

Theresa House EMPOWERS

WRITTEN BY NATALIE S. KNUDSEN • PHOTOS BY JEFF SILKER

The Work at Theresa House

Aptly named after its benefactor Blessed Mother Theresa Gerhardinger, foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and Mother Theresa of Calcutta, India, Theresa House offers support to women and families in need.

Founded in Mankato ten years ago as a collaborative effort between the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND) and Father Karl Voelker of Ss. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, its outreach into the community continues to grow.

Statistics like this show why – in 2005 Theresa House served 100 individuals through its 15-bed unit while turning away more than 400 individuals in need.

“More people ask for help every year,” points out Pam Bartholomew, director of Theresa House. “We see single mothers, families, refugees, and middle income citizens who have lost everything through death, divorce, illness, and domestic abuse. Close to 50 percent of our clients are homeless children.”

Theresa House occupies the former SSND convent and continues to receive funding from the Sisters. “The intent of the SSND, who are committed to justice and education and helping those in need, together with Fathers Karl and Ted Hottinger, who are of the Jesuit tradition dedicated to working with the poor, creat-

ed the concept for Theresa House,” explains Pam. Additional funding comes from ecumenical support by area churches along with the United Way, State of Minnesota, and private donations.

Although Theresa House was founded in the Catholic tradition, there is no faith requirement made of clients or volunteers. “The faith opportunity for the staff is to live out their faith and see the face of Jesus in our clients,” says Pam.

Making a difference

“So many different types of people require assistance,” points out Pam, “but they must be in imminent need for acceptance at Theresa House.”

What constitutes imminent need? Theresa House clients have been evicted from their homes, found living in cars, living in storage units, and even families living in a tent at a campground as winter approached.

As more and more families with two wage earners fall into poverty, statistics show the primary reason for homelessness is lack of affordable housing. “That’s especially true for large families,” points out Pam.

In addition to the 3.5-day staff positions, Theresa House utilizes college students who trade housing for volunteer hours. Pam explains that the college staff receives housing in exchange for ▶



Vicki Frank
Case Manager

Saves a Life

“I’m grateful to be alive today,” Mary says.

Mary’s building manager was using his keys and abusing his authority to enter her apartment. He watched her shower, fondled her clothes and lingerie, checked files on her computer, and tampered with her mail.

A baseball bat and pepper spray were her ever-vigilant sleeping companions. After more than two years of being stalked and terrorized by her building manager, Mary knew she needed help.

“I tried the police, CADA House and everybody had excuses why they couldn’t help me,” remembers Mary. “Finally one night I saw a mention for Theresa House on late-night television and in desperation I called them. The shelter was full and even though I didn’t have children with me and was considered a ‘non-traditional’ guest, Pam Bartholomew, the director, called every week to check on me until a space opened up.”

“Pam saved my life – literally,” stresses Mary a physically active, employed member of the community. “I wasn’t able to eat and was only sleeping two to three hours per night, the constant stress was causing me to hemorrhage and my hair was falling out in clumps. I was a shell of my former self.”

With only the clothes on her back, Mary entered Theresa House. There she says she found unconditional love, friendship, nutritious food, mental health and a caring, resourceful social worker. “I can’t say enough about Shari, a Theresa House Case Manager” Mary stresses. “She works with an impressive number of medical and business contacts and her compassion knows no bounds.”

In her flight, Mary lost nearly all of her furniture and personal belongings and was forced to rely on vouchers from the Salvation Army for everything ranging from underwear and socks to slacks and blouses. “To live for a month with things that you have no history with makes you feel abandoned and alone,” says Mary quietly.

Theresa House assists clients in finding medical care, counseling, job training, educational opportunities, clothing, furniture, housing, and transportation.

“There wasn’t anything I needed that Theresa House couldn’t help me with but you are not dependent on them, they help us find our way,” Mary points out, clearly making the distinction between independence and dependency. “Yet they’re always there backing us up and helping us find the resources that we need.”



