuals who are struggling to survive and maintain their dignity.

Ellyn expressed a desire for the shelter to be a more active neighbor by "giving back" to the community. She said the Fredericksburg community is so generous to the shelter that when the shelter's needs are met, the shelter would like to reciprocate by way of community service.

When asked the word "home" conjures up in her mind, Ellyn made reference to the sign by the door, The House That Love Built.

She paused, looked out the window, and said softly, "love, warmth, caring, security."

It's evident Ellyn's family provided her with an ideal sense of home and a secure beginning. Originally from Michigan, she was raised in a Christian home, a God-centered home. Ellyn said she doesn't know how people manage without this foundation to build on. "God is love. My intent throughout life is to love God totally," she said gently.

Talking about her future, she can't imagine ever retiring. She would like to do some creative writing. She has cut back in her shelter hours abit, providing her some rest time and time with her family. Ellyn says "it isn't time to leave yet. My work's not done yet. I'll know when it's time. I trust the direction. It's not time." 

Anyone who would like to donate clothes, items, or provide a service to the shelter, as helping to serve a meal or bringing a planned activity for the children, please call for further

## 'Schmooze or Lose'

By Jennifer Weiner

**Knight-Ridder/Tribune Information Systems**

PHILADELPHIA—Nod a lot. Smile more. Make eye contact. Stop standing in the corner. Remember people's names.

These useful tidbits and many more were imparted to the participants in a Temple University continuing-education class designed to teach the business skills you can't practice in a classroom—how to work a room, how to conquer a cocktail party, how to schmooze.

The one-night-only, \$45-a-shot course was called "Schmooze or Lose," and almost all of the 30-plus students were women—women such as Ann Marie Endy, who works in insurance and wanted to learn to "network comfortably, without feeling awkward, in a situation where I don't know anyone."

The instructors, by contrast, were all men—men like Jerry Blavat, oldies disc jockey extraordinaire, who bounced into the room, announcing, "I'm pleased to meet you girls ..."

Is this the fine art of smooching?"

Blavat's nugget of wisdom: If you forget names, think nicknames. "Frank Sinatra always calls me 'Matchstick,'" he said. "To him, that's my name."

Another instructor was onetime TV personality and course organizer Eddie Greves, who advocated using

family members to help you out of those sticky social situations. "I'll say to someone whose name I don't know, 'Have you met my daughter?' And they'll say, 'Oh, hello, I'm Bill.'"

A tentative hand made its way into the air. What if you don't have a daughter, or a spouse? What if you can't think of a nickname—or you just can't see calling your business associates 'Matchstick'? What if you just plain forgot? Can you ever just, you know, say so?

Absolutely not.

"Brutal honesty in a social situation is an absolute last resort," Greves said.

And with that, the course members rose, grabbed their business cards, affixed name tags to their right side and schmoozed.

Knots of women stood around tables, making small talk about business and friends in common, impeding the passage of waiters, as well as that of the celebrity impersonators dressed as Mae West, Carmen Miranda and Charlie Chaplin, who made balloon bracelets.

The other two made—what else?—conversation.

Simon versed participants on the fine points of the Sullivan nod—that little nod a waiter will give you when he asks if you'd like an appetizer. "It's positive, warm, endearing, embracing—and you don't even know it!" he enthused. 