

Hope for homeless families

Alexandria's Community Lodgings teaches Latino and homeless to help themselves

By Milagros Melendez-Vela, **El Tiempo Latino**

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The best translation of "Community Lodgings" into Spanish would be "community housing". However, in neither language can these words truly describe the significance this organization has in the lives of Latino families and families without permanent housing.

Founded in 1987 by eight churches in Alexandria, Community Lodgings' mission is to lift homeless families and help disadvantaged families, especially Latino families. "The purpose is to help them achieve stability, independence and self-sufficiency," said Bonnie Baxley executive director in a recent interview on January 11th.

Through its two-year Transitional Housing Program, the group offers social and educational services to 14 families. This year two of them are Latino.

Along with housing, they provide counseling services to clients to address the problems that led them to the condition of homelessness. An important part of the program is to help them create and manage a budget.

"87 percent of families complete our Transitional Housing Program successfully," the group says.

An example of success is Lee T.'s family (*full name not published*). In 2008 the family completed the two-year period and was able to buy a four-bedroom house.

The program's impact goes way beyond the 14 families living in transitional housing; in fact, there are dozens of families, especially low-income Latinos living in Arlandria community who benefit from their services.

In 1998, Community Lodgings opened the Family Learning Center to teach English and computer skills to adults in the community.

And in 2002 Community Lodgings founded the Youth Education Program, aimed to help at-risk children succeed in school. "To fulfill our mission of 'lifting' families of their status of poverty and lead them to self sufficiency, we also had to serve children," said Baxley. First they focused on children who were among the 14 families in the Transitional Housing program, but later extended services to the community.

The program grew by leaps and bound from 6 to 35 children and is now averaging 132, among elementary, middle and high school grades.

"We felt obligated to continue with the children as they grew, expanding the program from elementary to middle school and then to our high school program recently," smiled Baxley, who's eyes sparkle when she speaks of the youth, while in the background on Notabene Drive,

you hear the hammer blows of the construction.

Monday to Friday, dozens of volunteers help the children complete their homework and motivate them to continue their studies.

Not only this, volunteers become tutors or advocates of the children in the schools. "We work to support the parents. Accompanying and representing parents at school conferences, to ensure that the system takes care of these children as it should," said Baxley.

Ramon Calderon, 18, TC Williams School, explains the importance of Community Lodgings in his life. "I think if I had not had this place, I would have wasted my time in gangs," he said. The young man was raised by his mother, and has participated in the educational programs since he was 11.



Ramon Calderon, 18, who grew up only with his mother, along with Bonnie Baxley, director of the center.

Volunteers

People who donate their time and mentors are vital:

Dozens of volunteers provide valuable assistance to various programs at Community Lodgings, especially the mentors who work with children. "The mentoring program is an important component for us because that way the kids can interact with people who can serve as role models," Executive Director, Bonnie Baxley.

Volunteers can work as long as possible for a minimum of two hours, although many of them serve longer. And because of the variety of services to Community Lodging provides families, volunteers can contribute in a variety of ways, including helping children with their homework. Those interested can call 703-549 4407.

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