Pam Bartholomew
Director

Molly Hagen
Volunteer Coordinator

Preserves a Family

First the car broke down and Dennis couldn't get to work, then the bills starting piling up, and finally Jolene, Dennis, and five children ranging in age from seven to thirteen years, were evicted from the mobile home they owned.

"It was just one big circle of problems without a beginning or end," recalls Jolene of the events that left the family homeless for six weeks.

"My only goal was to keep my kids together," she states firmly, "and I did that by bartering child care and household chores so they had a place to sleep on someone else's floor."

Already in the social work system, Jolene contacted her case manager in search of emergency assistance to pay for lodging. "I was told that I was one of 200 cases and that she didn't have time to help me because she had recently returned from vacation," remembers Jolene.

"In the social services system you just fill out applications and wait," says Jolene, "you have to be without a job, car, or house but you have to prove that you have a place to go to before you can get assistance."

Not ones to sit idle, Jolene and Dennis sent out forty-eight job applications in one week alone without a response for employment.

One of Jolene's friends had stayed at Theresa House and urged her to contact them. Within two weeks of her application

Jolene, Dennis and their children had a place at Theresa House.

"It was tough for us here the first three to four days," remembers Jolene, "we'd never been in this situation before. There were lots of rules, new people, new schedules, new noises."

In less than a week, however, Jolene could see her children relaxing and feeling more secure. "We're not on the streets anymore. And Molly Hagen, volunteer coordinator, has helped me immensely with transportation, childcare, and with homework for the kids – who now have time to be just kids."

With the help of the staff and their

resources at Theresa House, Dennis has a job, Jolene is taking classes at Lincoln Community Center and working on her GED, the car is fixed, and all of the kids were able to stay in their own elementary schools.

The next step for Jolene and her family is finding affordable housing. "It's a challenge in Mankato because we have seven family members and most apartments won't take us but renting an entire house is beyond our means even with assistance," explains Jolene.

Jolene says Theresa House has given them the chance to get their lives together and move forward, "I take care of this place like it was my own home."



The community kitchen in the Theresa House where clients are able to cook their own meals.

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**Honey C. Miller,
Business Banking Officer**



School Sisters of Notre Dame's chapel within the convent which is open for use.



Residents 6' x 8' bedroom.

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working one night per week and one weekend per month.

For Pam the most rewarding aspects of her job are being able to say, "Yes, we can take you," and seeing families stabilized during their stay at Theresa House.

Living at Theresa House

Theresa House is unique among shelters in that its commitment is to families and accepts women, children, and men within the family group. Clients living at Theresa House are expected to perform daily and weekly cleaning tasks, cook their own food, share public areas for TV viewing and visitors, and abide by curfew times.

"It's definitely not a hotel," laughs Pam, "A few clients are surprised, not everyone wants to clean and cook for themselves."

Each 6' x 8' room at Theresa House contains a built-in dresser, bed, nightstand, and sink. "Most of the bedroom furniture is original and was used by the Sisters," explains Pam. Community organizations including Zonta, an organization of women executives dedicated to improving the status of women and children, and various church youth groups donate time and mate-

rials to redecorate the rooms.

While at Theresa House, a social worker helps clients set goals and then supplies the tools and contacts to help them reach their goals. Clients receive assistance ranging from job training and education, to physical and mental health contacts, to food and transportation. The average stay at Theresa House is less than four months.

One high school volunteer summed up her experience at Theresa House when she said, "The people at Theresa House are just like me."

Helping Theresa House

Theresa House accepts volunteers, in-kind donations, and cash donations. Cash donations are used for new underwear, clothing, shoes, gas expenses, and heating costs.

Donations to Theresa House may also be made in honor of a person. "We send a letter to the person being honored that includes a biography of a family at Theresa House," says Pam Bartholomew, director of Theresa House. "These donations are often made during the Christmas season and given as a gift." *W*

For more information on Theresa House visit www.theresahouse.org or phone 507-388-1664 or on the School Sisters Of Notre Dame visit www.ssndmankato.org.

Design

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