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CST 425

A Place to Sleep and Food: A Proposal for Goose Hollow Shelter

A Service-Learning Capstone

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## **Introduction**

Goose Hollow Family Shelter is an emergency refuge solely for families with children. Between February 15<sup>th</sup> and March 21<sup>st</sup>, I spent three nights at the shelter. After being submersed into the lifestyles of several different homeless families, I found the social construction of their world to deviate widely from the ideal. Under the circumstantial events of living in the shelter, most of the families construct a style of living that most of us would find foreign.

In this paper, I will give a background of the shelter. Next, I will describe a routine night at the shelter for the families admitted and the various interactions and observations made during my stay. Third, I will review some of the literature relevant to homeless families. Fourth, I will report on an interview with the director and her list of priorities for the shelter as she sees fit for the families, and finally I will propose one solution for some of the issues facing the shelter.

## **Background**

Founded in 1994, this temporary shelter remains open from November 1<sup>st</sup> to May 31<sup>st</sup>. The facility is connected to the United Methodist Church in downtown Portland on Jefferson Street. The shelter, however, is not considered part of the church. During the day, boy scouts and other camps will use the gymnasium downstairs where the homeless families stay for games and other activities while families who have nowhere else to go during the day, will travel a few blocks down to Goose Hollow's day shelter on Salmon Street. At night, families who want dinner must be at the shelter by 7:00 p.m. to eat and to sign up to stay the night. In the morning everyone must be out of the gym by 7:30 a.m. Not only must the grueling schedule wear on the families, but privacy is also very limited in the shelter. Families are separated merely by walls on wheels so they can be rolled in and put away in the morning. Privacy management becomes especially difficult when physical boundaries are so weak. Private information was constantly on display for the homeless community, and bouts of conflict were very hard to keep between parents. The regulation and control of disclosure required couples to alter their

speaking patterns. For example, if parents or a couple were apparently having a disagreement, they were not able to raise their voices behind doors. Instead they had to talk quietly during an argument in order for third parties to be excluded. Privacy was almost non-existent except behind thin walls and a curtain door.

### **My Experience at the Shelter**

As a participant observer and volunteer in this service learning project, I had the opportunity to experience the typical routine of families that would stay at the shelter for 40 consecutive nights at a time. In the three nights I stayed at Goose Hollow, a few moments and memories of certain people at the shelter really stuck with me.

One family in particular was interesting to observe. Nine year old Serry played somewhat of a motherly role to her ten month old brother Kayden. My first night at the shelter I remember sitting at one of the tables near the built in kitchen in the gymnasium while watching all the young children run around. There were a few babies crawling and just learning how to walk. I was throwing balls and talking in a high voice like I have always heard most mothers do to comfort young children or babies. Kayden was trying to walk around while watching other kids play with a ball until his legs buckled and he fell face first into the hard cement floor. The sound of his skull smashing into the ground still makes me cringe when I think about it happening again. Serry immediately ran to pick him up and rubbed his head to comfort him. Of course Kayden was hysterically crying and clung to Serry once he was in her arms. Fortunately, there was no serious damage done since Kayden was barely walking at this point so he didn't fall too hard.

Serry and Kayden's mother on the other hand is another story; she was very quiet and reserved. It wasn't until the second morning that I realized that she was missing an arm. I don't think I noticed because the two times I saw their family at the shelter their mother would always stay in their cubicle while Serry would watch over Kayden and play with the other kids. On the second morning, their mother

was making breakfast for herself while Serry was cleaning up the family's mats that they had slept on the night before. After her mom was finished with breakfast she began pushing Kayden's stroller toward the door so they could leave. I quickly asked to help her because it was obvious that it would be hard to steer a stroller with only one hand. Watching Serry's mom leave the shelter struggling to steer the stroller was heartbreaking. Serry was very mature for a nine year old and helped her mother out with mostly everything when it came to her younger brother and daily tasks her mother did.

After staying the night at the homeless shelter three different times, I found that being available for someone just to talk or help out was very important. The shelter offered food, laundry services, sheets and blankets to sleep on, games for kids to play with, and mats for families to sleep on. It is difficult to schedule enough volunteers to help out around the shelter, let alone to spend the night in a cold gym with crying babies.

### **Literature and Previous Studies**

Goose Hollow is mainly dependent on volunteers who ultimately work as a support system for the homeless families going through very difficult transitions. The literature on homeless families reveals many unmet needs. According to an article by Anderson, Stuttaford, and Vostanis (2006) support systems for homeless children and parents have proven to have a positive effect on families. The study revealed that the most prominent message was the presence of a friendly face, someone they felt like they could talk to. Parents clearly stated that practical help was as least as important to them as counseling and emotional support (Anderson, Stuttaford & Vostanis, 2006).

Furthermore, various shelters have implemented educational programs across the country. O'Neil-Pirozzi (2003) conducted a study on twenty-five families residing in one of four urban family homeless shelters. The study found that 62% of children who participated in the study were not enrolled in any type of education program at all. Results also showed that the older the children were the more likely the child was to have an overall language delay (O'Neil-Pirozzi, 2003).

However, more studies found emotional support to be the best approach to minimize the effects of homelessness. Fraenkel, Hameline and Thomas (2009) did a study on a shelter-based program designed to provide families with opportunities to share their experiences and to provide each other with support. The goal for the families was to regain a sense of pride, positive identity, self agency, and a hopeful vision of the future. Once again results from the study showed the importance of having someone to listen to the families.

