

'Their kids motivate them'

Esplanade House celebrates 20 years of helping families overcome poverty, addiction

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Gloria Rodgers has been program director at Esplanade House since 2004. "It's work, it's commitment, and many do succeed. That is the beauty of this place — their kids motivate them," said Rodgers. (Jason Halley/Staff Photo)



Cami Harrison (left) and Samantha Banchio are two mothers working to graduate from Esplanade House. (Bill Husa/Staff Photos)

CHICO — They are parents who want to break family cycles of poverty, substance abuse and everything that typically goes along with a dysfunctional lifestyle.

Their children are often removed from their homes, and the reason parents usually decide to change is to regain custody of their children.

The Esplanade House is celebrating its 20th year of helping troubled families become healthy, functioning and independent.

There are 55 families, including 154 adults and children. While it is the parents who make the changes, the reason the program exists is for their children.

Two mothers who, with their families, are participating in Esplanade House program.

"The children are number one at Esplanade House. You feel it," said Cami Harrison, who with her husband, is preparing to graduate from Esplanade House.

Harrison and her husband have two children, ages 5 and 6. "My husband and I were alcoholics. We've been sober for two years now. The transition for our kids here has been great. I have a drug/alcohol counselor and there is a case manager for our family," said Harrison, who said change is a process.

GET HEALTHY FIRST

"At first, you have to get healthy and it takes time. You need support. You have to learn to be held responsible."

Harrison, 48, said the time she and her husband spent on the waiting list for the Esplanade House served a purpose. "That wait gives you time to think. And once you're in, there is no tolerance for drugs or alcohol and they test you," she said. "My husband and I are doing well."

Harrison, who once worked as a paralegal in the Bay Area, looks forward to being functioning and responsible. "Living here changes your thinking. The staff is a safety net, a sounding board. And now, I am ready to go back to work," she said.

The Harrisons' boys have received professional help at Esplanade house, and they attend public school. "We have done a lot of work here. They helped us do so many things — our (Child Protective Services) case is closed now."

The Harrisons have obtained Section 8 housing to help with their first experience living independently after Esplanade House.

WORK TO DO

Samantha Banchio, 37, and her fiancé are doing well at Esplanade House, too. "We were on the waiting list for 10 months. I checked in every week. You have to do the foot work. Once you're here, you can't lounge around. You are expected to move upward, and you have work to do. We've had parenting classes, credit counseling."

Banchio and her fiancé have a 3-year-old daughter, who lives with them as they go through the program, and Banchio is pregnant. She also has 7-year-old twins who live with their father, and an 18-year-old.

"Now, my fiancé and my daughter and I are together as a family. He graduated from the Salvation Army's program and the future is good. We are a year and a half sober and plan to be living on our own at this time next year. And we're going to get married."

A SECOND CHANCE

Families can make changes and get a second chance at raising their children, often because they have completed the structured program at Esplanade House. Since 1991, the program is the reason many families are able to not only live sober, functioning lives, but regain custody of their children.

Gloria Rodgers, program director at Esplanade House since 2004, said there is always more than one reason families need this structured, supportive help. There is more than one reason why it works.

"The issue is generational poverty," said Rodgers. "And some families come from trauma. If you were beaten, or hungry for a period of time — it changes you for the rest of your life."

She said substance abuse and addiction, domestic violence and general lack of skills are reasons parents cannot care for themselves and raise their children. Most of that is directly related to poverty, she said, adding the economic downturn in recent years has only made matters worse.

"There are more families needing this kind of help. There are people who don't have education or job skills to make it and are from generations of poverty. It's happening in this county and across the nation.

"There are generations of drug abuse. These people have no safety net in their own families. Their families have no financial ability to help and often use drugs too," said Rodgers.

There are deeper troubles. "Most of them are disabled, either physically or have a mental health issue," she said. Substance abuse creates a downhill spiral, said Lynne Bussey, Esplanade House board member. "It's chaotic, crisis to crisis. It's always somebody who is addicted to drugs who doesn't make their car payment, the car gets towed, they lose their job because they're partying too much. It's a clear kind of syndrome"

IT'S ABOUT THE KIDS

Despite their personal problems, the goal of Esplanade House is to help adults so their children will not repeat their behavior or suffer long-term damage from years with unstable parents.

Janet Rauch, a retired child psychologist, volunteers at Esplanade House. "We can't undo what a child has experienced, but we can make it a less dominating factor in a child's life. A child may also learn that there are many good people in the world."

Rauch said she works with the whole family. "I'm more of a coach ... Families are doing the hard part. They've gotten themselves together, handling or have at bay their addiction. The rest of us here help fill in the pieces to make life good. That's what this program is about."

Families have the ongoing support of alcohol/drug counselors and case workers. They receive help with cleaning up bad credit, probation and court dates; with budgeting, nutrition education, work training programs and working toward a GED or higher education.

Esplanade House moved to its location on East Shasta Avenue in 2004. Before that, it was housed in an old motel on The Esplanade. Numbers are a little sketchy from that long ago. "There were no computers to keep track then," said Rodgers.

Since 1991, it is known that more than 400 families have been served.

Harrison and Banchio are examples of those who literally line up to take part in the structured program. "Right now, we have a waiting list of 62 families," Rodgers said. "That list can be up to 75 families waiting, and they might have to wait six to nine months."

She said homelessness has changed since the shelter opened. "We have many more single fathers now, it's not just mothers with kids. We have several dual parent families, too."

Rodgers said not every family succeeds, or is grateful for the opportunity. "We do good stuff, but it's not for everybody. Maybe some are not ready, and others never will be. They start with a lot of problems and it's like they have to dig their way out of a hole.

"It's work, it's commitment, and many do succeed. That is the beauty of this place — their kids motivate them," said Rodgers.

About Esplanade House

What it is: Transitional family shelter program of Community Action Agency of Butte County (buttecaa.com).

The beginning: Founded in 1991 in an old motel on The Esplanade, the brainchild of developer Greg Webb and physician Gary Incaudo. In 2004, a new facility was built on East Shasta Avenue. Funded through Community Action Agency, City of Chico, Esplanade House Children's Fund, State of California, Federal Home Loan Bank and private donations.

Happy anniversary: Celebrating 20 years with an open house Oct. 14.

How it works: With 15 staff, facility provides different size living arrangements for families as they rebuild their lives. Graduation ceremonies are every June for families who complete the program.

Wish list: Food cards, gently used clothing, household items, kitchen wares, maintenance tools.

Current efforts: Through Esplanade House Children's Fund and Esplanade House Endowment Fund, participating with Annie B's Community Drive, an annual fundraiser encouraging private giving for the public good. Visit nvcf.org. Drive ends Sept. 30.

Connecting: Call 891-2977, visit www.EsplanadeHouseChico.com.

Staff writer Mary Nugent can be reached at 896-7764 or mnugent@chicoer.com.