After examining several articles, I found many overlaps in information relevant to education, family therapy, fresh start programs and various methods of fundraising.

### **Interview**

In an interview, Brandi Tuck, the director of Portland Homeless Family Solutions, expressed two primary alterations which require funding in order to perpetuate the success of Goose Hollow. First, an estimated \$10,000 would be compulsory to extend the time period the shelter is open for an extra month. Therefore, homeless families would be able to have a guaranteed location to sleep from November to June. Such a large allotment of money for only a month would be allocated between the Goose Hollow staff and the current programs. Brandi stressed the need for volunteers to be overnight hosts, help serve food, and to help watch children at the day shelter.

Another addition to the shelter that requires funding would be a new website. Brandi estimated that it would cost around \$6,500 for the development and maintenance of the website. Goose Hollow currently has a website which has information about the shelter, the staff, how to volunteer and donate, as well as a newsletter, events, and how to contact the shelter. However, Portland Homeless Family Solutions has taken control over Goose Hollow and needs a new website to publicize their efforts and help homeless families in Portland. Therefore, the most feasible option would be to get the University of Portland community involved with promoting students and interns to help develop and maintain a

website at Goose Hollow. The website would act as an enabler leading to more resources and opportunities to rise more funding.

Tuck also explained that their programs focused on helping families with their most basic needs first. Basic survival necessities would include food and a temporary place to stay. Even though living in homeless shelters proved to be a factor leading to a deficit in educational tendencies, Brandi believed finding a home for a family first is more of a priority. Plus, the shelter was unable to implement anymore programs due to funding and space. Moreover, Brandi Tuck spends most of her time fundraising for the shelter. Tuck said fundraising events that were currently bringing in money were annual auctions, individual contributions, and direct mail appeal letters.

Based on the literature that was examined and from my personal observation I perceived that volunteers and interpersonal interactions with the families are very important. The director Brandi Tuck also emphatically expressed the need for more volunteers and a better way to fill volunteer positions. With these thoughts in mind, I propose that Goose Hollow Shelter create a communication social media internship position.

### **Proposed Approach and Work Plan**

The social media internship position would be under the supervision of a professional mentor that would help develop and apply the intern's abilities to work independently on assigned tasks. Specific duties would include utilizing and maintaining online mediums such as blogs, facebook, the Family Solutions website, and twitter to advocate and campaign monetary support for the shelter. Other various tasks in the work environment will also contribute to the growth of the students and their academic experience as prospective communication professionals. If students from the University of Portland wish to participate in the internship position they must earn good grades in written and oral communication as well as related subject-area courses in order to qualify. Standard requirements will

help guide eligible candidates toward a position that would provide them with valuable experience and knowledge.

Furthermore, the internship would be an elective course for highly ranked juniors and seniors. The opportunity to intern at Goose Hollow would also be added to a list of organizations which are disseminated to communication studies students regularly to choose from. Plus, having students fill positions at the shelter would generate positive outcomes for both the University of Portland as well as Goose Hollow. Brandi Tuck emphasized the amount of money that would be taken away from the monthly \$10,000 dollar budget just to be distributed to the staff. Therefore, staffing another person would not create any further financial road blocks for the executive director. On the other hand, the practical experience for University of Portland students would be beneficial as well. However, the primary purpose as an academic activity would be for interns to get a better understanding of the kind of skills and knowledge that would pertain to their specific work field.

Interns that were approved for the program would partake in activities relating to social media as well as working to develop and maintain the organization's website. Modern day's technology is utilizing the internet and various mediums to advertise market and advocate various companies or non-profit organizations. Social media tools such as a websites, blogs, or twitter would help mobilize the Portland community to volunteer at the shelter. In an article by Caroline Prestine, who focuses on social media tools to raise charity money, found that such campaigns have proven to be quite successful. Prestine said, "As more groups experiment with how to win donations through online social networks, some are finding, like Ms. Benet, that they are a useful way to publicize and encourage participation in fund-raising campaigns (Prestine, 2009)." The first step is developing a website in order to lead to another source of fundraising and more volunteers.

Moreover, communication classes at the University of Portland would also directly relate to the tasks needed to be completed by students. For example, Introduction to Public Relations, Visual



Communication, and Organizational Communication are all classes that would equip students with the necessary skills to participate at the shelter.

### **Closing**

In conclusion, Goose Hollow Family Shelter provides a great deal to families that are homeless. Yet, much more help is needed. Using media to generate additional income is one solution to the gap between needs and available budget. Creating a website will still cost money along with a supervisor for the internship position. However, students with strong academic backgrounds in public relations, advertising, and marketing would be more than capable to put social media tools to good use in order to create a successful fundraising campaign. Plus, more money would be saved when it came to the maintenance and upkeep of the website if students were involved in unpaid internships.

After staying the night at the shelter a few times it is blatantly obvious how much Goose Hollow is doing for the less fortunate families in the Portland metropolitan area. There are so many anecdotes available from my experience about the families that would engage students and the Portland community to lend a helping hand at the shelter. Various stories could be implemented in blogs to help catch the eye of potential benefactors, perhaps guess themselves could blog about their own family stories. The power of family stories added to the website or blogs could ultimately have a huge impact on thousands of people.

The first step would be for University of Portland students to experience Goose Hollow hands on. Students would not only apply their academic skills to build their resumes, but to help those families who are facing some of the hardest times of their lives. Service is central to the University of Portland mission. A Communication Social Media Internship would contribute to the University's mission, to the development of students' professional skills, and most importantly help homeless families survive in difficult times.